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**Fighting Cane and Canon:
Reading Abhimanyu Unnuth's Hindi Poetry
In and Outside of Literary Mauritius**

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in Languages and Cultures of South Asia

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Abstract

Fighting Cane and Canon: Reading Abhimanyu Unnuth's Hindi Poetry In and Outside of Literary Mauritius interrogates the development and persistence of Hindi poetry in Mauritius with a focus on the early poetry of Abhimanyu Unnuth. His second work, *The Teeth of the Cactus*, brings together questions about the value of history, of relationships forged by labour, and of spirituality in a trenchant examination of a postcolonial people choosing to pursue prosperity in an age of globalization. It captures a distinct point of view—Unnuth's connection to the Hindi language is an unusual reaction to the creolization of the island—but also a common experience: both of Indian immigrants and of the reevaluation of their experience by Mauritians reaching adulthood, as Unnuth did, with the Independence of the Mauritian nation in 1968. I argue that for literary scholars, reading Abhimanyu Unnuth's poetry raises important questions about the methodological assumptions made when approaching so-called marginal postcolonial works—assumptions about translation, language, and canonicity—and that the emerging methodologies of World Literature have much to offer. I test them here, providing the first translation into English of *The Teeth of the Cactus* and an analysis in which I focus on the relationship between my own perspective, the perspectives of Unnuth's imagined audience, and the perspectives of his actual historical audience. The fading legacy of *The Teeth of the Cactus* amongst its historical audience signals the decline of a vibrant era where Hindi poetry was central to the nation-building project of Mauritius; poets writing after Unnuth markedly position themselves as diasporic poets, and Unnuth's commitment to being a World Poet diminishes his importance in Mauritius while increasing his importance to literary scholars of World Literature.

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Chapter 1: Rethinking the Global in Postcolonial Poetry

I. Context and Perspectives

‘have you heard?’¹

Thus begins *The Teeth of the Cactus*, a collection of poetry by Abhimanyu Unnuth. The poem ‘And Burn Something Else’ opens his second collection, published in 1982. ‘[H]ave you heard?’ he asks us, that ‘my desire to live has killed itself?’ In the original Hindi, Unnuth uses the verbal construction that implies ‘has killed itself for your sake.’ As a reader, I lift my hands from the book to check my fingerprints: am I the ‘you’? Who, then, is the ‘I’? An instinctive rush of guilt runs through us, but it is checked: no one has really died. Just desire. Can I be held responsible for nurturing or destroying the desire to live of one I’ve never met? If not I, then what does, or should, nurture the desire to live? ‘[H]ave you heard?’ he writes, that ‘my desire to live has killed itself on the threshold of the labour office.’ Hearing these words, the poem rushes back to a physical location, and ‘you’ has a taken on, perhaps, a more corporeal identity: the man in the Labour Office. I have my own pictures of Labour Office men: stuffed suits, dhotis. The poem concludes, ‘the death certificate cannot be obtained, for today is May Day, a public holiday. On the funeral pyre, burn something else.’ Who is this Labour Office man, too busy commemorating dead labourers to nurture in living ones the desire to live? Those forthright sentences close the poem and open up a series of poems questioning the relationships between the administrators and the administered, between the desire to live and the desire to remember.

¹ ‘And Burn Something Else.’ #1. In the course of the thesis, poems from *The Teeth of the Cactus* will be cross-referenced by a numeral, which refers to the ordering of the poems in the collection as well as to the ordering of the translated poems, found on pages 74-109. Original found in: Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 1.

The Teeth of the Cactus was published in Delhi, but circulated and read mainly in Unnuth's native Mauritius. It was eagerly awaited by Mauritian Hindi litterateurs who had enjoyed his first collection, *The Prickly-Pear's Tangled Breath*, rife with flashes of righteous anger and the island's natural imagery. Somdath Bhuckory, an author of literature himself as well as the author of *Hindi in Mauritius*, considered Unnuth to be 'foremost among post-Independence poets.'² The collection, with eighty six poems of varying lengths, develops the themes of the first collection—labour, history, imprisonment, and nature both human and environmental—and grapples with questions affecting postcolonial Mauritius: how can a life be made worth living? Who has power over the lives of citizens of a self-governing nation, and what kind of relationship should those citizens have with power?

But why is it even necessary to learn the collection's most basic context? Why not take each word as it comes? Reading such evocative lines as 'In the past those pills I used to suck were insipid outside and in. Nowadays those I suck are sugar-coated tablets against the future's bitterness,'³ I, as a reader, may identify with strong feelings of despair, but I am also led to ask from whence these feelings arise. As a reader in a global literary world, I am often faced with poems that are simultaneously relatable and opaque. In the lines quoted above, an untitled short poem from later in *The Teeth of the Cactus*, I can empathise with the feelings of despair, but without knowledge of the original context, I can only fill in the gaps with my own experience (whether gained first-hand or through my previous reading).

Even the basic context already provided helps me clarify my relationship to the text. Literature about power relationships in a postcolonial society that differs from my own postcolonial society is interesting to me because I have already found

² Somdath Bhuckory, *Hindi in Mauritius*, 2nd ed. (Rose-Hill, Mauritius: Éditions de L'Océan Indien, 1988), 126.

³ 'Sugar-Coated.' #23. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 28.

literature about power relationships in societies with which I do have experience to be resonant. Books such as *The God of Small Things*, as Elleke Boehmer writes in her *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, ‘undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonialism—the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination’.⁴ In Roy’s novel, characters’ power over one another is shaped by their positions in society and their understanding of the eras of Portuguese and British colonialism in southern India. In tracing the suffering that these power relationships cause the characters, the novel offers a powerful critique of the continuation of colonial classifications. I might expect Unnuth’s writing to similarly contextualise for readers the colonial period and its repercussions, and to critique it. Outside of its historical and literary context, however, Mauritius is best known as the site of a socioeconomic miracle⁵ and, thus, an anomaly amongst nations which gained independence in the same period. Is it not then a mistake to assume its writers would share the same distaste for the colonial as Roy? Readers assuming Unnuth’s writing as postcolonial literature would be caught out as overeager ‘tourists’, ready to paint any scene in our own colours to make it digestible, which, as Huggan writes, ‘demonstrates the tourist paradox that foreign peoples/cultures may be exotic, not because they are incommensurably different, but, on the contrary, because they are already *familiar*’ [italics in the original].⁶ Finding contextual similarities between literary cultures helps readers to understand the differences, but assuming contextual similarities muddles our own perspective.

⁴ Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo, 1997).

Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

⁵ Joseph Stiglitz, ‘The Mauritius Miracle,’ *Project Syndicate*, 7 March 2011, accessed 9 September 2011, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/the-mauritius-miracle>.

⁶ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), 201.

And so context becomes significant. Geographical, historical, philosophical: where is Unnuth, and what is behind his words? But I must know my own perspective, too, in order to make any real connections, to find real relationships between his words and my mind. My perspective is a mixture of academic, with the discussion about postcolonialism to be continued at length in this chapter, and personal. I came to read Unnuth's poetry in part by chance, when I found a dusty book off the library shelf at the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library. And yet, libraries do not let us read entirely by chance: I knew where I was, in the Hindi literature section, I had wandered away from the general literary aisles to the more specialised shelves: Hindi literature not written in India. As an Indian based in the US and the UK, I expected to find poetry about migration, dislocation, perhaps about freedom and loss. Instead I found lines like those in 'Sugar-Coated' (#23) or, even more abstract, in 'The Fraction Sign' (#42): dizzying in their unexpectedness and opacity. The blurb on the book's cover told me that Unnuth wrote from Mauritius. Ah, the land of sea, sun, and sugar. Simply reading up on the general context was of significant, but limited, value. Reading more about the history of Mauritius, from its lack of a precolonial population to its role in the plantation economy to its relatively peaceful transition to Independence, lines about fields and labour began to make sense, but aspects remained unclear. The imagery of 'The Fraction Sign' began to be visualizable, but what of the last lines? The relationship between the speaker and the addressee in the poems made no sense, and without it, the entire collection is filled with holes for a reader such as myself, with little understanding of what this chronology had to do with the world Unnuth had created in his collection. Indeed, history can only take us so far in understanding poetry: as this poetry itself makes

clear, calling upon historians to write real histories,⁷ history is not a chronology of events but the relationship of the writer of history to those events. Reading history is not simply an understanding of this relationship but an understanding of your relationship to all of this. Reading poetry is not only this three-way relationship, but also involves others: why would Unnuth write poetry about events? This depends on who he thought would read his poetry.

Of course, many poets' imagined audiences do not line up exactly with the real audiences. Even once we know that Unnuth's primary audience was intellectual Indo-Mauritians, we can still perceive that his understanding of the personalities of those readers may be so off the mark as to render them basically imagined. Reading poetry is about forging a relationship with those imagined readers. For readers such as myself, encountering and interpreting works already read but somehow stagnating in global circulation, writing about this poetry includes forging a relationship with the poetry's real readers. Understanding how Unnuth's poetry was received may balance the one-sided view of the context that can be received from the poet's own relationship to it. Examining all of these relationships—between administrated and administrator, the desire to live and the desire to remember, between emotion and history, between chronology and a relationship to the past, between imagined and actual readers—I and, as you read, we, arrive at a reading of the poetry which allows us to simultaneously relate to it and to understand it. This thesis examines these relationships, tracing the steps so as to conclude with an analysis of the method.

When I read Unnuth first, his words not only drew me in, they surprised and unsettled me. They most certainly 'undercut the imagery of subordination',⁸ but they

⁷ 'Optimistic Journey.' #64. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 83.

⁸ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

differed from canonical postcolonial literature in three significant ways: he does not write in English, he is not wholly diasporic, and he is not comfortably marginal. These three characteristics are not shared by all literature that is considered postcolonial, but they come together to implicitly define a canon.⁹ As Sandra Ponzanesi writes in her *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture*, ‘the undisputed role of the English language within the postcolonial debate and literatures’ makes sense in context: postcolonial literature displaced or supplemented reading lists in English departments.¹⁰ Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*, for example, figures on the University of New Mexico’s Postcolonial Literature and Theory reading list for good reason: it looks at the way in which London and Britishness are changed by West Indian immigration.¹¹ Sajjad Zaheer’s Urdu novel *London Ki Ek Raat (A Night in London)* about Pakistanis in London has not received critical attention in the same context. This may change with the novel’s recent translation into English by Bilal Hashmi.¹² Ponzanesi, too, translates the Italian passages to which she refers into English as she ‘complicates the postcolonial condition’ by analysing works both in English and Italian. Like Ponzanesi, I translate *The Teeth of the Cactus* in chapter two in order to give it more visibility and attention in this context. Hashmi’s translation may not be enough to garner additional attention to Zaheer’s novel, however, because its protagonists are student visitors, not immigrants. Selvon’s *Lonely Londoners* presents the formation of a diaspora, a hybrid identity which looks back towards the

⁹ The University of New Mexico’s list is not considered an official canon in postcolonial scholarship but does show which books a scholar of postcolonial literature would be expected to have read. ‘Ph.D. Reading List: Post-Colonial Literature and Theory,’ University of New Mexico, <http://english.unm.edu/resources/documents/post-colonial.pdf>, updated 7/2003, accessed 19 November 2012.

¹⁰ Sandra Ponzanesi, *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), xiv.

¹¹ Though originally published in 1956, *The Lonely Londoners* is so well read as to have been reissued in a Penguin ‘Modern Classics’ edition: Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

¹² Sajjad Zaheer, *A Night in London*, trans. by Bilal Hashmi (Noida: Harper Perennial, 2011).

Caribbean while becoming fully a part of British culture. Ponzanesi (who looks at writing from the Indian and Afro-Italian diasporas) explains the importance of diaspora as a concept for readers of postcolonial literature; she writes that ‘diasporic spaces allow for the representation of those who straddle two or more cultures, languages, and ethnicities and offer a way of rethinking postcolonialism as blurring the lines of national enclaves’.¹³ Unnuth’s poetry subverts colonial discourse, as the thesis goes on to show, but he writes from within his country of origin. However, he is third-generation Mauritian. In the third chapter, I look at the ways in which Hindi in Mauritius has contributed to a national literary culture, but also examine whether Unnuth can be read as part of a larger Indian diaspora. Finally, Nick Bentley describes Selvon’s Londoners as ‘a marginalised group’, so that the novel represents the point of view of those on the periphery, subverting colonial politics of representation.¹⁴ However, as Ponzanesi writes, ‘while certain writers are marginal within discourses structured according to the center-periphery dichotomy, they are dominant within other postcolonial lineages’,¹⁵ and in the fourth chapter I position Unnuth as both central and peripheral in the Mauritian context (and explore the effect on his work). Like Ponzanesi, I attempt to complicate the postcolonial canon here, not by arguing for theoretical changes but by demonstrating that the theory allows for the canon to be enlarged.

In the next three chapters, I explore how and why *The Teeth of the Cactus* approaches language, diaspora, and marginality in unexpected ways to subvert the remnants of plantation culture. As I reach the fifth chapter, however, my theoretical

¹³ Sandra Ponzanesi, *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), xv.

¹⁴ Nick Bentley, ‘Black London: The Politics of Representation in Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*,’ *Wasafiri*, vol. 18, issue 39, 2003: 41.

¹⁵ Sandra Ponzanesi, *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), xiv.

journey mirrors that of Subramaniam Shankar. Shankar, in his 'Midnight's Orphans, or a Postcolonialism Worth Its Name', writes against Rushdie's assertion, in his introduction to the Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947-1997, that 'the true Indian literature of the first postcolonial half-century has been made in the language that the British left behind'; that is, in English, and his correlated claim that vernacular literatures suffer from parochialism.¹⁶ Shankar counters with, in part, the example of K.N. Subramanyam, a postcolonial poet who wrote in Tamil but was very much engaged with modernist poetry from beyond Tamil Nadu and beyond India. He calls Subramanyam's poetry an example of 'transnational postcolonialism'.¹⁷ By the time this discussion is transformed into the book *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular*, he positions Subramanyam's poetry as also part of the complementary, but distinct, theoretical orientation 'World Literature'.¹⁸ This new orientation has developed in the last ten years, though obviously the practice of reading literature from around the world is not new. Instead, David Damrosch and Franco Moretti's understandings of what the term means now have become the most regularly cited. Both Damrosch and Moretti (as I will explore further in the fifth chapter) see World Literature as focused on transnational relationships in literature, similar to Shankar's Subramanyam. When the transnational relationships are amongst postcolonial works, 'transnational postcolonialism' seems apt, but the difference is in the perspective from which the scholar is reading. Postcolonial literature sees national literatures becoming mixed; Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia*, for example, sees

¹⁶ Subramaniam Shankar, 'Midnight's Orphans, or A Postcolonialism Worth Its Name,' *Cultural Critique*, 56, Winter 2004: 64, 67.

¹⁷ Subramaniam Shankar, 'Midnight's Orphans, or A Postcolonialism Worth Its Name,' *Cultural Critique*, 56, Winter 2004: 83.

¹⁸ Subramaniam Shankar, *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

its protagonist negotiating different identities, all of them, however, British.¹⁹ World Literature takes the conceptual step of assuming a world where the nation is no longer the point of departure. It is not negating postcolonialism, but differentiating itself. Franco Moretti captures the consequences of this recognition when he notes that ‘World Literature cannot be literature, bigger; what we are already doing, just more of it. It has to be different. The categories have to be different.’²⁰ It is still a young field, and will only gain credence as it is applied to more texts. For David Damrosch, these texts are those which have already gained audiences beyond their national literary sphere.²¹ For me, reading *The Teeth of the Cactus* as World Literature made sense because more striking to me than the poems’ language, discussion of diaspora (or lack thereof), and marginality (and lack thereof), was the poems’ similarity to poems by Octavio Paz and Yevgenii Yevtushenko. However, there is no context, in secondary literature or in conversations with readers of Unnuth today, in which these similarities can be discussed. I feel that Unnuth, like Subramanyam, is transnational and postcolonial, and I feel he can be usefully read from the World Literature perspective because his writing shows him to be engaging with the idea that literary relationships can transcend the national. Indeed, he puts forth his own version of what global poetry can be. Perhaps readers have not found this compelling because, as the previous chapters pushed against, his work could easily be (and has been) neglected in postcolonial literary scholarship. The final analytical work in my thesis, then, is that the postcolonial *The Teeth of the Cactus* enlarges the field of World Literature by showing that even texts which have the potential to be read as transnational should be read from a World Literature perspective.

¹⁹ *Buddha of Suburbia* is also on the University of New Mexico’s Postcolonial Literature list. Hanif Kureishi, *Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991).

²⁰ Franco Moretti, ‘Conjectures on World Literature,’ *Debating World Literature*, ed. by Christopher Prendergast (London: Verso, 2004), 149.

²¹ David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4.

Thus far in this chapter, I have introduced briefly the three main themes of the thesis: context, the postcolonial canon, and World Literature. The chapter will proceed by introducing each theme fully. First, I provide a basic historical context of *The Teeth of the Cactus*. Next, I discuss postcolonial and World Literature theory in relation to Unnuth and his poetry. Finally, I expand upon the short outline of the thesis given above to introduce the coming chapters.

II. *The First Place: Unnuth's Mauritius*

Unnuth was born in Triolet, a largely Indo-Mauritian village hosting one of the major Hindu temples on the island, to parents who were not in poverty but had seen better days. (He still lives on the long main street of the town, which is lined by shops and homes but is not completely out of earshot of the shore.) In the year of his birth, 1937, Mauritius saw fierce riots over conditions on the sugar plantations on which many Indo-Mauritians were still earning their livelihood, and this unrest continued throughout his childhood, though never as violently. One of his most interesting reflections on his childhood (part of a series published in the newspaper *L'Mauricien*) concerns his relatively short period of working in the cane fields. He sets the scene with images also used in his poetry: 'The strong outburst of the midday sun. No leaf was moving. I was left behind by my colleagues in that suffocating heat. Time as though had come to a stop. My clothes drenched with sweat were stuck to my body. The coolness of the sweat was boosting up my morale to complete the work despite the tiredness and uneasiness amidst the heat.'²² The captain complains about his method in cutting the cane, and in the process berates him. Unnuth, still exhausted and sweating, calmly refuses to accept abuse, but is goaded until he throws his

²² Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Slices from a Life: Memoirs of a Great Author of Mauritius* (New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books, 2005), 102.

billhook at the captain. The village boy with few other prospects had effectively quit the job.

The rest of Unnuth's story about his development as a writer comes from an interview with Unnuth himself. He was kind enough to speak with me about *The Teeth of the Cactus* in August 2010. The story of his life is not a secret (though his personal life will not be covered except as it relates to his poetry), but the way he presents himself shows a strong sense of himself and his relationship to his society.²³ In his telling of the story, Unnuth's identity as a village boy is significant, as it sets him apart from other Indo-Mauritian writers who were better educated. He grew up speaking Bhojpuri and learned English, but he was one of the first generation to be offered Hindi at school, and simply enjoyed it, coming to identify in it a sort of feeling of home which he, too generously it seems, ascribes to others.²⁴ He never went to university, as he had to begin working to help his family in his teens, and the pride he takes in this can be described, perhaps, as perverse: the Mauritian Hindi literary sphere is educationally elite and this causes him to stand apart. He was eventually able to move towards literature. Although his family was poor, they were lovers of literature, especially in Hindi. He remembers his father as loving to expound on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and his mother as teaching her daughters the

²³ Abhimanyu Unnuth, interview by author, Triolet, Mauritius, August 2010. We'll return to this interview many times throughout the thesis. We spoke about his life, poetry, religious beliefs, and hopes for the future, as well as his own influences.

²⁴ Mauritian literature in Bhojpuri also exists. Mauritian Bhojpuri is similar to the language spoken in the 'Bhojpuri belt' in northern India that Mauritian champions of Bhojpuri write for an international audience, but the two languages are linguistically distinct enough for linguists to differentiate between them. Overall, the literary output is small relative to French or Hindi, but it is obviously an important symbol of heritage. Generally, though, it would have been seen as the oral language that complemented Hindi as a literary (and, in Mauritius, therefore more prestigious) language. Why doesn't Unnuth champion both languages? I believe that it may be a simple question of circumstance. In 1982, when the Mauritian Bhojpuri Institute was founded, *The Teeth of the Cactus* was already being published. Unnuth was making a name for himself as a writer in Hindi, so perhaps champions of Bhojpuri would not have wanted his help. They were, after all, trying to make a distinction between Hindi and Bhojpuri as literary languages. This thesis will not discuss Mauritian Bhojpuri in any detail because it is not relevant to *The Teeth of the Cactus*, but readers interested in the relationship between language and culture in Mauritius can look to the discussion of Eisenlohr on page 29 and of Gandhi on pages 128-129 for further information on how Hindi came to be seen as culturally significant.

letters—though always advising him to focus on something more lucrative. Unnuth did not follow her advice. He taught school at first, and then sent his first literary work off to Rajkamal Prakashan in Delhi. To everyone's surprise, it was accepted. Being published by a respected publishing house was a feat that was not well-received by those superior to him in the school hierarchy—it was more common to self-publish at cost. His popularity grew as his writing continued, with him growing all the while much more involved in the Mauritian literary plane. He wrote novels and short stories prolifically, plays upon occasion, and essays often. He associated himself with many institutions, even the Mahatma Gandhi Institute (a specialist non-Western studies university, where he served as editor to the literary magazine), although he would not be able to benefit, in terms of employment, from literature's further retreat into the educational structure. Indeed, he did not expect things to turn out the way they have; he expected more would be able to follow his route to success and expected more would follow his footsteps. Outspoken about his support for Hindi as a heritage marker, Unnuth used it in many varying ways: the latest *Mahabharata* TV series to be shown in Mauritius was also scripted by Unnuth. He has never been in exile from Mauritius, choosing to stay in Mauritius though he enjoys his travel to India to interact with his publishers and readers: his work has always been a comment or a reflection upon the state of his native surroundings.

Why was the harsh physical labour of cane cutting Unnuth's birthright? Geography plays its part. Mauritius lies at 20°10'S, 57°3'E, taking up about 2,040 square kilometres in the middle of the Indian Ocean, with its closest major neighbors Madagascar, 650 miles to the west, and Réunion, 120 to the southwest. Mumbai lies 2,880 miles to the northeast, and Cape Town 2,568 miles to the southwest. Though the modern-day Republic of Mauritius consists of the Mascarene islands of Mauritius,

Rodrigues, Cargados Carajos, and the Agalega Islands, Unnuth's writing, like most of Mauritian literature, concerns as yet primarily the island of Mauritius itself. In the modern Mauritian islanders' imagination, the smaller and more impoverished islands are quintessentially isolated, rendering the island of Mauritius itself less so. In fact, since the time of its population, Mauritius has never been without ties to Europe, Africa, and Asia, and less directly to other parts of the world—its inhabitants, all from elsewhere so recently that tales of arrival could be measured in ways commensurate with modern historical data gathering—fostered and propagated trade ties. The climate of the island allows for safe passage from elsewhere in the Indian Ocean and beyond: northeasterly winds blow from October until April and southwesterly winds from May until October; products of tropical agriculture could be, and were, easily exported. Mauritius, especially those parts of the coast which could be used as port cities, were in an extremely valuable address from a mercantilist perspective. If a crop could be harvested there it would easily and fruitfully fit into the colonial systems of global trade. Sugar, colonists realised, could be that crop.

Sugar—a wise choice in that it was better able to withstand the cyclones that periodically ravaged the island—required quite a lot of labour to produce, and the Mauritian population grew in accordance with that need for labour. Before the 17th century, the island's population consisted of wildlife and the occasional sailor. Arab and Portuguese merchants were aware of the island, but without any particular plans for its future, they never set up a permanent trading post. The Dutch arrived to settle in the 1630s, eventually replaced by the French and then the English.²⁵ The Dutch settled in what is now Grand Port, in the south, and named the island after Prince Maurice Nassau. Their multiple attempts at agriculture, for which they brought over

²⁵ For more information on the Dutch in Mauritius, see Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

settlers from Holland and slaves from Africa, were laid low by rat infestations and, in 1695, a hurricane. They were not able to recoup the natural resources they saw around them, nor build up a market for manufactured Dutch goods. In 1710, the island was evacuated. These Dutch settlers can be considered the most native inhabitants of Mauritius, but none of their descendants survive on the island. However, they left behind those slaves who had run away. They were left without the easy prey of the dodo bird, which the Dutch had hunted to extinction, for only five years of relative solitude on the island. Nothing is known of these slaves' histories, but the dodo continues to have a presence in the Mauritian imagination. This is dissimilar to its global reputation as an unadaptable dolt of an animal; instead, pictures and figurines of the dodo are a visual symbol of Mauritius as unique in the world, and, especially in relation to the tourism industry, where images of the dodo are widespread, unique in what it has to offer the world.

The Mauritian literary sphere is grounded in colonial French civilization. The French arrived in 1715, having already made inroads in relatively nearby Réunion, Madagascar, and Pondicherry. As much as they could, the French settlers tried to turn the island into a recognizably French society: during French rule, the island was called Isle de France. Mauritius would soon lose its Francophone vernacular (though Mauritian Kreol shares many characteristics with French)²⁶ but it retains a certain pride in this French cultural foundation and in the Francophone literature that was the first Mauritian literary corpus. Even after the British takeover of Mauritius, French culture and language were afforded prestige.²⁷ Franco-Mauritian literature in fact saw its significant beginnings not long before the rise of English and Hindi literatures in

²⁶ Mauritian Kreol can also be spelled Mauritian Creole or called Morisyen. I have chosen to use the term 'Mauritian Kreol' for this language because the term 'Kreol' illustrates its similarities to other creole languages, while spelling it with a 'K' is most consistent with Mauritian Kreol orthography.

²⁷ Vinaye Goodary, interview by author, Moka, Mauritius, August 2010.

Mauritius: 1880s versus 1930s. However, their head start mattered: those French writers who became famous in those first fifty years were read and held to be representative not just by the French community but by all of Mauritian community.²⁸

Although its literature would not be written for a hundred years, Mauritian cultural ideals, which became literary ideals, were being formed in the 18th century in relation to French culture as a manifestation of French power. French colonial Mauritius was a plantation culture, and Mauritian historian Ly Tio Fane Pineo describes the society thusly:

For the casual visitor, the plantation society was synonymous with a certain style of leisurely life. True, inmates of the 'grande case' were appreciative of the fine art of living. For the gentle sex, music, drawing, reading, and painting filled the long hours when the master was on inspection tour in the fields or in the factory. Lunch served by the 'domestique' in livery assembled all the members of the family at midday. A certain decorum was always the rule, the ladies in the long and glamorous crinoline dress, while the men, even on inspection tour in the fields, were impeccably dressed, their neck imprisoned in a stiff collar and the shoes protected with immaculate spatterdash. Hospitality towards overseas visitors or neighbors was profuse, but unusually fine expressions of sympathy were generally quiescent as far as workers were concerned.²⁹

French Mauritius in the 18th century was a society in which a small number of people enjoyed and abused disproportionate power—similar to plantation culture that would also spring up and continue after the French in the US, the West Indies, and British-controlled Fiji. Plantations, or their former shells, continue to dominate the Mauritian landscape. Yet the importance of freedom also has a physical, omnipresent manifestation for Mauritians thinking back on the components of their national identity: La Morne, a cliff on the southern coast, is infamous as a site from which

²⁸ This thesis will not discuss Franco-Mauritian writing in any detail because Unnuth does not look to it as his literary heritage, nor do his works show any influence of it. Although Mauritius has literatures in many languages, 'Mauritian literature' as a whole is very fragmented because works in different languages are not in conversation with one another.

²⁹ Huguette Ly Tio Fane Pineo, *Lured Away: the Life History of Indian Cane Workers In Mauritius* (Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1984), 67.

pursued slaves jumped to their deaths rather than return to bondage after marronage, or fleeing. Contemporary Francophone Mauritian-expat writer Ananda Devi has noted that a common Mauritian perspective on the island is to see it as both ‘a life raft and a prison.’³⁰ Unnuth uses prison imagery quite often in *The Teeth of the Cactus*, as well: in this selection from ‘All My Different Limbs’, he describes imprisonment as a type of disembodiment.³¹

...there
having been compelled to stay
my eyes, shrouded as they had become in sooty blackness
were my hope
my own heart was measure of my liveliness
I have left it there in pieces
on that stone
on which waves disperse into foamy pieces
just like a corpse,
all the things of its lifetime
left behind in different drawers
itself collapsed without identity on the pyre

Unnuth’s poetry can definitely be read as a response to bondage.

Unnuth’s poems express a fierce rage towards the plantation system; in ‘After the Auction’,³² he writes,

I wasn’t able to hide my ribcage
because my share
—these layers of flesh—
at the auction became fated to you.

The auction setting here reminds us of another type of auction, the slave auction. In fact, the French, who governed the Mauritian plantocracy in the 1700s, had enslaved mainland Africans to work in the fields. The British, who took over in 1812, inherited the slave system, but were open to tinkering with it for more lucrative results. The British began to fear that in the colonies at large, sugar was being overproduced,

³⁰ Ananda Devi, interview with Stephanie Jones and Susheila Nasta, London, 25 May 2011.

³¹ ‘All My Different Limbs.’ #28. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 35.

³² ‘After the Auction.’ #49. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 64.

driving the price down too far for the desired profit. Ryden asserts that it was the planters' desire to drive the price of sugar back up by using less labour that led them to bend to and eventually comply with the demands of the abolitionists.³³ In 1832, slavery was abolished. Nonetheless, slave owners were not only compensated monetarily for their loss, they were allowed to keep their slaves for an additional three to five year indenture period. During this period, slaves worked towards their freedom, and, in the ideal conception of the scheme, acclimatised themselves to wage labour. However, the planters did not foresee the extreme effect that abolition, in addition to their cruelty and the misery of the back-breaking labour involved in gathering the knife-sharp sugarcane plants, would have on labour supply: after indenture, none of the slaves agreed to work on the sugar plantations. With such an acute shortage for such a labour-intensive product, the Indian labour supply to which the British had access moved from back-up position to primary supply.³⁴ Mauritius was in fact used as the model for the system of indentured labour for Indians all throughout the colonies: it was the first to use them on a large scale and its fiscal success was an example for systems of indenture thereafter enacted in Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname, Fiji, and elsewhere. These Indian labourers were generally misled about the nature of their new work, and some share Hugh Tinker's opinion that

³³ Ryden, David Beck, 'Does Decline Make Sense? The West Indian Economy and the Abolition of the British Slave Trade,' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Volume 21, Issue 3, 2001: 347-374.

³⁴ In north India in the mid-1800s, there was an excess of poverty and a perceived excess of labour. The new *zamindari* system exacerbated environmental factors, and for a population already inclined towards migrant labour, being an indentured labourer was a choice. The opportunity to work led many Biharis, especially, to continue to come over as indentured labourers after abolition, even though British regulation of terrible working conditions was ineffective: in fact, immigration increased in 1886. For others, however, degrees of deception (advertisements portrayed the situation awaiting labourers in Mauritius as prosperous and healthy) or outright coercion was used to take migrants. A story that remains popular in Mauritius, but unsubstantiated, is the story that labourers were told that they would find gold on the island. No promises to this effect exist in the surviving documents, but it may have been a far-reaching oral tale that did entice many migrants. On the other hand, as Gulshan Sooklall pointed out to his BA Hindi students at the University of Mauritius in August 2010, it may have been a story that became popular after migration for labourers to explain to their children what had led them to such a life.

indenture was 'a new form of slavery.'³⁵ The two share an imagery of pain and exploitation. Unnuth inherited this imagery not just from his own work on the fields, but also because of his family history: Unnuth's grandparents were Hindu immigrants from the Indian state of Bihar who had arrived on the island already indentured to labour on its plantations.³⁶

It could be expected that labouring populations of Mauritius would coalesce into a shared identity in a movement similar to South African Black Consciousness. Yet *The Teeth of the Cactus* is a starkly two-toned work, with nothing intimating the existence, let alone interaction with, the other exploited ethnic groups on the island.³⁷ Part of the disconnect is the groups' historical attitude towards interaction with the white ruling class: the Muslims are largely descended from traders who were never enslaved. Also South Asian, they funded temples to help the Hindu indentured migrants, and shared news of the world with them through their mercantile network, but were not as a group wholly involved in slavery, indenture, or abolition of either. African slaves, whose descendants form the General Population, were characterised in

³⁵ Hugh Tinker calls the indenture system 'a new system of slavery' (Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974)) and W.W. Hunter 'semi-slavery (cited in Saroja Sundarajan, *From Bondage to Deliverance* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2006), 20)'. Perhaps the wisest way to compare the two is to recognise the 'slavery-indenture continuum,' as identified by Jagdish Mankrakhian of the University of Mauritius ('Examination of Certain Aspects of the Slavery-Indenture Continuum of Mauritius' in Bissoondoyal and Servansing, *Indian Labour Immigration: Papers presented at the International Conference on Indian Labour Immigration*. Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1984). For those brought to work by deceit or coercion, or whose ability to buy their freedom was stalled by nefarious means, it was perilously close to slavery. Materially, conditions were not different. Psychologically, hope that the period of indenture would soon end was a boon. In Mauritius, slavery and indenture were slightly farther apart on the continuum when considering cultural effects because of the change from French to British rule. During French rule, overseers suppressed any manifestations of African cultural life amongst the slaves, while during British rule, indentured labourers' cultural life was not suppressed.

³⁶ Abhimanyu Unnuth, interview by author, Triolet, Mauritius, August 2010.

³⁷ The population of the island of Mauritius rose from zero to just over 1,000,000 between 1638 and 2008 (the most recent census year). This lack of a precolonial population and the relative transparency of the island's process of population growth has played a role in shaping the relationships between ethnic groups on the island and in shaping the understanding that each ethnic group has of its connection to Mauritius. By the 20th century, these groups were officially described as Hindu, Muslim, Chinese, and General Population; this unsettling system of classification has been studied by socio-linguists and anthropologists, both Mauritian and foreign, on many occasions.

the French and British imagination as runaways and layabouts.³⁸ To escape being returned to the plantation system, they moved to small fishing villages and did not have a great deal of contact with the indentured labourers until after their periods of indenture. The indentured labourers ended up being largely from India, but Saroja Sundarajan notes that the Chinese population was also courted, writing that

Initially, the planters decided to obtain indentured labour from both India and China. But later, between the two countries, they preferred India when they understood that labour in India was plentiful and ridiculously cheap and that Indian workers would be susceptible to exploitation. The Chinese, on the other hand, would not submit themselves to be exploited by the white planters and would insist on being treated on par with the British labourers. The planters also learned that non-compliance with their demands would make the Chinese labourers ‘discontented, disorderly, and roguish.’ Another disadvantage was the long distance between China and the West Indian Colonies. The attitude of Indian labourers, which was in sharp contrast to that of the Chinese, attracted the planters to the Indian subcontinent.³⁹

The Chinese population on Mauritius grew into a shop-owning class, with each generation bringing over and helping new migrants themselves rather than through the indenture system. Indians, stereotyped as hardworking and docile, were called ‘coolies’ and considered to be mini-Britishers.⁴⁰ While there were instances of

³⁸ Ruma Bheeroo, interview by author, Floreal, Mauritius, August 2010.

³⁹ Saroja Sundarajan, *From Bondage to Deliverance: Indentured Labour in Mauritius and British Guiana* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2006), 12.

⁴⁰ In civic life, Indo-Mauritians started newspapers and as the nation itself grew apart from Britain, their participation in the civic life of the country of which they formed an ethnic majority increased as well. Although little of their actions suggested over-turning the system, Indians’ manipulation of the system for their own goals soon changed the fabric of Mauritian society in a way that the plantocracy had not foreseen. As soon as the first round of immigrants had finished their contracts and saved money, from the 1840s onwards, they began to settle into small-scale farming. Between 1870 and 1930, an Indian landowning class took shape. In this period, known as the Grand Morcellement, sugar plantation owners facing financial difficulties resorted to selling the lands on the edges of their plantations to free Indo-Mauritians. Free Indo-Mauritians did not have it easy, either—one could easily be erroneously arrested as a vagrant who had left his indenture contract—but many stuck it out. By 1930, Indo-Mauritians owned about 40% of Mauritian farmland—not each family necessarily lived on allotments large enough to push them into a middle-class standard of living individually, but together the community was becoming more powerful. Newspapers in the late 19th century show that many migrants, aware that the need for labour declined along with sugar plantation profits, pushed for the end of immigration from India on economic grounds—Indo-Mauritians saw themselves as an entrenched group in Mauritius and began to think in terms of group interests. However, the new Mauritius they envisioned would not be necessarily a new society: Jay Narain Roy wrote in *Mauritius in Transition*, in 1960, when the group interest was understood to be self-determination, that ‘the average educated Mauritian who dreams of self-determination knows that he has learned his dreams in

resistance in more obvious ways, such as shirking work or strikes, it is true that the Indian immigrants largely hoped to better their circumstances by working with the system, and they banded together with other Indian indentured labourers to do so.

Their demographic advantage (they were fast becoming the majority population on the island) was paired with another advantage the General Population did not have. The French were insistent upon suppressing any cultural expression on behalf of their slaves. The British denigrated the coolies but left enough leeway for labour communities to recreate a cultural environment, if not similar to, then based on, what they had left behind. Most of the labourers were Hindu and their religious life was the lifeblood of each village and the network of immigrants. Rather than write about the interaction and harmony between ethnicities as might be expected of a writer from ‘the Rainbow Isle,’ Unnuth describes his homeland with the religious imagery of his subgroup. In ‘Wrath’, for example, the anger he expressed earlier is still present and this time expands to a cosmic rage:⁴¹

the fairy on the shores of Fairy Lake
is desirous of doing the lord’s
tandava dance of destruction.
if the wheel of fate does not change the course,
then from the suicide of personal dissolution
like the asura who was burned to ashes,
you’ll, too, become ash

the British education and the British concept of democracy, and Parliamentary institutions’ (169). While Mauritius had never become a little Britain, the Indian population, which filled many of the civil positions vacated, is still today often considered (by all four segments of a population very ethnically segregated in self-perception, if not in practice, into Africans, Europeans, Indians, and Creoles) to be closest in stereotype to those minor British civil servants. English, while a colonial import, was not seen as necessarily an imposition by the Indo-Mauritian community, but rather an additional language of civic life. It was not a replacement for the languages spoken at home or in cultural gatherings, not a literary language yet, but a political tool which carried with it cultural prestige and would become very helpful in the coming century and especially as an alternative to Hindi in the post-Unnuth literary sphere. The complex history of interreligious and interethnic interaction will be taken up in each of the chapters to come.

⁴¹ ‘Wrath.’ #10. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikhṛus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 12.

Here, the fairy [*pari*] is on the banks of the lake islanders call Ganga Talao; they attribute to the lake all of the auspicious qualities of the great river they left behind. It is a fitting place for the *tandava* dance, and this image casts the rage in the poem as pure destructive energy. Rage becomes the opposite of the desire to live, enabling suicide of personal dissolution. Asuras in Hindu mythology are often called demons in English, but their identity is a bit different. Adversarial brothers of the group of divine beings who eventually became lower-level gods, they have the dedication and power similar to lower-level gods, but, as the story goes, never the luck of devoting themselves to the right things. One asura who burned himself to ashes attained the power to burn things to a crisp by praying so devotedly that the gods felt it necessary to reward his prayer. The gods, then, feeling threatened, tricked him into using the power to burn himself to ashes.⁴² The deceit here is on the part of the gods, and yet it is clear that the asura's devotion of all of his energy to destruction, rather than life, is at the heart of all that happens. The asura here has power over his own life, but he is not the only one with power over his desire to live: both his superiors and his adversaries share in this power insofar as he draws them into the orbit of his own life, giving them a stake in whether he lives or dies. Unnuth's poems resonate with Hindu images, concepts, and lore as he questions life, death, power, and meaning.

III. *Reading Unnuth's Indo-Mauritian Poetry While Looking Back*

Certainly, Unnuth sees himself as the descendant not of any prototypical Mauritian, but as an Indo-Mauritian. In our interview, Unnuth described himself as a creative person who stands up for Indo-Mauritians' ability to tell the story of Indo-

⁴² This story, known by its protagonist, the demon Bhasmasura, is further explored in Peter Manuel, *East Indian Music in the West Indies: Tan-singing, Chutney, and the Making of Indo-Caribbean Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 237.

Mauritians.⁴³ Like his ancestors, he finds importance in cultural maintenance, seeing it to be the only way in a new, changing Mauritius to make sure that Indo-Mauritians get an honest account of how they came to be where they are. In his preface to Bhisimadev Seebaluck's *Mahabharata: The Eternal Conflict*, he writes that the adaptation of the epic in this new play 'gives a new awareness and reassessment of the relevance of the great heritage in today's decaying society.' He goes on to quote Chinghiz Aitmatov, as saying, 'We turn to myths in an attempt to pour ancient blood into contemporaneity.'⁴⁴ Like Aitmatov, the Kyrgyz writer well known for *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, Unnuth is multilingual. Aitmatov began to write in Kyrgyz and slowly transitioned to Russian, while Unnuth is a Hindi writer, a complex legacy itself, through and through. He sees Hindi literary expression as his heritage, the Indo-Mauritian heritage, as strongly as memories of plantation labour, and sees himself telling stories of Indo-Mauritian heritage in his poetry. In our interview in his home, his family and other visitors popping in and out spoke in Kreol (and he responded to them likewise), I spoke to him in English (and indeed he mentioned that he could have translated his work into English himself had he been so inclined), but when speaking about literature and representing himself as a writer, he spoke in Hindi.⁴⁵

In poetry, history and expression are often conflated. J. Mohit of the Apravasi Ghat Trust Fund, a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Site which commemorates indenture at the site of the arrival of migrant labour to the island, scorns all Indo-Mauritian writers as luring

⁴³ Abhimanyu Unnuth, interview by author, Triolet, Mauritius, August 2010.

⁴⁴ Abhimanyu Unnuth, 'Preface.' in Bhisimadev Seebaluck, *Mahabharat: The Eternal Conflict*, <http://kiltir.com/english/b0017/download/mahabharat-preface.pdf> (5 April 2009).

⁴⁵ It was certainly a multilingual day (as every day in Mauritius has the potential to be), but one thing he did not want to discuss was any of the language in *The Teeth of the Cactus*. He wanted his literature to stand on its own, yes, but he was also surprised that it was being revisited. In chapter 5, I will speak specifically about his relationship to *The Teeth of the Cactus*.

readers away from histories no longer inaccessible in the Mauritian archives.⁴⁶ Mohit's derision is echoed in the works of scholars such as Chidi Amuta, who writes against an anthropological or ethnographic reading of African literature which assumes that literature is always a realistic reproduction of society.⁴⁷ For Amuta, by virtue of the roots of anthropology and ethnography in an imperialist academy, these assumptions are based in the desire to believe in generalizations about a society which paint it as continuously traditional. Certainly this danger is no trifle for Unnuth's works in which scenes of the field, certainly associated in his work with a reading of history which connects the past to a timeless group identity, are central. Mohit was most likely referring to Unnuth's most famous novel, *Lal Pasina*, part of a trilogy of historical fiction set in the days of indenture.⁴⁸ He could just as easily have been referring to a poem like 'Satiating', which in one reading underlines the view of Indians as docile and not at all worldly workers:⁴⁹

he brings drops of sweat

⁴⁶ Jeewan Mohit, interview by author, Port Louis, Mauritius, August 2010.

⁴⁷ Chidi Amuta, 'The Nigerian Civil War and the Evolution of Nigerian Literature,' *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Volume 17, No. 1, 1983: 85.

⁴⁸ *Lal Pasina* is Unnuth's most popular work in Mauritius, where it is taught on the university syllabus as a story through which students can learn about their history. It is also his most popular work abroad, having been translated into French by Kessen Buddhoo and Isabel Jarry and into English by myself; chapter six, especially, will deal with the work's translations in more depth. It is popular not only because of its accessible writing style, but because Unnuth makes the emotional reactions of his characters to indenture relatable. In an excerpt from the 2012 English translation [accessible in appendix A], villagers respond to the growing political activism they see around them: their responses are realistically varied, with some characters being for public aggression, others against it, and many only or primarily worried about the effect it will have on their friends and family.

In this scene, history comes to life because it pervades a complex world of human relationships: Kissan is worried about his son, not only because of the dangers outside but because, as an old widower whose friends have been dying, he feels his son is all he has. His son's friends, Dhanlal and Dawood, view him as a fatherly figure and are not eager to tell them the news which implicates Madan in the latest unrest, even though as readers we know that Kissan himself was once at the centre of the labourers' protests. Even the horrors Sunuwa has come to at the hands of the dogs is amplified by the awkwardness of the human relationships involved: the white plantation owner's daughter is both kind and callous to him, and the dogs' barking brings up a memory not only of physical brutality, but of the difficulty of navigating the social world. Unnuth brings up Sunuwa as a figure who is at once inspirational and confusing for the protagonist, Kissan, and the historical likelihood of anyone ever saying such words out loud is less important to the power of the novel as historical fiction than the understanding that such mental calculations were an implicit part of Indo-Mauritian lives.

⁴⁹ 'Satiating.' #11. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 14.

on his forehead to the field,
labouring, sowing-
when the blood-smearred crop is ready
someone else has
gathered those full green kernels
off and away into their safe-chest...

Here, the labourer is not trying to escape the bonds of indenture, but is, indeed, 'labouring, sowing' all for 'someone else'. When he finally reacts in the last two lines,

because of the sweat, wrath arisen,
the labourer has swallowed the sun.

his reaction is literary, and offers no specific historically-accurate description of resistance. Postcolonial scholars Simon Gikandi and Talal Asad counter that reading literature, not just as exclusively historical data, but rather with the view of understanding a society, can be useful, and that one can avoid making the faulty assumptions described by Amuta by keeping in mind the historical context of anthropology, ethnography, and history itself. Those narrow readings may describe society, yes, but as Asad says, 'what matters more are the kinds of political projects cultural inscriptions are embedded in. Not experiments in ethnographic representation for their own sake, but modalities of political intervention should be our primary object of concern.'⁵⁰ Certainly readers cannot and should not assume that the emotions Unnuth ascribes to the characters in his poetry actually crossed the minds of historical, rather than poetic, characters. What they can and should be concerned about is why and how it would matter if they did. Readers can, and I will in this work, look at how Unnuth seems to express history—how he desires to remember—and look at how their own understanding of that history causes them to read Unnuth differently to how he would read himself.

⁵⁰ In Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), 40.

The little secondary literature that engages with Unnuth's poetry usually does so in the context of the shared nationalist message in his prose and in his poetry. Patrick Eisenlohr's sociolinguistic study of Hinduism in Mauritius quotes Unnuth in a footnote. His understanding of Unnuth is not the most comprehensive of looks at Unnuth, but, like the rest of his significant study, one of the most analytical. Eisenlohr's commentary on Unnuth's quote reflects the scepticism that Eisenlohr has of Unnuth's version of Mauritian history:

The writings of Abhimanyu Unnuth, the most prominent Hindi writer of Mauritius and the winner of several literary prizes in India, focus on the suffering of the Indian indentured laborers during the colonial period... [Unnuth attempts to] depict how Hindi, especially in the form of collective reading and chanting of the Ramacaritamanas, became a form of resistance against the oppression by the planters, who, he claims, tried to suppress the learning of Hindi among the Indian laborers. Unnuth's particular version of remembering the situation of the Indian indentured immigrants in colonial Mauritius ends with the claim that the cultivation of Hindi represents the greatest and most crucial achievement in the 'preservation' of Indian culture in Mauritius. 'The biggest reason for the greatness of Indianness and Indian culture in Mauritius has been the creative process in Hindi' [Unnuth 1988, 143].⁵¹

Eisenlohr reads Unnuth accurately insofar as he understands the centrality of the Indo-Mauritian identity in Unnuth's writing, and he understands that to Unnuth, as to many of the other subjects of his book, Hindi has greater significance than simply the language in which they speak or write. Eisenlohr's own understanding of the historical trajectory of history sees the intentionality by which Hindi was propagated as disproving its own claims of inherence and authenticity. Eisenlohr's interest is not in literature, and though his analysis is on point it can be taken further. In the quote above, Eisenlohr seems to be alluding mainly to *Lal Pasina*, to which I referred earlier, and one could imagine that he would be even less enthused by the introduction to the novel: Unnuth opens with a scene featuring the arrival of Buddhist mendicants

⁵¹ Patrick Eisenlohr, *Little India: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 294-295.

to Mauritius in some proto-historical period. Whilst an interpretation of the scene as one in which Unnuth irresponsibly stirs up ethnic tension by falsely giving Indo-Mauritians a claim of being first on the island would be in line with the scepticism with which Eisenlohr views nationalism based on non-academic interpretations of language growth, the work that the scene does in the novel tempers this. The introduction serves less to glorify and legitimise communalism—which is not a theme of the book—and more to underline the temporal logic behind the slow awakening of consciousness of the novel’s protagonists over multiple generations. If Mauritius is coded as a destination and a place of awakening and freedom before the events which take place in the main narrative, then the narrative is stripped of the idea of suspense. The protagonist is expected, for narrative symmetry, to experience a similar journey; the novel can then really delve deep into the hows and whys. His poetry is similarly characterised by a lack of suspense in its more limited narrative. The choice of the succession of images is not necessarily dominated by a desire for narrative clarity, but this adds texture and complexity to the narrative rather than potential for surprise. In ‘Morning Septet’, for instance, the ‘I’ in the poem gradually comes to terms with waking up trapped.⁵² On the fourth morning,

scraping off the bars of my cage
I arrived into the open air
only then did I realise that my language, my speech
was left there inside the cage

Gradually, the protagonist takes on the language of his captors. Eventually,

seventh morning: forgetting the identity I’d left in the cage
rendering myself unrecognizable
I, in the language of vultures,
set about singing their praises

⁵² ‘Morning Septet.’ #34. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 44-45.

It is a moving chain of events, and readers might map the experience of the protagonist here with the historical memory of the inevitable cultural assimilation that transpired during migration and indenture; this would certainly lead them to sympathise with the position of those who sought to improve the lot of Indo-Mauritians in part by uniting them through the Hindi language. The thesis focuses on Unnuth's poetry as the most interesting of Unnuth's writing in part because its lesser political stridency gives it room, which Unnuth uses, to be imbued with a very complex and interesting take on large questions like the desire to live and the desire to remember.⁵³ However, his writing in general indicates an author who is interested in history not as source material open to manipulation for political or socio-cultural ends, but rather as something which mediates the experience had by his ancestors and the experience of his readers.

Unnuth asks a lot of questions in *The Teeth of the Cactus*, couched in poem-specific imagery or metaphor but always pointing towards a question more abstract: 'who can tell now,' he asks in 'I Will Not Let You Go To Heaven', set in a mill, 'whether I'm grinding or being ground?' In 'The Pain of the Sun', he writes of rebellious thorns, 'will you give punishment to those guilty thorns?' In 'That Incomplete Right of Action', the question is at the same time more clear and more complicated: 'how can this corpse be mine?' He knows that questions and answers are not necessarily of the same worth; in 'It is Necessary to Buy a Question', he asks, 'will you sell me an answer?'⁵⁴ Unnuth's questioning in the *The Teeth of the Cactus*

⁵³ Because of the greater popularity and accessibility of Unnuth's novels, those who I interviewed in Mauritius were often surprised that I chose to focus on Unnuth's poetry, though Gulshan Sooklall, professor of Hindi literature at the University of Mauritius, agreed that his poetry showcases Unnuth's strengths.

⁵⁴ 'I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven.' #8. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 9-10.

'The Pain of the Sun.' #5. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 6.

'That Incomplete Right of Action.' #46. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 59.

aspires in one way to be a realization of history, one that brought to light the labourers' principles and recognition of wrongdoing in the face of injustice. The implied answers to the collection's questions seem to say that both during indenture and afterwards, with compatriots rather than the British in control of the country, those in power do not agree that following ethical standards is more important than self-promotion and greed in a quickly developing nation in a global economy—while the questions imply that a nation is not just its economy, and that personhood is not just breathing. To conclude that Unnuth is just another nationalist instigating old ethnic tensions in a modern country may be logical, but such a conclusion is blind to alternative renderings of nationalism. In Unnuth's case, the questions seem to say that it is not a diluted or heterogeneous nation-state, but modernity itself that makes him tense.

The two Mauritian critics, Janardan Kalicaran and Syamdhar Tiwari, both also write literature. In their criticism, they position Unnuth, as they seem to position themselves, as diasporic Indians writing from the margins: Kalicaran's work is a general overview of Unnuth's storylines, while Tiwari explains Mauritanisms in Unnuth's novels to an Indian audience.⁵⁵ They read through a filter of New Delhi even though Unnuth is speaking to them directly. It is clear from the content of Unnuth's poems that he feels maligned; it is also clear that he does not think of himself as communalistic, as Eisenlohr sees him, nor as marginal. Like many postcolonial writers who are neglected for similar reasons, as Karin Barber points out, he is not writing back to the centre,⁵⁶ and is therefore not writing in a register which

'It is Necessary to Buy a Question.' #30. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 38.

⁵⁵ Janardan Kalicaran, *Abhimanyu Anat kā Upanyās Jagat* (New Delhi: Hindi Book Center, 2001).
Syamdhar Tiwari, *Abhimanyu Anat* (New Delhi: Abhinava Prakāśan, 1984).

⁵⁶ Karin Barber, 'African Language Literature and Postcolonial Criticism,' *Research in African Languages*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 1995: 13.

would be modified for readers at the centre to understand. This does not necessarily render his writing wholly local, as will be examined later, but it does put a greater pressure on us to understand his own context as its own centre. If minority cultures share ‘a similar antagonistic relationship to the dominant culture, which seeks to marginalize them all,’ as David Lloyd and Abdul JanMohamed assert to begin their *Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*,⁵⁷ it makes sense that postcolonial readers celebrate those minority writers who use their positions in the margins as a perch from which to resist domination. However, what has happened in Mauritius makes equal sense: dominated cultures throw off the ascribed identity of a minority culture, and demographically and culturally embrace a majority-culture identity in order to leave their antagonisers behind. Unnuth writes from the centre of his nation and, as the following chapters will demonstrate, on an equal footing with writers from around the world.

IV. Mauritian Postcolonial and Mauritius in World Literature

From the start of my endeavour to illustrate a method for reading Unnuth’s *The Teeth of the Cactus*, I have sought to read in order to relate, to understand, and to analyse Unnuth’s imagery, his cadences, his sounds in the context of his fiercely Indo-Mauritian identity. In the forthcoming chapters, I focus my reading on the relationships in Unnuth’s work, asking, is it best to read Unnuth alongside other poets who have the same themes as Unnuth does (coolitude poets), or place in society as Unnuth does (Muktibodh, Maunick)? Eventually I find the strongest relationship in Unnuth’s poetry is a relationship to the world that he shares with, amongst others, Octavio Paz and Yevgenii Yevtushenko. It is not a fundamental break from a

⁵⁷ David Lloyd and Abdul JanMohamed. ‘Introduction.’ *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. by David Lloyd and Abdul JanMohamed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1.

postcolonial reading concerned with the power dynamics of colonialism in the previous two centuries and in the twenty-first century (because all three poets write about power dynamics in some way), but it is not only a postcolonial reading. Being a collection of poetry concerned with the time in which it was written, postcolonial literary criticism cannot help but be at its base; *The Teeth of the Cactus* is, after all, a work from a land from which there is no precolonial literature. In the poem ‘Equilibrium’, Unnuth writes,⁵⁸

I don't want your happiness
but having taken all the grief
on one of my shoulders
I've been left maimed
that's why, on my other shoulder
load just enough sorrow
so that after I drown, both sorrows
will become each other's support
until then on my own chest
I take the pangs of hunger
I will keep on rising and falling
unbalanced...

In this poem, the poem's protagonist asks not for happiness, but for sorrow. It seems both have their weight, and sorrow, too, weighs less if balanced on both shoulders, hardly even needing the shoulders for ‘after I drown, both sorrows will become each other's support’. Hunger, too, has its weight, and it is the heaviest burden of all: for the speaker, his impending drowning is not a sorrowful event in itself, but a way to escape receiving hunger pangs instead. Unnuth measures out the complex relationships of retribution here: happiness and sorrow both have weight, but happiness cannot even out sorrow and grief, nor can it alone cure hunger. The relationship between the powerful and the powerless is one of giving and taking, but complex in its consequences and in the desires of both sides. In ‘Equilibrium’, Unnuth

⁵⁸ ‘Equilibrium.’ #76. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 96.

grapples with the consequences of the power imbalances that propelled Mauritian history and indeed the entire colonial world.

Postcolonial literary criticism has come a long way since its use by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) to critically reinterpret popular texts, highlighting within them an implicit understanding of the non-Western world which justified colonial domination. Most notably, postcolonial writers have begun to write about literature produced since the onset of colonial rule by colonial subjects, highlighting within those texts not only the effects of Western colonial thought on their understanding of self, but of implicit intellectual resistance. Centred on a reading of English literature produced by British subjects or their descendants, postcolonial criticism has been successful in marking themes such as difference, violence, memory, hybridity, diaspora, and globalization as popular sites within literary works of resistance to colonial rule or its lasting effects in the post-Independence period. Postcolonial theory itself has been resisted, most relevantly here by Serrano's assertion that it has spread itself too widely, serving only as crude commentary on literature from French (and other non-British) colonies, and internally questioned by the likes of Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra as to which of its own implicit ideologies may have slowed down a natural expansion of postcolonial theory to the treatment of non-English texts.⁵⁹ Noting the limits of postcolonial theory while using it to test and categorise resistance in Hindi poetry written in Mauritius makes more precise the boundaries of postcolonial literary criticism's legitimate depth and breadth.

Theories of postcolonial literary criticism do not purport to speak fully for all literature written during the colonial period, though they seem to imply that all such

⁵⁹ Richard Serrano, *Against the Postcolonial* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2005).
Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge. 'What is Post(-)colonialism?' *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: a Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 276-291.

literature would be better (that is, more politically engaged and therefore aesthetically authentic) were it to deal with themes such as difference, violence, memory, hybridity, diaspora, and globalization (and also the themes of orality, travel, and queer studies which lay outside of the range of this piece of writing). Though this point often gets obscured in arguments against postcolonial theory which dwell on its jargon or its self-confidence, most simply those opposed to postcolonial literary criticism as a useful critical paradigm are those, therefore, who do not believe in the implication that literature falling into a postcolonial purview is necessarily better. It is an ideological position, one that cannot be held without noticing one's own perspective as fully grounded in a historical space, place, and moment, rather than an intellectual position such as formalism, which examines texts for techniques that point to mastery of writing and better literature. At the outset of my work, I must admit that I find engagement with themes adopted as central by postcolonial theorists has resulted in the most interesting of Mauritian Hindi collections of poetry, while necessarily and simultaneously finding works that do not deal with these themes less interesting. I find that engagement with the fact of colonialism, in this context in which pre-colonial roots are lacking, has led to a developed and coherent body of literature which excludes poems that parrot English romanticism or Indian ghazals in order to express experiences of unrequited love or wholly personal religious experiences.

Unnuth's poetry, certainly, can be considered an act of postcolonial 'reworlding'; that is, refashioning the world not as the colonists saw it but in a way that makes clear the agency of the colonial subjects—powerless as they may be materially, they always have the power of memory—and the multidirectionality of

globalization.⁶⁰ Marking something as ‘reworlding’ is an act of intralinguistic translation; after all, this method is not without its own context, one which is situated in Western theories that consider reality as something apart from which the knower can re-present. If we as readers of World Literature present Unnuth in that way it is important to present ourselves similarly, proportionally concerned with refashioning the world through our writings, equivalently authentic rather than hidden behind a seemingly perspective-less critical lens. Presenting Unnuth in that way allows us to hear his voice, one which was previously subaltern. Including his voice in what we hear allows us to compare it to other voices which in other and future world literary studies are being newly heard. As Unnuth writes in ‘White Widowed Walls’,⁶¹

you’ve proven deaf
but not illiterate
that is why today’s generation
on the widowed walls
of your white buildings
goes on writing its own literature...

Even if we have been deaf, we can still read, and we must read the writing on the wall. We tie our voices and his together, for readers of World Literature can relate to Unnuth’s poetry even if it is in a voice we never expected to hear.

With all the constraints of postcolonial literary theory, World Literature has presented an alternative which allows us to retain an emphasis on memory and processes of relative hybridity. In fact, it may be to the benefit of both postcolonial theorists concerned about the delineation of postcolonial criticism’s purview and to non-postcolonial theorists still desirous of a conversation about the historical and social context of modern literature, especially in the Global South, to adopt a World Literature perspective. Those critics who are building up the field of World Literature,

⁶⁰ Emmanuel Nelson, *Reworlding: Literature of the South Asian Diaspora* (Oxford: Greenwood, 1992).

⁶¹ ‘White Widowed Walls.’ #78. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 99.

coming out of both postcolonial literary criticism but also a comparative literary perspective that postcolonial theorists rejected as propagating an unethical aesthetic status quo, do not reject all the ideas of postcolonial literary criticism, but emphasise what can be gained by analysing texts which do not fall into the purview of postcolonial literature and giving these texts further credence. In some ways this field does not yet seem to be focused enough to respond to postcolonial literary criticism (although this is less a problem than an incentive to develop it), but on the other hand responding to the challenge that postcolonial criticism is getting too vague by expanding it even further is a kind of genius: it lets readers compare and decide upon the relevance of literatures whose points of intersection are not resistance.

Postcolonial writing can be either that which dates from the end of the colonial period (a disingenuous definition, perhaps, as colonialism still continues in many parts of the world) or from the beginning of the colonial period: that is, post-colonization. In addition to being temporal, it sometimes has the understanding of being anti-colonial. These two meanings work together in my mind to produce the best perspective for postcolonial criticism in Mauritius: temporally it includes all Mauritian literature (because all Mauritian literature was written after colonization), but there are many poems that would only be interesting, from a postcolonial perspective, to deconstruct: tearing down the implied self-colonization in poems which find value in subjecthood.

The very language of Unnuth's poetry can be considered a postcolonial choice: Mishra and Hodge ask, 'does the post-colonial exist only in English? ... [W]hat about the writings of the Indian diaspora not written in English, such as the

Mauritian Abhimanyu Anant's [sic] *Lāl Pasīna (Blood and Sweat)*?⁶² Works in these languages are postcolonial in a different way; for instance, Unnuth's Hindi is what Kamau Braithwaite calls a 'nation language,' decentralizing European colonial culture; in this case, both French and, to a lesser but not insignificant degree, English. Unnuth, like writers who subvert the colonial power by destabilizing the coloniser's language, writes in relation to the colonial language. In Mauritius, as I have traced above, the colonial legacy includes both French and English, and Unnuth the literary legacy of both, focusing instead on other connections. World Literature grew out of literary critics' inkling that this could be the case. With its emphasis on the global, it posits the right questions to unearth this: it asks readers to look at neglected networks, or networks which are not connected through the colonial centre but through an idea of 'the global'.

V. *Looking Forward*

that mouse that today
 is gnawing, nibbling at my naked feet
 will tomorrow arrive at yours
 well-protected in shoes
 he will not come to find your feet
 that is why he will
 nibble and gnaw slowly at the seat of power
 to which you cling⁶³

'But Gnaw He Will For Sure' gives a warning to those who think that because they have shoes where others are barefoot, they are not vulnerable. It is just a matter of time: 'tomorrow [he] will arrive at yours'. It is a warning of the inexorable dynamism

⁶² *Red Sweat* is a literal translation, while Mishra and Hodge's *Blood and Sweat* clarifies the cause of the discoloration. Because it is a Mauritian text, I will use its common Mauritian transliteration, *Lal Pasina*, in the thesis, whereas here the transliteration uses the Indian convention.

Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, 'What is Post(-)colonialism?' *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: a Reader*. ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 278.

Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Lal Pasina* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1977).

⁶³ 'But Gnaw He Will For Sure.' #75. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikhūs ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 96.

of status, safety, and power, and could apply just as easily to our discussions of the world system of literature as it does to Unnuth's poetic world. One reason why *The Teeth of the Cactus* is not better known is because it is a work of poetry, not prose. The rising position and power of the prose writer relative to that of the poet is a matter of the power relationships at play by which literatures more viable globally affect norms in literatures with less global cultural capital. Casanova, in her *World Republic of Letters*, pushes for a system of reading in which the power relationships between the more prestigious and the less prestigious with regards to global readership are foregrounded. She notes that writers from countries that have less of a voice in the global conversation are either the most receptive to subversive, and, in Africa, usually politically-minded, theories, or unaware and uninterested in the system of literature.⁶⁴ Khair supports this understanding with his analysis of the celebration of hybridity in postcolonial literature as a celebration of a connected tie to the centre, one which keeps writers from the despair of alienation, and that those instances which do not have a direct link to the centre remain unseen.⁶⁵ Anglophone writers in Mauritius can view themselves as hybrid writers because of their use of English in conjunction with their exploration of Indo-Mauritian culture; by this iteration of hybridity, however, are they implicitly accepting the Eurolingual political status quo which had to be overthrown during Independence? Unnuth's prose, where he is more likely to highlight and celebrate historical instances of subversion by Mauritian labourers in a language which itself signals rage at the exploitation depicted, is more easily categorised as subversive political writing, while his poetry, focused more on finding the significance in their acceptance of labour, is less clearly subversive from this

⁶⁴ Pascale Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 43, 195, 280.

⁶⁵ B. Hayes Edwards, 'The Uses of Diaspora,' *Social Text*, vol 19, no.1, 2001: 45-74.

perspective (though it is felt to be more strongly worded by Indo-Mauritian readers⁶⁶)—clearly interesting beyond its market but not quite in line with the postcolonial zeitgeist. And yet Gulshan Sooklall, who teaches Mauritian Hindi literature to BA Hindi students at the University of Mauritius, can agree that Unnuth's poetry has more depth, complexity, and richness than this monumentally popularised prose work epitomised by *Lal Pasina*.⁶⁷

Vinod Mishra and Bob Hodge's recent mention of *Lal Pasina* is the most provocative mention of Unnuth yet in postcolonial literary criticism. In their discussion of *The Empire Writes Back*, they consider the ideology of celebrating the hybridization inherent in postcolonialism:

Theories of syncretism/hybridization are essentially pluralistic, as they maintain a pluralism which encourages freedom and independence," but "... the emphasis on hybridization leads to an uneasiness with social and racial theories of post-colonial literature. Though Sanskrit theories are given an extended gloss, their interest for the authors of EWB [The Empire Writes Back] lies, it seems to us, in their affirmation, finally, of an ahistorical aesthetic. Sanskrit theories of reception (*rasa*) and suggestiveness (*dhvani*) after all keep the primacy of the literary object intact. Sanskrit theories are still individual-oriented and easier for a pluralist to handle than theories of negritude (Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon)...⁶⁸

Postcolonial readers may be looking to highlight all reactions against colonial repression, but perhaps have stopped their search too soon after discovering works which are multilingual and have multicultural characters and themes, for these works signify freedom and plurality by their very existence. Works with an ahistoric aesthetic, which present themselves as discrete art objects (rather than as cultural

⁶⁶ Gulshan Sooklall and Vinaye Goodary, interview by author, Moka, Mauritius, August 2010. Mauritian university theses dealing with Unnuth's work focus on his prose.

⁶⁷ Gulshan Sooklall and Vinaye Goodary, interview by author, Moka, Mauritius, August 2010.

⁶⁸ Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge. 'What is Post(-)colonialism?' in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: a Reader*. ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 287.

artifacts), seem to be presenting themselves without an imagined audience defined in time or place. These works seem to be free from repression by being free of history.

Unnuth's works aim to be steeped in history, but he finds that this is its own challenge; in 'Optimistic Journey' he writes,⁶⁹

...now
our own hand's shaking
we all those lifelines
have let topple
because of which our people
are all hungry, all-half-naked

now on this smooth-fingered hand, splayed flat
if anyone is a historian
then write history
history of this journey of assurances
in which on the journey of struggle
firing bullets
time in its sleep-journey
is making a corpse's journey, a funeral procession.

History is something we write upon our very hands, he writes: something we need to keep intimate and visible. Yet he understands that the only history that can be written about his past must be that which fights against time, calls upon it to stand witness to what happened before it is gone. Time cannot stand witness; it is on a sleep-journey, a corpse's procession. Instead there is space, geography, a medium in which the unheard have always been able to travel. There are so many multiple geographies which go into Unnuth's poetry, and yet out of this Unnuth still chooses to present an alternative to the colonial which is not obviously pluralistic. Although the monolingualism and non-pluralism of *The Teeth of the Cactus* make it less reachable, reading is still possible. Unnuth's poetry is not impenetrable, and can also lead to answers to the question raised by Mishra and Hodge.

⁶⁹ 'Optimistic Journey.' #64. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 83.

This chapter opened with the basic context of *The Teeth of the Cactus* (that its themes included the desire to live, the desire to remember, to work, to be free, that though the themes are largely to do with what it means to be human, Unnuth's imagery is drawn from the Mauritian environment) but also asks for a self-conscious understanding of the need for context. Unnuth's unhappy poetry counters a dominant narrative of Mauritius as a postcolonial miracle island, and as readers of many other texts unhappy with the after-effects of colonial rule, reading a similar text from Mauritius, underrepresented in this set of postcolonial texts, gives us a quick understanding of who Unnuth is and how his poetry works.

Mauritian texts are underrepresented in the postcolonial literary sphere for a number of reasons, however, and *The Teeth of the Cactus's* context is somewhat unexpected. Although similar in demography and colonial history to its neighbour South Africa or to Guyana, *The Teeth of the Cactus* is not multicultural in a way that represents Mauritius accurately: it is centred wholly around indentured labourers and their descendants. It does not celebrate diversity or hybridity, but neither does it seem to be that Unnuth is a Hindu fundamentalist bent on inciting ethnic tension. Where in the world can Unnuth be positioned?

This collection doesn't seem to fit anywhere, and, in fact, recent academic studies of comparative literature have theorised how to read these works. Although its colonial past makes up all but four decades of Mauritian literary history, maybe *The Teeth of the Cactus* can be situated not in conversation only with postcolonial literature, but literature from around the world. The growing field of World Literature attempts to find more nuanced relationships between under-read works than postcolonial literature made possible, and to reconfigure our idea of literary systems beyond the centre-periphery model. In this thesis, I will read Unnuth's *The Teeth of*

the Cactus this way both to test the model and to see if there is more I can understand about this beautiful collection of poetry.

The second chapter, 'Translating *The Teeth of the Cactus*', looks at my methodology of translation. The words of *The Teeth of the Cactus*, originally in Hindi and written in devanagri script, are not only obscure, but literally unrecognizable. Readers of World Literature must translate from other languages into English, and in doing so, pick up a whole new approach to reading. More on the language issue within world literature itself. At its core is a firm grasp on a simple point: that texts have intended audiences which may not be ourselves. Reading as a translator, I not only infer my own understanding of the words of the text, but must also understand and convey both denotations and connotations that would come naturally to the original intended audience. In Unnuth's case, this means that I must delve more deeply into Indo-Mauritian culture and any other linked cultures in order to make sense of the text. I incorporate myself, both as an individual and as a part of an academic culture, into a system of understanding, but position the text, rather than myself, at the centre. Methodology in hand, the second chapter closes with the English translation of *The Teeth of the Cactus* in full. The next three chapters analyse the text in full.

In the third chapter, 'Unnuth and the Indian Labour Diaspora', I ask if Unnuth's poetry can truly be positioned alongside Indian labour diaspora literature. Fellow Mauritian poet Khal Torabully has coined the term 'coolitude' to refer to that poetry which redefines the labour diaspora identity, and poets from Suriname, Fiji, and Guyana can be read as coolitude poets. By reading Unnuth's works in juxtaposition with these works, I find that the specificities of the Mauritian experience, as well as Unnuth's own specific understandings of the world, preclude

any relevance of these poets to his own work. Diasporas are shaped by their encounters, after all; in Suriname, the Indian diaspora literature has been shaped by the presence of ethnic groups who had been in the country before the colonial period (the Mauritian slave population predated the Indo-Mauritian population but not the colonial period). In Fiji, the idea of ‘dismemberment’ was still central to the idea of Indo-Fijian culture as a people cut off, in some kind of Ramayanic exile, from a glorious golden Indian past. Unnuth’s use of Hindi and Hindu imagery is socially significant, but not in such a similar way to the poets in Suriname or Fiji that they could all be classed together as ‘coolitude poets’. Indo-Guyanese poet Rajkumari Singh’s 1973 essay makes a great case for reclaiming the coolie identity by embracing a hyphenated, pluralistic identity, whereas Unnuth’s redefined identity is not hyphenated at all. Differentiating Unnuth from the Indian labour diaspora writers leads to me to look elsewhere for networks and literary relationships in which *The Teeth of the Cactus* plays a part.

In the fourth chapter, ‘A Parallel Progressive’, I trace the importance of Hindi to Mauritians alongside its importance to Indians in the Hindi belt and I trace the importance of native language to African writers. Hindi rose to importance in Mauritius as a language that could unify the Indo-Mauritian population so that it would become a demographic strong enough to be granted independence. Unnuth was greatly influenced by ‘Hindi missionaries’ and his choice of Hindi is certainly political. The political content of his poems, though, is muted somewhat by his obscure imagery, a departure from the clear, progressive poetry of 1960s and 1970s Mauritian Hindi poetry. Trends in Mauritian history followed those in Indian Hindi poetry, and Muktibodh’s influence is clear in Unnuth’s writing, but as the Mauritian-centric political context of Unnuth’s poetry shows, he was not positioning himself as a

‘Mauritian Muktibodh’ whose primary readership would be in Delhi. He was not a marginal version of Muktibodh but a parallel progressive.

Unnuth’s poetry can also be read as parallel to that of the more canonical Mauritian writer, Edouard Maunick. Both poets could be described as, in Ato Quayson’s words, ‘skeptical interlocutors’ in Mauritian society, wholly engaged with society and yet alienated from it, as well. Maunick’s alienation was expressed in his search for a racial identity, while Unnuth’s is expressed in the spiritual nature of his otherwise political, progressive poetry. Maunick, writing in French, has been translated and anthologised; Unnuth has not. Muktibodh is a celebrated hero of Indian poetry, while Unnuth is better known for his less distinctive prose. Readers of both Maunick and Muktibodh would be interested in Unnuth yet have almost certainly never heard of him; reading beyond the dividing lines of language and nation makes room for new connections in World Literature.

In chapter five, ‘Re-membering the Worlds of Failed Poetry’, I compare Mauritian readings of Unnuth with my own. Reading as a translator, the local reception of Unnuth is important: which lines of his poetry seemed to resonate the most with readers, and which techniques were the most noticed? I find that contemporary local readers of Unnuth were reading Unnuth in the ways that I had earlier jettisoned: he was called the ‘Mauritian Premchand’, which marginalised the entirety of Mauritian Hindi literature, for one, and under-read the words in his text in favour of the overall politically progressive stance. Unnuth himself felt misunderstood: it was clear that he had not anticipated the way in which Mauritian readers would become more like me (a Western academic) and less like him (self-taught, non-exiled writer).

My own readings of Unnuth—as someone to read alongside Paz and Yevtuschenko, as someone who builds up worlds with the development on one word and with those newly created worlds, questions our own—seem to come much closer to Unnuth’s hopes for his future reception. It would be overreaching to conclude that reading as I do, looking beyond the assumptions of postcolonial literature and reading as a translator, one will always be able to find such meanings. Instead, in this instance, the conclusion I aim to make is that there is at least one poet whose work is intended to relate not only to his nation, but to the world. Why shouldn’t there be others who feel themselves to be writing not as postcolonial subjects, but as world citizens, and should they not form the core, if not the canon, of a new study of World Literature?

This thesis is focused on analysing a method of reading of one collection of poetry in a larger context, and its organisation is meant to reflect both the centrality of *The Teeth of the Cactus* to our analysis and the pervasiveness and importance of the reader’s own experience to her reading perspective. To that end, I make some detours from the traditional thesis structure: the second chapter, for example, focuses on translation because that skill, and our approach to it, shapes any reading from a non-Anglophone literary sphere. It ends with an unannotated translation so that readers can ingest the entire flavour, the cadence, and the shape of *The Teeth of the Cactus* as if reading for pleasure. In the body of the thesis, analysis of specific lines of specific poems are placed parallel with the historical, cultural, and contextual questions that arise from them, with neither the linear structure of the collection itself nor the linear structure of our overall argument—that Unnuth should be read, and reinterpreted, alongside a new set of writers of World Literature—dominant. Those readers who do not read the unannotated translation for pleasure will still read 90% of the *The Teeth*

of the Cactus excerpted for analysis, but they will hear it only through the filter of my own preoccupations.

‘[H]ave you heard?’ Unnuth asks. In the coming chapters, I aim to listen to what Unnuth has to say in *The Teeth of the Cactus*. He fights the colonial legacy of the sugarcane plantation in Mauritius, and he complicates the postcolonial canon. Moreover, I find Unnuth’s poetry offers its own alternative ‘global’. *The Teeth of the Cactus* stands on its own, but also alongside works by neglected world writers, in which World Literature readers may find many more alternative ‘globals’. Read with me, and let us read to discover what this writers can tell us about what our relationship as readers to the world can be.

Chapter 2: Translating *The Teeth of the Cactus*

I. *Reading Closely and Broadly*

I drank and drank poisonous satisfaction so
now I have become lifeless
but for
my anxious raspy breaths
crazed silence
who knows
what will make
the wolf which is inside you
miscarry?

mounted on the broken shoulders of time
you will run
then rage will chase you
from your barren state
the birth of this wrath
from its own explosion
your mind near death will blaze
and in its splendour
all of the vultures will be recognised

‘When They Have Been Recognised, Then’ will only leave us with questions.⁷⁰ In contrast to his shorter, more trenchant poems such as ‘Bang-Bang’,⁷¹ it presents us with opaque images that do not easily lend themselves to a clear political or philosophical message or opinion. The images, however, are so exceptionally vivid that it is impossible not to try. The poem starts with two figures in opposition: first, the ‘I’, drunken, listless, wheezy, yet curious about ‘what will make the wolf inside [the other] miscarry’. The other runs, chased by rage, barren himself, yet filled with a wolf filled with wrath: pregnant, in a sense, with a rage that is not his own, yet that neither he nor the ‘I’ know how to stop from spreading. Unlike poems like ‘I Will Not Let You Go To Heaven’,⁷² there are no scriptural allusions, though there are intertextual connections to the overall world of the collection in phrases like

⁷⁰ ‘When They Have Been Recognised, Then.’ #53. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 71.

⁷¹ ‘Bang-Bang.’ #27. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 34.

⁷² ‘I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven.’ #8. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 9-10.

‘shoulders of time’ from ‘In the Mist’⁷³ and the characters of the vultures from ‘Morning Septet’.⁷⁴ The emotional resonance of the image that can be pieced together here is at once clear—fear at the power of rage, and how it can move from body to body—and yet so foreign as to leave readers of the translation with questions about the exact relationship of wolves to time and blazing to vultures, to start with, about the internal world of this particular collection as well as the external world from which it came: perhaps pregnant wolves have an obvious symbolic meaning in Hindi?⁷⁵

Translation has often been seen as a barrier to understanding. Because of this prejudice, postcolonial literary theory often privileges those works written in the languages of colonization so that readers in the previously-colonial centre are on the same linguistic wavelength as writers anywhere in the perceived centre-periphery network. In this chapter, I argue that translation is actually value added to a work in the context of World Literature, as it forces readers to notice that a work has intended audiences which may differ from them. Therefore, in this chapter, I read as a translator. At first, this means exploring what can be gained from recognizing the foreignness of *The Teeth of the Cactus*: a focus on words and the separate issue of their connotations. Translation has always been set up as a test of one’s loyalties, and described in terms of fidelity or betrayal; reading translations, though, has been seen as a way to transcend one’s own attachments. After discussing my specific methodology of translation, I close the chapter with the English translation of *The Teeth of the Cactus*.

⁷³ ‘In the Mist.’#2. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 2.

⁷⁴ ‘Morning Septet.’ #34. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 44-45.

⁷⁵ No, they do not. It is possible that Unnuth is referring to the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood, but it seems to me that the pregnant wolf, though not appearing elsewhere in the collection, makes more sense when considered as a part of the natural world which is so important in the world of the collection.

Any poem written in a different context, linguistically or culturally, can be disorienting: what does a reader look for? How does any reader know if their readings are close to what the author was trying to present, and how do they decide if understanding those intentions is of paramount importance? In the case of *The Teeth of the Cactus*, which had only a limited temporal and geographical span of popularity (the Indo-Mauritian 1980s literary sphere), readers now can look to earlier readers and intended readers of the text for guidance. Translator-readers have a place to start: our own cultural and linguistic situatedness in a particular perspective we feel we share with others. Knowing how I define my own position as a member of a reading group, I can contrast this with the position and cultural context of the earlier readers and of the perceived cultural context of the author's intended readers. Unnuth's poetry is interesting to those of us concerned with World Literature for a number of reasons: the poems are a direct and inspiring response to the colonial project, repercussions of which are still felt today in the Mauritian literary sphere—it is hard to see how repercussions would not be felt when the entire history of settled habitation in Mauritius is tied up with colonialism—and across the globe. His poetry does not hesitate before a violent and effacing history of exploitation, nor before the complications inherent in re-membering a national identity in the post-Independence era: like many poets, he is frank about the shortcomings of his society even in poems which profess everlasting loyalty and alternative ways of confronting the future.⁷⁶ He questions the workings of governments that are unpopular with voters.

⁷⁶ The term 're-member', as Toni Morrison uses it in *Beloved*, emphasises the second half of the term. Just as things can be 'dismembered', they can be 're-membered', with the 're' serving the purpose it serves in 'represent'. It specifically refers to collective memories shared by all a society's members.

An examination of the way that *The Teeth of the Cactus* can be read, then, can start with the questions Unnuth poses within the collection about Mauritian society. In ‘I Will Not Let You Go To Heaven’,⁷⁷ he asks

who can tell now
whether I’m grinding
or being ground?

He asks a question of physical state, and, concurrently, cosmological state. If the resistant, skeptical speaker in this poem, as in many of the other poems, is a character from the nation’s past, I can see in this poem Unnuth re-membering, re-embodying ancestral memories, with the potential to question and change readers’ understanding of the past. Yet, how is it that I reach these conclusions? First, as a translator-reader, I ask of a poem what its terms are. Collections of poetry are both self-contained, independent works of art and cultural artifacts. Culture as well as language can be translated, and by thinking of reading poetry as a translation from one reader to another rather than as the shattering of a wall between them, the meaning can still be accessed even while respecting the fact that it is by and about an other. Taking the term ‘target audience’ as the actual median reader (where ‘median’ means, as in mathematics, the one position in the centre, rather than the average or most frequently occurring one), translation is an act of reading which recognises the power that readers have to identify themselves, or choose not to, with the ‘target audience’ and also that authors have in writing for an imagined audience which resembles, or does not resemble, the ‘target audience.’ In this act of reading, for the most balanced approach, the reader must know themselves, the ‘target audience,’ and the author’s imagined audience as well as s/he can.⁷⁸ ‘Grinding’ is an action that calls up a

⁷⁷ ‘I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven.’ #8. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 9-10.

⁷⁸ Although Friedrich Schleiermacher does not speak precisely to this point, it is his understanding of translation that underpins my point. He writes of translation as an act that necessitates either bringing

particular collective memory in Indo-Mauritian culture, and it is that physical and cosmological memory that makes this question imply so many answers.

Readers have often read those texts which have them, specifically and particularly, as the target audience—yet not all poets writing concerned with colonialism, its after-effects, and its changing power dynamics write for academia. Unnuth, it is clear, does not: in ‘I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven’, an excerpt of which we just discussed, he jumps from grinding to Trishanku with, for a non-Indo-Mauritian, dizzying ease. Even if writers can afford to write both for the local and the global, is there any reason for us as postcolonial or as World Literature readers to expect them to? It is not always clear that the answer is ‘no’; after all, academic readers help works spread and the reknown helps poets devote more or all of their time to writing. However, these are not ideological responses. There is no such reason postcolonial readers, even those of us situated in the Western academic literary sphere, should stay away from texts not meant just for us. We simply have a responsibility to read closely, broadly, and wisely. Reading like a translator helps us to do so, so there is no reason to ignore works in non-Western or lesser translated languages.

How did I translate *The Teeth of the Cactus*? In the paragraphs that follow, I will take two poems from the collection, ‘I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven’ and ‘Living Death’, as examples in order to illustrate my method.⁷⁹ Any decisions about the particular poems, however, were preceded by decisions about the collection as a

the reader closer to the culture of the text, or the text closer to the culture of the reader. The term ‘target audience’, the meaning of which varies by context, is seen as useful from so many perspectives, including mine, because of this idea that translation is like a multidirectional game of darts in which there are various ‘targets’. (For more information, see Friedrich Schleiermacher, ‘On the Different Methods of Translation,’ *German Romantic Criticism*, ed. A.L. Willson (New York, 1982)).

⁷⁹ ‘I Will Not Let You Go To Heaven.’ #8. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 9-10.

‘Living Death.’ #51. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 67.

whole. First, I read the collection straight through several times in order to get a sense of its overall mood: to me, this was ‘angry’ but also ‘clean’. Although the tone of the poems is emotional, the language used is not generally sentimental, but rather restrained in its precision without losing its audacity. I noted this effect, hoping to maintain it in the translations by using similarly restrained, precise, but strong diction. In addition, during this reading of the collection as a whole, I noted recurring images: the sun especially. The word *suraj* (‘sun’ in Hindi) is used at least fifty times overall, three times the frequency of more thematically significant words such as *mazdoor* (labour) or *pasina* (sweat). Unnuth could have used other words for sun: *surya*, also a common name, would have lent itself more obviously to personification, and *dhoop* would have given him a one-syllable option or a grammatically feminine option (*suraj* is masculine). This consistency showed me he felt the sun was an image that tied the poems together. Although I am not aiming for a literal translation, it was clear that each time *suraj* appeared in the text, even if as part of an obscure metaphor that might be easier to modify or domesticate, it would have to be retained so that readers would be able to trace the same imagery throughout the poem.

Translators from time immemorial have felt the tension between literal, word by word meaning, and fidelity to an overall sense, and I have not escaped this. I chose to value readability over literal fidelity in order to reach a target audience of readers of World Literature who may not find translated Hindi syntax to be fluid. In this, I seem to depart from the postcolonial project, which sees retaining foreign elements in the translation as resisting the dominance of a colonizing culture. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi take this stance in their introduction to *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* influenced in part by translation theorists such as Lawrence Venuti, whose *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* came

out only the year before.⁸⁰ In practice, retaining foreign linguistic elements has a greater effect in destabilizing a dominant culture when they are presented as part of that culture: for example, using Oscar's use of Spanglish in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.⁸¹ Oscar's voice may be stylised, but mixing two languages in a similar way is common for bilingual Americans and the book presents a multicultural America to its readers. In a foreignising translation of a monolingual book, this can lead to amazing translations which force readers to confront the original, such as Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*.⁸² Anglophone readers with no Russian can be amazed by its beauty and thus be led to look either to the separate volume of commentary or elsewhere for information about the conventions of Russian language and the book's cultural context; it, in part, inspired me to live for a time in Russia. However, if I were to then discuss Eugene Onegin with someone else who had only read the Nabokov and not gone on to learn Russian (perhaps because of a more practical issue like time rather than a failure to care about cultural difference), we would not be able to discuss the Onegin stanza (which Pushkin did of course have to take into consideration when choosing each word which Nabokov translates). Moreover, Nabokov's translation finds its way to Anglophone readers with no Russian because of Nabokov's fame as well as the success of Pushkin's original. I do want my translation to encourage readers to learn about the collection's cultural context, but if a reader has no prior knowledge of or relationship to a text, a translation which is presented as a row of words which do not make sense is just a set of puzzle pieces with no promise of belonging to a single and completable puzzle. I

⁸⁰ Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, eds. *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1999).

Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1998).

⁸¹ Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Riverhead, 2007).

⁸² Pushkin, Alexandr. *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, trans. by Vladimir Nabokov (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

try to convey the meaning Unnuth assigns to these words so that readers see that the content has meaning; only then will readers be open to a discussion of differing interpretations of that meaning.⁸³ My analysis of the text prioritises Unnuth's imagery, so in making the calculations necessary for readability, my translation prioritises his imagery—just as another Onegin translator, Walter Arndt, prioritised Pushkin's influential rhyme scheme, helping readers to understand why Russians considered Pushkin's work so formally satisfying.⁸⁴ Why imagery? I prioritised imagery because I believe Unnuth did. Hindi syntax is not necessarily jarring in English, but when reading the original, I found that it was the imagery in the poems rather than the rhythm of the lines that had the greatest effect. Therefore, I attempted to achieve a basically neutral rhythm, using, as Unnuth does, no metre or rhyme scheme. The most important aural quality to convey, I felt, was the sense of resolution that Unnuth often gives to his poems by including, in the last line of the poem, both a subject and a verb, rather than a lingering verb-less image. Amidst lines of sentence fragments, a closing proclamation such as 'I will not let you go to heaven' means that the poem never trails off or fades to a close.

The last overall effect to be decided was the presentation of the poems. Like all Hindi poetry (and written Hindi in general), Unnuth's poetry lacks a distinction

⁸³ A related question, posed by Ananya Kabir (oral examination, London, October 2012) is why I translated the poetry at all; if I discussed it without providing a translation, I might in the long run be helping World Literature to be a less Anglocentric field. One response is that I am prioritising the short run, in which I hope to engage those World Literature readers who do not read Hindi (and, later, Spanish and Russian), and the language in which I write (and would be most able to read any responses to this work) is English. The other reason is that World Literature has promise as a field in which English can come close to a lingua franca, rather than 'an invasive species' (as Esther Allen calls it in her 'Globalization, Translation, and English', PEN, <http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/1214/prmID/172>, accessed 24 November 2012). Its concerns do not favour literature in English or European languages, or literary connections that go through colonial centres: in fact, by virtue of its need to differentiate itself from Postcolonial Literature and Comparative Literature, it disfavors Anglophone works. At the same time, because of the invasiveness of English in general, it is a language which many people read and write as a second language, thus enabling an efficient translation of non-English World Literature scholarship into English and, though English, into other languages.

⁸⁴ Pushkin, Alexandr. *Eugene Onegin*, 2nd edition, trans. by Walter Arndt (Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishing, 1993).

between capitalised and lower-case letters. I could avoid capitalisation altogether, but to an Anglophone audience that lends an air of e.e. cummings to the finished product. Unnuth would never think of freedom as a breakfastfood. The most neutral choice would be to capitalise only the beginnings of sentences, but because, with the complex phrasing of some of the poems, I was making choices about where sentences began and ended, I felt this would be too great an injection of my own interpretation. I chose to capitalise 'I', but avoid capitalisation except in the titles of the poems. I used commas only when punctuating phrases that seemed unambiguous, leaving a sense of structural ambiguity to those areas where there is some grammatical ambiguity in the original.

Finally I turned to the individual poems. Although I have used the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) for my guide when transliterating footnotes because this is the system most commonly used by libraries, here I will transliterate the poems using the Harvard Kyoto system, which, unlike IAST, does not require the reader to know how to interpret diacritical marks. As a guide, using the Harvard Kyoto system of transliteration, upper-case vowels represent phonemic long vowels, with 'A' pronounced as in the first vowel sound in 'bravo,' 'I' as in the vowel sound in 'tree', and 'U' pronounced as in the first vowel sound in 'ruby'. Consonants sound approximately as they do in English; 'c', however, is pronounced 'ch', with 'ch' representing its aspirated counterpart.⁸⁵ The eighth poem in the collection is entitled *main tumhen svarg nahIn jAne dUngA*. This is a sentence in the accepted neutral subject-object-verb order of Hindi,

main tumhen svarg nahIn jAne dUngA
I you to heaven not go will let

⁸⁵ A guide with recordings can be found at the BBC's 'A Guide to the Hindi Alphabet' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/other/hindi/guide/alphabet.shtml>, accessed 8 November 2011.

so the title becomes ‘I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven’. The only reason for pause here would be the word ‘svarg’. It does mean ‘heaven’, and nothing else, but it refers to the Christian concept of heaven, the Hindu concept of heaven, and, with less frequency and less relevance here, to other conceptions of heaven. The English word ‘heaven’ generally holds the same meanings, though it has the Hindu sense much less frequently. In the body of the poem, there are words that make clear that a Hindu sense is meant here, so it seems that there is no need to add a gloss here.

apne hAthon ke chAle dekhne ke liye
 my hands’ blisters to see in order
jab maine chakkI rok II
 when I grindstone stopped
ghargharAhat nahIn rahI
 grring did not remain
sunAI paDI pisAn kI sisakiyAn
 to be heard began ground flour’s silent sobbing
kaun batAe ab
 who can tell now
main pIs rahA hUn yA pis rahA hUn
 I am grinding or being ground
apnI pratibhAon ke sAth?
 my talents with

In the first stanza, the meaning of the stanza as a whole is complicated (for me, especially the final question about grinding and being ground) but the words’ meaning and the images conveyed are relatively straightforward. A man is grinding to the point where his hands are in pain, and he stops grinding in order to contemplate that pain. I domesticated the sound made by the grindstone, removing the aspiration from the ‘g’ because it is a sound that English speakers often find hard to distinguish. In this case I felt it was more important for readers to hear the hum of the grindstone immediately than for them to grasp a culturally specific onomatopoeia. Similarly, *sisakiyAn* is more onomatopoeic in Hindi than I have rendered it; more precisely it could be translated as ‘the barely audible hissing sounds that accompanies sobbing’, but here I felt that the alliteration did some work in conveying a sound that is mostly comprised

of ‘s’ sounds. The biggest change I made in this stanza was the inclusion of the ‘you’ into the verbal construction in line four, which in the final translation has become ‘you heard the silent sobbing of the ground flour’. This is partly a translation of the inflections of grammar, but partly due to the particular challenges of this poem. Grammatically, an impersonal construction in Hindi (here, Unnuth uses an intransitive verb, *pisnA*, in the passive sense to contrast with the transitive verb *pIsnA*) is neutral, but less so in English. The choice to insert a listener gets rid of the clunkiness here. But to make that listener ‘you’ instead of ‘I’? This poem has the biggest translator’s intrusions of any of the poems in *The Teeth of the Cactus* (and thus serves well for a discussion of method) because it is comprised of three narratively disjointed stanzas, the final two of which involve allusions possibly unfamiliar to the Anglophone reader. I felt that the listener was ‘you’ rather than ‘I’ because the last two stanzas seem to be placing blame for the speaker’s predicaments directly in the hands of the addressee. I read it as implied that the ‘you’ was also responsible for the blisters.

The second stanza is full of characters from Hindu scripture:

main yuyutsu na ho sakA
 I Yuyutsu not could be
isliye naciketA rahA
 so Naciketas remained
par jab yam ne dvAr nahIn khola
 but when Yama door not did open
to trishankU ban
 then Trishanku became
merI aur uski
 mine and his
duniyA ke bIc
 world’s in between
parikramA kar rahA hUn
 circle doing I am
main tumhen svarg nahIn jAne dUngA
 I you to heaven not go will let

Yuyutsu, in the first line, is a character from the *Mahabharata* who does not quite fit in with his royal family: he is his father’s illegitimate son (and a half-caste). During

the battle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, he pretended to be a Kaurava along with the other sons of his father, but was really a spy. After the war, he was one of the few to survive, and it was he who performed the primary duty of a son when he lit his father's funeral pyre. Naciketas, in the second line, was also wronged and dealt with it by attempting to cross a line: in the *Katha Upanishad*, his father accidentally told him to go to hell, so he did. However, as the poem continues, Yama, the God of Hell, was not there to receive him, and he had to wait at the door to hell until he was received. Trishanku, a character in the *Ramayana*, wanted to go to heaven with his earthly body. The sage Vishwamithra allowed it and sent him up, but the god Indra disallowed it and sent him back down. Vishwamithra, upset at Indra's meddling, stopped Trishanku from falling entirely back to earth. All of the stories make sense in the context of this stanza, but Trishanku's story has the greatest resonance for an indentured labourer: eventually, without any input from Trishanku himself, it was decided that he would stay suspended and would be king of this in-between, lonely place which would be called *trishanku-svarg*: Trishanku's heaven. Like Trishanku, the labourers had attempted to reach somewhere better when they left India, but ended up in what others (the planters) defined as a good life for them. Trishanku's heaven is in contrast with the heaven of the title—which could be Hindu, or Christian—but is not the in-between, lonely heaven which the 'you' would not want. In translating these lines with so much back-story, I wanted to provide enough meaning for the reader that the poem could be read straight through, without patronizing a reader who could easily find the relevant stories. Assuming the reader would want to learn more, I used the Sanskrit forms of the names, rather than the Hindi forms that Unnuth uses, because these are the most Anglophone-search-engine-friendly forms. The glosses end in almost-rhyming words ('war' and 'door') because the Hindi lines end with the

same sound (the ‘A’ sound; they don’t rhyme either, though), breaking the pattern when Trishanku is introduced. They are in parentheses, which are not used elsewhere in the collection, to signal intrusion. Finally, I chose ‘peregrinator’ to define Trishanku in part to help convey the sound as well as the meaning of *parikrama* in the penultimate line of the stanza. *Parikrama* does not simply mean ‘to circle’, but specifically refers to circumambulating a set of temples clustered together, and I believe that here Unnuth is almost sarcastically highlighting the lack of (secular) purpose, as well as adding ‘god-like but not necessarily good’ to the characterization of the ‘you’.

In the last stanza, I hewed most closely to my desire not to impose my interpretation on the poem, but I was able to do so because I thought that the changes in the previous stanzas allow this stanza to make sense as part of the poem and as part of the collection. In this stanza, Unnuth writes

cAndnI ne merI amrAI ko bair nahIn diyA
 moonlight did my mango-grove blossom not let
Am bhI nahIn diyA use sUrya-rashmiyon ne
 mangos even not yield from it sun’s rays did
Apne hI sir par
 own [emphasis] head onto
pAvn rakhe Upar Akar
 feet by putting up coming
idhar-udhar jhAnkhA
 here-there peeping
ek or tum anjuli se cAndnI piye jA rahe the
 one direction you cupped hands from moonlight drinking kept on
dUsrI or tumhArA katorA
 other direction your bowl
bhar rahA thA
 filled was getting
sUraj ke ras se
 sun’s rays from
main tumhen svarg nahIn jAne dUngA
 I you to heaven not go will let

This seems like a major departure from the previous two stanzas. The image of moonlight in the mango grove is consciously romantic, though later in the stanza Unnuth takes it in a different direction. Reading the stanza on its own, it could make sense to try and clarify or contextualise the actions of the ‘I’ and the ‘you’. The imagery here alludes to a recurring image from Unnuth’s first collection of poetry, *The Pricky-Pear’s Tangled Breath*,⁸⁶ in which the ‘you’ is, in a sense, two-faced: he is receiving nourishment from both the sun and the moon, leaving the speaker with nothing. Since the first collection has not been translated, Unnuth’s use of it here, elaborating upon the image not only with cupped hands and bowls but two entire previous stanzas, needs to stand on its own. Like the first stanza, the words’ definitions are straightforward, but the meaning is harder to translate. I hope that the treachery of taking too much made sense in the context of a ‘you’ who watches while the ‘I’ gets blisters and is suspended between worlds.

The second poem was chosen as an example because its imagery is typical of the collection, and the shortcomings in its translation illustrate more clearly than successes the effects of choices made in the translation as a whole. Its title, *zinda maut*, means ‘Living Death’. The poem, all one stanza, is

cipki mAnsaltA ke bhotar kA kankAl
 clinging flesh ’s mass ’s skeleton
tumhAre pAip se nikale dhuen ko
 your pipe from emerging smoke to
gale mein lapetkar AtmhatyA kar cukA
 throat on wrapping suicide did
par jahAn jauvan ko maut A jAtI hai
 but where life to death comes
vahAn maut ko maut nahIn AI
 there death to death not comes
yAtnA itihAs ke antim adhyAy ke liye
 tortured history’s last chapter for the sake of
kankAl par mAns kI paraten ugne lagI hain
 skeleton on flesh of layers grow are doing

⁸⁶ Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Nāgphāni men Uljhī Sānson*. (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1977).

In this poem, the first three lines are densely allusive: the man who hangs himself (seen earlier in ‘In the Mist’⁸⁷) is described as a skeleton, with his flesh an unpleasant appendage. Elsewhere in the collection (for example, in ‘Bars of Bone’⁸⁸) skeleton bones constitute a cage, imprisoning a desire to live, and here it appears that the bones are willing to act to put an end to life itself. The pipe, which brings its owner, the ‘you’, into the picture, is significantly a rare transliteration from the English. Unnuth does this in other poems (such as ‘Four Moods’⁸⁹) with a few other words that gesture towards specifically colonial image of vice: gentlemanly products like whiskey and cocktails. Of course, the act of suicide itself is a recurring image in the collection, as well. Here, I stretched the three lines into four because I could not find a way to express *gale mein lapetkar* with Unnuth’s concision: ‘by wrapping around his neck’ is a good translation of the image, but does not capture the relative speed at which one can pronounce a Hindi phrase which uses only short vowels and nonaspirated consonants. The last four lines of the poem seem to be a commentary on the actions in the first three lines, with the definitions of words being clear and their deeper meaning complex and elusive. The final phrase to discuss here is *yAtnA itihAs*. *yAtnA* can refer to the tortures meted out by Yama (the God of Death who also appeared in ‘I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven’⁹⁰), so history, here, can be read as somewhat personified. In this poem, as in the collection, I strove to be clean and elegant, as I feel Unnuth is. However, this meant that when I could not reconcile those characteristics with particular moments of aural beauty, as seen here with the wrapping around the neck, or comprehensively convey every allusion, as seen here with Yama’s absence, things

⁸⁷ ‘In the Mist.’ #2. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 2.

⁸⁸ ‘Bars of Bone.’ #50. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 65-66.

⁸⁹ ‘Four Moods.’ #68. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 88-89.

⁹⁰ ‘I Will Not Let You Go To Heaven.’ #8. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 9-10.

were lost in translation. At the same time, I chose my priorities based on what I felt Unnuth's priorities were: he often seems to value message over sound, and the power of the image over the clarity of the image. No matter how much intrusions of interpretation are avoided, translation itself is interpretation. Comparing translations is an excellent way to compare relationships between texts and audiences. Having to read *The Teeth of the Cactus* in only one translation here is, from the perspective of a World Literature reader, absolutely less preferable to being able to compare this translation to a one by, for example, an Indo-Mauritian translator.

II. The Teeth of the Cactus: *A Translation*

In his poem 'Deserving Punishment',⁹¹ Unnuth writes

the time for sunset has come
but the sun is still, still within my four walls
cloaked itself in a half-torn sheet
gasping
yesterday, he with a transcendent heat
melted a few peeping out faces
that's why today in retribution
his place has been given to the moon

This poem is one of the simpler, more mellow poems of the collection, lacking obscure imagery and pulsating rage. The use of the present perfect in the first and last lines ('has come', 'has been given', which in Hindi are expressed using the perfect participle and the present tense form of '*hona*') frame the action within to convey an atmosphere of order: the punishment that was deserved has been given, and with this equilibrium restored, calm can prevail. But what has happened between those lines has had an effect: the poem as a whole conveys this, for why would it have been written if the interruption of order was so insignificant that it did not factor at all? The interruption here is on a large scale: the sun has been overexerting its own power, so

⁹¹ 'Deserving Punishment.' #55. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 72.

hot that most people keep themselves inside, and finally so hot that ‘yesterday [he] melted a few peeping out faces’. The sun has always played an important role in Mauritius, never more so than during the period of the plantocracy. While it traditionally was revered by the Hindu Indo-Mauritian labourers—seen as a protector and, indeed, as a god—if the sun were to callously over-express its own power, it would be torturous to those labourers who were at its mercy all day. If only they could have replaced it with the moon: these simple lines become sweet and sad when they are contrasted with the real powerlessness of all of us, but especially those labourers, to counteract such overarching power.

Translation, like reading World Literature, requires of us some open-mindedness about the ways in which senses of place overlap and fall apart over time. Translating Kafka, one must think of Germanness and Jewish identity in a Prague which is now capital of its own Czech Republic rather than part of an empire. Multiple senses of identity layer multiple senses of place over a single geographic location. The German literary sphere, the Jewish literary sphere, the Prague literary sphere: all of these and their relationships and the connotations of those relationships must be carried over into the target language. In reading World Literature, the target language is the idea of the world literary sphere. I have already written about the importance of his Indo-Mauritian identity for Unnuth (and will do so again in more depth in each coming chapter), but in his poetry, too, there are multiple geographies to which his Indo-Mauritian identity is related. Untangling these relationships and the connotations of these relationships in his poetry is a task that will bring me back to the importance of colonial and postcolonial history in Mauritius—and to the ways in which Unnuth tries to re-member his heritage, choosing to focus on the sun even more than the sea as shaping his past in *The Teeth of the Cactus*.

‘fearful’, begins ‘In the Afternoon Sun’.⁹² Alone in the line, it seems ridiculous underneath the seemingly innocuous title. The next line sheds a bit more light onto the situation:

fearful
in even the heat of the afternoon

Our bafflement is legitimised by the word ‘even’, but a change in the phrasing of the setting sheds a bit more light on the uneasy atmosphere. ‘Afternoon sun’ becomes ‘the heat of the afternoon’, not just a place but under the power of a sun which readers know, having read other poems in the collection, sometimes veers towards betrayal by becoming too hot. In the lines of the poem that follow,

your shadow cannot be seen
because the hungry people of your country
looking to eat up
your slices of the evening
stand with mouths agape

readers learn that it is ‘your shadow’, rather than ‘you’ or ‘I’ as they have come to expect, which is the subject of the poem, which retreats so as to avoid being taken by those open, hungry mouths, looking for ‘slices’ of anything cool, anything made of shade. This is a large assumption to make if I were reading the poem as a found object, but like a translator I have immersed myself in the world of the poem and found ways to bring it back to a language that makes sense to the ears of my target audience.

In this chapter, translation has served as a methodology through which different ways into *The Teeth of the Cactus* can be found. Taking recourse to the terminology and methodologies of translation when reading Unnuth is a pragmatic move. It offers a more thorough set of perspectives on Unnuth’s work. At the same

⁹² ‘In the Afternoon Sun.’ #57. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 75.

time, translation is not itself a neutral methodology: steeped in the pedigree of Western translation theorists from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Lawrence Venuti circling around questions of authenticity and betrayal, it is a methodology that at once allows the translator to position herself at a vantage point from where she can get results and where in the finished project she can strive to be not invisible, but still removed, an interpreter of the material. Tejaswini Niranjana, in *Siting Translation*, situates the Western theory and practice of translation as part and parcel of the classical concept of the mimetic relationship between ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’.⁹³ Reality exists apart from the knower: the knower is present and can then re-present reality. In its positive iterations, translators practice this re-presentation towards the optimistic goal of bringing knowers closer together, with the translators serving as invisible channels or media. In its negative iterations, it reinforces a fallacious theory about the ability of language to re-present, a theory that has been used to justify colonialism. The negative and positive iterations cannot be disentangled; historically, colonial interests authorised the study and translation of foreigners and foreign texts, and Niranjana puts forth the idea that translation out of this pedigree, albeit implicitly, always authorises colonialism.⁹⁴

Translation theorists find themselves caught in an infinite loop: to represent the work in a way that is loyal to the original language, or to represent the work in a way that loyal to the target language? From Emily Apter to Eliot Weinberger, eventually, translation theorists and practitioners must repeat that translation is both impossible and completely possible, and that a good translator is one who manages to hit upon some sort of sweet spot where loyalties are in equilibrium. Perhaps the

⁹³ Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992), 50.

⁹⁴ Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992), 50.

answer is that there is no way out of the loop, and Niranjana, at least, justifies abandoning the project by highlighting its role in a colonial history that I have no wish to see repeated in any sort of loop. Yet, sticking to a method of translation that achieves this equal loyalty to both tradition and postcolonial concerns is exactly what balancing the power that authorial intent and readers' intent have on the reading does get me out of the loop and away from practices with ideologically colonial shortcomings. The translator's instinct to efface himself was promising, yet dangerous in its use of a power that the author, once published, no longer has. Translators must do away with this and instead show ourselves and our concerns, rejecting the idea of a translation which 'withstands the test of time.' When celebrating works which engage in their moment and mark progress for the community, like the Kreol plays of Dev Virahsawmy that will be examined in chapter five, why reject engagement? Instead, by finding the assumptions about our intended readership, or to parallel each assumption made by the author about their readership, translators present the author to our readers through the eyes of one who has aligned him himself with the author. The conception of a true 'target audience' allows us both to bring the work to the readers and the readers to the work—simultaneous multidirectional translation that models the types of power dynamics which we wish to highlight and create in the literary world. This, indeed, is a translation which is hybrid in nature, composed of readers, plural, and writers, plural, weighted in equilibrium.

While this conception is indeed a reconception of a method which for centuries has produced works of translation read and loved by generations, it is not out to tear down existing structures which can work in their own context. Indeed, even in this context, representational theory can yet be salvaged in a way: not because the whiffs of colonialism have been subverted in the new equilibrium, but because

dealing with this colonial epistemology is an action that takes place on both sides of the equation here: I am, and Unnuth is, also, dealing with issues of representation, colonialism, and expression. Niranjana points out that assuming colonised people are rendered voiceless without a European language is one of the myths of colonialism perpetuated by the traditional methodology:⁹⁵ in fact, letting the market, which governs the publishing world and guides the assignation of even as yet unwritten books a place in hierarchy, keep scholars from work which is substantively quite related to their concerns seems prohibitively cautious and constrained. Reading to represent substantive knowledge leads to canonicity, she warns,⁹⁶ but reader-translators, or, to make the equivalence clear, World Literature readers, can limit themselves to an understanding of a canon as just a set of questions rather than a set of answers. Do World Literature readers want to create a canon? This is not a question about which there is yet critical agreement, but it seems that such a canon, so open as to only be really useful in hindsight, is exactly the contribution that such criticism can make for future readers. This sort of reading makes bare the time-sensitiveness of the enterprise: fifty years hence, these questions may not have the same urgency. Unnuth's questioning of what presentation and re-presentation of history actually says about truth echoes Derrida's concerns about representation, but these questions may recede from interest in time. The question, however, does have relevance to the current moment, in which understandings of hybridity, engagement, language, or other problems relevant to Unnuth's and others' work, are still important but the

⁹⁵ While what Niranjana means here is closer in sentiment to Karin Barber's demonstration of writers who speak to a closed group which is not addressed to the postcolonial reader, modern Indo-Mauritians display an alternate problem in this myth by refusing to align themselves with a European language but willingly subverting their identities as writers of Hindi to a globally stronger identity of the 'Indian writer,' albeit diasporic. Hierarchies, after all, are set up on multiple levels and Indo-Mauritian poets have made a choice that they feel is in their best interest (but with which the poetry by Unnuth seems to argue).

⁹⁶ Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992), 130.

understandings of which are newly instable, in flux. Niranjana makes the case that translation of the sort I present here should be itself a hybrid process. Translations should represent the hybrid, cobbled state of the work. She writes that

Perhaps post-colonial theory shows us that we need to translate (that is, disturb or displace)” (p38-9)... “The challenge will not, however, be made in the name of recovering a lost essence or an undamaged self. Instead, the question of the hybrid will inform our reading... as Bhabha is careful to point, colonial hybridity is not a problem of cultural identity that can be resolved by a relativistic approach... to restrict “hybridity” or what I call “living in translation,” to a post-colonial elite is to deny the pervasiveness, however heterogeneous, of the transmutations wrought across class boundaries by colonial and neo-colonial dominators. This is not to present a metanarrative of global homogenization, but to emphasize the need to reinvent opposition cultures in nonessentializing ways. Hybridity can be seen, therefore, as the sign of a post-colonial theory that subverts essentialist models of reading while it points towards a new theory of translation.⁹⁷

Translation, formerly an essentializing model of reading insofar as it was tied up with a theory of representation which put forth only one understanding of the truth (which could not be accessed properly using practical methods of translation in which the translator was invisible) should be hybrid and in this way, again, our struggles and the struggles of the writers translated are in equilibrium.

Unnuth’s poetry will be both an end in itself arrived at through translation theory, and will illustrate the power of a theory of translation strong enough to break free of the loop of betrayal, through the reading. ‘[Translation] can only be faithful,’ Heidegger writes, ‘when its words are words that can speak out of the language of the matter’,⁹⁸ underscoring the idea of language as a medium of expression, rather than as a reflection of lived experience. It is this conception of language that allows him to get at the goal of translation not only by linguistic channels, but also by the poetic. He understands that language carries with it not only the meaning of words, but the

⁹⁷ Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992), 45.

⁹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 243.

meaning of time. I first read Unnuth's poetry with the eyes of a postcolonial theorist, translating it from an historical expression to an ideological one, and then shifted, moving away towards a more inclusive reading of Unnuth's poetry not as an original to be betrayed but as a piece of World Literature waiting to find its place in an ever expanding yet ever more nuanced canon.

In my translation of *The Teeth of the Cactus*, I have chosen to preserve Unnuth's elegance, that smoothness that comes about so unexpectedly from the jarring imagery, over literal denotations. And yet Unnuth himself is not writing about the arcane with this jarring imagery. His poems are about death, and work, the sun, the passage of time, and his anger at how society approaches these things.⁹⁹ If Hindi was as similar to English as Spanish, an Anglophone reader might read some of these with a good dictionary. 'Now to take a bath in the Ganges,' Unnuth writes in 'Ganga of the Courtyard', 'there is rainwater collected in my courtyard'.¹⁰⁰ None of these words signal a mysterious, tropical paradise in the way that St. Pierre's luscious description of the Mauritian past and the tourism industry's descriptions of a carefree present have, distorting and making Mauritius an 'other place', a place where things can be different than they are. At the same time, Unnuth is trying to tell us that things can be different, and should be different, not by looking into an exotic mystery but by looking inwards, towards ourselves. If readers deduce that he means that Mauritius

⁹⁹ Unnuth has evidently been asked about his angry disposition before. He writes about it, good-naturedly, in one of the articles in the series he wrote about his life, 'Sold at Five Cents'. His mother, reading the *Mahabharata* during her pregnancy, decided to name her child Abhimanyu. The priest was upset, not because Abhimanyu was not a great warrior (indeed, he was) but because it was wrong to name a child after a personage with such a short lifespan. Unnuth's father never called him by that name, which in fact means 'great anger', calling him Umakant instead. 'Yet I was not spared,' Unnuth writes in *Slices from a Life*,

from the definition of it because Umakant means Shiva, he who in his great anger dances the Tandava. My childhood friends who were not able to pronounce Umakant properly did call me Makan, and even up to now for a few of my friends I am Macken, a dilemma, not knowing where to go for my roots—Bihar or Scotland.

Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Slices from a Life: Memoirs of a Great Author of Mauritius* (New Delhi: Diamond Pocket Books, 2005), 180.

¹⁰⁰ 'Ganga of the Courtyard.' #31. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 40.

should go back to its state of paradise, I will have failed in my translation, as I will admit, I failed in my first reading. Without adding more than what is there, I feel the need to have the poems completely supercede our preconceived knowledge or our previous ignorance about the world of his poetry. After reading ‘Ganga of the Courtyard’, I hope that it is clear that interior lakes and interior courtyards have a place in a country which currently entices us with its shoreline, the stretch of beach on the island’s circumference, facing every direction in the world.

I hope that this translation is able to represent the emotion in Unnuth’s poetry fully. I found great peace in his anger, an emotion so intimate that it made me turn my attention from my then-concentration on the Indian poet Muktibodh’s Hindi poetry and onto this, a collection which certainly follows in the footsteps of Muktibodh’s writing. Muktibodh wrote about the search for self in a slightly off-kilter universe, about an expression of an introspective moment which does not destroy the wisdom gained by introspection.¹⁰¹ At the same time his work was devised in a larger frame that allowed for a sense of reading within reality, of an engagement and longing to protect and perpetuate the positive aspects of reality. All this I found in Unnuth, as well, and to display the anger that goes along with this treacherous search and attempt at expression—I found it honest. Superficially I had been rather pleased to find that Muktibodh’s first language was not exactly Hindi, just as it was not exactly mine. Similarly I was rather pleased to think about Unnuth as an Indian-but-not, just as I am.¹⁰² And yet it was the complete lack in his poetry of any of the characteristics that might follow from this similarity that drew me in: Unnuth’s experience as a labour migrant poet, as an ethnic majority writer off the coast of mainland Africa, and

¹⁰¹ Gajanan Muktibodh, ‘Tīśra Kshan,’ *Ek Sahityik ki Diary*. 1964.

¹⁰² I am the child of Hindi-speaking immigrants to the United States. I learned my Hindi at home, but also in school, and for periods of my life I spoke Spanish and Russian better than Hindi (and discovered Paz and Yevtushenko during those periods).

external substance of which he writes are a very different experience of a postcolonial subject 'abroad'. I love to read poems in which I recognise 'my voice', but it can also be thrilling to read about a voice we never expected to hear. Translations can bring such worlds and words closer to us. If you are not pulled in by the strident call of Unnuth's verse, is it that the relationship between his words and your life is not as compelling as the relationship between his words and my own? This is, perhaps, the heart of what poetry is and can be; yet, reading my translation of Unnuth's word, not just his words but my relation to them must be of interest to you, and I hope that if my translation does not resonate with you, that you might try and find another.

The Teeth of the Cactus

1.

And Burn Something Else

have you heard?
my desire to live has
killed itself
on the threshold of the labour office.
the death certificate cannot be obtained
for today is May Day: a public holiday.
on the funeral pyre
burn something else.

2.

In the Mist

mist wrapped around his neck
he is dangling
in the narrow, constricted darkness—
the air has become stifled and anxious—
he has draped the sun with a black sheet.
he has placed the newborn
upon milkweed.
he has stretched time over top
that line of destruction—
in the jostling, time has fallen
into the saucepan's boiling water.
he has embedded the flag
on the dunes,
in the mouth of the thundering tides
he has lit a lamp.
putting on himself
the wings of a dying bird
flying, he rises
so that after the explosion
he can look down
onto the sight of his subjects
in the mist of his flaming breath!

3.

The Shard of Glass

as I worked the fields
that shard of glass
smeared my sole with blood:
today it rests in your museum,
on a velveteen pincushion

set, protected, as a jewel in a ring.

4.

Time, Dripping, Angry

from the angered *anjali*,
the hand cupped in offering,
morning seeps out.

smearing that sunlight on our faces
you and I run off to the horizon where
rainbows rise up like mushrooms.
on the harvested sugarcane fields
we find time's scattered pieces
mixed with the ashes of values
on the tuber pastures and the cane fields, both,
they are scattered on the fallows for the sake of new growth;
among them, growing out from the prickly pear cactus—
are plants, yours and mine, concealed.
these times, our days—
by the fields overcome with oozing growth
full of clacks and holes—
dripping, become
patched up, patch upon patch
a new generation is getting older
time is dripping from time itself, drop by drop.
gold found under the stone
is getting shut up in the dripping fists of time
which is neither mine nor yours
that generation, which denies
those very things which become its own,
tangled in thorns of milkweed.

5.

The Pain of the Sun

when one restless sunbeam, of
the sun of a languid afternoon,
unlawfully endeavours to caress
the pink roses of my courtyard,
one rebellious thorn tears it such that
the sun, all night long, whimpers and grieves.

6.

Word in Context

underlining words
from the lines of my poetry
with a red pen
you tired of

looking for the meanings
of all of them, in the lucid dictionaries
and then
you picked up
piece by piece with your fingers
the poem's newly invented words
like ice-cubes
you left them in your glass.
you kept watching the melting of the ice cubes
laughing,
and when they were fully dissolved
you picked up those melted words,
took them down your throat.
there was no chance to tell you
that
from words' melting
into water,
poison is born.

7.
Heaven and Heaven

what other heaven do you speak of? for
I myself know of only two sites:
there is a banyan tree, where in the flames
my ancestor ascended, becoming a heaven-dweller.
the other place is there, where
my future is settling in for a slow death.

8.
I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven

when, in order to see the blisters on my hands,
I stopped the mill's grindstone
the grrring stopped—
you heard the silent sobbing of the ground flour.
who can tell now
with my talents
whether I'm grinding or being ground?

I could not be Yuyutsu
(alive, alone, at the end of war)
therefore I remained as Naciketas
(arrived, abandoned, at hell's door)
but when Yama, death's guardian,
did not open the door
then I became Trishanku
(peregrinator extraordinaire)
between your world
and his

I will circle, I will roam,
I will not let you go to heaven.

the moonlight would not let
my mango-grove blossom
even those rays of sunlight did not yield mangos.
you climbed up
onto my head
peeping here and there
drinking in
one more offering from the moonlight.
in your cupped hands
your bowl in the other direction
was filling up with the rays of the sun.
I will not let you go to heaven.

9.
A Moment as Long as an Eon

we learned that
from day to week
from week to month
a month lengthens to a year.
here, though, a moment
is longer than year—

10.
Wrath

Bare Mountain! listen!
with the summer sun in your mouth
along with the lamentation
of hundreds of thousands of cursed souls
listen, betrayer of the nation!
before you melt like wax,
break your vow of silence
stop your inertia, your idiocy,
you veiled opportunism—
put your heartless chest forward
otherwise
you yourself will be melted
by the flaming arrows of angry eyes.

and, oh yes, Mozambique Channel
you listen, too,
to the storms rising within yourself,
in your fists,
the Deerpond Volcano was
awakened in your eyes;
with Grigri's calamitous waves

the fairy on the shores of Fairy Lake
is desirous of doing the lord's
tandava dance of destruction.
if the wheel of fate does not change the course,
then from the suicide of personal dissolution
like the asura who was burned to ashes,
you'll, too, become ash.

11.
Satiation

he brings drops of sweat
on his forehead to the field,
labouring, sowing,
when the blood-smearred crop is ready
someone else has
gathered those full green kernels
off and away into their safe-chest.
because of the sweat, wrath arisen,
the labourer has swallowed the sun.

12.
White Blood

I know—
o you with the velvet hand-gloves—
there won't be blisters on your hands.
they, tired out, shaking, blanched,
can't even for a moment
stop—
I know this.
I know they can't stop
because under the table, from behind the curtain
they are being worked upon by some other hands.
but what you don't know
is merely this, that
grinding, grinding me
your bloody millstone—
one day, at once, it will scrape my bones
and then
just like while eating sweets
some old man's last tooth
breaks,
just like that your millstone
will scatter into pieces.
it will be sure to surprise not you, but others:
seeing the blood flow from the sparks of the stones.

13.
He is Just As Exhilarated

the worker from whose hands
you have wrested the pearl:
returning on the footpath,
he has a drop of dew
from an unfurled leaf
clenched in his fist.
he is just as exhilarated
as you are.

14.
Achievement

underneath layers of unsteadiness
with the returning pulsations
in the mist
a new achievement,
like a new scientific invention,
comes to the rippling surface.
the helplessness of joblessness
the rage of dissatisfaction
the sea of consciousness—
for three new elements, a new body
crawling along on its knees
in the race towards civilization
it came first.
this most wonderful thing
which has in it mankind's
whole history
is, in a glass bowl,
on display
at the main gate of the World's Fair.

15.
That Waxen Speech

having taken that gift
you gave to me in the dark
I reached the light:
on it you'd etched your promises, and
promised on it.
I wanted to study it then
but by the heat of the lamp
that gift had melted away
the waxen words
flowed from my palms
covering my lines of fate.

16.
Last Warning... High Alert

rusted by the sun
dropped into the boiling water
like a bird's feathers:
shedding raybeams fall and are
scattered
worn away upon the earth,
shafts of light.
life, melted, is flowing
but the dogs' and the figs' connection
remains unbroken.

that enemy is behind the window
and here there are many windows
the chairs are limited:
even more limited than those are
the electric chairs.
the new assurances are countless.
the one searching for meaning loses himself.
as of yet the ants have not gotten off the walls,
bricks haven't been fried in a bit of oil
from others' skin
wrapped up, tomorrow
he'll be without sunshine—
the sun melts and leaks.

revolution- bound in a fist
like the bubbling froth of lathered soap.
all the filth can't be washed away by
the lone fairy with the water from the pond.
from the maimed sun,
new sunbeams can't be born.
underneath the big trees,
little trees cannot grow;
therefore the little trees
have met with the hatchet.
man becomes a traitor to himself.
the sun melts
from its own warmth.

17.

On the Promotion Ghaat

who knows to whose shoes
you've cowed your head
as you run heedlessly
towards the promotion *ghaat*,
towards those steps on the river's bank?
do I know him at all, whose turban has settled
there at the feet of the promotion granter?

18.

Queer Night

in the river the jungle-sun is bathing;
the city sun is in the fridge.
in the darkness the city and the jungle have merged.
the fox and the lion have gone and sat in the office,
their pointy teeth gnashing,
their long tongues flitting in and out;
the head of the office is wandering around the forest.

a white pigeon is trembling with fear
like a little piece of meat
the sun in the fridge has been saved from rotting
a man's muffled voice
has come and clung to the city
and is swinging from the branches of the jungle trees
and breaths are undergoing
the punishment of hanging.

the jungle sun, having burnt the river,
is wearing away the rocks.
the city sun is still closed up in the fridge.
the whole city is shivering from the cold.
a queer night, different from other nights—
every night in the city hovers like a cloud.

19.

The Worth of Those Drops

after rolling in the dust with me
the sun himself came and sat by me to take a rest
tired, thirsty, he kept drinking
the drops of sweat flowing from my skin
and in the evening, at the moment of farewell—
in his enfeebled glow
thinking your courtyard to be my courtyard
he threw the worth of those drops
in front of you.

20.

Every Other Moment

from the mountain of assurances
every other moment
life melting, melting
like a waterfall
is falling
on the system of rocks

diffused, scattered into countless drops
into the river's frothy ripples
life is being dragged on
having abandoned the nest
falling
like the corpse
of a bird, life
set aflame without a pyre
is burning
life becomes a sea

by the coral reef
every other moment
the waves keep lapping, groaning
every other moment
in a calamitous ebb and flow
they sink into themselves
every other moment
the blue sea
is becoming red.

21.

Slate Coloured Morning

the milky, shining morning that
comes to your threshold without being called,
has been by my house,
has left his slate-coloured shawl
hung on my door

22.

I am in Love with That Space

cast by the sunlight on the fields,
a dark gloom lies
on my tawny face.
how can there be attraction left over
from which you can, contented,
put my arms around your neck?

even now, that which is your hell
is my heaven
those red coals which rest
inside my tawny face
I am stopping them from burning,
cooling them by the sweat of my body—
but I am anxious you will burn
I do not want to scorch
the greenery of the fields
whose crop

you are stretching
in the space between my fields and yours
it is that very space with which I am in love
that differentiates me from you.

23.

Sugar-Coated

in the past those pills I used to suck
were insipid outside and in
nowadays those I suck
are sugar-coated tablets
against the future's bitterness.

24. *Interval*

in the morning, the noise of the bird's twittering
is nothing else but a broadcast
they are poking at the sun with their beaks
telling it to awaken—
this call then abates
when the sun gets up and gets to burning

at the summit of its power
it turns tail and there ensues an atmosphere of flattening silence
activity falls drowsy
begins to sweat, slows down
the birds doze in their nests

and then in the evening
when the western horizon
without opening its mouth
sets about swallowing the sun
the broadcasting caw of the birds then begins

between the beginning and the end
that extensive middle ground
when the birds remain quiet
and the sun desires silence
having become burnt and flavourful
the renegade moment of time is
preoccupied
in pecking at the kabobs from the parties.

25.

Cleaning

a broom's in the hands of the big folk
in the middle are the little folk
in the corner is the dustbin

26.

Search

search! a search for true meanings, proper goals
search! for the new scope of the new horizon
a search for new values
a search for the middle point in the compromise
in this ebb and flow the search for one's self is to begin;
the destruction of Hiroshima—
they do not find even the detonators
the intellectuals of Bangladesh—
they do not find even their bones
the refugees of Vietnam are not found
the agitated Indian Ocean has already churned
the nectar of the sea.
war has not yet broken out
but it will break out, this is certain
be it over bread, over pieces of ground
over colour, over identity
in Africa, in Iran,
a cold war, a civil war,
who profits?
the search for the answer is still progressing
even when found it hasn't been found
at the very end of the search party's journey
by coincidence it will be found.
selling all the effort which hadn't yet found a price
his drops of sweat
kept pouring out as he panted
a light scent of self-satisfaction
he alone is alive
each new sapling consists of his presence
in the sizzling sun of the fields
he challenged death
he runs on the first watch of history
within him
Hiroshima, Vietnam, and Bangladesh,
still moan
to the tune of self-satisfaction
a search is in progress
search! for the renaissance of thought
search! for a revolution
that new revolution which has already been purchased.

27.

Bang-Bang

the ough and arghs of obligation
the children's chant against fate

there— the whistling sighs of those moaning, grievous breaths
here— the resentful mynah birds caw
then— the bang-bang of the overseers' bullets

28.

All my Different Limbs

in the northern limits of my country
amidst the archipelagos
there is a round island
where birds rest, draw breath
there on a black crag
I left my hands
which were my future
there
having become compelled to stay
my eyes, shrouded as they had become in sooty blackness
were my hope
my own heart was measure of my liveliness—
I have left it there in pieces
on that stone
on which waves disperse into foamy pieces
just like a corpse,
all the things of its lifetime
left behind in different drawers
itself collapsed without identity on the pyre
that way
in just that way
in the domain of the pawned identity
I live out, too, my existencelessness
on that island
and on that island
all my different pieces are lying, dead.

29.

The Heart of the Machine

two barrels of trash
in front of your house—
over the two of them are hunched
two beings scavenging for something in them
one of the two beings is a dog
and the other
with his stomach contracted
starved for bread
he's some useless component of your machine
who has a heart.

30.

It's Necessary to Buy a Question

on my hands' worn away lines of fate
the cactus' sprouted saplings save the
gulmohar flowers
from your embers, from
being reduced to dust,
with the help of thorns which cut to the quick
which have blazed out from your eyes
they become my adornment
this to you is not today even palatable
some saplings will be settled inside
this is not to your liking
you are a shaper of destiny
you are a merchant, that is why
I want to make a purchase from you
in my fist
there are many questions
question upon question, there are no answers at all
these questions are not of silver
even so will you, in exchange,
sell me an answer?
I want some answers
to emerge from my fate-line
in order to fill with pollen
the cactus flowers.
your exiled, outcaste flowers:
thorns have choked them—
will you give punishment to those guilty thorns?

31.

Ganga of the Courtyard

you'd entrusted
my country's
enchanted lake-bank
to that white aggressor
in the language of
wandering
merchants,
now to take a bath in the Ganges
there is rainwater collected in
my courtyard

32.

Offered Breaths

in the absence of life
I invent life
unknowingly
sorrow, happiness, and death also cling to it

to longer than distances from birth to death.
in the space of one breath
I myself have contracted
that situation of never understanding life and death
elongating the breaths
it becomes mine
and I become the breaths' unraveller.

like a bird separated from the flock
I keep turning, making gyrations
all around just one breath
skimming the boiled air
continuously looking down where poets
take their poem-inscribed papers
and eat them

sleep is living a waking death
courtesans are busy in gathering
up their bespoilt beauties
the termites are nibbling away at the assurances
still remaining of the breaths are
glottal sounds at the back of the throat
the children keep repeating the names of things
they run to the stores

then they come back with empty bags
one corpse is sitting on the floor
the priest sows the corpse into the ground
with a supplication—
may this tree keep giving fruit

the flower was yesterday white
today from its red petalettes
I am taking the sun's champing, pointed beams
in tiny pieces
yesterday my own hands, too, weren't red

today meditating upon the offering of blooming flowers,
I come to a heightened state of breath.

33.
Pilgrim

on a journey...
you and I have set out, both together
stage one
separated into different classes by our tickets
after this station
on the second journey
without identity cards, without tickets

carrying the weight of our lifetimes on our heads
to other stages
we will travel together
to third journey

34.

Morning Septet

first morning: on that first morning
even after having opened my eyes
I could not see anything
there was the darkness of dazzling light

second morning: a very great stillness
having found a thundering, a leonine roar inside myself
I shrivelled from fear
in one corner of the cage

third morning: inside me hunger was born
my intelligence felt
the crushing oppression of my stomach
the poles of the cage had raised a ringing, echoing sound

fourth morning: on that fourth morning
scraping off the bars of my cage
I arrived into the open air
only then did I realise that my language, my speech
was left there inside the cage

fifth morning: aping others
I, too, became a part of the cawing

sixth morning: behind people
I, too, arrived to that cave
where vulturous, rapacious ones
amidst the bones and mortal remains
were chewing
the limbs and organs of the procession

seventh morning: forgetting the identity I'd left in the cage
rendering myself unrecognizable
I, in the languages of vultures,
set about singing their praises

35.

White Flag

and the faces of my children
are white
like upright flags of self-surrender.

that fleshless, bloodless hide of mine
you gave to your own children
to keep safe.
they blew it up, fattening it like a safe-chest
like the stomach, too, of a balloon
were it solid.
there is this consequence, that today
on your door
there are still these knocks.

36.

A Folk-Tale

she took me in her lap
having made a sign
in the sky, in the direction of the bursting stars
my mother would say to me—
this is a country of fairies
my thirst was slaked
she clutched my fingers
each person has their very own star
my hunger would be erased
in response to my questions my mother said—
among these stars, there is one that is yours, too
then would come to me a fierce hunger
I'd ask my mother—
when will I get my star for my own?
my mother said—
when you'll stop crying
after that. from then on
even in fierce hunger I would not cry
and one day, when
nauseated, restless from hunger
I for my star
began to sigh
then my mother spoke—
if you sigh, then it will turn to a glowing coal and fall
the flat roof of my house
was made of dry sugarcane sheaths
I became quiet
finding me sad, my mother spoke—
these stars, for good children,
turn to diamonds and fall
one day I quietly on the flat roof
put a platter full of water
like a black island, even today
amidst the water in the platter, a piece of coal!

37.

Thirst

opening his mouth bigger than the sea
after having drunk, he
wanted then inside of him
that the tide would not rise, and
ebb, that
there would not be revolutions
that there would be not
whirlwinds, that there would be not
the revolts or rebellions of the waves
and he wanted this, too, that:
after having drunk so much
thirst would still cling to him
cling to him

38.

A Knock at the Door

once, when I looked ahead,
there was a deep abyss, but
there was faith even in hopes
now they scattered drop by drop
my eyes have now dried
my expectation and hope have
wrung each other's necks
between the earth and the sky
empty, devoid
now between you and I
there is a distance
some of your people
are pulling us even farther apart
my courtyard has shrunk
my children's eyes
are like birds' faces in
the direction of a worm
covetously looking on
the frothy ebb and flow of the great sea
is in their stomachs and bowels
and in their eyes grapes
in those days
I was ready
in my eyes
for the surging ocean
for tomorrow's explosion
now my eyes
are lying there dry
alas!
this era
I cannot sink it
like the tears of a crocodile

even its teeth, too, are false
this is its fruit: today the sea is red.

39.

After Usefulness

in the chilly season
you buy the sun
in the warm season, the wind
and after use
you discard them in turn
in my courtyard

40.

Broken Microphone

the voice of the sky to gods did
warn—
together with nectar poison will also come up
from the churned ocean
in this age man's turn has come—
the sky-voice's
loudspeaker broke
the warning was not broadcast
the nectar of the fist of man
acted as poison
now men
will have to rise up by themselves
will have to cross by themselves
the flood of surging nectar
no one else will rise up for you
to whom you have given nectar
even he whom you've put into office
will not cross
the surging river for you.

41.

A Flood of Sweat

if swimming in my sweat
makes you younger
then go loosen up a bit
this cross upon my back
the rope has sunk half an inch
inside my skin.

42.

The Fraction Sign

having been exiled

from the spheres above
for some time I've remained suspended
now in the squares of the town below
inside the boundaries' three sides
I am searching for the fourth corner
because
in triangles
it is the fourth corner that
people consider to be the measure
of my worth
which in order to find
I must take
that heavy fraction sign
away before my price lessens—
that value which
to raise your own
you have placed before me.

43.

Lungs and Machine-Parts
a labourer of the sugar-fields
is, putting his hand to his dry, dry lungs, dying
not one doctor is close by
over there, five engineers gather
smearing with grease, applying moisture
to the components of the sugarcane factory

44.

In Accordance with Nature

i try to fit into
one round beam
from the sunbeams arrived in from outside
to save myself
from the cold's shivers
with the help of powerlessness
that beam, the size of a one-rupee coin
had come inside a pore in the wall
I am sitting here
seeing image upon image
of the freedom outside
once inside this circle of imagined warmth
I forget for a moment
that I am a prisoner inside my very self
how natural this is
that why I say
that I want to break up this naturalness
and you laugh.

45.

Powerlessness

hiding hunger
in my stomach—
i have been left powerless.
heat and cold,
seeing hunger hidden in my skeleton,
come to quarrelling—
which should melt it free?

46.

That Incomplete Right of Action

this historical lie
how much longer will it last
how much longer will this speech belong to me
and this corpse
how can this corpse be mine?
over its throbbing heartbeat
you have authority
just as
your estate
your car, your chattel, like that
even my existence is yours
my shimmery drops of sweat are yours
so then
how can that corpse be mine?
you have taken all the good
you've taken the past and the future
you left the bones from in between—
why don't you take all the rest, too?
history would have escaped
from the false testimony
that this present is mine—
whose the past is not
nor the future
how can his be the present?
How can this corpse be mine?

47.

After Zeal

there is no dead man
in the skeleton
on his shoulders, on his stopped breath,
he who has lived before the zealotry
has afterwards breathed his last.

48.

Desire to Live

on the sunbeams the frolicking cloudlets
peck daintily at the boiling air
of the heated afternoon
the desire to live, melted by fever,
disappears
life inside four walls of ice is
protected
the silent clouds' desire to rain is
at rest
they called for strength
even upon the melting of all life
the moneybags of the pilgrimage of life did not melt
just for that

hopes remained
one found relief from the coolness, from
the soft and seething pus streaming from the blisters
one found peace of mind
from the enclosing restlessness
and life too is the like the delicate cloudlings
hung from sunbeams
to the quivering of one's identity
I kept feeling
like the cloudlings skipping over the sunbeams

and when it comes evening
the bare branches of the felled trees
lift their pointed fingers
held
the shivering birds' wings' shadows
in the cold night the body's fever
giving the semblance of warmth
a grain of cornmeal has dropped out of the millstone
and in its place hopes have been crushed.

and the flour of hope,
the millstone's drone get stuck in the crevices
and at the sun's abduction, the birds' melodious song, too
get stuck in the gullet
the long silence's bloodthirsty teeth keep on gnawing
the night's skeletal ribs
the sun's remaining redness
drinking of the sea sip by sip
that consists of the sunlight and shade
there is here neither sunlight nor shade
nor quivering wings' shadows
night has draped upon itself
the spring's shroud
the felled tree's silent bird

is conveying its condolences.

49.

After the Auction

I wasn't able to hide my ribcage
because my share
—these layers of my flesh—
at the auction became fated to you.

50.

Bars of Bone

so far these prison clothes
haven't come off our body
both of us have tied
our freedom in a rope
bound each rope on a neck
then we two
will grasp our independence by our necks
and pull in each direction—
there is a tussle
until the rope breaks

freedom escapes, runs
again to the jungle
you run
behind with the rope
and I...
amidst my bars of bone
again
remain prisoner.
until that moment when
freedom
will be free
amongst my bars of bones
leave me bound.

51.

Living Death

the skeleton inside the clinging mass of flesh
has killed himself
by wrapping around his neck
the exhaust escaping from your pipe
but whenever death comes to life
there death cannot come to death
for the sake of tortured history's last chapter
on the skeleton, layers of flesh begin to appear.

52.

Fearful Jungle of Cities

in the fearsome, desolate jungle, the city's
stray man is wandering
taking the enjoyment of the wretched future upon his own head
even after full-fledged endeavour
to get out of the fearful maze of the jungle-like town
finds himself bound inside, each moment
the hunger in his stomach
as in the wolf's eyes he is doubled.

in the heavy dryness
there is a want of water
not of whiskey
electricity and power become enfeebled
but parties all night
keep on going

a raw anger
taking hold inside of it,
history before it even happened
understood that
desire to go back to what's left
of the pathos-filled tragedy—
the echoing small-echo's resonance
of the enemy left cold
in the fearsome jungle, the city's
man is wandering

53.

Wind and Wind

the rest of beings' likeness
I have no knowledge of
but of this— this I am not unaware
that you, too, are air, wind
you are that wind from which
tea-lights are extinguished
I am that wind from which
fire
becomes even more blazing

53.

When They Have Been Recognised, Then

I drank and drank poisonous satisfaction so
now I have become lifeless
but for
my anxious raspy breaths

crazed silence
who knows
what will make
the wolf which is inside you
miscarry?

mounted on the broken shoulders of time
you will run
then rage will chase you
from your barren state
the birth of this wrath
from its own explosion
your mind near death will blaze
and in its splendour
all of the vultures will be recognised

55.

Deserving Punishment

the time for sunset has come
but the sun is still, still within my four walls
cloaked itself in a half-torn sheet
gasping
yesterday, he with a transcendent heat
melted a few peeping out faces
that's why today in retribution
his place has been given to the moon

56.

Stunted Brilliance

here on people's feet are shoes of high-heels
even if humanity is bowed at the knees
even if existence has started to whimper
under the palm trees the stunted plants
somehow grow
bringing down the still calm of that place with a stir
the irrigation of the veins dried by the sun's warmth
like the sale in the market of stale goods for high prices
the price of the desire to live has also gone up
a progressive being is man
as the lines of progress get even longer
praise has rebelled
it has left the temple's four walls
and arrived
in the magazines
in the books
in the offices
in the parties
in the debates

in order to arrive under the cool umbrella
the rush of strong heat
becomes moist, peppered with sweat
here people wear high-heeled shoes
the fashion of wearing a cap on one's head has caught on
like the currencies of the world market
the price of values seems to have fallen too
under the umbrella toadstools have sprung up
on the toadstools' feet too are high-heeled shoes
you'd placed a wager
you and I with each other's sweat
spread on each other's rotis, would eat the rotis
you keep spreading upon your roti
the gravy of my sweat
I am eating only roti
because you, you
have not sweat at all

57.

In the Afternoon Sun

fearful
in even the heat of the afternoon
your shadow cannot be seen
because the hungry people of your country
looking to eat up
your slices of the evening
stand with mouths agape

58.

It is Not Here

a fringe of froth
wrapping within itself hopes
made even those hopes frothy
the strata of grime rose up

at the corner of the canopied night
on the ship of the morning
day is stretching out a sail
but the length of the mast
reminding us of the anguish
made our hearts tremble—
day lay there in the uncertain fringes

from the layers of the canopy-night
peeling away the night layers
for that unique morning
of my life
I have kept on searching

not able to conclude
that it is not here

59.

False Tongue

the inherited, counterfeit coin
is still in my fist
but even with this I could not
buy your words
you were once without the power of speech
you had tongue surgery
and in your mouth
remained your tongue, cloudlike
which thunders much, but does not rain
my counterfeit coin is still in my fist

60.

The Sun is Right Now Far Away

when will that new sun rise?
when will his shadows be visible?
its breaths, when will they
not seem so foreign and strange?
when in the sunlight
will the flocks start to be reorganised?
which in the darkness are
gnawing upon my identity

taking fright at the solitude
I set about groping for my shadow
then I realise that
the sun must be playing in the courtyard
where it is safe from the police's glance
its running here is also
not possible
right now the morning is far off
when will he rise?

this unanswered question's
fat, wealthy bundle—
putting it upon my head
falling down and rising up repeatedly in the course of things
on the sun's return
I will raise it in welcome
the sun is right now far away

61.

Your Own People and You

above, your flag was tearing
I with a black flag
went up, looking
giving you-knew-not-what type of sign
the hands of my people rose
and there was a stony look given
with my tumbling, a silence fell over
in the attempt of making a hubbub
everyone began to laugh

62.

Notice

it brings to mind that hot-headedness
certain handbills, certain notices even today
on the doors in the alleyways weathering the sun's sultriness and water
are posted
for the sake of the protection of identity
printed on it are several long vows on
which are gathered layers of rust
which when staring at it,
my eyes redden

on your side are the police, are the means, support
are the four walled barred structure of steel
arrest me and hang the gallows
making the rope that very garland
that I had once put on you
because I'd had faith in you
you have killed it with a great lack of pity
for this offense
give me the punishment
I am going to tear down the notices

63.

To the Bird's Claw, Electricity Doesn't Come

I would place
my head upon your claw
but I, from my window, have seen
on the electricity wire, the twisted legs
of that bird who was getting charred
who had, with a jolt,
touched his head to wire.
a bird's feet do not feel electricity
but the head does—
I hold my own head dear.

64.

Optimistic Journey

this is a strange journey
a journey which is history's instrument
on which my brother
neither I am going, not are you going
underneath our feet is that path
to which doubt has given birth
underneath-underneath our feet
the lane is going
in our hands having taken a new bomb of utter destruction
we are searching for the stages and
inside out fleshy bodies
meaning with pain on our bones
we are even now dressing our wounds
they have from the assurances sprinkled
we are sitting in this dew, that
tomorrow after the rain, like felled trees
on these too will grow flesh
because there too grass has grown
where Attila's horse used to roam
tired out, broken, have become dejected
now
our own hand's shaking
we all those lifelines
have let topple
because of which our own people
are all hungry, all-half-naked

now on this smooth-fingered hand, splayed flat
if anyone is a historian
then write history
history of this journey of assurances
in which on the journey of struggle
firing bullets
time in its sleep-journey
is making a corpse's journey, a funeral procession

65.

Darkness

to see what goes on in the dark
I took inside myself
two dry stones
so you had your hands
placed lightly on my head
and from that powerful energy
the two bulbs of my eyes died

66.

Here It Became Night in the Afternoon

here it became night in the afternoon
the wild fig bloomed, then disappeared
under the wings of the vultures
the life of the sparrow
was claimed by law
on the teeth of the cactus
the glittering bloodstain
slipped on the petals
the moonlight was caught on
the milkweed's thorn tips
on the red drops of dew
the black night kept swimming
on the rotting darkness of the light
the black dog's tongue kept licking
the sun's corpse smelled worse and worse
under the cover of a black sheet
the blind groom has with blind antimony
filled in the hair-part of the bride
here, afternoon has turned into night
the conjugal night has remained bound
inside the box of vermillion

67.

Merchant

sticking swelled flesh
to the oppressed skeleton
yesterday's black sun
laughs a white laugh
tomorrow still you will sell to the clouds
the pearls of the naked bodies of the labourers
for gold or silver cloth

68.

Four Moods

you have found the chance
with your cigar's ponderous smoke
to construct an army of the future—
groping at its walls
I am searching for the door to today

to get to the top
you have placed that file
beneath your feet, which
takes you three inches higher
that is my file
which even now is lying there below on the floor
a base for all those files which arrived after

a very big drop of indifference
drip-dropping
has sullied your chair and gone
your joyful clothes
sit on it
sullied, now saddened
by the ponderous smoke of your cigar

look seriously at your glass of whiskey
it has become a cocktail
of something, a drop of sweat from someone's forehead
has dripped into it
a drop of blood of someone's
a bit of a tear from someone's eye

69.

Freedom of Mine

I have one heart
which loves
I perceive that by which
I have one brain
which thinks, considers
which I feel because
I have one freedom
given by the government
who wants to touch it, cannot touch it

70.

From the Black Death of the Afternoon

the glimmering afternoons of the fields
die each day
each day their blood is extracted
bathing in the grieving afternoon's blood
in the evening the sun goes red
in the spirits of the newspaper
on the television screen
afternoons appear black
so as to gleam on that black
heavily laden neck's white necklaces
on the afternoon's lamenting
dominating it
a song from a Hitchcock film
it becomes pleasing, enchanting
from the black death of the afternoon

71.

Questions Risen Up

dumb rabble-rousers
this is your country's public
your squeezed-out public
are being juiced like mangos
like children, they are being entertained by the juicing
in your alleys
left behind are the old footprints of the high classes
to whom a lot of questions are being raised
the breaking of your vow of silence is imminent

72.

Your Three Distinguishing Characteristics

the sun-burnt rods
borne by a naked back
I keep on bearing your cross
to make my journey
more easily traversable
my package of boiled rice
you've taken in your own hands

a big task it is, this labourers' *jati*
which is yelling, yelling out
that you haven't gotten anything from him
but I, though, am in your debt
I know that my cracking sack's
emptiness
is your, your own gift

who says that
you are a mimic
of the west
you, you amongst thorny fools
are throwing out the thorns
deeming them dangerous
you with just the fools
keep on triumphing
over the men stationed at the laid table

73.

The Safe-Chest's Stomach

this crevasse, this moat
of time's pointed, attractive slogans
like the safe-chest's rapacious, drooling mouth
is getting even bigger
something of one's own will have to be thrown in this
before filling it in, the pregnant safe-chest's
stomach has extended quite a lot

74.

In the Fridge

with that money with which
grain was not gotten
I have bought sleeping pills
until the ship of food arrives
me, my wife, my children
may as well put our hunger to sleep
because
election time
that beautiful speech you gave me
is lying at my place
it has begun to rot
we cannot eat it
that is why I've shut it up
in the neighbour's
fridge

75.

But Gnaw He Will For Sure

that mouse that today
is gnawing, nibbling at my naked feet
will tomorrow arrive at yours
well-protected in shoes
he will not come to find your feet
that is why he will
nibble and gnaw slowly at the seat of power
to which you cling

76.

Equilibrium

I don't want your happiness
but having taken all the grief
on one of my shoulders
I've been left maimed
that's why, on my other shoulder
load just enough sorrow
so that after I drown, both sorrows
will become each other's support
until then on my own chest
I take the pangs of hunger
I will keep on rising and falling
unbalanced

in your new journey's
open mouth, furnace-like

one hundred common people, their blood
and flesh bodies crammed in
that exceptional man's
construction is going on
who tomorrow will build you

77.

Trees and Men

man's blood
has been transfused with the trees'
the trees begin to quiver
in order to move
in order to save themselves from being crushed
men are not able to move

78.

White Widowed Walls

you've proven deaf
but not illiterate
that is why today's generation
on the widowed walls
of your white buildings
goes on writing its own literature
you in your censor's hand
place a black-coloured-filled paintbrush
before
the widowed walls declare themselves
happily married brides

today's half-dried-up river
with a viscous, clammy soul
is flowing in this unflowing manner
with a crazy hope that
it sees it first:
the ocean of the future's restlessness

amidst creeping, crawling life
even with the banned slogans
rebellion's crutch has been seized
let at least one being scream
so that the glass in the other hand
from this apocalyptic roar
becomes shattered

79.

In One Moment

on that day

after a long speech
on your humanity
people saw you
in the hand of a beggar
place a ten rupee note
that's why today on the ramparts of the town
they are standing with hands outstretched

80.

White Night

with the dry
red bloodless bedbugs of my charpoy bed
I have struck up a friendship
they have understood
that this dearness is not my fault
that the blood of each vein
has frozen together solid like ice
even so, that night which brings sleep
does not yet reach inside my room
I get lost in open-eyed dreams
of love with a sugarcane gatherer
a village girl
but marriage was to
a white night

81.

Language

the shelter of my fist is my own
hidden in the hollow space within
my face is my own
this ally is my own—
from wherever
children's swarthy bodies
are touched by the sun's
toil-drops
from my forehead

the eager, covetous air is also mine
even after blowing out
the lamp in my home, it is mine
the dryness of my eyes is my own
the well of my stomach is my own
my rented breaths too are mine
what I eat, what I enjoy, is mine

but there is just language
which is not mine

82.

Prosperity

in my reign
the powerful have become cripples
in a mire
the swimmers' hands and feet
have become steel
the breeze has become handicapped
the birds' wings become steely-firm
because of this:
to rest
the blows of time
upon their own soul
I'd begged, asking you
for steely forbearance

83.

Seething Silence

in the clutches of silence
groping for breaths
by means of the fingers
on which pallor has fallen
I want to experience it
For only then
the ringing in my ears crescendos
from the sound of spiders' legs
having risen up above the door
due to that explosion
which from my seething silence
became crashing
and erupted
like a volcano's raging coals

84.

And Show Me No Kindness

as I bow my knees
you keep giving me help
my aide
from your beneficence
I am still not freed
even now
I have not been able to gather the interest
now, show no kindness
to my son
do not hold the crutch
for the price of a third leg
I will not be able to settle

in this lifetime

85.

Here is My Freedom

in my fist is an ill evening
my eyes are full of morning
there is no ground beneath my feet
nor sun above my head
here is my freedom

86.

The Night, Too, is Alone

in its loneliness
the night has rented a mynah bird
as it sings out its dark, ardent melody
it is giving forth thus by my side
a thought occurs then
in the night there is neither deafness
nor is there blindness
the night is also not a deaf-mute
and therefore
even sights, too, fill it up
it has, too, its own solitude
and maybe
in its solitude
that very night
has rented me

87.

Significance

after the harvest
in the empty sugarcane fields
the labourers' hands
are sown into the earth
those hands, for which
the significance of those dividing lines was
the significance of
germinated hands
from the warm breath of memory
having drooped, scorched, withered
in the boiling cauldron of time
thriving and prosperous
meditating upon seeds
high parapets of stories are growing up
the labourers' descendants'
black dreams
on the crags

are floundering

88.

New Moon

the night has never seen the day
but the day has seen
countless black conspiracies
from the messiahs of darkness
when the sun with its countless breaks
goes on pecking
from the foreheads of the drudging labourers
emerging drops of sweat
in the labourers' eyes
a descending canopy of darkness
day becomes evident, with their very own eyes
the night has never seen the day
but the day has seen the moonless night

Chapter 3: Unnuth and the Indian Labour Diaspora

there on a black crag
I left my hands
which were my future...¹⁰³

In 'The Politics of Representation,' Charles Taylor asks why expression and reception of identity are so important in contemporary society. He examines why 'a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.'¹⁰⁴ He asks why not necessarily to question the importance of the reception of identity, but rather to draw attention to the fact that this concept is not universal or eternal, instead growing up around European Enlightenment thinking on identity. Now that identity is something individualised, unfinalisable, and dialogical, and authentic, it is not enough to acknowledge one's self or the other, but to understand that they are imbued with 'equal dignity'. Taylor turns to Rousseau; elegantly paraphrasing his views, he writes, 'A perfectly balanced reciprocity takes the sting out of our dependence on opinion, and makes it compatible with liberty.'¹⁰⁵ For the Indian labour migrants, coolitude, this identification with their new role as migrant labourers, whose hands, as Unnuth writes, represent their future, was a natural response to their journey only because they ended up in a colonial environment where such a measure of identity had taken shape. Theorizing the group as part of a diaspora, the Indian Labour diaspora, is logical (especially as the original emigrants from India often had only the vaguest idea of the difference between Mauritius, Guyana, or other future homelands), and has precedent in Mauritian

¹⁰³ 'All My Different Limbs.' #28. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 35.

¹⁰⁴ Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Representation,' *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25.

¹⁰⁵ Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Representation,' *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 48.

literary criticism itself in the writings of Khal Torabully. In this chapter I will look at Mauritian theorist Torabully's conception of 'coolitude' as a means of expressing one's identity in response to physical dismemberment (the separation from the cultural homeland) and whether or not *The Teeth of the Cactus* engages fully enough with coolitude to be aptly called diaspora poetry. Like the previous section, section two of the thesis will begin with translations of Unnuth's poems themselves so that I approach my analysis from the position of a reader first and foremost.

I. *Coolitude and the Labour Diaspora Identity*

'Notice'¹⁰⁶

it brings to mind that hot-headedness
certain handbills, certain notices even today
on the doors in the alleyways weathering the sun's sultriness and water
are posted
for the sake of the protection of identity
printed on it are several long vows on
which are gathered layers of rust
which when staring at it,
my eyes redden

on your side are the police, are the means, support
are the four walled barred structure of steel
arrest me and hang the gallows
making the rope that very garland
that I had once put on you
because I'd had faith in you
you have killed it with a great lack of pity
for this offense
give me the punishment
I am going to tear down the notices

'It is Not Here'¹⁰⁷

a fringe of froth
wrapping within itself hopes
made even those hopes frothy
the strata of grime rose up

¹⁰⁶ 'Notice.' #62. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 81.

¹⁰⁷ 'It is Not Here.' #58. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 76.

at the corner of the canopied night
on the ship of the morning
day is stretching out a sail
but the length of the mast
reminding us of the anguish
made our hearts tremble—
day lay there in the uncertain fringes

from the layers of the canopy-night
peeling away the night layers
for that unique morning
of my life
I have kept on searching
not able to conclude
that it is not here

Unnuth's poems 'Notice' and 'It is Not Here' both describe embattled hope, a hope which must have pervaded the ships in which the indentured labourers were taken to their new homes. Here, Unnuth does not speak directly of the plantation, but rather of society and of nature, also turning against the poems' speakers. In the first poem, the speaker comes across a political notice plastered to a door in an alley, a notice which he once felt expressed the desire to empathise with the speaker's plight, but he knows now that the notice writer has 'a great lack of pity'. The hope that was once given to the notice-writer has been replaced by anger. The poem ends suspended: nothing yet has happened after the initial look at the notice. 'I am going to tear down the notices', the speaker concludes, but here, too, the poem concludes, leaving us with the possibility that nothing will ever be done in retribution. Readers, too, are left with the anticipation of what is to come; as they decide which reaction they would find the most suitable, their anticipation may become hope that the notices have been kept up or that they have since been torn down regardless of the punishment that the speaker knows is sure to follow. The second poem deals not with people, but with the sea and the waves, the night and the day: a day which 'lay there in the uncertain fringes' when it needed to prove itself, apologise for the trouble

which the sun had already caused them all, making ‘their hearts tremble.’ Though the night and the day are in many ways beyond change, the speaker writes that he is ‘not able to conclude’ that the changed day for which he searches ‘is not here’, that the frothy hopes at the poem’s beginning are just that: froth. And yet the eventual option of such a conclusion is implied: again readers are left wondering, what will happen next? This question, fuelling as it does reflections on what is happening now, leaves behind the emphases on field labour, on hunger and sweat, that pervade the collection, and shift readers’ focus to the inner life of the labourers and their descendants, who, indeed, are what happened next. How did they come to terms with what had happened?

Khal Torabully, himself a Mauritian poet as well as a theorist, coined the term ‘coolitude’ for an attitude he saw emerging in Mauritian poetry dealing with the indenture experience. It was an attitude that considered the experience of the indentured labourers, pejoratively called ‘coolies’ by the plantocracy, as something to be engaged with and, now that indenture was over, to be gained from. Coolitude takes the voyage of the migrants as the starting point in Indian labour diaspora history, viewing the journey as one in which people encountered one another as they began to encounter their new world. The labourers were crossing the caste-effacing black waters, and Torabully insists that as early as the voyage, they were able to begin reconstituting their own identities. Those who went through the month-long journey together formed strong bonds, the transformative potential of which Torabully highlights as the first step in a multiple reconsideration of identities. To Torabully, ‘the chief characteristics of coolitude are, to sum up, the redefining of ‘India’, of the relation to India, to other cultures, in the setting of their adoptive homelands. A cross-cultural vagabondage/cultural vagrancy is definitely at its heart’, and coolitude

'broadens the concept of the 'Indian abroad' or the Indian Diaspora into the consciousness of a mosaic, complex vision, acknowledging the traumatic and constructive potential of the voyage/exile. It entails of the inclusion of Indianity into a mosaic poetics, which involves an interweaving with 'otherness/alterite'.¹⁰⁸ For Torabully, understanding one's coolitude involves understanding that one has a new language that is different and gleaned from various others, reflecting the author's multiple identities.

Many writers of the Indian labour diaspora, Mauritian or not, engage in this complex reconfiguring of identities. Some of them self-consciously engage in coolitude; some may not have heard the term 'coolitude', but exemplify it nonetheless. With the Hindi poetry of writers such as Abhimanyu Unnuth, Shrinivasi, and Kamal Prasad Mishra, Nand Kishore, and Kashi Ram Kumud, as well as the English poetry of Rajkumari Singh, it is possible to see a network of coolitude which spans the globe. As they engage in cross-cultural vagabondage, the history of the voyage ties them together, creating deeper bonds that shape the way these writers define their own identity. Torabully is drawing upon Glissant in his conception of coolitude: an identity forged out of a sea journey. Glissant also articulates the 'poetics of relation' that emerges; he writes:

Just as the first uprooting was not marked by any defiance, in the same way the prescience and actual experience of Relation have nothing to do with vanity. People who have been to the abyss do not brag of being chosen. They do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force. They live Relation and clear the way for it, to the extent that the oblivion of the abyss comes to them and that, consequently, their memory intensifies.

For though this experience made you, original victim floating towards the sea's abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others. Peoples do not live on exception. Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge.

¹⁰⁸ Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, *Coolitude: an Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London: Anthem Press, 2002), 194.

The experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange.¹⁰⁹

The aforementioned poets engage with questions of identity in their work; with experiences of indenture varying so much by destination, should they be read as a diasporic set? Glissant's passage suggests so.

This type of literature, without reference to *The Teeth of the Cactus*, has already been read as a diasporic set. Vijay Mishra, the author of *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, defines a diaspora as 'people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities on their passport' and the Indian diaspora as people for whom 'homeland is the *desh* (in Hindi) against which all the other lands are foreign, or *videsh*'.¹¹⁰ Mishra's definition differs somewhat from William Safran's oft-cited definition of diaspora from the first issue of the journal *Diaspora* (1991) as 'expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics:'

1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "center" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (83-84).¹¹¹

Mishra's definition downplays points four and five of Safran's definition because, just as is the case in Mauritius, not many other labour diaspora Indians have returned or even seriously considered returning to India, nor worked for its welfare. Unnuth and

¹⁰⁹ Edoard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 8.

¹¹⁰ Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 1.

¹¹¹ William Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return.' *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83-99.

the Indo-Mauritian community fit well into Mishra’s understanding of the diaspora as dependent on the hyphen for a well-fitting sense of identity, but although we have been using the term here for precision, there is no hyphenated term used in Mauritius by Indo-Mauritians to refer to themselves. They were previously referred to as ‘coolies’ and now they are referred to, and refer to themselves, as Hindus. As I will show in this chapter, Unnuth played a role in creating this non-hyphenated identity for Indo-Mauritians. His choices regarding language, religion, and history shape his voice as a poet without a hyphen, and in this chapter, I will look at the limits to reading Unnuth as a poet of the diaspora.

The term ‘Hindu’ highlights not the country of origin but a way of looking at and guide for acting in the world. Hinduism, as much a culture as a set of beliefs, is a good lens through which to analyse the cultural content of labour diaspora poetry insofar as it includes both manifest, visual practices which can be described as well as ways of thinking and questioning. In the poem ‘Broken Microphone’, Unnuth uses the very well-known Hindu story of The Churning of the Ocean of Milk to recalibrate his relationship with religion:¹¹²

the voice of the sky to gods did
warn—
together with nectar poison will also come up
from the churned ocean
in this age man’s turn has come—
the sky-voice’s
loudspeaker broke
the warning was not broadcast
the nectar of the fist of man
acted as poison
now men
will have to rise up by themselves
will have to cross by themselves

¹¹² ‘Broken Microphone.’ #40. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 53.

This story exists in several scriptural forms, but most relevantly it is found in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, Canto 45.

the flood of surging nectar
no one else will rise up for you
to whom you have given nectar
even he whom you've put into office
will not cross
the surging river for you.

In the original story, to highlight the relevant points, the gods and the demons are in warring camps. They both wanted to churn the Ocean of Milk in order to retrieve the nectar that would give them immortality. The gods pretended to work with the demons, holding the tail of the snake Vasuki, while she was tied to Mount Meru, to churn the ocean. The demons held Vasuki's head, and did not realise that in doing so, they would be poisoned by Vasuki's breath. Next, the gods were also endangered by the poison that emerged from the nectar; luckily, Shiva drank it for them. When the nectar of immortality was finally extracted, the gods used Vishnu's help to deceive the demons one more time. When the demons had wrested away the nectar from the gods, they were prepared to drink it—but Vishnu disguised himself as the intoxicating woman Mohini and, distracting them, gave it to the gods who thereafter were immortal. With its depiction of gods as not always immortal, the story raises questions about what it means to be a god; with all the deception on the gods' part, furthermore, it raises questions about what it is that humans need their gods to be. In his poem, Unnuth does not identify Vishnu, but starts with 'the voice of the sky':

the voice of the sky to gods did
warn—
together with nectar poison will also come up
from the churned ocean

He does not continue to tell the story in its original setting, but transposes it to 'this age', writing

in this age man's turn has come—
the sky-voice's
loudspeaker broke
the warning was not broadcast

the nectar of the fist of man
acted as poison
now men
will have to rise up by themselves
will have to cross by themselves
the flood of surging nectar
no one else will rise up for you
to whom you have given nectar
even he whom you've put into office
will not cross
the surging river for you.

Here, Unnuth continues to write about power and the way and efficacy with which some people entrust it to others. Now, he writes, men will have no help from gods, nor from those more powerful than the gods. They have churned their own time and gathered nectar in their fist, but even those whom they willingly entrust with power will not use that power to help sustain society. But what choices does he leave? The original story is not written in such a way that answers can be easily inferred. In the context of the *Mahabharata*, perhaps one of its popular descriptive adjectives for *dharma* sums up the situation best: 'subtle' (for example, Sabha Parva 66). The poem, like the original story, points out faultlines in a neatly sewn cosmology, places the human at the centre of a very complicated set of power relationships, without answering any of the questions it raises.

Torabully, in his conception of coolitude, makes it clear that the ship is the foundational point: it was the journey on which the migrants were able to form bonds with Indians from other castes and other communities who were suffering the same hunger and oppression, and who were likewise trying to improve their lives by taking this leap of faith across the sea. While the diminishing of the importance of caste is relevant when considering the unified sense of Mauritian-ness or Fijian-ness that resulted, underlying that caste identity was a Hindu religious identity that shaped, beyond caste, what 'self' and 'identity' meant. This religious identity was a popular

Hinduism, influenced largely by Puranic stories and vernacular versions of the epics. For those migrants, exile was already a pathway once trod by Rama, and the self was defined by its duty and its travails just as the epic characters were defined by theirs. In the poetry, however, even this sense of self with its basis in popular Hinduism is transformed into new forms of spirituality which emerged in the encounter of indenture and its legacy.

How do the three components of language, religion, and history fit together? In this chapter, I look at Indo-Mauritian writers engaging with their identity through language, religion, and history, and also trace the extent of their engagement with what Mishra defines as the Indian labour diaspora. I explain how Hindi became representational of a Hindu culture and a historical past which together, writers felt, created an Indo-Mauritian identity deserving of equal dignity in the multiethnic nation. The components of this identity (a Hindu culture and a historical past comprised of indentured labour) are not specific to Mauritius, and therefore I must ask: was the cultural identity created here part of a global diasporic Indian identity, a postcolonial identity that transcends the local?

Books like Vertovec's *South Asians Overseas* or the recent anthology *India and the Diasporic Imagination* take the existence of an Indian diasporan cultural identity expressed in Mishra's work as given (though not monolithic, of course) and analyse the ways in which emigrant Indians and their descendants have both looked back to India and looked around at their new inclusion into a transnational cultural network. Literary anthologies like Emmanuel Nelson's *Reworlding* show how self-expression has been a part of this engagement with new geographical and cultural

surroundings.¹¹³ Separating the labour diaspora from later waves of Indian emigration, one would think that the Global South, rather than the former colonial centre in the UK, would take centre stage, geographically, yet the Indian labour diasporic writer of unparalleled success is VS Naipaul, knighted ‘Sir Vidya’ in the UK and with his back wholly turned on any part of Trinidad that does not flow, wholly controlled, from his pen.¹¹⁴ This ‘marginal at the centre’ theme which is so central to the postcolonial understanding of hybrid culture relegates so much diasporic writing to the side, and here Unnuth will be read in the company of Indian labour diaspora writers who have also stayed in their country. Fellow Mauritian poet Khal Torabully has coined the phrase ‘coolitude’ to speak about these writers as belonging to a composite culture, and in this chapter I show that Unnuth is, to some extent, part of this culture of coolitude, while keeping in mind that the Indo-Mauritian writer might in fact find coolitude culture irrelevant in the face of a growing, unified Hindiphile Indo-Mauritian culture.

¹¹³ Steven Vertovec with Colin Clarke and Ceri Peach, *South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

India and the Diasporic Imagination, ed. Rita Chastain and Judith Misrahi-Barak (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2011).

Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992).

Reworlding is part of a series entitled ‘Contributions to the Study of World Literature’, of which it is number 42. This series illustrates the difference between a general study of literature from around the world, consisting of an inconsistent set of works including a survey of African women writers, a monograph on Olof Sundman, ‘writer of the north’, and an annotated bibliography of the Equal Rights Amendment. World Literature, as we theorised it in the first section, is less about a specific set of works than about articulating a perspective on all these texts so as to have transparency in, at least, the relationship we have as readers to the texts. Nelson’s *Reworlding* fits well into our understanding of World Literature as that literature which is drawn from understudied networks and which thus contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the global in literature.

¹¹⁴ Good introductions to Naipaul in this context include the website *Is Naipaul Postcolonial?* <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/caribbean/naipaul/postcolonial.html>, Accessed 13 June 2012, Rob Nixon, *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), and John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).

Self-analysis in Unnuth's poems 'Your Three Distinguishing Characteristics' and 'Your Own People and You' happens through a distinguishing of the self from the other:

'Your Three Distinguishing Characteristics'¹¹⁵

the sun-burnt rods
borne by a naked back
I keep on bearing your cross
to make my journey
more easily traversable
my package of boiled rice
you've taken in your own hands

a big task it is, this labourers' *jati*
which is yelling, yelling out
that you haven't gotten anything from him
but I, though, am in your debt
I know that my cracking sack's
emptiness
is your, your own gift

who says that
you are a mimic
of the west
you, you amongst thorny fools
are throwing out the thorns
deeming them dangerous
you with just the fools
keep on triumphing
over the men stationed at the laid table

'Your Own People and You'¹¹⁶

above, your flag was tearing
I with a black flag
went up, looking
giving you-knew-not-what type of sign
the hands of my people rose
and there was a stony look given
with my tumbling, a silence fell over
in the attempt of making a hubbub
everyone began to laugh

¹¹⁵ 'Your Three Distinguishing Characteristics.' #72. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 93.

¹¹⁶ 'Your Own People and You.' #61. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 80.

In 'Your Three Distinguishing Characteristics' and 'Your Own People and You', the analysis of the 'you' and the 'I' happen simultaneously, if not expressly to define the 'I' through the 'you', then to explore the 'I' through an 'other' who is sometimes hardly distinguishable. In the first poem is the familiar bitter twisting of words which are obviously taken from the 'other': the taking of rice as a kindness, the lack of food as a 'gift' that leaves the 'I' indebted. The three distinguishing characteristics seem to be those which the 'you' is precisely lacking: kindness (in lightening a load), munificence (in giving emptiness) and civility. This last one brings in questions of cultural hybridity: 'you' as a 'mimic of the west,' able to tell the thorns from the mere fools, may be triumphing for now, but will in the long run, the poem seems to warn us, suffer for being unable to know that of thorns and fools, fools are more dangerous. These three characteristics so obviously do not fit the 'you' that they may be tried on the 'I', but the question of whether they fit the 'I' remains. In 'Your Own People and You', on the other hand, the 'you' is almost not present: merely watching the 'I's 'you-know-not-what type of sign'. The 'you' is being superceded by this climbing 'I', until the speaker falls over, and his own people break into uneasy laughter. Though clearly distinguished from the 'you', the 'I' is trying here, and failing, to take the position of the 'you'. Is the attempt to replace the flag a mimicry of the West, and what does this failure signify? What would Mauritian readers, or readers well-versed in Mauritian social realities, make of this battle of the 'you' and the 'I'?

Anjali Prabhu's *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects* provides a rare analysis of the concept of diaspora with specific reference to an Indian labour diaspora, in this case in Mauritius.¹¹⁷ In it, she responds to recent frustrations with the concept of diaspora as too vague, agreeing that the lack of utility in the idea of

¹¹⁷ Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007).

diaspora obscures our understanding of the specificities of the Mauritius situation. She notes that hybridity has, in the postcolonial imagination, become almost synonymous with, and certainly simultaneous to, the idea of diaspora. Diasporas are defined by their hybridity, and hybrids are explained with reference to their diasporic (and therefore multicultural) origins. She distinguishes two distinct concepts in hybrid-diaspora, the first implying 'a certain fixedness' of underlying nationality, where, as Mishra writes, the new land is always considered *videsh*, or foreign.¹¹⁸ The second is Stuart Hall's non-essentialist conception in which

... diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all cost return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea ('Cultural Identity and Diaspora' 401).¹¹⁹

The Mauritian context seems to favour the second conception of diaspora, with its settling on to a new, non-hyphenated identity. As Torabully theorises, the sea journey away from India can be marked as the first moment of a new identification. Torabully, in coining the term 'coolitude', sets up an internal opposition to thinking primarily in terms of hybridity for this conception of diaspora: coolitude's allusion to negritude implies a foundational identity of 'coolie-ness' parallel to the black identity put forth in the negritude movements. The coolies' identity had its own essence not primarily, as it had been in the past, described in relation to the economic role they served in an economy that privileged the white plantation owners. In Paris, the black intellectuals who championed negritude saw the black community described and defined by non-black writers and thinkers and questioned the necessity of black intellectuals to define themselves within the same framework. They wanted to re-appropriate the pejorative term 'nègre' into a term that took pride and direction from the black culture which

¹¹⁸ Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 2.

¹¹⁹ Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 3-4.

had emerged. To make the term more precise, it was necessary to describe more precisely what he thought the positive attributes of blackness were; for the early champions of negritude these were a humanism, an engagement with society for its betterment, through realistic literature and Marxist politics, and a celebration and carrying forward of the narratives and symbols of older African history and beliefs. Blackness was pan-African, and indeed included since its inception members of the diaspora. Negritude was panned by critics as being just as racist as the European conception of blackness, based on created generalizations, still caught in the European construction of race which assumed a hierarchy.¹²⁰ In this chapter, I will explore how the term ‘coolie’ is used and defined not only in the Mauritian context, which is a diaspora in Hall’s sense, but also in the rest of the Indian labour diaspora which seems to align with Mishra’s conception. As Prabhu’s work implies, I find the way in which the term ‘diaspora’ applies to the Mauritian context to be too distinct to read Unnuth as part of Mishra’s diaspora.

The type of diasporization displayed in the various literary spheres of Mauritius changes over time, and my argument about Unnuth’s limited role in the diaspora does not extend to the current generation of Indo-Mauritian writers. In the period discussed in this chapter, up until 1968, the Indo-Mauritian community does not display a Mishra-ian sense of diaspora, engaging with a hybrid identity centred on the hyphen; it does, however, display a Prabhu-ian reliance on past trauma as social unifier. The development of the Hindu identity as a reaction to the coolie identity is a self-conscious move towards economic uplifting. Prabhu notes that: ‘In privileging

¹²⁰ My discussions of negritude are based on Michael Chapman’s discussion on the topic in ‘African Literature, African Literatures’ in *Research in African Literatures* 34, no.1 (2003), as well as Abiola Irele, *The Negritude Moment: Explorations in Francophone African and Caribbean Literature and Thought* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2011) and Ellen Conroy Kennedy, *The Negritude Poets: An Anthology of Translations from the French* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1989).

subaltern agency, these theories [she mentions Fanon, Gilroy, and Bhabha's, especially] simultaneously suggest that hybridity is a positive, resistive force to cultural hegemony. What is less obvious is the ways in which such cultural resistance is tied to other types of social resistance, to economic oppression.¹²¹ Unnuth's series of poems about the city and the jungle criticise rather than fuse cultures. They present the city as somewhat dissolute: for example, where 'even the stunted wear high heel shoes,'¹²² but they come to an ambiguous understanding of the jungle as well, with its ferociousness and cruelty. They involve a subtle examination of urbanisation, but recognise that there is no way to idealise the village without erasing large crimes which exacerbated poverty and stripped the Indo-Mauritian community of a fair start in the national economic hierarchy.

Poetry is one site in which these migrants and their descendants can perform the identity of 'homelanders', using either an entire language of a homeland or by preserving characteristics such as syntax, diction, or rhythms. These choices become part of a hybrid identity: one which both (as Hall conceives of diaspora) involves unsettling and reformulating in new arrangements and also, as Bhabha understands, reveals overall Mauritian culture itself to be hybrid, and thus provides a space from which the Indo-Mauritian literary sphere can voice itself. The next section will examine the rise of this Indo-Mauritian sphere in the 1900s, especially noting the ways in which the literati turned away from India as a source of identity and the ways in which they used educational institutions as sites of identity formation and protection. Then, the Mauritian journey in general will be juxtaposed with the response of Unnuth's poetry in particular to the idea of coolitude and diaspora. Moreover, Unnuth's poetry will be juxtaposed with selected poetry of the Indian

¹²¹ Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 7.

¹²² 'Stunted Brilliance.' #56. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 73-4.

Labour Diaspora in Guyana, Suriname, and Fiji, especially that poetry which can be classified as coolitude poetry. Although the three literary spheres—Mauritian, Unnuth's own, and the Coolitudian—are all diasporic in Prabhu's second sense of the term, the juxtapositions will analyse why the other spheres coincide more closely with Mishra's conception, and will examine the limits to which Unnuth's poetry should, in fact, be read alongside coolitude poetry.

II. *Hindi, Hinduism, and Coolitude in Indo-Mauritian Poetry*

'False Tongue'¹²³

the inherited, counterfeit coin
is still in my fist
but even with this I could not
buy your words
you were once without the power of speech
you had tongue surgery
and in your mouth
remained your tongue, cloudlike
which thunders much, but does not rain
my counterfeit coin is still in my fist

'To the Bird's Claw, Electricity Doesn't Come'¹²⁴

I would place
my head upon your claw
but I, from my window, have seen
on the electricity wire, the twisted legs
of that bird who was getting charred
who had, with a jolt,
touched his head to wire.
a bird's feet do not feel electricity
but the head does—
I hold my own head dear.

The formation of a unified Indo-Mauritian identity coincided with the decline in volume of immigration from India. This was not a coincidence, but nor is the Indo-Mauritian agitation against the system of indenture considered to be a process in

¹²³ 'False Tongue.' #59. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 77.

¹²⁴ 'To the Bird's Claw, Electricity Doesn't Come.' #63. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 82.

which there was no outside help. The Apravasi Ghat Trust Fund historians describe the end of Indo-Mauritian indenture thus:

In 1869, Adolphe de Plevitz wrote a petition on behalf of the Indians and eventually it reached Governor Gordon. By the early 1870s, a Royal Commission of Inquiry was set up and it made some recommendations to alleviate the terrible plight of the Indian labourers. Gradually, over a long period, between the late 1870s and early 1920s, the repressive apparatus of the Indenture system was being dismantled. Restrictions on movement, the pass system, the double cut system, and long contracts were outlawed. The condition of the Indian labourers was steadily improving.¹²⁵

Though indentured labourers had complained since the outset, through strikes and official complaints, no less, it took a European voice for labour complaints to initially reach the right ears. De Plevitz was a Parisian of Polish descent who arrived in Mauritius in 1859, just after a large wave of immigration sparked by the 1857 mutiny in India. His wife was a member of the plantocracy, but de Plevitz bought into the system only in its broadest strokes: his labourers were not under an indenture contract, but free wage labourers with better conditions. By the end of indenture in 1938, however, Indian voices were also beginning to be relevant to the political situation. One reason for this change was the organization and momentum gained by the Indo-Mauritians themselves, and one impetus behind that momentum was another important visitor to Mauritius. This time, he had already made a name for himself before arriving in Mauritius. His contributions to India and South Africa are known world-wide, but his contributions to the island of Mauritius are most remembered in the words and strength of the Indo-Mauritian community.

Mohandas K. Gandhi stayed in Mauritius from 29 October 1901 for 18 days. Although the scope of his travel was limited because of an outbreak of plague, his role

¹²⁵ *The Apravasi Ghat Trust Fund: The Indenture Experience.*
<http://www.apravasighat.org/indenture.htm>, accessed 20 March 2011.

in the history of Mauritius is still important.¹²⁶ It was the visit of Gandhi in 1901 that really inspired the community to take action towards increasing literacy for its own sake but also as a significant aspect of identity: Gandhi saw language itself as a sign, one that signified a whole cosmology that excluded other possibilities. As he did in South Africa and would do in India, Gandhi championed the idea of an essential Indian identity that could unite men to perpetuate non-Western values. Part of this identity hung on the unifying language Gandhi chose: Hindi. Sanskrit would have been the language with the most prestige attached to it by Western standards, and indeed, the governour of Mauritius at the time of Gandhi's visit was working on a translation of *Nala and Damayanti* into English. Indeed, he could have picked his own vernacular language, Gujarati, which had come to Mauritius with merchant families. However, he chose a language which he thought could unite Indians together in a sense of group identity as the common man. While Gandhian ideals were prevalent in Mauritius before and after his visit, it is possible that Mauritian Bhojpuri or Mauritian Kreol, which Gandhi did not speak, could have served as such a unifying language that would have further estranged the Indo-Mauritian community from the Indian communities in South Africa or in India; it was the actual charisma of Gandhi the man in person, perhaps, that solidified Hindi as the language that would serve this purpose. After his visit, interest in Hindi education and intellectual life began to rise, and became part and parcel of political life. The goal had been formulated: to make Hindi a language as prestigious as a European language, alongside making the Indians

¹²⁶ Saroja Sundarajan, *From Bondage to Deliverance: Indentured Labour in Mauritius and British Guiana* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2006), 69.

as prestigious as Europeans. The guidance and significance of Gandhi is felt most acutely in Munishwarlal Chintamanees's poem 'Babu, Please Come Once Again'.¹²⁷

Gandhi's visit came more than a decade before the end of indenture. Immigration was stopped in 1910 largely because of a lack of available land, and a recognition by plantation owners that their labour needs could be met by the local supply. Further migration would only exacerbate the poverty that had resulted from this system of indenture. However, immigration continued unofficially for the next several years. Sundarajan notes that 'no doubt there were incremental improvements in contracts, wages, and working conditions in the sugar plantations. But the labourers' work was as hard and daily life as precarious as they had been nearly a century before when their ancestors came as indentured labourers'.¹²⁸ For the early generation of the Indo-Mauritian intelligentsia, indenture was still a fact of life, and even for Unnuth's generation, first- or second-hand knowledge of what it was like to work on a sugar-cane plantation was not hard to come by. Indo-Mauritians had been able to become small landholders and gain non-labour jobs, but plantation labour was by no means a thing of the past, an item of nostalgia. Ananda Devi Narsimloo writes:

With the opening of the Suez Canal, competition in the form of beetroot sugar led plantation owners to rent out bits of their land, in what is called the 'metayage' system. In this way, the Indian labouring class in the early 20th century began to become a land-owning class. By the 1930s, they owned 30% of the land. None were rich, owning large estates, but this changed the overall position of the coolie who had been at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The Africans, who were largely fishermen, engaged in an alliance with the Creoles and the Indians under the auspices of the the Labour Party in 1937, and there were strikes all over the island, some violent. These were the impetus for the political gains leading up to enfranchisement, but after this goal had been reached, the ethnic alliances began to break up as they realized they were

¹²⁷ The original can be transliterated as 'Bāpu, Āo Phir Ek Bār'. For an excerpt, see page 211 where the poem is discussed at greater length. Munishwarlal Chinatamanees, *Mauritius ki Hindi Kavita*, ed. Abhimanyu Unnuth (Moka: MGI, 1975), 18-19.

¹²⁸ Saroja Sundarajan, *From Bondage to Deliverance: Indentured Labour in Mauritius and British Guiana* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2006), 73.

competing for jobs. Even the inter-Indian alliance between Hindus and Muslims, which had existed since the early days of labour migration when the Muslim traders who were already on the island helped them set up the temple, and the migrants joined in the Muharram celebrations, as Muslims realized that, as outnumbered as they would be in a democracy where their wealth would not matter as much, things could go wrong. The Samaj and the Sanatan divison already existed—the monotheists with their limited rites versus the trinitarians with the countless rites—and on this island of volcanic origin, it looked time for more eruptions.¹²⁹

The concern for the rising Indo-Mauritian politico-intellectual class, then, was working conditions, and ignorance or parochiality the cause for the stagnation of their welfare. Hindi was first disseminated through those newspapers which enjoined the common man to agitate for better conditions. For example, when Manilall Doctor arrived, at Gandhi's request, to Mauritius in 1910 to start a chapter of the Arya Samaj, he also started several bilingual newspapers and campaigns to get Indo-Mauritians to educate their children. The Arya Samaj was certainly responsible for advancing the cause of Hindi more directly than the Sanatanists had up til then been: they brought Swami Dayanand's Satyarth Prakash, printed in devnagari (the script used for modern *khari boli* literature) into Mauritius and equipped people to read it. They called it the 'arya bhasa': the noble language, the language of the Indo-Mauritian community. The Arya Patrika paper put out by the Arya Samaj was immediately countered by the Sanatan Dharmak of the orthodox, challenging the Samajist views on rituals and rites but agreeing with the political implications of a congregation as involved in politics as it should be in religious life. The Sanatanists, as the mood changed, began to converse more often in *khari boli* Hindi at religious gatherings, and in the present Hindi is seen as a religious language to the same degree as, if serving a distinct function from, Sanskrit.¹³⁰ Mauritius, which had always been a multilingual country, has become linguistically even more rich. It was also becoming linguistically more complex: not

¹²⁹ Ananda Devi Nirsimloo, Thesis: *Telagu Ethnic Identity in Mauritius*. SOAS: 1982.

¹³⁰ This distinguishes Mauritian Hindi from Indian Hindi, but currently the two iterations of Hindi do not linguistically diverge to the point of being labelled dialects.

each person was multilingual at all, and those who were did not necessarily have the same repertoire of languages. Indo-Mauritians from the South, where they are less concentrated, often did not feel uneasy not being able to converse in anything but Kreol.¹³¹ Not all languages were considered equal in value, whether the value was efficiency or the ability to convey pride during communication about other topics.

Although Hindi faced a different set of challenges in India, some transnational thinkers felt that the language could be used to political, yes, but also social, effect in both locations. Some men, like Basdeo Bissoondoyal, went to India to study unrelated topics like the law and returned to be missionaries for the Arya Samaj, arguing that Hinduism could gain new relevance for Indo-Mauritians were it experienced through Hindi. Others, such as Mauritius' first Prime Minister, Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, did not subscribe to the Arya Samajist belief system, but recognised the potential of Hindi it championed. (In 1977, he would make sure Hindi authors were included, in translation, in the literature anthologised for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture.) Although the two men were the towering men of the movement, they were never able, perhaps due to their ideological differences, to work together. Unnuth is clearly indebted to Bissoondoyal, citing him as a major influence and even authoring his biography, which begins with Unnuth's recollections of hearing Bissoondoyal speak as a child. Reading the descriptions of Bissoondoyal setting himself up as a preacher of cultural awakening through the Hindi medium, it is easy to see the Unnuth's links to oral poetry were not only the experiences he remembers listening to the *Ramayana* in the community gatherings known as *baitkas*:

I had my first taste of the cultural activities of Pandit Bissoondoyal in my childhood days when I used to be among the packed audience gathered to listen to him in the courtyard of Maheshwarnath State-Aided School. Every

¹³¹ Balwantsing Nobutsing, interview by author, Curepipe, Mauritius, August 2010.

time he spoke, the crowd listening to him was profoundly impressed with his speech and personality... The impact he produced on me at that time was so strong that I used to accompany my father even to distant places in order to see him and to listen to him. I was only a child of six or seven then, and there was no question of my understanding what he was saying, and yet I wanted to listen to his sermons more and more.

...Through a process of deculturization, the younger generation had become disoriented. Not only were they fast losing their own culture, they also faced the danger of conversion to an alien religion. The missionary, Basdeo Bissoondoyal, answered the call of the movement... the consequences of this campaign had an impact on the political as well as the cultural area of the day.¹³²

The Bissoondoyal brothers launched their Jan Andolan movement in 1943, a year of huge riots which had been occurring with regularity since 1937, the year of Unnuth's birth. They led the people in singing songs of praise not to the pantheon of gods which the Arya Samaj did not value, but to themselves. However, the Arya Samaj religion was not all secular: Bissoondoyal 'persuasively invoked the Gita, the Upanishads, the Ramayan and the Vedas and convinced people that their religion was a living one, as far-reaching as the vast ocean, not just a force that existed within the pages of books'. One of the songs propagated to this effect sends this message: 'Everyone read Hindi: A B C! It is the language of the ancient sages: E F G!'.¹³³ In poems like 'Morning Septet', where Unnuth describes now not his limbs, but his language, as imprisoned, he, too, connects language and knowledge, language and praise.¹³⁴

¹³² Abhimanyu Unnuth, *A Portrait of Professor Basdeo Bissoondoyal*, trans. L. P. Ramyeed (Rose-Hill: Editions de l'Océan Indien, 1988), 1-2.

¹³³ Abhimanyu Unnuth, *A Portrait of Professor Basdeo Bissoondoyal*, trans. L. P. Ramyeed (Rose-Hill: Editions de l'Océan Indien, 1988), 32, 45.

¹³⁴ 'Morning Septet.' #34. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 44-45.

Language emerges as an important theme for Unnuth in *The Teeth of the Cactus*. In the poem titled, appropriately, 'Language', he ends the poem with the lines,¹³⁵

but there is just language
which is not mine

These two lines seem to run counter to his devotion to Bissoondoyal and his faith in the Hindi language: isn't language all he has? The key is in the way he builds up the idea of possession in the poem. The phrases 'mine' and 'my own' act as refrain in the poem:

the shelter of my fist is my own
hidden in the hollow space within
my face is my own
this alley is my own—
from wherever
children's swarthy bodies
are touched by the sun's
toil-drops
from my forehead

the eager, covetous air is also mine
even after blowing out
the lamp in my home, it is mine
the dryness of my eyes is my own
the well of my stomach is my own
my rented breaths too are mine
what I eat, what I enjoy, is mine

In the first stanza, the things possessed are neutral, and sometimes positive: the 'shelter of [the speaker's] fist', his face. In the second stanza, though, that which he possesses also serves as a sign of how empty and worthless possession can be. 'The dryness of [his] eyes', 'the well of [his] stomach': these do him no good but to help create an empty pride of ownership, to give him possession of the same pride that the more powerful seem to take in their goods. Language does not add to that empty

¹³⁵ 'Language.' #81. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 103.

possession: one, because due to political history, he does not necessarily have it, but also two, because it is not a thing to possess but to use, to create hope and, thus, forge bonds.

The connection between Hindi and Hinduism was especially potent for Unnuth's idol Basdeo Bissoondoyal because he went to a Catholic school in Rose Hill as a child and would have converted had it not been for the example of his grandfather, who chanted the Ramcaritmanas every day.¹³⁶ The three Bissoondoyal brothers were born in the early 1900s to children of migrants from Bihar, and their grandfather's influence proved instrumental. The brothers got their career-starts in journalism, first in French and English, but as time went on and they were able to teach themselves the language, Hindi as well. In 1923, Basdeo, the youngest brother, started teaching. In 1933, he went to Lahore (then in India) to study, and was horrified by the conversions he witnessed and intrigued by the seeming force the Arya Samaj was able to have against this trend. Although he was not born when Gandhi visited Mauritius, he was a fervent Gandhian and was able to see him in Lahore. When he returned to Mauritius in 1939, eager to take the Hindi movement to a higher pitch, his oldest brother died and for a period he did not participate in political reform. When he returned, however, he led the people through his charismatic speeches in their protests for higher wages, more representation, and a sense of self-worth, protesting from in and outside of jail. Ramgoolam, though more traditionally religious, brought these beliefs less to bear on his political agitation through his participation in the Labour Party.

¹³⁶ Abhimanyu Unnuth, *A Portrait of Professor Basdeo Bissoondoyal*, trans. L. P. Ramyeard (Rose-Hill: Editions de l'Océan Indien, 1988), 5.

School attendance did rise, but the real spearhead was the political action the same intellectuals were involved in: suffrage. When a law was passed allowing anyone who could sign their name, even in an Oriental language, to vote, Indians began to return to formal education. As the push for suffrage was achieved by those who were already supporting education, the institutions were in place at the same time: from 1944 to 1949, more than 300 voluntary Hindi schools had been opened across the country, where education was free. This observation from Burton Benedict shows the rising level of enthusiasm: ‘in 1956, the education department had to refuse admission to children because of lack of facilities, demonstrations of protest occurred throughout the island culminating in an organized campaign.’¹³⁷ Free education could bring about, through votes and earning power, an end to the hunger Unnuth describes in ‘Folk-Tale’ through the eyes of a child and in ‘A Knock at the Door’ through the eyes of a parent who sees his children’s eyes like ‘birds faces in the direction of a worm’¹³⁸ when that worm is not his to give.

This brings us up to date in illustrating the mood before Independence, and later chapters will take up the story from this point. It is useful, however, when looking back, to have a basic understanding of the present, and I shall close with a summary of Hindi’s position in Mauritius after Independence. Indeed, education was made universally compulsory in 1968, but Hindi is still an optional subject. At the primary and secondary levels its instruction did not include anything beyond simple grammar. Only those Indians, a miniscule number, who continued with Hindi at higher levels came to be familiar with the literature beyond what was circulated in

¹³⁷ Burton Benedict, *Education Without Opportunity* (London: Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, 1958), 318.

¹³⁸ ‘Folk-Tale.’ #36. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 47.
‘A Knock at the Door.’ #35. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 46.

newspapers: while the rise of Hindi and the rise of education are inextricably linked, they do not always work for each other's benefit. Education in Mauritius has been a pathway to a materially better life, or, barring that possibility, a symbolic sign. As Benedict notes, 'education symbolizes having left the fields and thrown off the coolie stereotype... not even great economic hardship will induce an Indian who considers himself educated to return to the fields. He may drift to town to become a part of an ever-growing population of semi-educated youths constantly seeking employment that does not involve manual labour, discontented, and feeling they have been cheated out of their rightful positions as government employees.' At the same time, sometimes the educational track does provide means for a life, relatively speaking, of the mind: Benedict continues that 'one way in which these semi-educated youths maintain themselves is by living off the educational system itself.'¹³⁹ They go into teaching or private tutoring and propagate those subjects which they found the most intellectually useful; however, it is significant to note that all teachers must be able to converse in English and French as well as their subject of specialization, so all Hindi teachers in Mauritius are at least bilingual. Leisure reading in Hindi for most Indo-Mauritians, though, is simply not a common pastime; it is a gendered activity (female) and is not generally a topic of casual conversation. The push for literacy that began with Gandhi lost its urgency for many with the possibility of an independent Mauritius, and the lack of literariness in society will be addressed again in the discussion of the post-Independence Mauritian literary sphere. For Unnuth's imagined audience, however, literature is more than under-enjoyed entertainment. It retains its symbolic importance as a marker of engagement with one's community.

¹³⁹ Burton Benedict, *Education Without Opportunity* (London: Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, 1958), 320.

Indeed, literature began to be written in Hindi in Mauritius in conjunction with the push for both linguistic and political rights. As previously discussed, Eisenlohr sees Unnuth as a strident reactionary for the political cause of Hindi. Because so many of Unnuth's poems are set in the past, it is obvious to look at the Bhojpuri/Hindi choice, but as they speak also about Mauritius in the 1980s, the Hindi/Morisyen (also called Mauritian Kreol) choice is also telling. Hindi, never spoken by many, is only obviously connected to most Indo-Mauritians in their religious life. Reading poetry in Hindi cannot be disentangled completely from an analysis of Mauritian Hinduism.

In his poem 'All My Different Limbs', an excerpt from which began this chapter, Abhimanyu Unnuth describes himself in pieces in solitary confinement in what resembles the penal site of Flat Island, Mauritius.¹⁴⁰ Each piece of him is in concordance with an aspect of his identity that, together with the others, makes up something that lends him a sense of existence. His eyes were his hope, his heart his liveliness, but, in the language of labourers and of writers, his hands were his future. When contextualizing Unnuth's words, his own present, his Indo-Mauritian literary sphere, can easily be compared with poetry from the labour diaspora's similar contexts. Finding a place for the Indo-Mauritians in Indian diaspora poetry, a more studied field, would be significant from a World Literature standpoint because a new transnational network that included Unnuth would have been found. At the same time, it is important to note that Mauritian writers before and during Unnuth's day turned away from engagement with writers from the Indian diaspora. Their focus is wholeheartedly insular. While thinking about the diasporan parallels helps us infer the importance of historical trajectories such as isolation and linguistic self-determination, readers should not confuse this noting of parallels with the idea that Unnuth and his

¹⁴⁰ 'All My Different Limbs.' #28. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 35.

predecessors found the parallels significant; they were instead concerned with a project they found nationally bounded: self-identification as a majority population.

Unnuth is at once a poet of coolitude and a poet engaged with the religious. His poems grapple with the sufferings faced by the community's labouring ancestors as well as the meaning that such suffering can have in light of the shortcomings Unnuth witnessed in Mauritius in the 1980s: poverty, hunger, exploitation, and political obfuscation. He draws upon the experience of labour in his understanding of his historical identity, seeing the shared suffering of this labour as the crux of the Indo-Mauritians' communal identity. In his poetry, Unnuth expresses the suffering of labour as giving rise to indignation, and, taking the slant of coolitude poetry, paints this indignation to be completely righteous.

Using literature to relate group and religious identity has a historical precedent in the Indo-Mauritian community. In the early days of Indian immigration to Mauritius, poetry and religion were brought from India both in textual and in oral format: Sarita Boodhoo, in her *Across the Kalapani*, reminds us that literatures were mainly known orally: puranic stories, folk songs, and even plays, but of course the epics were both brought over in oral and written format. Literacy, then, was not originally a major concern. For the first several decades, labourers were largely uneducated and did educate their children in government schools. Under the French, labourers had not been allowed education, but under the British they were given the opportunity. Most did not take it up: firstly, the plantation owners often made the workers pay the fees for their own children out of their wages even though owners were legally obligated to pay, secondly, the schools taught the children in English, which children found intimidating and parents useless, and thirdly, most of the

schools were religiously sanctioned and the parents disapproved of missionary tendencies. Over time, several languages were tried as media of instruction, including Bhojpuri in the 1880s under Governor Arthur Phayre. Using Bhojpuri (and other Indian vernaculars depending on location), the children were seen to prosper, but the government (after Phayre was transferred out of Mauritius) soon ended the policy after noting that raising children educated in Indian vernaculars was of no use to the Mauritian state. After 1882, English was used as the primary medium of education, with French as a side subject (made compulsory in the 1890s after protests by the French elite), and the vernacular offered depending on availability. Throughout this first century of Indian immigration, however, the *baitka* system was a constant place for the community to come together and educate their young, and children were taught the basics of their vernaculars and scriptural and cultural knowledge. Because of the similarities between the Avadhi of the Ramcaritmanas and *khari boli* Hindi, a reverence for Hindi as a subject of knowledge often began in the quasi-religious assemblies of the *baitka*. Reading meant thinking about the one thing that tied these immigrants together through their homeland: religion.

Both coolitude and popular Mauritian Hinduism characterise the world as split into ‘us’ and ‘the other’, in which the ‘us’ is left more mysterious than ‘the other’: coolitude splits indentured society into the owners and the workers, while popular Mauritian Hinduism splits the same society into the divine and the human. The power differential is the same in both cases, and Unnuth plays with this in his work, injecting the tone of a political protest into seemingly quite personal poems. In modern Indo-Mauritian society, in which there is disenchantment with both political and religious action and youths are taught to focus on personal material success for their happiness and that of their family, Unnuth’s poems offer a well-considered counter-voice.

It makes sense that coolitude poetry would focus on labour, as this was seen as the marking characteristic of the coolies' ancestors. At the same time, the performance of hard labour was not what created the biggest change in the life of the majority of the migrants. Often they were subjected to similar hardship under similar poverty at home. The resonant differences were the realization of exploitation and a larger dislocation than ever before. As many have noted, crossing the sea was a significant move because this journey resulted in a loss of caste. Though there was a reshuffling of personal ascriptions of caste (somehow there were more higher caste Hindus leaving the boat in Mauritius than had got on the boat in Calcutta), the system itself was adapted to the extent that Brahmins were necessary to import for religious ceremonies. Indo-Mauritians preserved their religious festivals, using Hindi rather than Sanskrit for many of the proceedings, but with Hindi as a slightly out-of-reach language, the connection that most Indo-Mauritians felt to religion waxed and waned. The arrival of the Arya Samaj in the 1900s created a split between the Samajists and the Sanatanists, but in this split, many were lost in the middle, and Pahlad Ramsurran notes that Hinduism for many modern Indo-Mauritians is a series of rites, rituals, and festivals merely promoting self-pride without any understood substance.¹⁴¹

It is to this dulled, unquestioned and unquestioning Hinduism that Unnuth's poetry responds. More reactive than conservative, it explores the emotional gulfs left by the fading significance of religiosity and tries to insert therein what emotional zeitgeist society still has: political zeal. Popular Mauritian Hinduism is at once clearly split and rather homogeneous. The acrimonious nature of the Samajist-Sanatanist split has faded with time, with both priests and practitioners on both sides recognizing that many Hindus attend services of either side. The Arya Samaj has more programs and

¹⁴¹ Pahlad Ramsurran, *The Development of a Mauritian Identity and National Literature* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1982), 96.

institutions in place targeted at youth involvement, but it is the Sanatanist temples which have seen less of a drop in youth attendance. Interestingly enough, both sides attribute this not simply to any relative theological attraction of the Sanatanists, but also to the relative ease of a temple visit centred on darshan compared to a seminar. The prevailing viewpoint amongst both young and old is that religion is something inherited, rather than studied, and that youths should spend time preparing themselves for the job market. Youths who categorise themselves as ‘religious’ do not necessarily find Hindi complementary, nor do those who study Hindi feel it to be motivated by a desire to learn about their religion. Instead, most cite an interest in understanding their history. Previously, the Hindu nature of Mauritian Hindi literature was taught in schools, but the current trend is to divorce the two.¹⁴² Hindu religiosity has become ahistorical and so, in a society still grappling with a colonial history, unreachable.

In Unnuth’s poetry, religion is presented as something gleaned from the coolie heritage, something which connects personal dissatisfaction with the communal anger still directed at the exploitative system of indenture. In Unnuth’s poetry, the speaker first tries to wrest answers from his superiors, but eventually realises that it is the questioning that has shown him the direction to the answer: not to be found in his superiors, but in his community. Throughout *The Teeth of the Cactus*, his relationship with his superior evolves and its importance diminishes, while his relationship with his community becomes more and more important as he realises that its nurturing goes hand in hand with his relationship with himself. He travels the traditional avenues of Indo-Mauritian self-assertion—language, politics, and religion, questioning every step. In ‘Heaven and Heaven’, Unnuth writes¹⁴³

¹⁴² Gulshan Sooklall, interview by author, Moka, Mauritius, August 2010.

¹⁴³ ‘Heaven and Heaven.’ #7. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 7.

You speak of some other heaven, but
I myself know of two sites:
There is a banyan tree, where in the flames
my ancestor ascended, becoming a heaven-dweller.
The other place is there, where
my future is settling in for a slow death.

This poem about heaven(s) addresses the questions of what time and death mean to someone on the verge of despair. Life has included suffering, but what awaits us? The identity of the addressee is a vital point: is the addressee someone inside the world of the speaker, either a friend/relative or an authority figure? Here, another conceivable alternative is the author as addressee, which would assume that the speaker's voice in the poem is not that of the author, but a labouring ancestor. Is the addressee a religious teacher or a divine figure who has first-hand experience of heaven? The initial acceptance of the opposing viewpoint without subversion places the addressee in a position of esteem, someone generally trusted but somehow unable to provide this definition of heaven. The first site that the speaker offers is heaven of two natures: not only a place to which the dead go, but also the place from which they ascend. The door/path to heaven is also heaven. The second site continues to belie the expectation of both a particularly Christian version put forth by the white plantation-owning class, offering instead the forward-looking, if not entirely optimistic, assertion that heaven is in the future, and the future will be heaven.

In 'I Will Not Let You Go To Heaven',¹⁴⁴ Unnuth revisits the afterlife with more fleshed out characters. He writes

...I could not be Yuyutsu,
Therefore I remained as Naciketas
But when Yama, death's guardian,
did not open the door,
Then I became Trishanku,

¹⁴⁴ 'I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven.' #8. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 9-10.

between your world
and his
I will circle, I will roam,
I will not let you go to heaven...

Here, there is a constant referral to epic characters (Yuyutsu, Naciketas, and Trishanku), and the line which ends this stanza is a constant refrain throughout the poem, one that reads as rather plaintive, even as it gave more insight into the opposition present in the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. The speaker is so frustrated, yet his anger, and the shape it takes in this poem of a refusal to let the addressee go without an answer that cannot be given, gives him rhythm, habit, character, and eventually, perhaps, purpose. He could not be like Yuyutsu, so instead he waited, like Naciketas, to attain the afterlife through his own mental strength. Thwarted again by outside forces, however, he wanders between the realms, looking, like Trishanku, for the way forward. In these poems, we see the resilient voice of coolitude: Unnuth is engaging in a reappropriation of the identity of the coolie, giving imaginative voice to his memories and his identity as a dispersed soul.

III. *Hinduism and Coolitude in Labour Diaspora Poetry*

What about foreign poetry, however? Are other poets of the Indian labour diaspora engaging with coolitude in a way that warrants inclusion into a literary sphere which includes Unnuth? I will look first to Surinamese poets, and then to Fijian. In Suriname, Indians were not the first ethnic group to be brought in for migrant labour; the Javanese preceded them. However, Indians were considered the most adaptable, and nearly all Indians brought to Suriname stayed there, leading to the proportionally large population. When settled in Suriname, the Dutch arranged for the ethnic groups to live in their own villages; for this reason, although Indian culture

wasn't necessarily maintained with a high level of accuracy, a common culture emerged, grown out of the memories of the diverse migrant population and their experience once in Suriname. Hinduism in Suriname, also manifest in the continuation of the chanting of the Ramcaritmanas amongst other practices, was left alone, as opposed to in further away Guyana, where Hinduism was repressed to the extent that all Hindus had even to be buried until 1956. In Suriname today, since the Arya Samaj arrived in 1929, Hinduism is split into Arya Samaj Hinduism and its orthodox counterpart, the Sanathan Dharm, which organised itself institutionally only as a reaction to the Samaj.¹⁴⁵

A major difference between Suriname and Mauritius was in the degree of interaction between the Indian labour diaspora and their ancestral homeland. While not many Mauritian writers do travel often back and forth to India for cultural events, Gandhi's visit and the visits of many other Indian notables like Yashpal illustrate the physical connection and its significance. Rakesh Rampartab writes of Suriname's isolation, '...The Surinamese I spoke with said they don't think that Hindus in India even know there are Hindus living in Suriname. They could not recall any visit by a major Hindu leader, nor recount any significant assistance received from India in any way.'¹⁴⁶ As a result, identity symbols like Hindi and Hinduism have become important markers vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in Suriname rather than vis-à-vis India and are shaped by the discourse surrounding what culture is in Suriname. From the vantage point of coolitude, the diasporas are shaped by their encounter.

Although Suriname has been independent only since 1975, its publishing industry took off in the 1950s: van Kempen notes that oral literature is often central to

¹⁴⁵ Michael van Kempen, *Deep Rooted Words*, trans. Sam Garrett (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Voetnoot, 1992).

¹⁴⁶ Rakesh Rampartab, 'How Differently Hinduism Developed in the Adjacent Nations of Suriname and Guyana,' *Hinduism Today*, January-February issue, 2000: 11.

a conception of ethnic literature in Suriname.¹⁴⁷ Originally slaves, and later other groups of migrant labourers, were often not able to bring over a written language, whereas oral poetry was a maintainable connection and a source of usable narrative. Therefore, for written poetry in an ethnically specific language to hold water, some value needs to be added; in Surinamese Hindi poetry, this tends to be an argumentational aspect.

Shrinivasi, perhaps, has succeeded in living up to this standard of argumentation where he does not quite fit into people's other categorizations of Surinamese poets. Shrinivasi, born Martinus Lutchman in 1926, is the most prominent Indo-Surinamese writer, fluent in Dutch, Hindi, and Sarnami, and writing poetry in all three. Like Unnuth, he was by profession a teacher, and his poetry touches upon the 'national encounter' of ethnicities and the communalism that is the danger there.¹⁴⁸ For Shrinivasi, the literary accolades that came with his success meant little next to the cultural acceptance. Raised Catholic, Shrinivasi had always felt himself to be on the margins of Sarnami culture, never accepted as a 'real Indian'.¹⁴⁹ Perhaps this uncategorizability led him to write in so many languages, as a truly national poet. His argumentational style mirrors Unnuth's societal concern, but also Unnuth's reflexivity. Shrinivasi is often quite critical of the post-Independence government. In *Poisoned by Promises*, he writes of being angry at the 'poor and timid, humiliated' people they have become, allowing themselves to be exploited and taking away the

¹⁴⁷ Michael van Kempen, *Deep Rooted Words*, trans. Sam Garrett (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Voetnoot, 1992), 17.

¹⁴⁸ Michael van Kempen, *Deep Rooted Words*, trans. Sam Garrett (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Voetnoot, 1992), 179.

¹⁴⁹ Michael van Kempen, *Deep Rooted Words*, trans. Sam Garrett (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Voetnoot, 1992), 175.

hope of better lives from their children.¹⁵⁰ Like Unnuth, his anger is directed at in-group shortcomings not only from the standpoint of one who can envision better policies, but of one who can imagine better emotional responses that may even be traditional, if not accessible by historical research. In his poem 'Bulahat', however, Shrinivasi hits a very different tone. He writes (my translation): 'Who called me in the night?/ In the dark, lamp in hand/...I answered with a joyful heart/ him, he who is my Lord.'¹⁵¹ The question and answer, the opposites, the devotion: in this poem, Shrinivasi does show an influence of oral poetry. Shrinivasi's poetry gains its resonance as diaspora poetry from its expression of acute marginality, dissatisfaction, and willingness to bring premodern characteristics of the homeland culture into the present as cultural signifiers. The religiosity in his poems is at once in line with the idea of Rama, the exile, who followed his divine duty, his divine call, with a joyful heart, and echoes its language. It also throws a wrench into the idea propagated by the Arya Samaj and the Sanatanist groups in Suriname that Hinduism is the identifying mark, the only acceptable expression of spirituality, of the diasporan Indians.

once, when I looked ahead,
there was a deep abyss, but
there was faith even in hopes

In the poem above, 'A Knock at the Door',¹⁵² Unnuth comes back to hope, a theme which has been prominent in *The Teeth of the Cactus*, though usually not as a solution to questions about the desire to live and the way to live. Here, he notes that faith is tied up with hope, but goes on to describe hopes as tears:

¹⁵⁰ Michael van Kempen, *Deep Rooted Words*, trans. Sam Garrett (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Voetnoot, 1992), 189.

¹⁵¹ Michael van Kempen, *Deep Rooted Words*, trans. Sam Garrett (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Voetnoot, 1992), 190.

¹⁵² 'A Knock at the Door.' #35. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 50-51.

now they have scattered drop by drop
my eyes have now dried

and then as a personified aggressor, fighting expectation:

my expectation and hope have
wrung each other's necks

Then, he goes on to situate his hopes in the outside world:

between the earth and the sky
empty, devoid
now between you and I
there is a distance
some of your people
are pulling us even father apart

Without hope, there is nothing 'between earth and sky' or 'between you and I'. Hope is that which, in his world, comprises the relationships between two beings, constructs between them something which, in the best case, is not entirely antagonistic. And this hope seems to connect more than just the 'I' and the 'you': almost severing this relationship inflicts damage even upon those relationships in which the hopes are much more realistic: children hoping that their parents will provide for them. The poem continues:

...my courtyard has shrunk
my children's eyes
are like birds' faces in
the direction of a worm
covetously looking on
the frothy ebb and flow of the great sea
is in their stomachs and bowels
and in their eyes grapes...

Hope itself, rather than any religiously-inflected belief system or deity entrusted with hope, seems to be at the root of the connections in Unnuth's world.

Although Fiji was the last major destination for Indian labour migrants, these migrants became half of its population of about 600,000. The country is made up of hundreds of islands on which sugarcane grows well. Cane as a cash crop was

introduced by the familiar Arthur Gordon, who upon the British acquisition of Fiji in 1874 served as governor after his stints in Mauritius and in the West Indies. He felt that using the native Fijians as labourers would be disruptive politically, so brought in outside labour, a force with which he was by this time very familiar. Although Gordon did well to call attention to the mistreatment of workers in other labour colonies (though not as well in working to address it), he did not do so in Fiji. As in the other sugar colonies, Indian labourers were called ‘coolies’, but this was only one indignation out of many that served to kill workers’ spirits. J.S. Kanwal notes the oppressive conditions: ‘If a labourer argued or showed any kind of emotion, he received corporal punishment in return. This kind of attitude shown by the bosses produced a sense of humiliation and injustice in the minds of the workers. Outwardly quiet, they would burn inside’.¹⁵³ When indenture was abolished, effigies of coolies, of the public ‘self’ forced upon them, were burned.

In Fiji, the creole vernacular that developed amongst the labour migrants was not one that was used by the entire population; brought in to keep the native labour force from upturning order, the lives of the Indo-Fijians were not intentionally intertwined with native Fijians. The Indo-Fijian community created their own creole called Girit Hindi. It combined several dialects and some English words learned from their overseers. This was a bond for the community, and Indo-Fijians looked upon *khari boli* Hindi in different ways: many did not see the necessity in learning the language, but others found that the similarities between their daily vernacular and this globally more powerful language made it easier for them to connect to their Indian roots.¹⁵⁴ The homeland referenced in diaspora need not hold power to have power over the imaginations of the scattered population; in fact, the idea that the homeland is

¹⁵³ J.S. Kanwal, *A Hundred Years of Hindi in Fiji* (Suva : The Fiji Teachers' Union, 1980), 19.

¹⁵⁴ Kate Gillion, *The Fiji Indians* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1977), 44.

in trouble is often more compelling. However, we should remember, as Casanova reminds us, the often overlooked relationship between affinity for language use and an understanding of the power of that language in the global market.¹⁵⁵ In Fiji, this practical understanding is also matched by an understanding that Hindi holds power in terms of spiritual communication: it is the language of Indo-Fijians' persistent religious practice.

Kay Gillon notes that Indo-Fijians imitated the Brits over the Fijians because there was no incentive to assimilate in that direction. However, they were not a group united in their mimesis, and the religious divisions were extremely deep. The Arya Samajists leaned more Western, naturally, than the Sanatanists, who continued to look (westward, actually) to India, but in the 1900s, with India already influenced by Britain, such assignments are complicated. In 1930, they brought over two charismatic priests, Pandit Ramchandra Sharma and Pandit Murarilal Sastri, who led Sanatanists in a revival of traditional religious song, gatherings, and what the Arya Samajists thought of as 'causing dissention'.¹⁵⁶ The Arya Samaj responded by publishing 'Religious Debate in Fiji with the Arya Samaj',¹⁵⁷ in which featured a bold, but still Puranic, account of the gods' sex lives.¹⁵⁸ The Sanatanists were outraged and Vishnu Deo, the Arya Samajist compiler, was also legally prosecuted for obscenity. The fight continued in the field of education, with the Arya Samajists providing the most modern schooling (close in curriculum to the mission schools for Europeans). When I now turn to a discussion of Fijian religious poetry, the understanding that religious people did feel they had something to prove or defend in their expressions of faith helps contextualise the outpouring.

¹⁵⁵ Pascale Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁵⁶ Kate Gillon, *The Fiji Indians* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1977), 130.

¹⁵⁷ A transliteration of the Hindi original title would be: 'Fiji Mein Arya Samaj se Shastrarth'.

¹⁵⁸ Kate Gillon, *The Fiji Indians* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1977), 130.

Folk songs were central to Indo-Fijian life, and several have been captured on paper. They cover a range of subjects: longing for a lover left behind, anger at their pain and suffering of labour and deceitful recruitment, and the apprehension they felt during the voyage. In addition, religious songs by Mira, Surdas, and Tulsi were very popular. One that combines many of these topics was a song composed and made popular in reaction to a 1912 scandal: a labourer, Kunti, escaped from rape by her overseer, but was chastised by her landlord rather than aided in the search for justice. Her faith, whether a real characteristic or not, was lauded in the song, which ended:¹⁵⁹

think of some solution to this degradation
so that the life of every Kunti becomes meaningful
remember! without embracing religious faith,
peace and harmony shall not prevade.

Although Hindu mythology has a deep sense of place, listeners are not expected to be intimately familiar with every landscape depicted in, for example, the Ramayana. In that sense, these stories are extremely portable. However, this poem upholds religion without calling upon the very literary ingredients through which virtues such as justice, faith, and resilience were shown to be positive. Instead, a faith which is not described in the poem is that which makes the life of its subject meaningful, perhaps injecting the poem with its meaning as well. The virtues of faith go beyond their historical or communal value to inject meaning into a contemporary, political storyline.

Indo-Fijian poetry was bound by religion, just as much as community self-understanding was. Although individual poems were published in Fijian newspapers since the beginning of the 20th century, individual poets began to make their mark a few decades later. The most popular, Kamal Prasad Mishra, is known for his quiet

¹⁵⁹ J.S. Kanwal, *A Hundred Years of Hindi in Fiji* (Suva: The Fiji Teachers' Union, 1980), 44.

compassion, which is displayed in this excerpt from his poem 'The Path of Life', (1970s, exact year unknown):¹⁶⁰

our destiny is fixed
something unknown is written unto our fate
a force is driving us ahead
day and night we are moving forward

whether we face love or hatred
we have to cross the ocean of life
in us we do not have so much power
that we could take a step backwards...

It is an interesting counterpoint to the call to progression that characterises the work of Unnuth. Mishra's equipoise here is not one that rules out interaction with, as he writes, 'the ocean of life,' or as Torabully would write, 'alterity,' or even being changed as a result of these interactions, but it circumvents melodrama. In it is absent the longing for the future to repair the damage of the past, but instead a sense of the ineluctability of the future, a forwards orientation that is seen throughout coolitude poetry. The philosophy of the poem is certainly not something out of step with Indian Hindu culture; it does not indicate a pro-assimilationist, anti-diasporian message. The whole conception of diaspora is simply side-stepped, highlighting the not-unknown, but often underemphasised, limit lines of the use of the concept.

Nand Kishore, the poet most popular with the labouring class (who was active in the Sugar Labourers' Union and the Farmers' Union) wrote a straightforwardly Hindu poem on his deathbed, ending:¹⁶¹

...Life's candle is fading out
No worldly desire is in my mind now
O Lord, there is but one wish,
I want to say goodbye to all attachments.

¹⁶⁰ A transliteration of the original Hindi would be: 'Jivan Marg'. J.S. Kanwal, *A Hundred Years of Hindi in Fiji* (Suva: The Fiji Teachers' Union, 1980), 51.

¹⁶¹ J.S. Kanwal, *A Hundred Years of Hindi in Fiji* (Suva: The Fiji Teachers' Union, 1980), 54.

One can hear echoes of Shrinivasi's calling out. Kishore has described death as a decently lucid, peaceful experience: desires themselves have fled, attachment to things desired, rejected, or acted upon mentally in several ways, is all that remains. This death does not justify life, much less a life of suffering, and that is quite a freeing choice.

Indo-Fijian poets, like the Indo-Mauritians Eisenlohr describes in *Little India*,¹⁶² deify their nation as the mother goddess. Here, Kashi Ram Kumud writes:¹⁶³

O Fiji, lying in your motherly lap
We have tasted thy milk
now we shall take a vow of that sacred milk
we shall erase all sufferings from your face
our forefathers have gone to eternal sleep in thy lap
from the dust of thy sacred soil
we shall apply tilak to our foreheads.

Using the same language as that which connects them to the lost homeland, the diaspora here makes a connection with the found homeland. The arriving period has ended, and arrival commenced, all without losing connections to the larger, global, context. While the Hindu pantheon is ever-expanding, this poem illustrates the advantages of redefining the conception of a diaspora to include those who have no more love for their long lost deities and no longing to return. Instead, Vijay Mishra posits another relationship to the homeland: a cultural acceptance based on a golden age rather than a less abstract connection. He writes that 'the unattainable, mythical values of this Hindu India [of the Ramayana and of their ancestral memories] have led not only to a sense of personal inadequacy on the part of the Fiji Indian and his children (that Fiji Indians are somehow lesser than the inhabitants of Rama's kingdom) but also, as an excessive recompense, to a wholesale acceptance of all

¹⁶² Patrick Eisenlohr, *Little India: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁶³ J.S. Kanwal, *A Hundred Years of Hindi in Fiji* (Suva: The Fiji Teachers' Union, 1980), 55.

things Indian.’¹⁶⁴ This poem both reflects and unsettles Mishra’s interpretation of Fijian culture: while the self is still defined by the religious mores of the mother country, it is also wholly, firstly, diasporic, and Fijian.

Fiji’s reconstitution of its dismembered society ran quite parallel to the reconstitution in Mauritius, but poetically Fijians were much more focused on the spiritual aspect of the reconfiguration. Indo-Mauritians’ focus on the material well-being of the Indo-Mauritian society as the most important safeguard of their demographic security led Unnuth to frustration. Would Unnuth have felt more at home in Fiji? Perhaps it is useless to posit such counterfactuals; market forces have led to more or less no circulation of his works there or of Fijian works in Mauritius beyond limited-circulation world-Hindi anthologies. Unnuth is not familiar with their work, though he is familiar with the work of similarly religious poets writing lesser poetry in Mauritius. (Nobutsing translates several of these poems in his translated anthology *Garden of Flowers*; poems such as Rampeary Proag’s ‘Laxmi, Goddess of Light’ suffer from superficiality of content and plodding rhythm.) But then Unnuth’s work is, while overtly Hindu, not overtly religious in the way that the Fijian writers speak of ‘destiny’ and ‘faith’: his is more subtle in its reaction to the surrounding culture of materialism.

IV. *Unnuth, the Indo-Mauritian*

Prabhu writes that ‘the figure of the Indian worker as the ideal symbol of ‘Mauritianism’ slips very easily in the political rhetoric...’¹⁶⁵ In discussing Aslakha Callikan-Proag’s preface to Cabon’s *Namaste* (the 1965 novel depicting life in a small

¹⁶⁴ Vijay Mishra, *Rama's Banishment: A Centenary Tribute to the Fiji Indians 1879-1979*, edited with an Introduction and Epilogue (London and Auckland: Heinemann, 1979), 4.

¹⁶⁵ Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 65.

Indo-Mauritian village, made into a movie by MBC in the early post-Independence period), Prabhu notes that

in a move that is strikingly similar to the prime minister's comparison of Gandhi and Mauritius itself [as a bridge between Africa and Asia], the author of the preface likens this author of *Namaste*, Marcel Cabon (of Malagasy origin) to Abhimanyu Unnuth, the contemporary and recognizably Indo-Mauritian author who has published in Hindi and who has been edited with success in India: ...[In the same tradition comes to mind another author who is Mauritian in the strong sense of the term: Abhimanyu Unnuth. Writing in Hindi, he too lives the problems that he addresses in his work; he lives them even more intensely than Cabon with regard to the Indians, given his origin... Both these writers... carried and still carry the flame of a true Mauritianism, incarnating at the same time the struggles and aspirations of the labouring classes.]¹⁶⁶

Once again, the authenticity of the Indian experience within the national sphere surreptitiously becomes the point of departure. The suggestion is, then, that the adequacy of Indianness to account for Mauritianness in a sort of synecdoche not at all uncommon in prominent nationalist discourse. In Callikan-Proag's presentation, Cabon and Unnuth reach a true Mauritianism by way of Indianness: the former by the 'Indian' inspiration and content of his work and the latter by virtue of his 'Indian' origin and the experience it implies.¹⁶⁷

Descendants of Indian indentured labourers underline and undermine the concept of diaspora in varying ways, illustrating feelings of connection to their ancestors, though perhaps not their ancestors' homeland. The act of migration so far away and so irreversible, out of proportion to the migrations (often exiles) latent in traditional Indian cultural understanding, destabilise what may be a natural attempt to regain their identity in a reassembled society. The differences in the examples chosen here, as much as the similarities, illustrate the usefulness of reading diasporan poetry, at least at first, as instrumental. Their poets depict the past in hopes that it may prove

¹⁶⁶ Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁶⁷ Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 62.

to affect the future. Their poems use the specific imagery of the new situation but embed within it perceptions of dislocation. Unnuth in this instance is an archetypal labour diaspora poet, with poems such as ‘Satiating’, ‘The Worth of Those Drops’, and ‘It is Necessary to Buy a Question.’¹⁶⁸ A discussion of all three is warranted to illustrate Unnuth’s geopoetics, the relationship in his poetry between the land and the past: in this case, a past which is most certainly made significant not because of the land it happened on, but because of the exploitation that occurred there. In ‘Satiating’, he writes¹⁶⁹

He brings drops of sweat
on his forehead to the field,
laboring, sowing—
when the blood-smear crop is ready
someone else has
gathered those full green kernels
off and away into their safe-chest.
Because of the sweat, wrath arisen,
the worker has swallowed the sun.

The sun, the drops of sweat, the field: all of these are not images unique to Mauritius, but rather to the labour experience. In Unnuth’s poetry, these are the anchoring images, the characters, so to speak. At the same time, he is not concerned with writing about the shared experience of labour, but rather the strongest image here, of the worker, swallowing the sun, wrath arisen, harks back to a poem earlier in the collection, ‘Wrath’, in which he ties natural imagery to political opportunism in post-Independence Mauritius.

‘The Worth of Those Drops’¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ ‘Satiating.’ #11. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 14.
‘The Worth of Those Drops.’ #19. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 23.

‘It is Necessary to Buy a Question.’ #30. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 38.

¹⁶⁹ ‘Satiating.’ #11. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 14.

¹⁷⁰ ‘The Worth of Those Drops.’ #19. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 23.

after rolling in the dust with me
the sun itself/himself came and sat by me to take a rest
tired, thirsty, he kept drinking
the drops of sweat flowing from my skin
and in the evening, at the moment of farewell—
in his enfeebled glow
thinking your courtyard to be my courtyard
he threw the worth of a drop
in front of you.

Here the sun, the main character for Unnuth, is seen as an ambiguous figure: he is a constant companion to the labourer in the fields, but the protagonist here and in other poems is never quite sure that the sun is a loyal companion. Here, he pays for the sweat he evinces, but he pays the wrong person, he pays the one who is already rich.

By accident, or intentionally?

‘It is Necessary to Buy a Question’¹⁷¹

On my hands' worn away lines of fate
this cactus's sprouted saplings let go of
from your coals
humbly born gulmohar flowers
of the roots, the mud
out of meeting in the dirt, they are being saved
steel's blazing rods
even having left from your skin,
they become my adornment
this to you is not today even palatable
some inside will rip apart
this is not to your liking
you are a shaper of destiny
you are a merchant, that is why
I want to make a purchase from you
in my fist
there are many questions
question upon question. above, there aren't any at all
this question is not of silver
even so will you, in exchange for it,
sell me something better?
i want something higher, something better
emerging from my fate-line
in order to fill the pollen
in the cactus flowers

¹⁷¹ ‘It is Necessary to Buy a Question.’ #30. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 38.

your exiled, outcaste flowers:
thorns have choked them—
will you give punishment to those guilty thorns?

Here, history as a theme is made explicit: ‘you are a merchant, a shaper of destiny,’ he writes. In comparison, the labourers, who have travelled so far and made so little mark on history, are unclear about their destiny. Relate as he can the labourers to the flowers of the cactus, the teeth of the cactus, the resilient nature of these native plants, he cannot be sure that, left to their own devices, the shapers of destiny will show concern for them. They can go it alone, the migrants, they can reach for something higher, but will they be punished? How deep do the power relations extend into the future? These poems illustrate the potential in discussing Unnuth as a poet of the diaspora, though this is done while also taking into account Unnuth’s own understanding of himself not as a poet of the diaspora but as a poet of the historically dismembered majority of Mauritius.

Unnuth’s poetry as a specific instance of diasporic poetry can be further analyzed by noting what it is not: focused entirely on arrival, focused on celebrating instances of labourer rebellion, focused on maintaining oral rhythms, structured like a purana or a retelling of an epic, peppered with phrases from other languages. The term ‘diaspora’, defined by what it is not, is also defined by what it refuses to say. Poets of the Indian Labour Diaspora in Mauritius were keen to build a tradition that allowed Indo-Mauritians to speak to one another with the normalcy and confidence that comes with being the demographic majority in a state conceived in nationalism. Referring to them as a diaspora emphasises those who are thereby rendered invisible: the minority population, historically (and, whispering now, currently) more powerful. The word ‘diaspora’ renders impossible the idea, obviously not historically-imbued, but

powerfully used by Europeans, that timeless ties to the land confer the ultimate moral right to dwell undisturbed by any other.

After following so far this language of negation, what positive image emerges? Unnuth's rewriting of his labouring ancestors' history emphasises physical suffering and a search for understanding. In poems like 'Satiation', 'White Blood', and 'The Heart of the Machine', blood and sweat are depicted, and resentment expressed.¹⁷² Notably, Unnuth's poems are always addressing that someone who seems to be invisible between the text and the reader. The identity of the ambiguous addressee affects the meaning of the poem just as the other groups that indentured migrants' descendants encounter affect the meaning of diaspora. Unnuth writes in 'White Blood': 'It will be sure to surprise not you, but others/ to see the blood flowing from the sparks of the stone'¹⁷³; the blood, the poem implies, is that which the labourers have put into these materials through their hard work. It is somewhat dissonant to imagine, if the addressee is the plantation owner, that he would ever openly acknowledge his lack of surprise, but the idea that the labourer knows they share a bond forged by this terrible intimacy is one that makes the poem soar.

In many of the poems from *The Teeth of the Cactus*, the poem's speaker addresses an unknown antagonist. In 'Pilgrim',¹⁷⁴ the poem is not about antagonism or distance, but about the closeness that binds these two. 'on a journey...', the poem begins,

you and I have set out, both together
stage one
separated into different classes by our tickets

¹⁷² 'Satiation.' #11. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 14.

'White Blood.' #12. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 15.

'The Heart of the Machine.' #29. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 37.

¹⁷³ 'White Blood.' #12. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 15.

¹⁷⁴ 'Pilgrim.' #33. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 43.

The poem might be about class, about separation, about power hierarchies, and with the superior position of the 'you', it certainly reminds us of poems in the collection which do speak of these. Yet the title of the poem, 'Pilgrim', ties the two together more deeply than just their shared direction of travel. The poem describes how their closeness develops as time goes on:

after this station
on the second journey
without identity cards, without tickets
carrying the weight of our lifetimes on our heads
to other stages
we will travel together
to the third journey

What are the three journeys; to where do the pilgrims travel? It is impossible to say for certain, though the fact that the third journey is at once a journey and a destination suggests that the third journey is death. Is life a pilgrimage, then; for all our desire to live, is there a balanced trajectory carrying us towards the end of life? What is gained by conceiving of it in this way? For one, it allows readers to see the 'yous' of life as fellow travellers, just as close to us, in some way, as *jehajibhais*. Unnuth's poetry never mentions Indian labourers from ships headed to other destinations, let alone the ship journey to Mauritius; his poetry is concerned with expressing and examining the relationship between those who he considered his own people (for example, in 'Your Own People and You'¹⁷⁵) and the internal 'yous', the internal Mauritian others.

I have looked at some ways in which Hindi poets of the diaspora have engaged with their religious sense of self. Coolitude poetry, of course, is not always or necessarily connected to the Hindi language,¹⁷⁶ but poets who write in Hindi in the

¹⁷⁵ 'Your Own People and You.' #61. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 80.

¹⁷⁶ An example of an English-language coolitude poet Indo-Guyanese writer is Rajkumari Singh, whose poetry will be discussed later in the chapter.

diaspora are choosing, intentionally, to tie themselves to a network of others who must engage in some way with a journey which began there. One of Torabully's most trenchant observations about the people described in coolitude writing is their recoil.¹⁷⁷ Though Torabully's area of expertise is the Indo-Mauritian diaspora, he speaks generally of the Indian labour diaspora's act of recoiling from the mainstream culture (Western and Creole, even if those two groups are demographically in the minority) of their new sites of residence. They see this culture as 'Other' even as they recognise that they are now 'other' to the Indians in India, yet hope to develop their own voice. This keeping abreast, this 'othering' performed, builds boundaries and in its most problematic manifestation leads to a racist attitude towards the non-Indian population. This recoil, considered more self-consciously and in a more nuanced fashion, leads to the understanding in Hindu coolitude poetry that while a re-appropriation of their labouring past keeps their identity unsullied, this conscientiousness must have a reward of its own that bears in mind the actual relationship between the Indian labour population and the general population of the island. Why take offence at a lack of understanding of Indian language and religious culture while endeavouring to perpetuate it, without making its lessons applicable not only to an understanding of the historical coolie, but to the modern writing and reading population?

Mauritians distinguish groups in society largely based on their historical professions, which were determined historically by ethnoreligious power differentials. The subsections of Mauritian society came to be: Hindus, Muslims, Chinese, and a 'general population' which consists of Creoles and in smaller numbers White and Black Mauritians. While all speak Mauritian Kreol and study English or French in

¹⁷⁷ Marina Carter and Khal Torabully, *Coolitude: an Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (London: Anthem Press, 2002), 198.

school, Hindus have also endeavoured to preserve a spoken knowledge of Bhojpuri, Telugu, Tamil, and other vernaculars. For the majority of Hindus, Bhojpuri has been their spoken vernacular. However, Bhojpuri speakers have advanced the knowledge of Hindi, instead, as a prestige language to be accorded the same status as English or French, likening Bhojpuri to Kreol. This situation is actually not the same across Indian labour diaspora populations. In Guyana, for example, neither the spoken nor the written vernaculars have been preserved significantly, so English is the primary language for coolitude writers. The work of the poets looked at here is in Hindi, and consciously so. Pragmatic concerns and national norms play a part, but when the choice is available, as it is in the multilingual societies of Mauritius, Suriname, and Fiji, it becomes significant. These poets' choice to use Hindi is an act of recoil, but the substance of their words indicates that this recoil is not a knee-jerk reaction away from assimilation but a studied attempt to control how identity changes over time in the diaspora. The choice to use Hindi, which is so straightforward, can be contrasted with my choice to look at Hindu identities, which are complex and slippery in every case.

The Guyanese, who also lost their Indic languages upon migration, have a less ambiguous relationship with the former slave population. Like the former slaves, they write in English and their writing is thus accessible not only to themselves but also to everyone else in the nation. Rajkumari Singh is an Indo-Guyanese poet whose 1973 essay 'I am a Coolie' is a prime example of self-identification which attempts to understand the coolie renewal as a reaction against colonialism, which would place the former slave population and the former indentured population on the same vantage point. Carving out a place for Indo-Guyanese poets in a diversifying canon of Guyanese poetry in English, she traces the Indo-Guyanese reaction to the word

‘coolie’ at first correcting (‘no, a coolie is a porter and I am a farmer’) and then indignant. She advocates instead for a rethinking and a celebration of the term: what does it evoke for you? she asks, suggesting the answers of not only ancestors in pain but of *ancestors*, experiencing it, owning it, rejecting it: ‘and let us not forget,’ she writes, ‘how often this sweetness became bitter gall for them seeking their rights... in return for our heritage, what greater tribute can we pay to them than to keep alive the name by which they were called? COOLIE is a beautiful word that conjures up poignancy, tears, defeats, achievements.’¹⁷⁸ Whatever is there of the past, she writes, is what there is in which to find joy. Ian McDonald, another Guyanese writer, reminds us in the sugar context what Ashis Nandy said in the Indian context: a loss of self and a hatred of self are the results of colonialism. Sugar, McDonald notes, was actually produced first in India, but no Indo-Guyanese farmer was led to believe that his ancestors were capable of anything not obviously inferior to their Western masters (see, for example, ‘Tiger to the Stars’, ‘I am a Coolie’, and ‘Evolution Song’ from *They Came in Ships*).¹⁷⁹

Essays like Singh’s and poems like Unnuth’s ‘Heart of the Machine’ and Singh’s ‘Evolution Song’ were necessary rejoinders to this past, tight and severe poems whose last-minute triumph echoes the feeling of smugness, the exhalation after the period of colonialism. ‘Heart of the Machine’ sets up a contrast in a straightforward way: in terse, severe words, there are described two barrels of trash, two hungry beings.¹⁸⁰ In the eyes of the householder, those two beings are equivalent: the dog and the useless part of the machine. The last line provides the friction

¹⁷⁸ Lloyd Searwar, ed. *They Came in Ships: an Anthology of Indo-Guyanese Prose and Poetry* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1998), 85.

¹⁷⁹ Lloyd Searwar, ed. *They Came in Ships: an Anthology of Indo-Guyanese Prose and Poetry* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1998), 271-274, 220.

¹⁸⁰ ‘Heart of the Machine.’ #29. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 37.

necessary for the poem to be alive, the new angle of illumination necessary to see that the householder, the machine-owner, is a monster who views starving men as 'useless components of his machine'. 'Evolution Song' starts out more slowly, situating the reader in the correct past, the 'hoary/Indian myth'.¹⁸¹ It advances, though to retroflex endings and strong verbs. The final four lines, stretched out into two slowly moving couplets (first with longer vowel endings, then at a complete and thudded stop with the final 'm') is the new angle, the punchline: there is no getting rid of a sin-riddled past, for it stays on in the wronged party's descendants.

Each ethnic group, of course, has its own interpretation of history, and while they are all based on the same conceits (that legitimacy comes from improving a piece of land) they are all slightly different, as if to reinforce the designated difference between ethnic groups: Europeans set up cultivation which could sustain a population, Africans were the first to actually labour on behalf of the population, and Indians arrived in a place which made no steps to help sustain them and they sustained not only themselves but future generations. The different treatment shown to slaves and labourers helped the colonialists pit them against one another to different degrees. In Mauritius, the French cultural repression of the slaves versus the British laissez-faire treatment of Indian culture gave former slaves a reason to suspect Indo-Mauritians would never be quite dedicated to Mauritius, but only to their own advancement as a group which was able to bond together and advance its interests. In the late 1800s, when the planters were forced to sell off some of their lands, Indo-Mauritians were able to buy many of these plots and thus rose faster in the non-plantation social hierarchy. In Guyana, the journey was much longer, but the labourers were better

¹⁸¹ Cyril Dabydeen, 'Evolution Song,' *They Came in Ships: an Anthology of Indo-Guyanese Prose and Poetry*, ed. by Lloyd Searwar (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1998), 220.

looked after than in Mauritius, and were given the right to work wherever they chose immediately upon discharge from indenture.

Indenture in both countries began early (in Guyana, 1838, four years later than in 'model' Mauritius), and continued for eighty years. Migrants in both countries maintained their cultural and religious beliefs, erecting temples and holding festivals, and in both countries migrants were able often to emerge from poverty. In Guyana, however, the ethnic violence that accompanied the self-determination of the migrant community has shaped its tradition in ways that Mauritius has circumvented. While returning Mauritians had mixed reviews, sometimes encouraging new migrants to try their hand there, returning Guyanese were uniformly negative. This led to an increase in deception being used for 'recruitment' relative to the other destinations.¹⁸² Those captured and sent to Guyana were from a more mixed segment of the Indian population, geographically and caste-wise. However, political circumstances were, on the surface, better for those who ended up there. Gandhiji himself, initially as opposed to indentureship in Guyana as elsewhere, gave his hesitant support to the experiment in 1920 after noting that Indians were given representation in the legislature and equal constitutional rights.

While there were plenty of reasons for grievance (the Indians had taken jobs for lower wages, taking away the Africans' chance to negotiate higher wages, for example) the African community in Guyana never actively took a political stance against the Indians. However, small acts of vengeance were rampant: Africans had the jobs of policing, and Sundarajan notes that they 'delighted in arresting and clapping up Indians in jails... This attitude encouraged the planters to let loose African policemen on the Indian labourers if the latter protested their ill treatment on the

¹⁸² Saroja Sundarajan, *From Bondage to Deliverance: Indentured Labour in Mauritius and British Guiana* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2006), 99-105.

estates'.¹⁸³ Interestingly, while in Mauritius neither ex-slaves nor labourers were very educated, in Guyana the ex-slaves did take advantage of the church-based education that the Hindu labourers did not, and this educational gap led the Africans to jobs such as police while limiting Indians' career options. However, they were still connected by their necessity to take jobs that subordinated them completely to the British rulers. In the 20th century, the two ethnic groups banded together against colonial oppression, protesting falling wages in 1905, working conditions in 1913, and further conditions in the coming years. They were able to achieve their aims at times, but each protest was responded to with violence, and lives were sacrificed.

The tension between the Indo-Guyanese and the Afro-Guyanese, encouraged by global leaders for their own devices, is manifest most in literature as a need for self-definition. Both groups write mostly in the shared national language of English, and both groups flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. Indo-Guyanese were stereotyped as thrifty 'coolies', hardworking, but also childlike in their petulance—just as the Indo-Mauritians were; these stereotypes worked well with the conception British supporters of the system wanted to have that indenture was good for Indians, who could be reformed, matured, and then make of themselves good post-indenture adulthoods.¹⁸⁴ Prior to the 1960s, Indo-Guyanese poets emulated British models of poetry—nothing particularly reknowned—and even during the period when the People's Progressive Party was in power, identity politics had not yet been so pervasive. It was the People's National Congress that made the cultural political, and for Indo-Guyanese poets, this was an impetus to write.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Saroja Sundarajan, *From Bondage to Deliverance: Indentured Labour in Mauritius and British Guiana* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2006), 109.

¹⁸⁴ Lloyd Searwar, ed. *They Came in Ships: an Anthology of Indo-Guyanese Prose and Poetry* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1998), 11.

¹⁸⁵ Lloyd Searwar, ed. *They Came in Ships: an Anthology of Indo-Guyanese Prose and Poetry* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1998), 172.

Indo-Guyanese poets in the People's National Congress period reappropriate the term 'coolie', using it to describe the group that had taken to Guyanese soil in their own way, Rajkumari Singh the most memorably. Singh had joined the PNC party 'in an ultimately futile attempt to create an Indo-Guyanese presence within the ruling party'¹⁸⁶ and was part of the Messenger Group, a circle of writers who aimed to promote Indo-Guyanese culture in the face of two forces: the PNC, which was trying to assert its legitimacy saying that the Indianness of the People's Progressive Party rendered them foreign to Guyana, and the Indian community itself, which held on to a foreign-defined (India-defined) identity through invitations to Indian artists and movie stars 'at the expense of what was authentically Indo-Guyanese, the rich folk cultural forms which were denigrated as 'coolie'.'¹⁸⁷ Like Unnuth, she represents the possibility for change in her own community, even when the community itself is rocked by forces beyond its control, not ignoring this, but aiming for balance. Comparing Unnuth's poem 'Word in Context' with Singh's 'Days of the Sahib', similarities are evident in the way the two poets speak to Indian Labour Diaspora politicians. In Unnuth's poem, he describes a protagonist waiting, watching as his words are used, not realizing until too late that he missed a chance to explain how important words are in upholding the group's heritage and compass:¹⁸⁸

Underlining words
 From the lines of my poetry
 With a red pen
 You tired of
 Looking for the meanings
 Of all of them, in the lucid dictionaries
 And then
 You picked up
 Piece by piece with your fingers

¹⁸⁶ Lloyd Searwar, ed. *They Came in Ships: an Anthology of Indo-Guyanese Prose and Poetry* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1998), 42.

¹⁸⁷ Lloyd Searwar, ed. *They Came in Ships: an Anthology of Indo-Guyanese Prose and Poetry* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1998), 42.

¹⁸⁸ 'Word in Context.' #6. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 6.

The poem's newly invented words
Like ice-cubes
You left them in your glass
You kept watching the melting of the ice cubes
Laughing
And when they were fully dissolved
You picked up those melted words
Took them down your throat
There was no chance to tell you
That
From words' melting
Into water
Poison is born.

Singh, similarly, equates an understanding of the past with a foundation for an ethical compass which is necessary to carry on as a community amongst, she concludes, all communities. In this excerpt from the poem 'Days of the Sahib' she writes:¹⁸⁹

...The word alone
passed from mother to child
is evidence of brown women
ravaged in the filigreed shadows of swaying sugar cane—

pen the atrocities, O brown offsprings of a brown
people, for posterity needs must be told
that they too have known frustrations!

Urgent it is to set down
the struggles 'gainst the brutality of bullies and despots—

to know is vital, for the young, the unborn,
must never bow their heads
believing that theirs offered naught to the fight!

Yet, write sagaciously
inspire, rather than burden down
with complexities of inferiority and hate—

lest they too succumb to evil of violating
human dignity!
for the rights of man are for all men!

For Singh, the Indo-Guyanese history is that which needs to be explored, for memory and reconstruction are vital to the survival not only of the Indo-Guyanese, but of all

¹⁸⁹ Lloyd Searwar, ed. *They Came in Ships: an Anthology of Indo-Guyanese Prose and Poetry* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1998), 191-192.

Guyana and the globe. The constant reminder of a plurality is a marking point, distinguishing those who see themselves as one amongst many diverse groups, versus a majority/minority approach which limits concern to within the nation's boundaries. Acceptance of diasporan identity becomes a way to accept that one is not still on a journey of travel either away from or towards home, but on a more sedentary journey to coexistence.

Vijay Mishra writes that the trauma of 'failed millenarianism during indenture' has led writers across the Indian labour diaspora to feel not quite at home in their new lands, and to see the hyphen as central to their still-evolving identity.¹⁹⁰ Torabully's coolitude is a more optimistic rendering of the idea: he sees writers across the Indian labour diaspora as constantly re-evaluating their identity in light of the pluralism that surrounds them in their new lands. Unnuth seems to approach the failed millenarianism of indenture differently, reminding Indo-Mauritian readers that their religious heritage also offers ways of dealing with historical trauma. Is the Hindu identity that emerged out of the Mauritian Hindi literary sphere a type of coolitude, then, with the empowered Hindu replacing the disempowered coolie? If so, is this use of religion something that runs across coolitude and Indian labour diaspora poetry? In this chapter, coolitude poems from Suriname and Fiji have been religious, but to different ends than Unnuth's religiosity. Coolitude poems from Guyana, which do not use Unnuth's interrelated tools of language and religion, Hindi and Hinduism, are more like Unnuth in their approach to re-membering the present and the future, but, as Torabully and Mishra have described, these Guyanese poems focus on engaging with the pluralism of the new land.

¹⁹⁰ Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 52.

Unnuth's coolitude differs from that of the Indian labour diaspora at large. Unnuth does not focus on being a part of the diaspora because he does not need to: along with other Indo-Mauritians, he made sure that Indo-Mauritians could see themselves as the empowered majority population they demographically were. While diaspora populations are constantly negotiating the self and the other, recognizing the presence of both in a hyphen-based identity, in *The Teeth of the Cactus*, Unnuth controls the definition both of the 'I' and the 'you': the self and the other.

If, as I have shown here, Unnuth cannot be read as particularly characteristic of or engaged with Indian labour diaspora literature, this does not mean that the exploration of the issue has yielded no useful results. Finding an unexpected lack of relationship means re-assessing assumptions based on that path. First, although Unnuth is clearly central to and engaged with his local readership, if his perspective differs so much from that of Torabully, a writer and critic in the same community, either Unnuth's relationship with his local readership is lacking in some particular way, it is being diluted by another, more power relationship to a different readership, or Torabully is fundamentally misreading Indo-Mauritian literature and should be disregarded. Without a lengthy exploration that supports Torabully's understanding of post-indenture literature, it would be easy to disregard Torabully. If so, my reading of Unnuth as slightly different to most diasporic writers, could be my conclusion. In the next chapters, however, prompted by the negatively-expressed findings here, I look more closely at the way Unnuth relates to his local readership: how he is both an insider and an outsider, trying to inspire progress by thinking globally, with his audience never quite following him. My ultimate assessment of Unnuth as a poet of World Literature rests, counterintuitive as it may seem, on his lack of engagement with other Indian labour diaspora from around the world.

Chapter 4: A Parallel Progressive

I. *Unnuth in Context*

In this section, I have asked ‘what kind of a writer is Unnuth?’ In the previous chapter, it was concluded that he is diasporic, but only to a point. More specifically, like other Indo-Mauritians, he looks to the future. In this chapter, I examine his attitude towards the future: his progressivism, understanding it through a juxtaposition with more prominent writers whose progressivism Unnuth shares. Again, poems and analysis are entwined here, beginning with a poem about both the present and the future. In the poem ‘In One Moment’, the image Unnuth paints is fairly banal: all the poor people raise their hands to a politician for a handout. Sometimes, however, Unnuth’s strength lies not in the image he paints but in the perspective he has the reader inhabit. The politician, the speechmaker, is only described as ‘you’ and readers are invited to inhabit this space, to be directly addressed, or to read the poem over the politician’s shoulder, so to speak, not fully identifying with him, but sharing his line of vision. It is unclear whether Unnuth envisions this politician to be one of the colonisers, before Mauritian independence, or one of the post-Independence speechmakers, and this ambiguity highlights the shared moral psychology needed to hold either of those positions. It is necessary for the speaker of the poem to explain to you why these people are looking hopefully towards you. It is a simple explanation:

on that day
after a long speech
on your humanity
people saw you
in the hand of a beggar
place a ten rupee note¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ ‘In One Moment.’ #79. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 101.

The realization that this is something that needs explanation highlights to readers the types of blindness suffered by those who would exploit others. Readers share the speaker's perspective and simultaneously inhabit the politician's perspective, and this allows them to be hurt more acutely by the politician's inability to see. David Spurr describes this unjust inability to see in his *The Rhetoric of Empire*:

“Postcolonial” is a word that engenders even more debate than “colonial,” in part because of the ambiguous relation between these two. . . I shall refer to the postcolonial in two ways: as an historical situation marked by the dismantling of traditional institutions of colonial power, and as a search for the new discourses of the colonial era. The first is an object of empirical knowledge—new flags fly, new political formations come into being. The second is both an intellectual project and a transcultural condition that includes, along with new possibilities, certain crises of identity and representation. . . but in neither the historical nor the cultural sense does the postcolonial mark a clean break with the colonial: the relations of colonizer to colonized have neither remained the same nor have they disappeared. The instability of the colonial/postcolonial divide belongs to this discourse as well. . . With this instability in mind, my concentration is on writing itself rather than on other manifestations of colonial rule. *Returning for a moment to that classic situation, one can see a metaphorical relation between the writer and the colonizer. The problem of the colonizer is in some sense the problem of the writer: in the face of what may appear as a vast cultural and geographic blankness, colonization is a form of self-inscription onto the lives of a people who are conceived of as an extension of the landscape.* [italics my own]¹⁹²

The politician, the speechmaker, cannot anticipate a reaction to his words that is predicated on hunger, because when he sees the land and the people over which he now has power, he can imagine only replicas of himself, inspired by, but not desperate for, whatever hope (false or not) he offers. ‘In One Moment’, as Unnuth entitles his short poem, demonstrates all of this, since Unnuth has the reader inhabit both the space of the coloniser and the writer. The writer is almost like the coloniser, but readers experience the lack of overlap here.

A short, incisive poem can highlight injustice very effectively by painting a picture without the distraction of extraneous ambient visual information in an actual

¹⁹² David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire* (Durham, Duke University press, 1993), 6-7.

picture, and without the limitations of time and space placed on a photographic reporter. In ‘Bang-Bang’¹⁹³, Unnuth paints a piteous scene of moans, of groans, of children’s laments, of ‘the whistling sighs of those moaning, grievous breaths’; so pervasive is the misery that even ‘the resentful mynah birds caw’:

the ough and arghs of obligation
the children’s chant against fate
there—the whistling sighs of those moaning, grievous breaths
here—the resentful mynah birds caw

This scene is sad, but it does not leave the reader with a specific desire to change society in addition to feeling disappointed. The poem evokes a desire to change society when it highlights specific, changeable injustices in the last line:

then—the bang-bang of the overseers’ bullets

The characters of the ‘overseers’ with their guns bring to the reader’s attention an imbalanced power struggle. The children may chant against fate, but their fate can be changed, the reader recognises, by changing at least their relationship with the overseers. Unnuth’s strength here is in his ability to isolate the image that takes a reader from pity to indignation.

Faced with a changing inner landscape, the writer is confronted with alienation from society and from the landscape. In Mauritius, where the landscape itself, with its rolling fields of sugarcane, is so shaped by the society of the colonised, poets encounter choices that shape their relationship to their readers. They, as Unnuth does, can engage in resistance, reworlding, and re-membling, but Spurr questions how far away into a new mode of being poets can really take their readers. He asks ‘whether this resistance, identified as latent and marginal within the texts of colonial discourse, can be converted into a conscious authorial strategy without simply recycling the conventional tropes of ideological opposition. Put another way: do the possibilities for

¹⁹³ ‘Bang-Bang.’ #27. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 34.

written description and representation of other cultures extend beyond the theoretical space occupied by the Western discourses of power?¹⁹⁴ In Mauritius, this is a question of colonial vs. postcolonial, one culture set against another, but in Mauritius as well as in other postcolonial societies, this is also a question of temporaneity. Those Indo-Mauritians in Unnuth's generation who grew up with the idea of postcolonialism as a potential frame for reality may be truly alienated from those ancestors who did not. Unnuth attempts to find answers for the postcolonial within the colonial in his interrogative, progressive verse.

Unnuth's perspective on the issues surrounding Mauritian Independence is not solely personal, but arises out of a sphere which had distinguished itself from the parallel Indian Hindi postcolonial plane but shared its concerns. He positions himself as an Indo-Mauritian writer but not as the Indo-Mauritian writer dealing with Indian concerns. It would be erroneous to read Unnuth as writing as a token of Mauritianism amongst a rich array of postcolonial Indian writing when his work situates itself at the centre of a national discussion. In this chapter, I will look at Unnuth as a poet simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' both the African and Indian literary spheres, alienated but still engaged: ultimately, a key national progressive writer. Rather than attempt an impossible summary of continental and subcontinental literary spheres, I will juxtapose poems from *The Teeth of the Cactus* with poetry by two writers, Maunick and Muktibodh, who share Unnuth's insider-outsider position to some extent, while still being canonical enough to reflect on, and speak in a limited fashion for, those literary spheres of which they are a part. I position Unnuth as parallel to these two better-known poets: the Hindi Maunick or the Mauritian Muktibodh,¹⁹⁵ but, it should be noted, Maunick and Muktibodh are not altogether very similar to one

¹⁹⁴ David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire* (Durham, Duke University press, 1993), 187.

¹⁹⁵ Unnuth notes that he is often called the 'Mauritian Premchand', and Gulshan Sooklall confirms this assertion. Like Unnuth, I find this appellation inaccurate, as this chapter will go on to show.

another. It is the insider-outsider quality that the three share, and Unnuth brings them together here.

II. *Maunick's Mauritius*

In the 20th century, Mauritius, like scores of other then-colonised nations, achieved its independence from a European colonial power. Liberated from this yoke, Mauritius was free to re-member, re-define, and re-situate itself. From the ethnic make-up of the island, an understanding as either South Asian or as African was the most likely to be helpful, and the Mauritian intelligentsia argued both sides. South Asia and Africa were often allied (in the Non-Aligned Movement, vis-à-vis the West and the Soviets, for example), but in Mauritius it also seemed logical that they would be set in opposition. For Unnuth to be read as an African poet evokes questions, but is eminently reasonable. In his article 'African Literature, African Literatures: Cultural Practice or Art Practice?', Michael Chapman remarks that 'African literature, in its past and present conventions, is deeply aware of the traumas of dislocation and the search for a home'.¹⁹⁶ This perfectly characterises Unnuth's *The Teeth of the Cactus*: not always focused on, not always problematised, but always *aware* of dislocation, and often addressed to those who benefited from that history.

Chapman goes on to identify another large theme in African literature in which Unnuth's poetry shares: political overtones. Given cultural and historical context, he writes, the understanding of literature as political is much more acceptable, even celebrated, than it often is in European literature. The idea of art for its own sake is flirted with but carries a different cache. However, Chapman notes, there is still a demarcation between art and editorialism in African literature, and that

¹⁹⁶ Michael Chapman, 'African Literature, African Literatures: Cultural Practice or Art Practice?' *Research in African Literatures* 34, no.1 (2003): 1.

is its maintenance of enough focus on style and on ‘rhetoric—the act of eloquence— [which] can obscure rather than clarify the truth. The potential of rhetoric, nonetheless, is to assist in human conversations about what is valuable and what is not... a symbiotic relation between politics and art’.¹⁹⁷ For African writers and their readers in a chaotic, violent 20th century, self-reflective rhetoric in literature was an important tool in formulating the value of humanity and indeed what it meant to be human, especially in the African context.

This section sets up our juxtaposition of Unnuth and Maunick; it explores the development of an African literature, one that values the search for location and the search for value. It explores reactions amongst the literati in Mauritius about whether or not Mauritius should be a part of that development, and how Unnuth’s poetry clearly stands at the heart of this debate. The significance of his linguistic choices is framed in a debate crystallised, but certainly not finalised, by the views of Unnuth’s contemporaries Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o, and that significance is juxtaposed with the choice to write in English and French made by Edouard Maunick, another contemporary of Unnuth’s, a Mauritian poet: the language they choose decides their audience and affects the audiences’ expectations of its goals and influences. However, for both authors, the effects of the linguistic choices are offset by the similarities and complementarities in their work in poems where they each address their awareness of dislocation and the resulting search for an identity worthy of self-valuation. Unnuth, Maunick, and other poets react to the dis-memberment of ancestral identities by a re-membrance, as Toni Morrison writes, of past and present longings, desires, and understandings. Protest, both personal and political, does not get neglected in this act of looking back which is more than nostalgia. Protest not only

¹⁹⁷ Michael Chapman, ‘African Literature, African Literatures: Cultural Practice or Art Practice?’ *Research in African Literatures* 34, no.1 (2003): 2.

to themselves, but to those culpable; an African literature which is a coherent whole, but not blind or uncaring about that which occurs outside itself.

As Indo-Mauritians intellectual leaders led the push for independence, they found themselves striving to persuade the people that this agitation was worth it. They had to explain themselves and define themselves every step of the way. In doing so, they discovered that literacy is only seen as worthwhile when it comes with power, and heritage is only worthwhile when it provides a way forward. The symbiotic relationship between politics and art was thriving.

At the Second World Hindi Conference, held in Mauritius in 1976, historian J. Hazareesingh spoke on 'A Century of Indian Life in Mauritius,' (in English), noting:

In seeking for intellectual liberation, we not sever our ties with the ideals that have inspired India in her cultural flowering. The soul of a race is linked to its language and literature. But some of our countrymen who have been jostled with occidental life can hardly appreciate in our mother tongue the treasure-house of Indian thought. Has any virile nation ever lost its language? Has any nation ever survived such a loss? As Hugo says: "One idea has never more than one form peculiarly its own. Kill the form and you nearly kill the idea." The study of Hindi is indispensable, so that we may appreciate the beauties of our literature. We should therefore give it the same importance as English.¹⁹⁸

His words seem dated and quaint: is 'Indian' a race? Whatever group it might be, multilingual and multiethnic are certainly some of its most visible characteristics. Why does it matter that Indians cannot read from the 'treasure-house of Indian thought' in the original? Translations are often available, and, moreover, to an Indian educated in the Western tradition, it is quite difficult to decide which works are part of the treasure-house without falling back on Western Indology. Can one really appreciate the gems of Indian literature as an Indian without excising the Western aspects inherent in a colonial and postcolonial identity? Hazareesingh would like to

¹⁹⁸ J. Hazareesingh, 'A Century of Indian Life in Mauritius,' *Mauritius: Anthology of Literature in the African Context* (Port Louis: Ministère de l'éducation et des affaires culturelles de l'Île Maurice, 1977), 16.

say so. The call here is not the impossible call to forget the present, to forget or to devalue English, the language in which Hazareesingh is most comfortable speaking in public. Rather, it is to break free of the jail in which English keeps the Indian, alienated from ideas put forth by those whose messages might resonate.

The need to learn ancestral languages, especially when there is no clear choice for which ancestral language out of several is the best one, can seem absurd to those who have faith in the communicative power of translation. And yet it is also clear, if beyond reason, that a feeling of shared identity with the messenger can make the message more persuasive: religious paintings throughout Europe with their localised depictions of Jesus and Mary attest to this. The English language in English colonies often did not lack in communicative power or in the power to speak to the entire nation, but it came with a glass ceiling. This section explores the responses to that ceiling.

The 1950s and 1960s in Africa were a time of reassessment of African literature and the growth of criticism that did not position itself as simply geographically removed from Europe. The questions implicit in Hazareesingh's quote (what is a language supposed to do, and what are our languages currently doing?) were addressed. Furniss notes that these questions were not exclusive to Africa, but that the layers of colonial language/native language/creole language that co-existed in African nations were the terms of the debate whereas modern use of language/traditional use of language were the terms in Western debates. 'What has been described as creolization in African settings,' Furniss writes, 'is in some respects similar to the condition that Europeans and Americans experience as post-modernism or post-pluralism. Language as an object of concern finds itself subjected to, usually incompatible, desires for purity, authenticity, modernity, Africanness, national usage,

equality, and statal identity'.¹⁹⁹ An idea brought back from the past, the diaspora, and the Francophonie which quickly gained traction was the idea that in Africa, whichever language was used should be used to re-value and re-member an African identity. This idea grew into the movement, referenced in the previous chapter, from which coolitude takes its bearings: negritude.²⁰⁰

While the Indo-Mauritian case is not a representative nor was it a driving force in these debates, the complexities it raises help clarify why language became such an important factor in the choice between these three definitions. Literature produced in Africa uses a geographic standard that, while it would include Hindi poetry in Mauritius, either disregards the historical imbalances of power that saw so many Africans dispersed involuntarily or gives too much credence to stories like Bernardin de St. Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*, stories written not without experience of Africa, but without commitment to it. Literature produced by Africans or their descendants anywhere either excludes Indo-Mauritians due to popular conceptions of belonging or places Mauritian Hindi poets in a position of self-definition regarding their Africanness. The latter seems reasonable but also runs into the question of whether or

¹⁹⁹ Richard Fardon and Graham Furniss, eds. *African Languages, Development and the State* (London: Routledge, 1994), 5.

²⁰⁰ The ideals and goals of negritude as a cultural movement shaped the discussion on the ideals and goals of African literature. In 1964, Robert P. Armstrong, in a speech at the African Studies Association meeting, argued that even if it is written in a European language, if and since African literature uses its own metaphor, symbol, and situation, it should be treated as a discrete entity. (1) Other critics, such as Canadian Edgar Wright, suggested that African literature, whether given its own name or not, should simply be judged by the same universal standards as all other literature. (3) 'As might be expected,' Bishop writes (4), 'the Africans argued that it was the 'universal' that must adjust itself to Africa. The retort of Malagasy poet Joacques Rabemanjara was that

in so far as the African is authentically, African, he automatically attains the universal. When [the West] speak of universal, one gets the impression of opposition between universal and African because for centuries the notion of 'universal' was monopolized by the West. But we say to you, a universal from which we were absent was truncated and we do not accept it.' ('Negro Theatre' 351).

As with negritude, the questions then became: what is this African dimension? Perhaps not surprisingly, there hasn't emerged a unified African aesthetic, but there have emerged a set of accepted options. Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo delineated these (6): it could be either literature produced in Africa, literature produced by Africans or their descendants (anywhere), or literature (anywhere, by anyone) on the subject of Africa.

Rand Bishop, *African Literature, African Critics: The Forming of Critical Standards* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

not black writers who live on the continent or in the diaspora can similarly opt out, making the literature seem more homogenous, more in line with negritude, than perhaps accurate or helpful. Finally, literature by anyone, anywhere on the subject of Africa has a similar effect of including those who opt in to one central debate but excluding those writers who by dint of writing either more abstractly or on subjects farther from their lived experience add unexpected but perhaps vital voices to the corpus. This third technique might exclude a poet like Unnuth who never explicitly focuses on the question of Africanness but whose poems on writing seem like poetic responses to Ngugi and include the poetry of Edouard Maunick, the Mauritian of mixed ethnicity whose poetry focuses on the questions of belonging but seem to conclude that a true site of belonging for him is the ocean. Choosing to write in a language native to Africa is a way to opt in not based on race: Indo-Mauritians writing in Mauritian Kreol would have an easier case to make for inclusion.

Yet it is not so simple. Using indigeneity as a defining factor in Africanness of language is not clear cut. Even for the fathers of negritude, European languages were useful for the unification and ease of communication properties but also represented qualities that they felt did reflect true humanist values which had been demonstrated by the words of Europeans. The two positions taken on the language issue in Africa by the 1980s, represented especially by Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, centre largely on pragmatics, but are not without implications of more serious discussions. Nigerian critic Obiajunwa Wali has tried to pragmatically circumvent the issue by opining that writers must use that language in which they think, but Achebe and others have noted that while this would work in an ideal world, the linguistic abilities of Africans and the state of publishing industries in Africa make it not

practicable.²⁰¹ Achebe notes that he writes in English because in multilingual, modern-day Nigeria, English is a valid medium of communication amongst Africans and as such should be considered valid for purposes of African literature. Moreover, he says, ‘I do not see African literature as one unit but as a group of associated units—in fact the sum total of all the national and ethnic literatures of Africa’ with national being ‘in a national language’ and ethnic being ‘in an ethnic language.’²⁰² The nation is an institution that may not be native to Africa but has established itself to the point where, and helped the progress of Africans to the point where, national languages as subsets of African languages are worthy of propagation. Ngugi famously switched from writing in English to writing in Gikuyu, eschewing the colonial language in favour of a rediscovery of an African heritage, resulting in an African literature that necessarily depends on translation. Although Unnuth also chooses to rediscover the language of his heritage, his lack of interest in translating his works illustrates the confidence Unnuth has in the political power of this language, Hindi (and the lack of interest many publishers have in translating writing from non-European-heritage African languages).²⁰³

Some who chose to write in English, whether or not they did so to increase their chances of publication, began to use a distinctive African style in their writing which incorporated native rhythms and proverbs, a characteristic which Mishra and Hodge point out as integral to postcolonial writing in a larger geographical sphere. It is true that those writers who chose to write in indigenous languages often had the same incorporations of traditions. Bishop rightly articulates this not as a nostalgic

²⁰¹ Rand Bishop, *African Literature, African Critics: The Forming of Critical Standards* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 29.

²⁰² Rand Bishop, *African Literature, African Critics: The Forming of Critical Standards* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 29.

²⁰³ In 2011, Unnuth began to change his opinions about translation. In chapter 5, I will look at why and how this happened, but in this chapter, I will focus on his attitude towards translation during the time of his poetry’s greatest success.

affect but as a constructive process, a re-memberment process on both sides: 'Their invoking of a tradition, however vague at times, indicated their strong desire to create one'.²⁰⁴ Like the skeleton in Unnuth's 'Living Death', 'for the sake of tortured history's last chapter/ on the skeleton, layers of flesh begin to appear.'²⁰⁵

Negritude was a part of the African literary heritage but it was certainly not simply a phenomenon of negritude literature being written in days of agitation for independence. Senghor's poetry was seen by many as being too surrealist, too removed, indeed to the point of being detrimental to a construction of a proud African identity. Mustapha Bal wrote that Senghor's surrealism was an admission of defeat, for 'if there is no hope for liberation, the poet can take refuge in words, because there are words that liberate. Failing to change reality, we can change our vision of reality. Behind surrealism there is this tacit admission of impotence'.²⁰⁶ Poets such as Jose Rabearivelo, Crispin George, and Dennis Osadebay emphasised instead the power of realism in facing both the problems in African society caused by the imperial powers and, later, those exacerbated or caused by post-Independence powers. They described in their work poverty, violence, and racial strife which they witnessed. Nkosi notes that their work often blurs a line drawn in Western literature between poets and society; they 'did not produce an elite which was alienated from the black masses or even the conditions of everyday life...'²⁰⁷ Instead, the poet is there to be a part of the social fabric. Unnuth's identity as an engaged poet is at the centre of his observations of society in *The Teeth of the Cactus*, and his direct address to those outside of his society (those who hold the power over its people, both materially, in the case of

²⁰⁴ Rand Bishop, *African Literature, African Critics: The Forming of Critical Standards* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 78.

²⁰⁵ 'Living Death.' #51. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 67.

²⁰⁶ Rand Bishop, *African Literature, African Critics: The Forming of Critical Standards* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 96.

²⁰⁷ Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile* (London: Longmans, 1965), 45.

white Mauritians and the modern Mauritians who betray the people, and spiritually, in his religious ruminations) places him at the centre of the society about which he writes.

opening his mouth bigger than the sea
after having drunk, he
wanted then inside of him
that the tide would not rise, and
ebb, that
there would not be revolutions
that there would be not
whirlwinds, that there would be not
the revolts or rebellions of the waves
and he wanted this, too, that:
after having drunk so much
thirst would still cling to him
cling to him²⁰⁸

Mauritians looked time and again to South Africa as their closest and much more powerful neighbour, but Indo-Mauritians often had more political power than their neighbours during their fight for civil rights. Not all Indo-South Africans were able to participate in the political movements of those decades. Many were going against their parents' wishes in getting involved in the agitation. Others, however, were encouraged by their parents to become involved in their natal community. Zubeida Jaffar traces one such participant, Ayesha Jadood, who was forced to watch the movement from afar, after being compelled to leave the country after a series of events which followed her participation in the protests organised by the ANC.²⁰⁹ Jaffar notes that her life was inextricably linked to Mandela's. Just as she watched the movement from India, many young people in Mauritius watched closely, thirsty for social revolution like the character in Unnuth's poem above. Edouard Maunick, the most prominent Creole Mauritian poet (writing in French and English), was one of these. Eventually, he moved first in a diplomatic capacity, and then in his retirement

²⁰⁸ 'Thirst.' #37. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 49.

²⁰⁹ Zubeida Jaffar, *Love in the Time of Treason* (South Africa: Kwela Books, 2008).

from the civil service, to South Africa. Growing up in Mauritius (born in 1931) with mixed Black and French blood, he was taught to ignore the non-white parts of his heritage and be Franco-Mauritian. 'For the first 29 years of his life, which was lived entirely in Mauritius, he was taught to ignore his African and Indian forebears and claim only his French background. As he grew up, however... he learned to hate the white man for rejecting him.'²¹⁰ His early poetry was a search for a true identity. 'Knowing these roots,' he writes, 'my silence is a sign of mourning/ for that part of me which is rejected:/ By choice, I am a Negro.' Calling himself a Negro, he was able to identify attributes about who he was rather than whom he feared becoming: spectres painted by racist notions he had been fed as a child.

Maunick worked as a teacher, left for France, and returned to take up a diplomatic post to South Africa. He has remarked that he regrets not also being part Indian, and not reading Hindi, so he could participate in Mauritian poetry to the fullest extent. The poetry he wrote after leaving Mauritius for the first time addresses the violence in Soweto, the problems of Africa as a whole, and his role in it all. His writing often shows him to feel dislocated not just from Mauritian society but from the preoccupations of the present on the whole. In his collection *Mandela Dead and Alive* (2001), he writes of frustration at being told to think of the present when the past lay thick on the ground:²¹¹

I am asked to forget
the cargo of long ago
and to write in the vivid silk
of a planetary era
while the dust thickens
weaving a shroud
for every new body butchered
in the black south of Africa...

²¹⁰ Edward A. Jones, ed. *Voices of Negritude* (Judson Press, 1971), 73.

²¹¹ Edward A. Jones, ed. *Voices of Negritude* (Judson Press, 1971), 73.

As a result, ‘since 1964, the sea has played an ever-increasing symbolic importance in the poet’s work: it has become his symbolic country, a dream-island surrounded by continents.’²¹² The sea as his choice of symbol is interesting in relation especially to *Paul et Virginie*, in which the sea connected Mauritius to Europe but disconnected Mauritians from one another. The sea is timeless, yes, but the globalism it symbolises portends the future, which it is clear Maunick hopes will include progress on attitudes towards race and ethnicity.

Unnuth, like Maunick, addresses the entirety of Mauritian society in his poetry, making clear his disappointment at the inability of any of the ethnic groups to truly create a prosperous and peaceful nation which values all. In his poem ‘Wrath’, he addresses the various natural features of the island as he would its various human segments. ‘Bare Mountain,’ he says, ‘Listen! ... And oh yes, Mozambique Channel—you listen, too.’ He addresses these anchoring points, the same points shared by all Mauritians: the mountain, the channel, the volcano, the southern cliffs of Gri-Gri, the fairies of the Ganga Talao. In this poem he does not cloak his message in imagery: he says ‘Stop your inertia, your idiocy, your veiled opportunism!’²¹³ And yet, in other poems in the collection, we struggle to understand with whom the speaker is concerned.

The failure of Unnuth to create the legacy he wanted for his poetry will be discussed at length in the following chapters. A would-be legend, today, he is better known for his prose, although his poetry is more critically acclaimed. Unfortunately, those to whom he perceived himself to be speaking were not really listening.

²¹² Edward A. Jones, ed. *Voices of Negritude* (Judson Press, 1971), 73.

²¹³ ‘Wrath.’ #10. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikhus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 12-13.

Unintentionally, Unnuth took on a popular role for African writers (one that Maunick chose when he abrogated his membership of one race and joined another without having endured the childhood suffering of its members): he fell into the category of the alienated African writer. In poems like ‘On the Promotion *Ghaat*’²¹⁴ and ‘Search’,²¹⁵ even the poet who calls upon ‘his people’ knows he does not speak entirely on behalf of or in agreement with them. In the former poem, he airs his differences with a sympathiser of the status quo in a series of aggressive questions: who knows why you are really being so obsequious, and to whom? Do you agree only to be kind to the hand that feeds you, or do you agree with the whole system?:

who knows to whose shoes
you’ve cowed your head
as you run heedlessly
towards the promotion *ghaat*,
towards those steps on the river’s bank?

And finally he asks a question not directly to the sympathiser, but, referring to the ‘you’ as ‘him’ now, to his people, or perhaps only to himself:

do I know him at all, whose turban has settled
there at the feet of the promotion granter?

Questioning and working to change the current set of standards has become such a part of the speaker’s identity vis-à-vis his people, his own group, and that group identity, that to see for his own eyes those who ‘run heedlessly’ against everything he writes for is a shock. In ‘Search’, he links his group’s search to that of victims of political violence worldwide, to Hiroshima, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Africa, Iran, recognizing that the connections he feels to those who despair across the world make more sense than the ones he feels to those who ‘purchase’ revolution, who work for

²¹⁴ ‘On the Promotion *Ghaat*.’ #17. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 21.

²¹⁵ ‘Search.’ #26. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 32-33.

change but then remake a system with the same goals and values, selling their futures for a greater share in the new system. ‘search! a search for true meanings, proper goal! search! for the new scope of the new horizon’, he writes, knowing that for all his striving,

...war has not yet broken out
but it will break out, this is certain
be it over bread, over pieces of ground
over colour, over identity
in Africa, in Iran,
a cold war, a civil war,
who profits?
the search for the answer is still progressing
even when found it hasn’t been found...

Ato Quayson spoke about alienation and the alienated writer in a postcolonial reading of African literature at Cambridge University’s Center for African Studies in November 2010.²¹⁶ Called upon to speak about myth in African literature, he noted that the topic had been dealt with comprehensively, and brought up a new aspect of African literature to debate, one which is part and parcel of the overall language-and-identity debate personified by Ngugi and Achebe, both of whom Quayson referenced in his speech. Alienation, Quayson remarked, was illustrative of the ‘problematic of self-writing’. In 1967, after the publication of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Achebe, at that point working at Heinemann on the African Writers Series, noted that the novel’s expression of its protagonists’ alienation was dependent on a foreign metaphor. In this moment in history, it seemed reasonable to Achebe to consider alienation a Western import, better suited to French existentialists than optimistic, nation-building, socially involved African writers. Yet, Quayson noted, later African writers, such as Coetzee, Soyinka, and Achebe himself, would make this theme one of

²¹⁶ Ato Quayson. ‘Self-Writing and Existential Alienation in African Literature’, Center for African Studies, Cambridge University, November 2010.

the most resonant in the African canon. How did alienation become, or become understood to be, a native concept?

Quayson's answer was that Mbembe, in bringing Foucault's idea of 'self-writing' to the fore, introduced into the discussion the idea of the audience and how the conception of the audience affected the author's understanding of their own work and, indeed, affected their work. Drawing upon early Christian monks' habit of writing about themselves and their preoccupations in diaries in order to guard against the incursion of evil into their thoughts, Foucault noted that writing as though one will be read without actually expecting to be read necessarily involves imagining a 'skeptical interlocutor': someone who would never find your work relevant enough to read, but in your imagination is still reading it. Unnuth does just this in poems such as 'When They Have Been Recognised, Then,' addressing the Western reader who cannot understand his language, or political readers who have forgotten the instrumentality of poetry and literature in general in accomplishing political goals of the recent past.²¹⁷ His poetry, his 'self-writing' can be read as both addressed to Mauritians in general and addressed only to those who share the same view of the imagined Hindi readership discussed in the introductory chapter; I spoke of this in relation to 'In One Moment'²¹⁸ as well.

Quayson notes that for Fanon, in his *Black Skins, White Masks*, the White skeptical interlocutor is given part explanation, part contestation. The historical shortcomings of history are explained and the lack of remuneration is contested. However, the interlocutor is 'intersubjective', in that the gaze of the interlocutor is not exterior to the writer's consciousness, but the writer's point of view based on his very

²¹⁷ 'When They Have Been Recognised, Then.' #53. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 71.

²¹⁸ 'In One Moment.' #79. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 101.

self becomes that of the white man, the skeptical interlocuter. Like many African writers, Fanon wants to free himself to experience his true identity, but it seems impossible. Once thus trapped, a writer becomes alienated not only from their native community, from whom the interlocuter has made them estranged, but from any community. While Quayson notes that the skeptical interlocuter is not always the white man, Unnuth's alienation does fall into this categorization. As a poet it is not possible for Unnuth to be, coherently, both personal and socially present. He addresses his poems to those who would certainly never care and in doing so alienates those whom he tries to interest in the history of their own empowerment. Maunick made the choice to write from a position of self-conscious alienation, moving from passing as White to self-identifying as Creole; Unnuth did not, and his poetry, in its strivings to be more than just socially engaged, but socially and concurrently spiritually engaged, reflects this. His alienation from some readers in his immediate Indo-Mauritian context may make him search out others, but on the other hand may have encouraged him to turn inwards, away from others. He never cites the works of Maunick, instead turning to Latin American and Soviet writers when discussing other poets. Maunick and Unnuth are two Mauritian poets who have looked beyond Mauritius for their identity, hoping in this way to expand the Mauritian identity beyond its common borders. Maunick concludes with the sea: a true poet of coolitude, perhaps. Unnuth, too, as will be discussed in the next section, does not succeed in carrying others with him in an expanded self-understanding; in his old age he feels he has failed, he has lost, he is at sea, in a sea which is turning red with blood.

South African writer Devarakshanam Betty Govinden has written about literature as 'remapping cartographies': 'It reconfigures what we understand, in this instance, by 'Africa' and 'the African diaspora', 'Asia,' and 'the Asian diaspora,' as we

explore less familiar intersections and 'contact zones', we thus actively resist cultural ghettoisation and enhance our sense of a common world.'²¹⁹ How Unnuth and other writers have chosen to do this has become in aggregate the characteristic and defining methods of Indian Labour Diaspora literature and of African literature. This remapping is necessary, Govinden notes, because it brings back questions which have been silenced: 'What thoughts filled the early Indian migrant workers in their physical and emotional encounter and confrontation with the colonial masters and the new land? What 'counter-memories'... came into being? ... The stifling and even absence of a literary tradition among Indians prevented us from reflecting on our psychic displacement... Geographic transplantation results in loss of culture, of nationality, and of selfhood, necessitating a turn to the past in order to retrace the history that has been erased.'²²⁰ Those questions focus on the hard work that Indians did on the land, giving them a right to their new home countries.

Indo-Mauritian poets looked beyond personal experience to a more global and worldly understanding of their lives. At the same time they did not reach out to other Indian Labour Diasporas or to their African neighbours in Mauritius or on the mainland African continent. What they lost by doing this is really seeing where the connections identified in the paragraph could have led them when followed through; what they gained is my concern here. By ignoring any other Indians around the world outside of the subcontinent, Indo-Mauritians protected themselves from a feeling of 'minority' that is pervasive in many diasporan settings. In his article 'Culture's In-Between', Homi Bhabha writes about Charles Taylor's idea of the partial culture: the culture of migrants who, in cobbling together a new mode of being, do not end up

²¹⁹ Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, *A Time of Memory: Reflections on Recent South African Writings* (Vancouver: Solo Collective, 2008), 13.

²²⁰ Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, *A Time of Memory: Reflections on Recent South African Writings* (Vancouver: Solo Collective, 2008), 115.

with anything totalizing. In his understanding of Taylor's concept, Bhabha likewise limits the culture of migrants to the culture of minorities.²²¹ While it may be simple to write Mauritius out of all discussions of Bhabha's mobile and hybrid populations who write so powerfully from the liminal margins, I would argue that the unique historical situation of Mauritius which would incline one to count it as the exception should in fact be looked at in Taylorian/Bhabhan terms because it is clear that the majority of inhabitants of Mauritius came to similar conclusions. Not content with a culture that was neither totalizing nor enfranchised, they chose to work for enfranchisement, Independence, and power. Taking advantage of the demographic anomaly, the Indo-Mauritians seized what powers of the majority were available to them; in reading Unnuth's poetry, though, the downside of their choices' consequences also becomes clear. They rendered themselves invisible to postcolonial readers, performing a different hybridity and specific diasporiality which served to create a proudly self-sufficient Indo-Mauritian sphere, literary and otherwise. Turning away from spheres with which they had parallels of experience (labour and reclamation of language) they faced two directions. They could look inward, building up a vital and engaging Hindi literary sphere. Certainly, Unnuth felt that this would happen with the relative strengths the Indo-Mauritians enjoyed in building up a strong sense of community and its concomitant sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of its members, both economically and spiritually. Otherwise, they could look outwards, towards India or beyond. In this chapter, I will discuss how Unnuth and his peers chose to keep a distance from the Indian Hindi sphere, building up a parallel sphere rather than affixing themselves to the margin of the larger and stronger one. In the next chapter I will examine the alternative outreach Unnuth proposes, based on parallels of shared

²²¹ Homi Bhabha, 'Culture's In-Between,' *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay. (London: SAGE, 1996), 53-60.

economic and cosmological concerns, and, finally, what the reception of Unnuth's poetry was beyond his own first generation of independent Mauritians.

In the poem 'Merchant',²²² readers encounter, unusually, a specific description of the 'you' before they begin reading the poem itself. Reading the title and having read the collection thus far, readers can imagine that the poem will not be laudatory. However, the first image of the poem does not meet readers' expectations of a direct attack on the merchant's character, instead focusing on the sun's misdeeds:

sticking swelled flesh
to the oppressed skeleton
yesterday's black sun
laughs a white laugh

At first, black/white seems to be setting up an opposition, but while 'black' does seem to be the old standby for 'bad', what is a 'white laugh'? Such a laugh emerging from the sun as it pushes flesh onto the skeleton seems to be not 'good' but 'cruel'. Unnuth ties his disappointment with the sun to his disappointment with the 'you', the merchant, not through a conjunction or through punctuation but by using time to set them in opposition with the speaker: 'kal' in Hindi referring to a day one day off from today, both 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow'. 'Tomorrow...', he writes,

...still you will sell to the clouds
the pearls of the naked bodies of the labourers
for gold or silver cloth

Here is the attack anticipated in the title, the connection of 'you' to the merchant, the merchant's second-hand commoditisation of the labourers' bodies as pearls. In this poem, the political misdeeds of those who make money off of the bodies of the labourers are made explicit. 'Four Moods' delves more deeply into the 'you's'

²²² 'Merchant.' #67. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikhūs ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 87.

persona, with images that map directly onto the 'you' as a person: cigar-smoking, feet-on-files, indifferent, whiskey-drinking. It is in the last stanza that this person is directly addressed.²²³

look seriously at your glass of whiskey
it has become a cocktail
of something, a drop of sweat from someone's forehead
has dripped into it
a drop of blood of someone's
a bit of a tear from someone's eye

With the intimacy of the mixed fluids (a chosen beverage, sweat, blood, and tears) the speaker reminds this person that in a relationship, even one as twisted as theirs, complete purity and separation are impossible. As Spurr noted, the coloniser often imbues the colonised with his own attributes, but here the situation is reversed: the speaker, though coyly with the description of them as 'someone's forehead', 'someone's blood' and 'someone's eye', has physically invaded the person's drinks, their mood, and their lives. This poem uses the few loan words from English that are found in the collection: 'whiskey' and 'cocktail' are both transliterated versions of those exact words. Yet in the poem the hybridity it illustrates is one which leaves behind the usual postcolonial trope of brown-person-struggles-with-Western-ideals, showing instead a speaker for whom these words are penetrable.

In *The Teeth of the Cactus* two poems focus on a similar subject, a subset of the collection's preoccupation with the sun: dark afternoons. 'Here It Became Night in the Afternoon' differs from 'From the Black Death of the Afternoon' in the cultural context of its imagery.²²⁴ In the first poem, the central image is of a Hindu groom and

²²³ 'Four Moods.' #68. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 88-89.

²²⁴ 'Here It Became Night in the Afternoon.' #66. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 86.

his bride, and the afternoon is likened to ‘the conjugal night’. In the second, the afternoon is black like ‘a television screen’ showing a foreign film: Hitchcock, a film in English, to be precise. The overall inward focus of the collection paints Unnuth as a writer invested in using local symbols of self-expression, so the rare instances where something obviously Anglophone is incorporated are worth investigating to more accurately grasp the limits and uses of language, symbol, and imagery in the poems. These two poems about dark afternoons offer up a fine distinction between feeling blind and feeling misrepresented.

‘here it became night in the afternoon’ begins the first poem. Describing this aberration further, the poem brings up images that have appeared throughout the world of the collection to show that the natural order of things has not been distorted, as might be expected from night in the afternoon, but heightened:

...under the wings of the vultures
the life of the sparrow
was claimed by law
on the teeth of the cactus...

...the moonlight was caught on
the milkweed’s thorn tips...

...on the red drops of dew
the black night kept swimming
on the rotting darkness of the light...

...the sun’s corpse smelled worse and worse
under the cover of a black sheet...

In these examples, the order is not flipped, but rather things have overstepped their natural boundaries and become tangled in one another: the sparrow in the vultures, by way of the cactus’ teeth, the moonlight in the milkweed, the rotted light and the reddened dew, and the sun and the black sheet. It seems that night in the afternoon is

‘From The Black Death of the Afternoon.’ #70. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 91.

not a symptom of all the world turned on its head, but rather of night seeping into the day and tangling itself up with the afternoon. The pricks of pain and the smell of rotting permeate this heightened night. The last five lines of the poem are a more sustained image:

the blind groom has with blind antimony
filled in the hair-part of the bride
here, afternoon has turned into night
the conjugal night has remained bound
inside the box of vermillion

This image shows what happens when people are caught up in this heightened state: the heightened night, taking over the afternoon, has left no room for the actual night which was to come. This conjugal night which was to follow the marriage ‘has remained bound/inside the box of vermillion’ which, unable to access, the groom has replaced with antimony on his bride’s head. They are both blind in the darkness, perhaps unable to see that their marriage, according to their own standards, is a sham. The sun’s fickleness has been a problem in the collection, but here it is clear that the night, too, can be a danger if unchecked.

In the second poem, the dying sun sucks the red from ‘the glimmering afternoons of the fields’, setting in a blaze of red. It is then that

...in the spirits of the newspaper
on the television screen
afternoons appear black...

The problem here, beyond the killing of the afternoon, is the way it is presented. It is presented logically, for how can the television screen portray an afternoon devoid of sunlight as anything but dead black? At the same time, the poet has mixed emotions, for the poem does not end there. Instead it ends with the way that the presentation on the screen may be misleading, after all:

...on the afternoon's lamenting
dominating it
a song from a Hitchcock film
it becomes pleasing, enchanting...

Rather than present directly the afternoon's sorrow in the face of its own demise, the sound of the television is 'dominated' by Western film music. Even if the song is from a horror film, the poet writes that this renders the whole scene 'pleasing, enchanting'. Both of the poems use the idea of darkness overtaking the afternoon to talk about an ability to see things for what they are, but the second, with its concrete references to the Anglophone world and all it entails, directly addresses the issue of being misrepresented.

III. *Poetry and Independence*

Who is Unnuth then as a writer, and how can he be represented fairly? Looking closely at his self-presentation as a Hindi poet of Mauritius, a chronicler of his society's past but also a mapmaker for its future, it appears fair to represent Unnuth as a progressive poet. Progressive poetry has a strong tradition in Indian poetry, but this section distinguishes Unnuth from poets of the Indian Hindi literary sphere.

...election time
that beautiful speech you gave me
is lying at my place
it has begun to rot
we cannot eat it...²²⁵

Mauritian Hindi poetry most closely echoes Indian Hindi poetry when the progressive poems of each sphere are compared; for example, lines like these above, from Unnuth's 'In the Fridge', would not be out of place amongst the poetry leading

²²⁵ 'In the Fridge.' #74. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikhūs ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 95.

up to Indian independence. At the same time, a shared type of suffering and a shared language do not add up to a shared literary sphere, with a shared dominant culture and equivalent market realities. The use of Hindi in the public sphere for political and cultural reasons did draw Mauritians closer to northern India, with its larger Hindi literary sphere, but, as previously noted, Mauritian readers and writers of Hindi saw themselves as a separate entity, in a separate literary sphere. This self-understanding has its roots not just in empty personal pride or dependence on geographical or national boundaries, but in a recognition of the importance of emphasis. Even though the best poets in both spheres were progressives, Mauritians drew from Indian poets while picking and choosing what was relevant for them. They did not expect Indian Hindi progressive poets to make overtures in their direction (and did not receive them) because they made no effort to render their poetry relevant to specifically Indian concerns. 'Progressivism' as a literary movement had a different meaning in each country, and Unnuth's poems are not simply a marginal iteration of Indian progressive poetry but a parallel progressivism, dealing with parallel trajectories towards postcolonialism.

Mauritians read progressive Indian poetry with the keen ear of those poised to recreate the political trajectory of India in their own country. Although Unnuth was not writing like an Indian, he was doing his best to read like one, recognizing that looking to the literature of somewhere else, somewhere undergoing parallel changes, may prove resonant. Mauritians, since their welcoming of Bernardin de St. Pierre, have always welcomed visitors and regular interaction with the world across the sea. Initially it was the merchant Indo-Mauritians, not the indentured labourers, who maintained ties with and received regular news from India, but there was constantly a widespread interest in international news. Gandhi, for example, was quite well known

when he arrived in Mauritius at the start of the 20th century. Those Indo-Mauritians who were literary as well as literate kept up, also, with the rise of *khari-boli* Hindi in India as the 20th century progressed. Although they were not able to read the latest journals or the latest reviews, popular and canonical Indian Hindi writers soon achieved this status in Mauritius, as well. Although, as will be discussed in later chapters, Unnuth was not able to get other Indo-Mauritian writers interested in participating alongside Indians in an international poetics, they were nevertheless interested in reading what Indians read when Indians were focused inwards. For example, even those Indo-Mauritians who were glad to be away and distinct from the impoverished agricultural north celebrated Premchand's novel *Godaan*.²²⁶ When Indian writing dealt with Indian independence, Indo-Mauritians observed and read. When their own encounter with independence took place, their response showed the attention they had paid to the North Indian Hindi literary canon.

Unnuth took from his reading of Indian Hindi literature the importance of language in the formation of a functional nationalism. Such parallels of language are often the first relationships postcolonial or World Literature readers see, and we often see them as the most powerful. This is not always true, but we should not, on the contrary, ignore its role. This next section tells the story of Mauritian Independence in order to make sense of the various poetic responses to it. As throughout the African continent, those poets who were committed to political action saw this commitment as a progressive attitude. However, Hindi poets in Mauritius also shared a common canon with Hindi poets in India, and the reaction of Indian Hindi poets to their own independence both shaped the reactions of Hindi Mauritian poets to their own changes and also showed the parallel, nonintersecting natures of the two Hindi-speaking

²²⁶ Vinaye Goodary, interview by author, Moka, Mauritius, August 2010.

planes. While Mauritian poets shared much of a common poetic canon with an independent India, progressivism in Mauritian Hindi poetry and in Indian Hindi poetry differed in that Mauritian goals were at once in response to something more discrete (the coolie experience) and amorphous, with regards to the future in a multiethnic nation. Unnuth's progressivism speaks to both, and can be read not just from either perspective, but as a point of contact between the two perspectives.

in my fist is an ill evening
my eyes are full of morning
there is no ground beneath my feet
nor sun above my head
here is my freedom²²⁷

Unnuth was not the first Hindi writer in Mauritius, and to understand Unnuth is also to understand several of his predecessors, dating from the very beginning of Hindi as a literary language in Mauritius. The birth of Hindi as a literary language took place in northern India, with writers making use of the modern vernacular to tackle contemporary issues and themes. Nationalism became a central theme; for many, central to their identities as poets. Many poets were socially engaged and many wrote poetry that called for reform. After Independence, many progressive poets lent their voices to the debate about the trajectory the nation should follow and in doing so defining the national character; Orsini calls them 'literary activists' in her *Hindi Public Sphere*.²²⁸

The Progressive Writers Association, epitomizing the progressive movement in India, has its roots in the birth of the Hindi Public Sphere which Francesca Orsini so comprehensively describes in her book of that name. Orsini notes that 'from the first half of the nineteenth century, under the influence of British ideas and

²²⁷ 'Here is My Freedom.' #85. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 107.

²²⁸ Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25.

institutions, many educated Indians started evolving codes, institutions, and a language to express the need for new concepts like ‘unity,’ ‘progress,’ and a ‘common cultural heritage’²²⁹ For Hindi speakers, levels and types of usage of Hindi varied per region—the language of *khari boli* Hindi, ‘the lingua franca of the bazaar over the whole of northern and central India’ was their instrument.²³⁰ (Prior to this period and for some time concurrent to it, Braj Bhasa was the standard poetic language.) Via the channels of education and religion (though, in this case, the Christian religion of the colonisers), *khari boli* Hindi became the standard for communication of civil movements and of civic life. Orsini writes that ‘the self-conscious adoption by the educated Hindus of northern India of *khari boli* Hindi as their public language in the second half of the nineteenth century marked the upsurge of a cultural movement that Urdu intellectuals could not comprehend... higher and middle castes, of once-diverse linguistic competencies,... compacted around *khari boli* Hindi. Although Urdu and English had been more esteemed in those regions, especially in the years between 1920 and 1940 Hindi gained much ground and was indeed able to stake its claim as the national language of the whole of India’.²³¹ Indo-Mauritians were paying attention.

Those Indian writers who were serving the people often coincided with nationalists. Orsini notes that most were not full-time politicians, but the majority were active in the national movement politicisation in some way.²³² For them, the establishment of institutions and assemblies for the propagation of Hindi was linked

²²⁹ Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1.

²³⁰ Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

²³¹ Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.

²³² Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14.

to ‘other issues of community interest like education, and with exclusively Hindi symbols like cow protection’.²³³ At this point, however, the development of the Indian nation through Hindi was not seen as problematic for the British, who even promoted *khari boli* education. The alternative, Urdu, undoubtedly played a large part in this decision, however; perhaps larger than the linking of nationalism and independence. Just as in Mauritius, Hindi broke through to have real status in politics through the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, as well through the (related) adoption of Hindi by the Congress Party.²³⁴ It stood for ideals, and, after Gandhi, especially an idyllic village India.

The Indo-Mauritians’ use of Hindi was slightly behind the Indians’ chronologically, however; their English-inspired poetry soon became progressive, and their progressive period lasted until just before Mauritian Independence, with perhaps overly didactic tendencies. Mauritian Independence was achieved by an intellectual class which included poets. The point of departure for any understanding of the history of Hindi literature in pre-Independence Mauritius should be L. P. Ramyeed’s *The Establishment and Cultivation of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius*.²³⁵ Published in 1984 by a member of the Hindi Pracharini Sabha²³⁶ (a group started in 1938 for the propagation of Hindi), it chronicles how Hindi joined English and French as a prestige language for Indo-Mauritians and was often used to voice the otherwise untold histories of their indentured labourer ancestors. Formal education and Hindi literature in Mauritius were fought for and nurtured by the same people: Gandhi, Manilall Doctor, the Bissoondoyals, and their supporters. Many supporters of this

²³³ Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26.

²³⁴ Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 30.

²³⁵ L.P. Ramyeed, *The Establishment and Cultivation of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius* (Moka, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1985).

²³⁶ in English, ‘The Society for the Disemmination of Hindi’.

movement and students who benefited from the teaching of Hindi (systematically outside of, and then inside of, schools) also became the first Hindi writers.

The first literary production is actually outlined in Tiwari's update to Ramyead's account: Tiwari notes the publication of an anonymous chapbook entitled *Holi* comprised of poetry on that subject. The first attributed work, however, is the *Raspunj Kundaliya*, a collection of poetry certainly influenced by Bhojpuri and Avadhi but written in Hindi.²³⁷ This work, published in 1923, and his other work published in the subsequent decades, focuses on the dark side of Indo-Mauritian society: suffering, greed, and social ills. The work was published in India and distributed in Mauritius, but like many Mauritian works, it is remembered but physically inaccessible, all copies lost. The work of another poet of the 1920s and 1930s, Janab Mohammad, is also lost. Prose works, most notably by Pandit Atmaram and JN Roy, were typically written by those who had already made a name for themselves writing in English, and dealt with similar topics of the need for social reform—not surprising when so many authors were reformers.

In 1926, Lakminarayan Caturvedi, writing under the penname Raspunj, published the first Mauritian Hindi poetry collection, *Raspunj Kundaliya*.²³⁸ Caturvedi returned to Bihar in the 1940s, but a spark had been ignited. The budding Indo-Mauritian authors were abreast of the political situation in India and knew of the progressive poetry being written there. They used the format for their own intentions, to react to the problems of their own civil society. Like the poems of *Raspunj Kundaliya*, most early Hindi literature written in Mauritius was a departure from the popular saint-poems or epic poetry which had come to Mauritius in the form of religious or folk knowledge. It was not that these traditional poems did not have

²³⁷ L.P. Ramyead, *The Establishment and Cultivation of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius* (Moka, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1985), 57.

²³⁸ The title suggests that the poems may have been in Bhojpuri or Braj Bhasa.

within them calls for reform or the basis for a progressive attitude; certainly, saint-poets such as Kabir are valued for their subversion of the established order. This poem, translated by John Stratton Hawley,²³⁹ would certainly have resonated with those who were calling for simplifications to the Hindu ritual along the lines of Arya Samaj reform:

Why be so proud of this useless, used-up body?
One moment dead, and it's gone.
How nicely you adorn it with sugar and butter and milk:
Once the breath goes out, it's fit to burn.
That head with its turban so artfully arranged
Will soon be adorned with the jabbing beaks of crows.
Bones: they burn like tinder.
Hair: it burns like hay.
And still, says Kabir, people won't wake up—
Not until they feel death's club
 Inside their skulls.

As noted, however, the use of Hindi for these expressions of exasperation and calls for reform was becoming more important. Reworking old poems to speak about the new problems was not currently en vogue. In India, even old themes were being given new forms, like Jai Sankar Prasad's 1936 work *Kamayani*, which was itself a new epic, imbuing the traditional Rig Vedic flood tale with a modern concern about the development of human civilization, with its persistent tension between rationality and love.²⁴⁰

A set of new Indo-Mauritian writings exposed the evils of that period in their own language: in 1941, Jay Narain Roy published the first Indo-Mauritian play, *Jivan-Sangini*, about a mismatch between an educated husband and an uneducated wife,²⁴¹ and Pandit Atmaram began to write on religion and society (both also

²³⁹ John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, *Songs of the Saints of India* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 1988), 54.

²⁴⁰ Jayshankar Prasad. *Kamayani*. 1936.

²⁴¹ Jay Narain Roy. *Jivan Sangini*. 1941.

published in English).²⁴² In 1935, the Hindi Pracharini Sabha was registered. Countering the Arya Samaj and Basdeo Bissoondoyal, his 2000 followers, and his trilingual (Hindi-English-French) newspaper *Zamana*, the Sabha sought to bring Hindi back from the language of pandits and swamis to become a language of the educated man and to ‘prevent religion and literature from getting mixed up’.²⁴³ Unnuth would continue the stance against the Samaj but not against the mixing of religion and literature. The writing of novels had a late start in Mauritius; poetry, the short story, and theatre were the more popular genres. Nonetheless, in 1960, K. Lalbihari published the first Indo-Mauritian novel, *Pehlā Kadam* (a love story with social barriers),²⁴⁴ and Bissoondoyal translated the paradigmatic *Paul et Virginie* into Hindi, not because anyone did not know the story already, but for the development of a Mauritian Hindi poetry.²⁴⁵ Unnuth, who wrote in his biography of Bissoondoyal of

²⁴² Pandit Atmaram’s work sheds a fascinating light on the intellectual understanding of Hinduism in Mauritius at the time. The Hindu identity was very important, so much so that the ethnic designator for Indo-Mauritians is ‘Hindu’, with Muslim Indians split off and reoriented towards a pan-Islamic contextualization. At the same time, the Hindu identity was not exactly fixed. With the Arya Samaj and the Sanatanists taking sides, it seemed that Hinduism could mean anything that worked for group cohesion—and not necessarily just for the overall group of Indo-Mauritians. Monique Dinan, in her work *The Mauritian Kaleidoscope: Languages and Religions*, notes that while immigration largely stalled during the fifties through the eighties, the number of religious denominations rose exponentially, often with what would be understood as cultural or caste divisions in India being described as religious divisions in Mauritius. This of course included the epics, but it also included Atmaram’s ‘principles of Hinduism’, which he lays out like the ten commandments. These ethical principles uphold the idea of Hinduism as a spiritual quest but also call upon Hindus to follow the trajectory of life set forth in the *dharma shastras*, which include devoting much of one’s adult life to the community.

²⁴³ Somdath Bhuckory, *Hindi in Mauritius*, 2nd ed. (Rose-Hill, Mauritius: Éditions de L’Océan Indien, 1988), 31.

²⁴⁴ K. Lalbihari, *Pehla Kadam*. 1960.

²⁴⁵ Kalpana Lalji would later transcreate this story in Hindi poetry (from an English prose version). Bissoondoyal translated the story so that Hindi poetry would include it, a necessary component of the Mauritian identity, and Lalji, as an immigrant to Mauritius after her marriage, would later look to it for the same reason. Unfortunately not much else has been translated, so those Mauritians who read only Hindi literature miss out on more recent works in French, English, and Kreol. Sita Ramyeed has recently put out a collection of the Hindi versions of Mauritian folk tales entitled ‘Pattar ke Lor’, after the rock which is always weeping at Gri-Gri, and one hopes that translations of authors like Nirsimloo and Appanah are soon to follow. Both Lalji and Ramyeed are involved with women’s organizations on the island, and as women writers in English and French have recently received support with publications through the British Council and ELP, it would be gratifying to see Hindi women writers receive the same support in the near future.

the great influence the 'Hindi missionary' had on him, would certainly have sought out these works.

During this time modern Hindi poetry was also developing in India. Modern Hindi as a language of literature came into its present form at the turn of the 20th century, but it has not been a stagnant medium. Prominent literary critic Ashok Vajpeyi writes that

Hindi literature has been furiously innovative and experimental—allowing for enriching tensions between the individual and his/her milieu—and imaginatively daring to expand itself into hitherto unexplored geographies of both the inner worlds of the tormented and the agonised and the external world of the oppressed and the marginalised. It has been an interrogative space where conventions, received wisdom, notions of modernism and strategies of colonization of the mind, as well as its current 'co-colonization' have been questioned and examined and their contradictions and relevance passionately and rigorously contested.²⁴⁶

At first the explorations of the inner worlds and of the external worlds were done separately, in succession, by the Chhayavadi poets and the Pragativadi poets, respectively.

Maria Offredi explains that Chhayavad poetry was not apolitical but rather, political issues were being discussed through the mystical poetry's creation of concordances including that of individual and society. This, she writes, was 'a feature of the Indian mentality of the age. Politically, the state was in bondage and, consequently, marginality; yet, independence, signifying perfection and greatness, was the goal that lay waiting to be achieved sooner or later'.²⁴⁷ Perfection could be achieved in poetry when the small and the great were drawn together; small was also identified with reality and greatness with ideality, and closing the gap between the

²⁴⁶ Ashok Vajpeyi, 'Opening Editorial,' *Hindi*, Vol. 1, No. 1: 5.

²⁴⁷ Maria Offredi, 'A Note on Marginality in Hindi Literature,' *Hindi*, Vol. 1, No. 1: 116.

two was a goal on many levels. To achieve this goal, Chhayavad poets set aside rhyme and reached for new subject matters: the natural world, the emotional world, and their intersection. The sensuality of Nirala's 'Arise Once More'²⁴⁸ seems to bring the material world so close to the reader, until the last line's exhortation reminds one that the poet is trapped not in the material world but in the alluring emotional intoxication that can be had from it:

...he with eyes like a black-bee's
in pursuit of which honey is he caught in this alley?
eye-lids closed,
he drinks honey quietly
or sleeps on the tender buds—
the poet is shutting down—
arise once more!²⁴⁹

Perhaps Nirala is making the point here that the actual material world can be experienced without such intoxication, in a more political sense, but one can read the poem without these undertones.²⁵⁰ Offredi's analysis of their method brings to light how integrated political consciousness could be with mystical strivings. One can see Unnuth reaching for such integration in the way he treats natural imagery in his poetry: sometimes he is very accurate, but always nature is imbued with an emotional content that is not a static backdrop, but rather instrumental in building up the philosophical content. In 'Desire to Live',²⁵¹ Unnuth opens up about the pre-occupation he has with sunbeams throughout his poetry; here, in describing a sunset:

... at the sun's carrying away, the birds' melodious song
gets stuck in the throat

²⁴⁸ 1929, the original title can be transliterated into English as 'Jāgo Phir Ek Bār'.

²⁴⁹ Suryakant Tripathi Nirala, *Nirāla Racnāvali*, (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakāśan, 1983), second stanza, 148.

²⁵⁰ The suggestion has also been put forth (by Francesca Orsini, personal communication, 2011) that perhaps the message is that the poet is blissfully unaware of the world outside poetry, as the material world does not figure here. I would argue that experiencing 'the drinking of honey,' for example, is an action that necessitates the consideration of the material world even if this action is then being taken to express a non-material experience.

²⁵¹ 'Desire to Live.' #48. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikhūs ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 62-63.

the long peace's jagged teeth keep on nibbling
 the night's skeletal ribs have come up
 the sun's remaining redness
 drinks of the sea sip by sip.
 the sun consists of the sunshine and the shade
 there is here nor sunlight nor shade
 nor quivering wings' shadows
 night has draped upon itself the spring's shroud
 the felled trees' silent bird
 is conveying its condolences.

At the same time, this excerpt shows where Unnuth's style diverges from the Chhayavadi. His nature poetry is not meant to be traditionally beautiful or flow mysteriously, but rather it builds up drama by its ugly strangeness in images like 'the nights skeletal ribs'. Perhaps it is Karine Schomer who, in her description of Chhayavadi poetry, isolates the difference:

If the new Chhayavad sensibility entailed a powerful sense of communion with nature, it was never mere nature-worship. Likewise, the exaltation of the individual, the new vision of the love-relationship, and the subjective connection to the cultural past all point to something yet more fundamental... a vision of the individual's participation not only in the world of nature and culture, but in a greater cosmic reality as well. Thus, the individual in Chhayavad was not the isolated individual of existentialism who must create his own meaning in an indifferent, or even hostile universe. On the contrary, Chhayavad poetry is pervaded by a sense of profound harmony between the individual and a permanent reality underlying all things.²⁵²

Unnuth is also not an existentialist, but he is confronted with the hostility of the universe at the present time; the reality he depicts is not permanent, and, therefore, ugly images of an imperfect modern reality are inevitable.

David Rubin calls Chhayavad poetry 'elegant, rarefied, and baffling', and writes that 'its most striking element...is its subjectivity'.²⁵³ Unnuth was able to bring this own subjectivity into his own poems, even when there was no first-person

²⁵² Karine Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma and the Chhayavad Age in Modern Hindi Poetry* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983), 50.

²⁵³ David Rubin, *Of Love and War: A Chhayavad Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2005), vii, xiii.

speaker, by honing in so precisely on the emotions of the third-person labouring subject. However, as the collection goes on, the poems make use of the first-person speaker more and more often. In this poem, 'Bars of Bone', one with a first-person speaker and one without, readers get a real sense of Unnuth's affinity for the goals, if not the methods of Chhayavad poetry:²⁵⁴

Right now, these prison clothes
won't come off of our body
and I, our freedom, have
tied in a rope
I've bound each bucket-handle-rope on a neck
then we two
will grasp our independence by the neck
and will each pull in our direction
it remains an entangled mess
til the rope breaks
to escape from the bonds of independence
we've run again to the jungle
you behind
ran with the rope
and I...
amidst my bars of bone
again
become bound
until that moment when
until independence
will be free
amongst my bars of bones
leave me bound.

This poem is more straightforward than many in the collection in terms of the narrative, and it revisits imagery (bones, ropes, the jungle) which has been important in previous poems. Like the Chhayavad poets, political Independence is important, but the concept of independence is tied up in an experience that is simultaneously very personal. Reading 'Bars of Bones' alongside Prasad's 'Anguish, Stay!', the musicality of 'Bars of Bones' is certainly less evident than Prasad's poem, but a cool

²⁵⁴ 'Bars of Bone.' #50. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 65-66.

elegance shines in both of these poems considering the cost and the meaning of freedom and peace.

Raspunj was a Bihari migrant who eventually chose to return to India (he was an orthodox priest, rather than a labour migrant), but successive poets were born and lived, and were encouraged to write in Hindi, in Mauritius. Poet Balwantsing Nobutsing remembers that he learned English and Hindi in school.²⁵⁵ Because it was in English classes that they read poetry, he first turned to English for his own poetry. Teachers told him that an Indo-Mauritian writing Hindi poetry would never be read. He rebelled and switched to writing in Hindi, hoping that there would be at least a few readers. In the 1930s, lovers of literature were working hard to make Hindi literature institutionally supported and viable: in 1933, for example, there was a well-subscribed poetry competition, and in 1935, the Hindi Pracharini Sabha was founded as a non-religiously-connected literary branch, supporting authors who were neither writing specifically Arya Samajist nor Sanatanist writings. Also in 1935, a training site for Hindi teachers was opened on the island so that teachers were not just those who had gone to India to attain their teaching certificates (the official government school for teachers would not open until after the enfranchisement success, in 1950). The Hindi-in-Mauritius movement was growing and Nobutsing had a chance to make his own opportunities. He eventually won a scholarship to improve his Hindi at Banaras Hindu University and returned to write several volumes, sending the manuscripts to India for publication. He also edited an anthology of Indo-Mauritian Hindi poetry translated into English, and is currently working on an anthology of Hindi poetry from the entire diaspora. His anthologies differ from those Unnuth has compiled in that his circle of poets is more centred around the Banaras Hindu University experience; for these

²⁵⁵ Balwantsing Nobutsing, interview by author, Curepipe, Mauritius, August 2010.

writers whose Hindi itself is multicultural, who have left Mauritius, leaving Hindi in order to put out an anthology in translation makes much more sense than it ever would for Unnuth.

While Nobutsing never achieved a large readership in either Mauritius or in India, Madhukar was able to achieve fame in both. His poems at the height of his popularity in the 1950s and '60s were patriotic in a way that is rarely seen in Mauritian poetry anymore: dually pledged in allegiance to both the Mauritian nation-state and the Indian nation, in both their cultural and political aspects. This was supported by a flowering in the production of plays in Hindi by both Indian and Indo-Mauritian authors. Although this actual parallel allegiance is a thing of the past, it sparked an important trend in Hindi Mauritian poetry: it placed the plight of Indo-Mauritians at the centre of the focus of poetry just as it had been the centre of journalism, drama, short stories, and novels by Indo-Mauritian authors. Romantic poetry, in either sense, was pushed into the background, taken up mostly by those poets writing in English. A parallel progressivism was championed, and has been ever since.

Progressive poetry written in India enlarged the field in some ways by legitimizing the use of stark realism. Sarita Maheshwari posits that the progressive poets were really the first to embrace realism at all. While she may be underestimating the imagery of the Dwivedi period, she has certainly highlighted this important innovation. Just by agreeing to talk about reality progressive poets could demand relevance.²⁵⁶ There was no shortage of emotional content in the subject matter of, for example, farmers, and poets were able to continue to explore ideals and universal emotions while describing the poor and humble. Preceding Unnuth, most

²⁵⁶ Sarita Maheshwari, *Pragativād, Prayogvād, Nayi Kavita* (Delhi: Apratim, 1991), 68.

political Hindi in Mauritius was of the progressive variety. In India, highlighting the plight of the poor and the overworked was an important component of the Independence movement; in Mauritius, such poetry was not so much aimed at attaining another independent identity but at reacting to large-scale freedom from indenture. First-generation Indo-Mauritian Hindi poet Munishwarlall Chintamanee employs its characteristically heavily metrical, heavily nationalist style in his poem, ‘Bapu, Please Come Again’.²⁵⁷ Though its title echoes Nirala’s ‘Arise Once More’ in its vocative appeal, it quickly proceeds in a different direction:

Humanity’s sunken,
Crushed consciousness:
Who here will give it faith?
Who will efface the lack of peace²⁵⁸
And the horrid darkness of fear?
When will be the day when true nonviolence
will emerge from deliverance-buying violence?
Come,
offer libations in front of the new world’s new creation
Bapu, please come again once more.²⁵⁹

In this poem, Chintamanee explains how lost his people have become since Gandhi’s time, and how badly things have gone without him. He uses heavily Sanskritised language, but not for its power to convey complex images, but rather to evoke an official pathos. This formal tenor, not often used in speech in areas in which Hindi is a language learned in infancy, reads more fluidly in the Mauritian Hindi sphere. Ramyead notes that Chintamanee’s simplicity of language contrasts vividly with Unnuth’s ambiguation.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ The original can be transliterated as ‘Bāpu, Āo Phir Ek Bār’.

²⁵⁸ The original word here is ‘ashaanti’, in which the prefix ‘a’ adds negative value to the word ‘shaanti’ (peace). Another way to translate it using the created word ‘im-peace’, which would render the original Hindi instantly recognizable to Hindi speakers.

²⁵⁹ from *Mauritius ki Hindi Kavita*. ed. Abhimanyu Unnuth. (Moka: MGI, 1975), 18-19.

²⁶⁰ L.P. Ramyead, *The Establishment and Cultivation of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius* (Moka, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1985), 188.

Madhukar, the pen name of Brajendra Kumar Bhagat, is the first and so far only Mauritian poet who has enjoyed widespread popularity in India. He wrote poems about everything from patriotism and social evils to nature and love incorporating Mauritian Bhojpuri syntax and diction. L.P. Ramyeed suggests that ‘the poems testify to his ability to shift easily from the mundane to the transcendental in which he often excels’.²⁶¹ While Ramyeed is charitable (Madhukar’s verse is often heavy-handed) his analysis is insightful in that Madhukar’s poems seem simple in technique while reaching their best points at moments of lyrical praise for his own object of devotion: the so-called Indian nationalist culture that shows itself in Mauritius. His poem ‘The Immigrants’ Story of Rama’²⁶² illustrates the influence that Madhukar’s success had in delineating the discourse of Indo-Mauritian immigration as an early primary topic of Indo-Mauritian writing. Clearly the Ramayana story was central to their lives as immigrants, but from Madhukar on it is also central to the concerns of poets’ depiction of the lives of immigrants, more so than folksong or material goods, things that may have indeed had a more enduring importance for the majority of immigrants. The poem begins and ends with the exhortation, ‘Listen, listen, O Indiawallahs, to the immigrants’ story of Rama!’ In four stanzas rhymed in aabbccc fashion, he chronicles the suffering of the immigrants, the sorrow felt at leaving their motherland behind, and the strength through which they saw through their labours and made the fields prosper. Heretofore without any overtly religious content, Madhukar ties the immigrants’ story back to the Rama story with the delicate line ‘Long is their journey, and long is their story.’ The fourth stanza concludes with less nimble lines about mothers passing on their *dharma*, driving the point home perhaps too hard, but that

²⁶¹ L.P. Ramyeed, *The Establishment and Cultivation of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius* (Moka, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1985), 160.

²⁶² Kamal Kishore Goenka, ed. ‘Ramayan Pravasiyon Ki,’ *Madhukar Racnāvali* (1948), 61.

moment of transcendence and grace at the third stanza's conclusion explains the esteem Madhukar enjoys both in Mauritius and in India.

Madhukar's suggestive language and original imagery, his taste for poetic ambiguities, and the indeterminacy of meaning he employs, often result in multilayered planes moving gracefully from one layer to another. Unnuth's poetry is freer than Madhukar's, but he, too, writes poems which shift planes effortlessly: a richness which is sometimes neglected in progressive poetry. In this excerpt from 'Offered Breaths',²⁶³ he writes of the relationship between the protagonist and his breath,²⁶⁴ both banal, as in

...courtesans are busy in gathering
up their bespoilt beauties,
the termites are nibbling away at the assurances;
still remaining of the breaths are
the glottal sounds at the back of the throat
the children keep repeating...

and numenous:

in the space of one breath... life...
elongating the breaths, takes leave
becomes mine,
and I become the breaths' unraveller.

Unlike Madhukar, Unnuth eschews traditional structure to make these shifts (for example, in the Madhukar quote above, 'long is their journey, long is their story,' Madhukar employs parallel structure to strong effect) in favour of unexpected points of departure. It is doubtful that Madhukar would bring up the glottal sounds in the back of the throat even though such bodily description does relate to the spirituality of breathing. Some lines seem transitional, or suggestive, or the multidimensionality of the relationship, like the image of 'the priests [who] make their supplications/ this tree keeps giving fruit.' If one could truly access the experience of the protagonist, of this

²⁶³ 'Offered Breaths.' #32. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 41-42.

²⁶⁴ This relationship is discussed in the Upanishads; it does not come from the Ramayana.

non-dogmatic devotee, it seems, the connection between the offerings and the fruits would be clear. For Unnuth, the journey finishing in this poem is expressed as easily, as lightly, as lines of Mirabai's submission. As she writes,

at the passing moon, O Lord, I lost myself dwelling in you²⁶⁵

so, too, is Unnuth's final ascension—

today when meditating upon the blooming flowers
I came to a heightened state of breath

—both an encapsulation of his meditations on breath throughout the poem, and its reward. When, as in this instance, Unnuth has chosen a lighter pressure (technically, seen in the contrast between the longer and more lingering vowel sounds in the Mirabai excerpt), echoes of the past saint-poets and those who would later love and model themselves upon them are heard. Like Madhukar and his Indian contemporaries, however, Unnuth balanced these instances out with heavy emphasis on modern events.

He not only emphasised modern events in his poetry, but also worked to create such events with his Indo-Mauritian literary contemporaries. Their literary plane was small scene—Bhuckory literally lists and discusses all the people he thinks are reading books in Hindi, and it doesn't take up more than a few pages of his book²⁶⁶—but ambitious and varied. Munishwarlall Chintamane, from Quatre Bornes, was a literary personality in Mauritius in addition to being a poet: he co-founded the Hindi Lekhak Sangh and was involved with the Mahatma Gandhi Institute since its inception. He wrote plays and he supported and took part in the programmes of the Mauritian Broadcasting Corporation, whose Hindi programming was not necessarily literary but certainly supported local literary endeavours, giving plays airtime and

²⁶⁵ Mirabai. *Unbreakable*. [poetseer.org.] 2 February 2010.

²⁶⁶ Somdath Bhuckory, *Hindi in Mauritius*, 2nd ed. (Rose-Hill, Mauritius : Éditions de L'Océan Indien, 1988), 126-129.

putting out film versions of popular stories. Chintamanees poetry is also that of a parallel progressive, patriotic, but overall often rather traditional, even though, as Ramyaad notes, he was the first to use blank verse in the Mauritian Hindi poetry in his *Shantiniketan ke Or* in the early 1960s. As he did with Madhukar, L.P. Ramyeaad chronicled his literary contributions in *The Cultivation and Establishment of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius*. His poetry before and after independence is markedly different, with the latter more satirical or more spiritual.²⁶⁷ Contemporaries of Chintamanees include V. Madhu, G.R. Mishra, R. Kowlessur, and Somdath Bhuckory; together, these six leading poets read their work at the 1966 first Hindi poetry conference. Ramyeaad notes that it was organised not by the Hindi Pracharini Sabha, but by the more elite, more French- and English-focused Indian Cultural Association, indicating the wider level of support that Hindi literature had begun to enjoy. At the same time, Bhuckory wrote about the conference as a display of a movement in progress: ‘Let it be remembered that, at the present time, Hindi literature in Mauritius is still lisping like a child and toddling on its feet.’²⁶⁸

Unnuth, too, was involved with the Hindi literary sphere before he published his poetry. In 1961, Unnuth with these other writers formed the Hindi Lekhak Sangh, though no books mention public activities or events put on. In 1963, the Hindi Parishad is formed to advance creative writing in Hindi rather than the Hindi language per se. Also in 1963, the Sabha organised Hindi Week, with Yashpal Jain as the rare famous visiting author from India. In 1976, only 5 years after its inception, the Mahatma Gandhi Institute (of which Unnuth was a founding member) hosted the second world Hindi conference (following one in Nagpur and preceding one in

²⁶⁷ L.P. Ramyeaad, *The Establishment and Cultivation of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius* (Moka, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1985), 186.

²⁶⁸ Somdath Bhuckory, *Hindi in Mauritius*, 2nd ed. (Rose-Hill, Mauritius: Éditions de L’Océan Indien, 1988), 31.

Delhi). Unnuth was an active propagator of Hindi poetry even prior to his publication, and continued to be so until he stepped down as the editor of *Vasant*. Along with the other stalwarts of the Hindi literati, he saw the Indian Hindi canon come into existence: the national acclaim of Indian authors such as Kabir, Tulsi, Sur, Jaisankar Prasad, Nirala, Pant, and Gupt as champions and influences for the Mauritian Hindi literary sphere.

For Ramyead, all Hindi poetry in Mauritius had two phases, pre-Independence and post-Independence, and his view both sums up the pre-Independence poets and looks ahead to the next section. He noted that the pre-Independence trend of poetry strengthening the idea of Indo-Mauritianness was carried over into post-Independence poetry, but post-Independence poetry took on a more reactionary flavour. When he writes about the post-Independence poets, he sees Hindi poetry as having moved from didacticism to *exposé*. Less successful attempts are described as ‘lumbering, banal, and platitudinous’,²⁶⁹ but at least, at Ramyead also notes, they are nearly ‘unobtainable’. More successful attempts, such as those by Unnuth, seem to Ramyead to recall the Rasputj Kundaliya in its description of the labour situation in plain language that nonetheless shows an ‘extraordinary sensibility’.²⁷⁰ Ramyead noted that while the older generation of poets ‘composed poetry comprehensible to ordinary people, Unnuth produced poetry with a highly symbolic structure in a diction which... was a clear break from the past... he can at will shift from the recondite to statements of the utmost simplicity.’²⁷¹ This didacticism Unnuth complexified, the move away

²⁶⁹ L.P. Ramyead, *The Establishment and Cultivation of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius* (Moka, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1985), 173.

²⁷⁰ L.P. Ramyead, *The Establishment and Cultivation of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius* (Moka, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1985), 177.

²⁷¹ L.P. Ramyead, *The Establishment and Cultivation of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius* (Moka, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1985), 180.

from which will be discussed in a moment, served an important purpose for Indo-Mauritian writers.

Simply developing a linguistically specific voice for the community was not enough; it had to speak out about the problems the Indo-Mauritians faced. Mauritius may have escaped precolonial problems by virtue of the lack of population, but by the end of the colonial era, there were several groups of people laying claim to the island. By the 1960s, Indo-Mauritians had emerged as strong political and cultural force. Allen Rawick referred to it, rather shrewdly, as ‘L’Isle de L’Inde’.²⁷² They had a strong political presence in the form of the Labour Party, and they had a literature all their own in Hindi. In 1961, British and Mauritian leaders decided to move towards independence. Mauritian society had always put an emphasis on race, and communalism, or fear of it. Some Indo-Mauritians may have voted along racial lines, but parties such as the Social Democrats were able to incite a lot of fear in non-Indo-Mauritians that majority rule would constitute a takeover in which minorities would be left greatly underserved. Nonetheless, throughout the 1960s, Labour Party alliances held power. On 12 March 1968, the country gained independence with Seewoosagar Ramgoolam, the head of the party, as Prime Minister. The poet M. Rajeevonn, only sixteen at Independence, when this poem appeared in an Unnuth-edited anthology, evokes best the zeitgeist of pride and apprehension in his ‘Whither Hindi?’ He writes

The day before yesterday
Hindi
Was the language of my culture;
It was my heritage
It was my mother tongue
Yesterday
It became the language for employment;
It became the language for earning one’s living.
Today
It has become the language for vote-catching

²⁷² ‘Mauritius: L’Isle-de-L’Inde.’ *Africa Today*, Volume 12, No. 8, 8-11. p.8.

And tomorrow
What will it become?²⁷³

Those who had championed Hindi for so long had achieved their immediate political goals.

The following years were not rosy, however. Prolific Mauritian writer Anand Malloo writes:

The history of Mauritius since the return of Ramgoolam in 1935 to 1968 had been almost exclusively focused on the battle for political rights and independence. The other social and economic problems including unemployment, poverty [*sic*] had been quietly pushed under the carpet until the attainment of independence...

The new constitution of independent Mauritius guaranteed the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual—private property, freedom of expression, freedom of movement and protection from discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, colour, creed. It underscored all the constitutional powers and functions of the legislature, the judiciary, the executive and of the legal and public service commissions. The shape of Mauritius after independence was to change dramatically. The opponents of independence, mainly the Franco-Mauritians who still monopolised the wealth of the country, were quickly to come to terms with the political reality...

In his turn, Ramgoolam was eager to reconcile with the capital owners if his government was to deliver on the economic front. Besides, it was alien to his personal culture of making friends with all and enemy with none. His priority was to bring together the new and the former rulers of the country in a bid to solve the urgent economic problems, establish social and political stability in order to attract foreign investment and technology.²⁷⁴

These problems were not solved immediately, and many felt that Ramgoolam's policies were making things worse. Those further to the left of the political spectrum joined together, in 1969, to form the Mouvement Militant Mauricien. It was led by Paul Berenger, a charismatic Marxist who attracted many youths to the party, and Dev Virahsawmy was the first candidate it placed in a representative office. While

²⁷³ L.P. Ramyeed, *The Establishment and Cultivation of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius* (Moka, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1985), 198.

²⁷⁴ Anand Malloo, *After Independence*. http://ssr.intnet.mu/after_independence.htm, accessed 15 February 2012.

Ramgoolam's party leaned West during the Cold War, the MMM, as it is known, leaned left. Domestically, it focused on reinvigorating the trade unions. In 1971, in response to MMM-led strikes, Ramgoolam instituted a State of Emergency, arresting MMM leaders and censoring the press. This was not received well, even by many who had previously supported Labour. Ramgoolam repealed the State of Emergency when instability had passed, in 1976, but the damage was done. Strikes continued, the economy faltered, and in the early 1980s unemployment was at 20%. In 1982, the MMM took control of government in coalition with the Parti Socialiste Mauricien. Squabbles within the alliance led eventually to Labour in fact returning to power in 1983. Ramgoolam's son, Navin Ramgoolam, served as Prime Minister. It was in the wake of these events that Unnuth published *The Teeth of the Cactus*. Since then, various iterations of the same parties have held power and Mauritius has done well economically, diversifying its economy largely by attracting foreign investment, but the leading party has consistently been defeated in elections. There are still problems of poverty, corruption, and varying understandings about economic priorities, with implementations of policies never measuring up to people's expectations.

It is almost shocking to note Unnuth's deep level of involvement in Indo-Mauritian society when taking note of the indebtedness seen in his work to a somewhat asocial direction Indian poetry was taking at that time. While the progressive movement offered a framework in which authors could make political and literary statements simultaneously, there were those who felt constrained by this broadened social and political role for poetry. In 1943, Agneya had launched *Tār Saptak*, a collection of seven new Indian Hindi poets who wrote that their school of poetry was no school of poetry at all. They had no message overlaid on their poetry, and no overarching concern other than the concerns of humanity. Ashok Vajpeyi

notes that ‘the beginning of modernity in Hindi poetry may have been with Bharatendru and Maithilisanan Gupt. Be that so, a new phase was started with Tār Saptak... it was surprising how quickly it turned Hindi poetry away from the style associated with progressivism.’²⁷⁵ One of the most successful of the original Tār Saptak poets of progressive orientation, Muktibodh, used a distinctively new style when he published two long poems exploring the ideas of beauty and of humanity in disjointed imagery and lines of uneven length. These were and remain wildly popular in both India and in Mauritius. In one entitled ‘In the Dark’,²⁷⁶ his protagonist is a shadowy figure whose process of self-actualization is described, and in the other, ‘The Face of the Moon is Crooked’,²⁷⁷ exemplifies in its very title his use of images beautiful but too strange in their conceptions of beauty to have been heretofore considered.

Unnuth seems to have been greatly impacted by Muktibodh’s innovations. His response was an adoption of Muktibodh’s disjuncture while shifting the perspective to one of non-romanticism, more abstractly philosophical. Comparing Unnuth’s ‘In the Mist’ to Muktibodh’s ‘In the Dark’, Unnuth’s poem also starts with a strong image of a man,²⁷⁸

mist wrapped around his neck
he is dangling

This sets the rhythm for the entire poem. There is a man. But then it gets complicated:

in the narrow, contracted darkness—
the air has become stifled and anxious—
he has draped the sun
with a black sheet.
He has placed the newborn
upon

²⁷⁵ Ashok Vajpeyi, *Kavitā kā Galp* (New Delhi: Radhakrishna, 1997), 99-100 [my translation].

²⁷⁶ 1964, original can be transliterated as ‘Andhere Men’.

²⁷⁷ 1964, original can be transliterated as ‘Chānd ka Muh Ṭhera Hen’.

²⁷⁸ ‘In the Mist.’ #2. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānti* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 2.

milkweed.
 He is stretching time over top
 that line of destruction—
 in the struggle, time has fallen
 into the saucepan's boiling water.
 The flag was embedded
 on the dunes,
 in the mouth of the thundering tides
 he has lit a lamp.
 Putting on himself
 the wings of a dying bird,
 flying, he rises
 so that after the explosion
 he can look down
 onto the sight of his subjects
 in the mist of his breath!

The questions come quickly upon one another: to begin, why is he hanging in a darkness of his own making? There is a strange, interjected line, a new theme of the newborn, and then the man returns. Here the ambiguity is in the relation of the images, not the grammar or syntax: does this image of time falling relate to the newborn in a way inherent in the poem or is that an empty space that the reader is to fill in? As the denotatively but not as such connotatively disparate images (boiling water, thundering tide, explosion) continue to build up to a pitch, carried forwards by the narrative (mounting, flying, looking), the narrative arc is circular only when the idea of mist (though a different idea of mist than in the first word) returns. This poem is unambiguous in tone and narrative but utterly ambiguous in meaning, due to the laces untied around the images. There is potential for many interpretations. The man in 'In the Dark'²⁷⁹ is more clearly the center of each image, more distinctly defined: 'that mysterious man,' Rosenstein translates, 'is my expression which I haven't found yet.' This tightness reminds us that Unnuth's man is described from an invisible vantage point, the goal of looking undescribed until it happens. The ambiguity in Muktibodh's poem lies in the ornamentation: it is a long and dense poem quite easily

²⁷⁹ Lucy Rosenstein, *New Poetry in Hindi* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 30-35.

summed up in the lines above, but of course that summation does its richness very little justice. Darkness is not just a metaphor for ignorance here, but it situates the poem in an atmosphere created by the variety of meanings of the word: it creates mystery, hinders perception, makes uneasy with its strangeness, acts as a foil to brilliance, hides unmeasurable expanse, implies boundaries like those of walls or of the human body around a soul, and also implies fecundity (the dark pipal tree). Whether the reader is expected to choose from amongst the options is unspoken: the tones are similar but not the same. Unnuth's poem, by contrast, treats the sketching of man in an atmosphere awaiting self-understanding in a way that calls attention to image, by virtue of its more extreme ambiguity than other elements, rather than tone. Unnuth's tone is straight-forward to the point of being neutral, and non-atmospheric. Images build everything, images that are visible to those who have access to the information that ties together boiled time and flagged dunes: not a societal drop-out but a keen observer. Unnuth's work parallels that of Muktibodh's, but these differences make clear that Unnuth was not trying to make his mark by being the 'Mauritian Muktibodh'. Instead, his work adds to the trajectory of North Indian Hindi poetry by responding to this innovation, while using the innovation for a different purpose, a call for a persistence or return to past values, in Mauritius.

In India, others were also responding to Muktibodh while imbuing their work with a progressive sensibility. In 1979, the journal of literary criticism *Ālocanā* ran a series of works honouring Premchand. Then-editor Namwar Sinha reminded readers in the opening editorial that the centenary celebrations for Premchand could be a time to revisit agricultural narratives. Khagendra Thakur writes in a subsequent article, 'Premchand and the Progressive Movement', about the renaissance of the progressivism at the time of print. He places the first remembered renaissance of this

perennially blossoming movement in the bhakti era—that are ‘progressive’ periods in every age—, and writes that social consciousness has risen again, ‘expanding writers’ imaginations,’ just as it had in its bhakti form.²⁸⁰ The Progressive poets in the pre-Independence days were inspired by freedom fighters like Gandhi. The latest blossoming of what can be called ‘the neo-progressives’²⁸¹ owed much perhaps to the passionate responses to the *Tār Saptak*. As Gagan Gill, Kunwar Narayan, Srikant Verma, and Kedarnath Singh write in *World Literature Today*, political poetry, especially of the progressive variety, ‘has dominated Hindi since the middle of the nineteenth century, it became especially central to the Hindi literary world after about 1970, when writers all along the political spectrum began to reevaluate the Indian postcolonial condition in poetic terms.’²⁸² Unnuth’s poetry can be compared to the poetry of Kedarnath Singh. Of course, the former is not translated and less widely celebrated. However, Singh and Unnuth’s work shares a tension between the rural and the urban that is central to questions of postcolonial national planning and identity. Singh, born in 1934 in Chakia, Utter Pradesh, was associated with the Progressive Writers’ Movement and tied to the Bhojpuri belt. His poetry is more straightforward in its style, often with a first-person protagonist, but never simple or didactic. In his poem ‘Mother Tongue’,²⁸³ he writes

Like ants returning
 To their holes
 Woodpecker
 To its tree
 In the reddening sky
 Wings spread
 Planes return

²⁸⁰ *Ālocanā*. Rajkamal Prakashan. 1979.

²⁸¹ I have created this term to refer to progressives writing and reacting to current events from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, rather than in the decades leading up to Indian Independence and in the 1950s.

²⁸² Gagan Gill, Kunwar Narayan, and Kedarnath Singh, ‘Four Hindi Poets,’ *World Literature Today*, Vol. 68, No. 2: 326.

²⁸³ Singh, Kedarnath, *Cranes in the Drought*, trans. by Vijay Munshi (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), 77.

One after another
To the airport

O my language,
I come to you
When keeping quiet
My tongue stiffens
My soul,
In torment.

His poem describes a personal journey, a personal relationship to language. Unnuth's poem 'Language' describes a similar relationship.²⁸⁴

the shelter of my fist is my own
in the hollow space within is lost
my face is my own
this ally is my own—
from wherever children's swarthy bodies
are touched by the sun's
toil-drops'
from my forehead

the eager, covetous air is also mine
even after blowing out
the lamp in my home, its mine
the dryness of my eyes is my own
the well of my stomach is my own
my rented breaths too are mine
what i eat, what i enjoy, is mine

but there is just language
which is not mine.

Both poems are straightforward in their language while conveying a range of possible understandings. Both Singh and Unnuth describe the suffering they endure because of their relationship to Hindi (Singh's tormented soul, Unnuth's separation from it) but in the end both seem to be describing relationships which have their empowering alternatives latent within the present. For Singh, language is a natural refuge. For Unnuth, it is a refuge because all else that he owns has been taken from him.

²⁸⁴ 'Language.' #81. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikhūs ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 103.

Speaking, for both, is an instrument, one they can use to keep their home in order, or to see it progress.

Unnuth's Mauritian peers also wrote on this question of how to progress. They often take established sides: Bhuckory, in 'From School to Achievement', writes about the superiority of choosing to experience humanity over experiencing religious tranquillity.²⁸⁵ Sibbarat, in a poem entitled 'Mauritianism' rues 'those foreigners who protect the heart of Mauritius with their coin/ foreigners to Mauritius who take Mauritianism to be becoming its second round of rulers.'²⁸⁶ Unnuth would share the sentiment, surely, but Sibbarat's focus here is not on internally-driven progress the way Unnuth or even Bhuckory's is. The externality echoes Chintamanee and even the older wave of Indian progressives (rather than the neo-progressives). Bhuckory speaks of Unnuth's role in founding the Mahatma Gandhi Institute as something of a crowning of his role as Mauritius' rising star. The reason for Unnuth's stardom, I believe, is that he wrote something new. The major departure in his poetry from previous Indo-Mauritian writers is a head-on grappling with metaphysical questions usually left to traditional religious leaders, positioned as necessary complements or forerunners to social justice-minded considerations.

Unnuth's entire corpus and the works of other Mauritian writers in Hindi, and institutions of their making, such as the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, made Hindi not just a language of ritual, but a multifaceted language parallel on the island to French, English, and Kreol. Unnuth's linguistic choice can be both aggravating this cleavage and reacting to the growth of Hindi-language educational growth and its insistence on recognition of linguistic diversity. In either case, its internal purpose in *The Teeth of*

²⁸⁵ 'School se Sādhanā Tak,' *Mauritius ki Nai Hindī Kavi*, ed. Abhimanyu Unnuth (Moka: Mahatma Gandhi Institute), 9.

²⁸⁶ Suryadeb Sibbarat, *Ek Phool... Gunne Ka* (New Delhi: Star Publications 2004).

the Cactus would be the same: the fusion of Hindi with a Hindu identity allows Unnuth both to access his past in some constructive way within a local setting and in a global setting. Eisenlohr writes that ‘cultivating Hindi does so by locating the meaning of Hindu-ness in Mauritius in an ancestral time, combining ideas about language with ritual performance evoking an ancestral homeland in India’.²⁸⁷ *The Teeth of the Cactus* makes ample use of this ancestral time, but also updates a Hindi/Hindu identity. It layers temporal spaces like a rich cake in which the bitter anger’s beauty lies in its seeming necessity. This is exemplified by the underlying unity of the disparate images of one of the collection’s most challenging poems, ‘I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven’: there is blistering, grinding, and silence, and also the unknowability of the beginning or end of a story or an experience; when Yama does not open the door to heaven, the narrator vows to bind the begging bowled renunciant to himself in life forever. Progress for Unnuth is clearly not simply a matter of material uplift; it includes a re-appropriation of inherited thought systems, to face the present with this heritage and then look to the future.

Unnuth fits in well with the neo-progressive Hindi poets of his era; the question is whether the neo-progressivism of the 1970s and 1980s differs from the original post-Independence progressivism, and if so, whether Unnuth’s focus on his own nation’s recent postcoloniality would have him better designated a progressive poet than a neo-progressive. The answer is in his self-contradictory tone: like the most engaged Hindi poets of this time, Unnuth left behind sentimentality but also refused to give in to the despairing alienation of the modern world. Like political Chhayavadis, Unnuth and his peers used their own experience to allow readers to see both the larger

²⁸⁷ Patrick Eisenlohr, *Little India: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 238-9.

point and the connection between the personal and collective worlds. Unlike the Chhayavadis these experiences were not those that they felt could symbolise experiences of injustice, but rather were non-abstract descriptions of their experiences of suffering injustice: necessarily personal in their symbolism, largely local. When the modus operandi changed, scenery took on different meanings; Unnuth was not alone in his expression of the natural world as an integral part of his social message. Poets wrote about the disappointment of continuing communalism and economic disappointment in post-Independence India, and Unnuth used these same answers to write about post-Independence Mauritius. Unnuth is stylistically a post-Tār Saptak poet reacting to a more recently postcolonial world, reacting to changing times in both India and Mauritius, speaking to both and linking them in his imagined readership; the best appellation is ‘parallel progressive’. Monolingual, but not monotone, Unnuth’s poetry is a hybrid work that says, yes: there is an English-less postcolonial literature, a global literature.

Giving Unnuth the name ‘parallel progressive’ provides insight into Unnuth’s imagined audience, for whom progress in a new Mauritius is something previously conceived as material: a concept to be enriched by his poetry. For postcolonial readers who are not part of his imagined audience, that the colonial, rather than the precolonial, heritage is the source of newfound strength enriches our idea of Mauritius and of progress. The island’s demographic history (a recently post-colonial doubly colonised nation without a precolonial population) provides backdrop to his poems, but contextualizing the work shows how Unnuth’s work is not *only* relevant to those interested in Hindi literature, but also to any reader interested in undertheorised postcolonial poetry. Highlighting the parallels between Unnuth and Muktibodh opens

up ways of readings that escape national constraints and is truly a reading of World Literature.

IV. *A Parallel Progressive*

The reader of *The Teeth of the Cactus* slowly builds up a cast of characters and a variety of set pieces. Most of the elements, such as the labourer and the authority figure, the sun and the night, sweat and blood, the city and the jungle, are universal, and many of his short poems rest on a powerful, easily to visualise, image. Their meaning grows richer as the poems build upon one another. ‘The Pain of the Sun’, for example, appears early in the collection. Its image of the thorn piercing the sulking sun is beautiful, but perhaps yet too fragile for analysis:²⁸⁸

When one restless sunbeam, of
the sun of a languid afternoon,
unlawfully endeavors to caress
the pink roses of my courtyard,
one rebellious thorn tears it such that
the sun, all night long, whimpers and grieves.

Reading further on into the collection, the sun and the thorn take on meanings more specific to Unnuth and to Mauritius. The sun, the changeable figure upon whose setting and rising the labourer’s livelihood and suffering depend, becomes a figure almost shadowy in its character: it is all the labourer has to trust, in some instances, but it cannot be trusted to act on behalf of the labourer: it stays at a party, hobnobbing with the rich, hides in the fridge, melts and leaks, and in so many poems, aims its rays directly on the forehead and back of the wilting labourer. The labourer is uneasy: in ‘The Sun is Right Now Far Away’, Unnuth writes:²⁸⁹

Taking fright in solitude,
I set about groping for my shadow
then I realise that

²⁸⁸ ‘Pain of the Sun.’ #5. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 5.

²⁸⁹ ‘The Sun is Right Now Far Away.’ #60. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 78-79.

the sun must be playing about in that courtyard
safe from the police's glances

Yet readers understand that the labourer is somehow aligned with the initial, vindictive thorn. Against the sunbeams are a set of sharp objects, allied with the labourer and with the reader's sympathies: thorns, cactus spikes (teeth), flags, steel rods. These duelling images are just one set in a collection full of the battles of colonial and postcolonial Mauritius.

Unnuth's poetry calls upon its readers to react to Mauritius-specific imagery and Indo-Mauritian history. It seems, then, that Unnuth imagines his readership to be Indo-Mauritian, clued in as they all may be to events happening in South Africa, in India, and around the world. His decision to write in Hindi signals that he is also engaged in the de facto India-centered Hindi poetic plane. He engages with both at once, giving readers a glimpse of his multifaceted understanding of progress. The Hindi language has a historically, politically, and symbolically important role in Mauritius; what started as a ritual language became an instrument of sociopolitical unification and progress for the Indo-Mauritian community. Unnuth uses Hindi to reach out to this community, united for the causes of religion, education, suffrage, and general progress. The low level of competence in Hindi in Mauritius means that the actual readership of Unnuth's poetry in Mauritius is limited,²⁹⁰ so the community to which Unnuth writes is one which is still attached to this idealised view. His alienation from Mauritian reality is a theme previously touched upon and covered in more depth in the next chapter; for now note that members do exist, but as an identity this community is also partially imagined and its construction is based on a history of the development of Indo-Mauritian self-awareness. Unnuth is not the first to use

²⁹⁰ Modern competence in Hindi is even lower than it was in the early 1980s, and since then, Kreol literature has emerged as a strong alternative.

Hindi for literary purposes in Mauritius; with his choice, he joins a decades-long debate over what should constitute an Indo-Mauritian identity. Together, these writers' concerns and their language do not mimic, but rather parallel, those of writers in the Indian Hindi sphere.

Unnuth's historical motivations can be considered in light of the historical material on Mauritius so long as this conception of Mauritius includes the extent and limitations of its interactions with the Hindi literary sphere in India. Just as in India, in Mauritius, the development of the Independence movement went hand in hand with the development of a Hindi-reading public. However small and difficult to research, a Hindi-reading intelligentsia did form. It developed concurrently with the Hindi-reading intelligentsia in India, but beyond the centrality of Gandhian and Arya Samajist concerns in both histories,²⁹¹ Indo-Mauritians and Indians were only interested in, rather than active in, one another's cultural lives, and more often than not, the interest flowed and involvement was unidirectional out of Mauritius. Unnuth's literary heritage includes both spheres with their different vantage points on the Indian Ocean, and as the developments of importance for his poetry on both sides are traced, his poetry will be juxtaposed with that of both Indo-Mauritian and Indian progressives. He fits in, not as a token Mauritian describing the exotic to Indians, but as a writer using his isolation to attempt poetry that affords both personal and societal progression; this Muktibodhian introspection distinguishes him amongst other progressive Indo-Mauritians poets, as well. In the decades since his poetry has been published, Unnuth has traveled to India numerous times to attend conferences and receive awards, but he has never seriously considered moving there, unless, he told me in the summer of 2010, he found himself able to die the holiest of Hindu deaths on

²⁹¹ For an in-depth discussion, see chapter 5 of Peter Gaeffke, *Hindi Literature in the 20th Century* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1978).

the Ganges in Kashi. Unlike those travellers who return to their home to die, he returns home to Triolet, his town-once-a-village in Northern Mauritius, to live.

Sisir Kumar Das, in his *History of Indian Literature: 1911-1956*, writes that, even in India,

the impact of the Independence upon the writers was not uniform: it varied according their positions in the new scheme of things and the nature of the experience they had during the colonial days. Navakanta Barua writes, 'National liberty gave the artists a sense of respite to think of other values of life. There had a been a romance in the national struggle and in the search for an Indianness—but when independence became a reality it made us feel that we are men and not merely Indians.' 'The Independence of India has not brought,' writes Alokranjan Dasgupta, 'any bellicose patriotism in our writings. On the other hand, a world-vision of literature has been cultivated by the leading writers of the day.' In fact, the first ten year after the Independence and partition of the country should be considered as transitional years.²⁹²

In his complex paragraph, Das highlights ways in which Indian literary reactions to Independence were parallel to those of Mauritius, ways in which the experiences were different, and gets us to an understanding of the significance of these. Indian writers, before Independence, were dealing with colonialism. Their experiences differed depending on class, religion, gender, location and personality, but they were being classed together as Indian subjects. The bloodshed of partition makes too clear how fragile this unified front was, but its crumbling yielded at least abstract literary benefits (leaving the political aside): no longer caged in, they were now free, and therefore, they were men above all else. Indo-Mauritians were dominated by the same colonial power, as well as by the suspicion that underneath their British mannerisms, they were Indian loyalists. They, however had built up an identity for themselves, a new Indo-Mauritianness which was not an Indian loyalism, but nationalism, with themselves as the centre of the nation. Suspicions be what they may, the Indo-

²⁹² Sisir Kumar Das, *History of Indian Literature: 1911-1956: Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2006), 394.

Mauritians poets, if they could shed the colonial yoke, could see themselves not as British, not as Indian, not as the brown minority of a multiethnic nation, but as men. And yet during the heady days following Mauritian Independence, Unnuth's poetry made it clear that he still felt very much imprisoned by hunger, by a feeling of despair and distrust for his own countrymen.

In his 'Optimistic Journey', Unnuth the Parallel Progressive is in full swing.²⁹³ Though the title's hopefulness perfectly describes the idea of progress, the hopes of progressivism, the poem's two first lines speak otherwise, saying 'this is a strange journey/ a journey which is history's instrument'. Here, unlike anywhere else, he describes the addressee as 'my brother': a brother who thinks they are making progress together, but really 'neither I am going, nor are you going... underneath our feet/ the lane is going, leaving their people all hungry, all-half naked.' But the poem does not end there; hurdles are only there to be crossed. If our feet cannot take us, and our hands cannot belabour to solve our problems through sheer hard work, they can still serve us... 'now on this smooth-fingered hand, splayed flat,' he writes, 'if anyone is a historian/ then write history.' Things are not always progressing as they should, hands cannot always labour as they should, but they can be imprinted with words as they were with suffering. Like India, Mauritius would not find its way through violence (though it did occur) but through the understanding and the displaying of the truth, of the truth that history can hold. To this end, a national progressivism which had seen success in India was a natural model. The nationalism that had been aspirational until the mid-1960s would afterwards have to become a public obsession. Nationalism and communalism it was that would gain parliamentary seats, and poets

²⁹³ 'Optimistic Journey.' #64. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 83.

could either join in or not. Would the linguistic nationalism that had been both so successful in bringing about Independence and such a failure in preventing the Partition unite in Mauritius, or would it only divide? As Indo-Mauritians began to understand what would be required of them after Independence—that is, to develop a perspective—Unnuth clung to the broad world-vision he saw being cultivated on the subcontinent by Muktibodh and other writers.

It was a good thing that Indians had united around the prospect of enfranchisement in the forties: twenty years later, Mauritius did not hurl itself into Independence but voted itself there. In 1965, British and Mauritian leaders decided that Mauritius would declare its independence as soon as a pro-Independence party was elected to leadership. This took three years to arrive, until the Social Democratic Party was toppled by a coalition of the Mauritian Labour Party, the Independent Forward Bloc, and the Muslim Committee of Action. The Social Democratic Party, comprised mostly of Franco-Mauritians and Creoles, favoured a less than total independence, whereas the coalition, comprised by mostly Indo-Mauritians, favoured the independence that was eventually attained. Independence won on these terms saw a flare-up of communal violence, the likes of which Mauritius is proud to have avoided as a chronic problem. Indo-Mauritians, always treated as a distinct segment of the population, had now to demonstrate their concern for the well-being of Mauritius as a new nation, but were plagued by suspicions that they cared only about themselves; if not only themselves, then perhaps India. The Indo-Mauritians had always been connected to the subcontinent by migration of people, goods, and ideas; it was poets such as Unnuth who explored and established the fictions and realities of this relationship between India and Indo-Mauritians. As seen in the previous chapter, Indo-Mauritians did not consider themselves to be writing from the diasporan

position. Nonetheless, they did not completely ignore the homeland, but rather, they were engaged with the larger Hindi literary sphere in which Indian writers dominated. They took in the lessons of the Progressive Writers Movement, but also of the trends afterwards. Unnuth, so indebted to Muktibodh, championed his Indian heritage as a part of his Mauritian identity, but as will be discussed in the next chapter, was not able to convince his readership that his understanding of this Mauritian identity was worth taking on.

In 'Letter to Ellen Conroy Kennedy', Maunick writes

There is the weight of the word
The bilingual semantic
The sea opened my mouth
On a certain morning immemorial
And here I stand
To shred my birth certificate
And laugh the negro laugh
Over name and passport...²⁹⁴

The sea opened his mouth, and although the language that emerged was French, the stanza makes clear that the language used on his birth certificate, his passport: none of these are as loud or as clear as 'the negro laugh', a laugh that connected him to a community of writers and readers interested in forging a new path for black writers. Muktibodh chose Hindi over his mother tongue, Marathi, so that his strange new poetry would have a set of readers willing to see where his innovations could lead them. Unnuth, too, chose a language of expression all his own. His work echoed the concerns and styles of Maunick and Muktibodh, aiming for thoughtfulness and progress. *The Teeth of the Cactus* questioned the actions of the society around it, calling for change in such descriptions as

²⁹⁴ in Ellen Conroy Kennedy, 'Indian Ocean Poets in French,' *The Negritude Poets*, trans. by Teo Savory (New York: Viking, 1975), 272.

...this is your country's public
your squeezed-out public
are being juiced like mangos...²⁹⁵

Leaving behind the power structures of the past, intertwined as they were in Mauritius with the colonial languages of English and French, Unnuth looked at his society from both inside and out without having to leave it physically behind. In the next chapter, I will look at the ways in which Unnuth looked beyond Africa and Asia, trying and ultimately failing to bring his local literary sphere, as he imagined it to be, into a global literary conversation.

²⁹⁵ 'Questions Risen Up.' #71. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikhus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 92.

Chapter 5: Re-membering the Worlds of Failed Poetry

I. *Education and Literary Legacy*

Unnuth's Mauritian heritage and his locatedness in Indo-Mauritian culture have been central to our understanding, as Western-educated but non-Mauritian academics, of *The Teeth of the Cactus* thus far. In this chapter, I will compare my reading to the Mauritian reception of *The Teeth of the Cactus* in more depth. While I read Unnuth as a world writer, setting him in conversation here with Paz and Yevtuschenko, in the Mauritian literary sphere, through the educational system, Unnuth has been presented as an Indian diaspora writer. However, legacies are always in flux: a recent decision by the Mauritian government to fund the translation of Unnuth into English marks yet another stage of Unnuth's reception in and outside of literary Mauritius. Who, then, is Unnuth: the Englishised voice of a nation, a diasporic link to the Indian subcontinent, or a writer of World Literature? None of these are neutral descriptions; each carries with it a relationship with a certain readership: the Mauritian literary sphere, the Mauritian government, or Western academic readers. In this chapter, I argue that although each description presents Unnuth as they want him to be, only the last also portrays Unnuth as he intended to be read: as a poet in dialogue with local conditions, creating in his poetry new worlds to destabilise the status quo, and very much in dialogue with other poets with the same goals from across the globe. Although his work failed to change his local world as he hoped, *The Teeth of the Cactus* is not merely nationally significant, but helps us to further articulate what can be meant by World Literature: that literature from around the world which seeks to engage with and redefine the world in its lines.

A generation after his poetry was published, in August 2010, Unnuth sat in front of a shelf of his works, influential in the wrong ways, and pronounced, 'My

poetry was a failure.²⁹⁶ Why did so few read his poetry, and why did those few misinterpret him? The answer is not only that he wrote in Hindi, but that the Hindi literary sphere in which he wrote was changing into a more streamlined, institutional place: one which was being primed to hold its own in a world globalizing in a way that both economically and culturally reinforced the centre-periphery dynamic of colonialism. A sustained examination of the educational system in Mauritius will illustrate the detrimental effect of institutionalization on Unnuth's hopes for Hindi as a pan-Indo-Mauritian literary language.

At the very basic level, outside of the specific message of his poetry, Unnuth's poetry failed in that it, along with other Indo-Mauritian Hindi writing in the 1970s and 1980s, did not encourage more Mauritians to learn to read Hindi. As discussed in the third chapter, Unnuth's turn to Hindi was intentional, influenced by 'Hindi missionaries' such as Basdeo Bissoondoyal; in *The Teeth of the Cactus*, the issue of language is treated directly in poems such as 'Word in Context', 'That Waxen Speech' and 'Language'.²⁹⁷ However, these poems were not able to make Hindi a truly pervasive literary language in Mauritius. As fewer people adopted or sustained the use of Hindi in their daily lives or even just their introspective or creative moments, those for whom Hindi was simply a way out, a channel to India, began to sound more persuasive. Unnuth, like his predecessors, cultivated Hindi as a language for the Indo-Mauritian community, but since the 1980s Hindi has lost its position on the language ladder in multilingual Mauritius. Although Edouard Maunick wished to learn it, he was in the minority, and as a non-Indo-Mauritian, it would have been

²⁹⁶ Abhimanyu Unnuth, interview by author, Triolet, Mauritius, August 2010.

²⁹⁷ 'Word in Context.' #6. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 6. 'That Waxen Speech.' #15. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 18.

'Language.' #81. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 103.

unlikely that he would have had the opportunity. Unnuth himself learned Hindi at home, and some older writers, like Nobutsing, remembered learning and teaching Hindi at the village *baïtkas*, but as Indo-Mauritians began to have more agency with regards to the formal institutions of education in Mauritius in the post-Independence era, Hindi teaching became the provenance of schools, exams, and diplomas.

The ability to attain a recognised qualification in Hindi while in Mauritius seems to make sense as a way to encourage the writing and reading of Mauritian literature in Hindi. Instead, it placed Hindi in competition with French and English, redefining Hindi's use in terms of the use of French and English: as pathways to prosperity rather than identity. By the 1980s, Mauritius was a crowded nation: it was the third most densely populated country, following only Hong Kong and Bangladesh. At the same time, it was socially stratified to a degree that made it resemble the days of *Paul and Virginie*. Indo-Mauritians had made great strides in political inclusion, but had not cracked the economic dominance of the plantocracy. Many Indo-Mauritians saw education as a way to move higher up (not necessarily to break the ladder itself), and while the Hindi sphere is the focus of this larger work, it should be noted that many continued to see mastery of English and attainment of traditionally English signs of success as the way forward. The language issue in schools has been, and remains, contentious. The largest seminar on the issue was held in 1982, with seventy-one papers presented, offering views supporting education in English, French, Hindi and other vernaculars, and Kreol.²⁹⁸ Although the conference included speeches from those arguing for Kreol education and other alternatives, English continues to be the medium of education, Kreol continues to be the spoken vernacular amongst students during the school day, and the debate goes on.

²⁹⁸ *Proceedings: National Seminar on the Language Issue in Mauritius, 4-11 October, 1982*. University of Mauritius. ed. By H. Unmole, 1984.

The limited Hindi taught at school may be culturally significant, but Indo-Mauritians do not see the language as a means for their students to attain a higher standard of living because Hindi is not the medium of university education. Degrees and certifications are perhaps disproportionately important to Mauritians. The stereotype prevails that they are only important to Indo- or Chinese Mauritians and not to Creoles.²⁹⁹ As the stereotype reflects, they are important as symbols of ethnic cultural values: just as they had been seen since the end of slavery, Creoles are perceived as overwhelmingly desirous of a life outside of the rat race which might include fewer creature comforts or global interactions; just as they had been seen from their introduction as indentured servants, Indo-Mauritians are perceived as overwhelmingly in favour of chasing a higher standard of living with each generation which might include less leisure time. In any case, the quest for degrees is important beyond the realm of symbolism to all who do or do not get them, for they tend to decide what lifestyle one will have.³⁰⁰ Hindi literature, like literature degrees the world over, is not a safe choice, and because Hindi is not a language that traditionally lends itself to large scholarships to study in England or France, and thus it takes on the sense of an extracurricular activity rather than an integral subject in the curriculum. However, there is no time for extracurriculars in a typical Indo-Mauritian family's life, as the after-school hours become an extension of school life where as

²⁹⁹ Roselie Lum, *Culture Shock Mauritius* (London: Bravo Limited, 1997).

Ruma Bheeroo, interview by author, Floreal, Mauritius, August 2010.

³⁰⁰ In the lead-up to Independence, schools were synchronised with the Cambridge system of examinations. While previously, students studied privately and were then qualified to attempt any BA exam (itself taken via correspondence), schools would now teach and offer the GCSEs and A-level exams. The University of Mauritius, founded in 1965, offered bachelors degrees, and eventually postgraduate degrees. Even with wealthier Mauritians opting for universities in France or the UK, and many students continuing to pursue higher education through correspondence, the University of Mauritius became and continues to have larger enrolments than envisioned. The campus simply deals with overcrowding up to a point, but access to higher education remains competitive.

much time as possible is spent studying the subjects necessary to compete for a place at a university.³⁰¹ Most Indo-Mauritians simply have no energy left for Hindi.³⁰²

Who is left to read Unnuth in the next generation, then? The Mahatma Gandhi Institute does have a class of approximately thirty students a year coming to read Hindi at BA level and houses several scholars. I must focus on these local readings of Unnuth, then, before Unnuth disappears altogether from local readership; in the next two sections, I argue that in fact the government's translation plans and these local readings are adding to Unnuth's diminishing importance as they misread his poetry. First, positioning the translated Unnuth as a the voice of a nation ignores the tempestuous relationship he has with his nation. Such a positioning, however, is only

³⁰¹ A large cottage industry of tutors exists in response to the level of competition, so pervasive that fees for these programs are simply part of the understood costs of raising an aspirational middle-class Indo-Mauritian child, no matter if the child is slow or not. Because tutors are often teachers working to supplement their income, it is widely surmised that some of the most valuable material for passing exams is held back for the tutorial sessions. The tutoring system did not spring up overnight, and by now is firmly entrenched. Burton Benedict describes it thus:

It extends from 6th standard primary to the B.A. level. Fees vary with the level... Tutoring is well established in Mauritius. The Royal Commissioners of 1909 complained that masters of the Royal College were doing special coaching out of school and receiving payments for it. Today parents, pupils, and teachers alike believe that few students can hope to get beyond the very lowest levels of schooling without tutoring. They express none of the shock of the Royal Commissioners, but accept tutoring as a legitimate part of education. This attitude, of course, fosters the system and very probably reduces the quality of teaching in the schools and the attention that the students pay to classroom work. Teachers themselves do much of the tutoring, but the demand is so great that almost anyone with some secondary education can find students to teach.

Burton Benedict, *Education Without Opportunity* (London: Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, 1958), 322.

See appendix B for a 2010 case study of one Indo-Mauritian family.

³⁰² Even outside of school, those who are choosing to carry on learning a language are choosing English over Hindi. The Mauritian College of the Air provides an alternative to a traditional university education. Tony Dodds writes in *Mauritian College of the Air* that 'this institution, although small, has to date stuck resolutely to a policy of providing those courses most needed for national development rather than the usual range of respectable Oxbridge-style irrelevant university courses on which so many universities in the Third World have squandered resources' (Tony Dodds, *Mauritian College of the Air* (Cambridge: International Extension College, 1975). Founded in 1971, this non-profit college provides extension courses in subjects such as Agriculture and Carpentry, but one of its most popular programmes has been its English for the School Certificate programme. It includes classroom time, but also TV and radio hours. It has been so successful that its curriculum has been taken up by many schools themselves. Certainly many people are studying for the School Certificate because that qualification, rather than the knowledge of English, is required for the job they desire, but in this way they also join Anglophone Mauritius.

based on local readings of his work which focus on the use of local imagery and progressive politics to position Unnuth as a ‘Mauritian Premchand’ who can show the Indian subcontinent that Indo-Mauritians, too, have a writer who is intensely focused on the national situation and its progress.³⁰³ As a result, I argue that my new reading of *The Teeth of the Cactus* in this chapter’s fourth section, focused on his international influences, re-members (in Toni Morrison’s sense of the term) Unnuth’s second collection of poetry. I show next that the connections the collection has to the sense of the term ‘world’ are similar to those put forward as alternatives to postcolonial and comparative literature, and as frameworks for World Literature: a site of transnational understanding and communication which augments, rather than replaces or silences, a society’s imaginary of its own local sphere. Finally, I use my understanding of Mauritian poetry as gleaned from this reading of Unnuth and his legacy to reflect on the future of heteroglossia in Mauritius and the future of Unnuth’s readership in and outside of literary Mauritius.

II. *Reading Unnuth Inside Literary Mauritius*

In the context of Hindi’s declining readership in Mauritius, it is easy to see why, after more than twenty years of refusing to consider the idea, Unnuth has now given his blessing to, and is actively involved in, the translation of his works into (British, rather than Indian) English.³⁰⁴ An English *Teeth of the Cactus* can reach Britain much more easily, certainly, and there is the chance that his works could create a worldwide splash—but also, without an English version his works may stop

³⁰³ I have already spoken, in chapter 4, of Unnuth’s similarity to Muktibodh rather than Premchand.

³⁰⁴ I am also involved in the translation though, clearly, I have misgivings about the direction the project is taking in its representation of Unnuth.

being read in Mauritius itself within a few generations.³⁰⁵ For the Mauritian government to give any funding to the project indicates that they, too, see the usefulness of maintaining a specifically Mauritian literature, but the fact that they have chosen to fund only one Hindi writer sets Unnuth up as the canonical choice for the voice of Mauritius in the Commonwealth. Some of his novels, such as *Lal Pasina* (the translation of which is due to be released first) may tell an appropriately national story, following up on the slavery narrative in Bernardin de St. Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* with its narrative of indenture, but his questioning, prickly poetry fights its own canonization.

Having just translated *The Teeth of the Cactus*, reading broadly and closely at once, I have a basis on which to judge whether Unnuth's voice can or should be the voice of a nation. Unnuth's poetry does engage itself with the broad outlines of the Mauritian nation, and makes good use of the island's natural imagery. However, even a simple following through of one image (Mauritius at night) shows that Unnuth's poetry may be too personal and too bleak to work well with the global imaginary of the Mauritian Miracle or the Rainbow Island. Nighttime in 'New Moon' does discuss indenture, whereas 'The Night, too, is Alone' does not. 'New Moon' describes the horrors the day sees in Mauritius: conspiracies, false messiahs, and above all the sweat that accompanies hard labour in the fields.³⁰⁶

the night has never seen the day
but the day has seen
countless black conspiracies

³⁰⁵ French would be an acceptable substitute for English, as French literature is still widely read in Mauritius, though it is being supplanted by Kreol as the language in which to write. One of Unnuth's works, the novel *Lal Pasina*, has been translated into French, with a preface by J.M.G. Le Clezio, a French writer with Mauritian heritage who won the Nobel Prize; it had limited success, giving rise to one more translation [of a set of short stories] and there are no additional translation projects on the horizon.

³⁰⁶ 'New Moon.' #88. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 110.

from the messiahs of darkness
when the sun with its countless breaks
goes on pecking
from the foreheads of the drudging labourers
emerging drops of sweat
in the labourers' eyes
a descending canopy of darkness
day becomes evident, with their very own eyes
the night has never seen the day
but the day has seen the moonless night

The poem plays on our expectations of the night, and of the unknown, as frightening and sinister. Day and night are contrasted, and the night comes out altogether better: less horrifying because its horrors remain a mystery. In some ways, it can be read as a hopeful poem, but a bleak one. It does not hint at any feeling of triumph at an overcoming of this exploitative past. 'The Night, Too, is Alone' also looks at the night, fleshing out its character:³⁰⁷

in its loneliness
the night has rented a mynah bird
as it sings out its dark, ardent melody
it is giving forth thus by my side
a thought occurs then
in the night there is neither deafness
nor is there blindness
the night is also not a deaf-mute
and therefore
even sights, too, fill it up
it has, too, its own solitude
and maybe
in its solitude
that very night
has rented me

In this poem, the day has seen the night, but in its own time, the night is alone. Unknown, it remedies its loneliness by giving shelter to a dark, unseen, but speaking bird. The bird sings 'by my side': this not a poem about collective sorrow but about a personal communion with what the speaker first experiences as silent darkness. Only

³⁰⁷ 'The Night, too, is Alone.' #86. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 108.

when the bird sings out does it realise that what was there all along in the night was not a nothingness impervious to light or sound, but an actual silence and darkness affected not only by the bird's song but by the speaker's very presence. The unknown may be terrifying, or comforting (if the day is bleak), and here it is a bird (which usually appears in the poems as a model of forbearance³⁰⁸) which models not only how to face it but to exist comfortably within it. If these personal, bleak poems were to be seen as expressing the Mauritian people as a nation, the positive message put forth by the Mauritian Miracle and the Rainbow Island would be compromised.

This unwelcome mantle of 'Mauritian Premchand' seems not to have been a reaction to Unnuth's poetry immediately after its publication. There is little critical literature on Mauritian Hindi poetry, but Unnuth is well-represented in it, especially within the context of the literary sphere of the 1980s. The most recent work, Shyamdhari Tiwari's 1993 book, the title of which translates into English as *The Formation and Development of Hindi Literature in Mauritius*, is most valuable to us not as the most contemporary critical reading of Unnuth, but as an illustration of Unnuth's involvement with poetic conversations of his day.³⁰⁹ Tiwari's account shows the effects of the loss of enthusiasm and momentum of the Independence movement on the understanding of Hindi poetry. Though he summarily analyzes the first generation of post-Independence poets, such as Unnuth, his best new data is not on up-and-coming poets, but on recalling more richly the first generation of Hindi poetry. His focus on redefining the past is a theme that Unnuth and his contemporaries, such as Harinarayan Sita and Suryadev Sibbarat, engaged with as

³⁰⁸ For example, in 'To the Bird's Claw, Electricity Doesn't Come' (#63), the birds are able to withstand the buzz of excitement which would drain the speaker of his life force. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 82.

³⁰⁹ Shyamdhari Tiwari, *Mauritius mein Hindi Sahitya ka Adbhut aur Vikas* (Vinsar Prakashan, Dehradun, 1993).

well. L.P. Ramyeed's work, *The Establishment and Cultivation of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius*, published in 1984, is the most compelling source for a critical, rather than poetic response, to Unnuth's poetry in its own time. Ramyeed speaks of the contemporary poets at length, interested in how these poets were different from those who wrote before. Poets at the start of the post-Independence era included those who had begun writing before Independence but whose work reached maturity after they had spent time and energy pursuing political freedom. Of these, poets like Abhimanyu Unnuth, Harinarayan Sita, and Suryadev Sibbarat valued a frank discussion of the success and failures of changes wrought in society. Unnuth was engaged in a societal project of redefining the past in light of their reflection on the unexpected nature of a present somewhat unlike the vision of a prosperous, harmonious post-Independence state.

Sibbarat and Sita's works demonstrate that this recalling of the past was political, but not at the expense of the literary. Differing levels of optimism and differing understandings of these changes distinguish them, but the idea of recalling, the idea that things that were not fully understood in the past can be re-understood in the current climate, for better or worse, runs through the poetry of all three. This poem, 'Flash Forward' by Sibbarat, is an example of an overtly political response to the past, but it is also a literary examination of the fears of childhood:³¹⁰

In my old age
I see
today
the demons
of my childhood's stories.

Demons!
Those white
Demons!

³¹⁰ Suryadev Sibbarat, *Ek Phool... Gunne Ka* (New Delhi: Star Publications, 2004), 56-57.

Those black
 Demons!
 Those white and black
 Demons!
 Those not white
 Demons!
 Those not black
 Demons!
 Those thieving
 Demons!
 Those abductors,
 Those rapists
 Demons!
 who terrorise
 The holy men, the poor, the weak.

Today
 I have seen them.
 Surrounded by bodyguards
 Walking the red carpet
 Soaking in everyone's respects
 Wearing garlands
 and
 Taking bribes
 paying for votes.
 Today
 I have seen them.

In this poem, the childhood fear of demons is realised in the present; the poet understands now what, exactly, characterises a demon for him. These are not action-packed poems: the action took place in that central period, in the period of these men's youth, and the idea of the poet is now an older, but still relevant, man, understanding what knowledge they had already had before they decided to take action. Unspoken but obviously underlying the poem is the attempt, in the interim period, of the poet to create a future without demons. There is a similar undertaking in Unnuth's poem 'A Folk-Tale', where he narrates an interaction between his mother and his childhood self, but the meaning is found in the time that has elapsed between the action and the writing.³¹¹

she took me in her lap

³¹¹ 'A Folk-Tale.' #36. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 47-48.

having made a sign
in the sky, in the direction of the squashing stars
my mother would say to me—
this is a country of fairies
my third was taken away
she clutched my fingers
each person has their very own star
my hunger would be erased
in response to my questions my mother said—
among these stars, there is one that is yours, too
then would come to me a fierce hunger
i'd ask my mother—
when will i get my star for my own?...

...one day I quietly on the flat roof
put a platter full of water
like a black island, even today
amidst the water in the platter, a piece of coal!

At the start of the poem, Unnuth looks back on his mother's ability to weave stories that deal adequately with a child's hunger, and at its end, he remembers a time when he followed the advice he had inferred from her stories to try and catch a star. As he retells the incident, he connects the coal on the roof to his country, which 'even today' is a 'black island' on which there are still many hungry children. The poem is written sweetly, nostalgically, as if Unnuth is not sure that a child could be so innocent today, and what tales he owes today's hungry children.

Sita's 'My Shoulder' reveals a similar perspective; Sita, too, is weighed down by the past.³¹²

In my childhood itself, I
taught him
while walking along
to hold on to my finger.

He is blind, but
he's been walking along
for years with his hand
still today upon my shoulder.

³¹² Harinarayan Sita, 'Mera Kandha,' *Mauritius ki Hindi Kavita* (Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 2003), 14.

Today, because of his hand
my shoulder has broken—
then
how long must I carry
the weight of his hand!

It seems, at the end,
its worth, too,
will be borne by this shoulder.

Aid offered in childhood has unforeseen results: a shoulder offered is a shoulder broken. With the politically charged atmosphere of pre-Independence poetry, Ramyeed saw the danger in tending to veer into the dangerously prosaic in poems of exposition, and these new poets were distinguished by their inability to give in to that danger. The best poetry at this time was tighter, more concise, than the didactic, melodramatic jingoism had needed to be.³¹³ Imagery grew more elaborate as artistry became valued over clarity of message. It is worth noting that in this period, Ramyeed considers the poetry written to be more significant than the prose.³¹⁴ It is certainly true of Unnuth's writing: he was a politically engaged poet, like Premchand, but obviously also engaged in different societal questions, such as how to recall the past and what to do with it in an unexpected present.

The unexpected present rendered the means of struggle of the past less meaningful to many Indo-Mauritians. As Hindi was becoming institutionalised, it was also gaining significance as a language of global communication. Though earlier writers had been involved in the development of a Mauritian Hindi sphere to the exclusion of any involvement with other Hindi spheres around the world, the Indo-Mauritian intelligentsia found this parochialism to be less meaningful after Independence. Mauritius hosted the second World Hindi Conference in 1976 (the first

³¹³ Recall, for example, Chintamanee's poetry from page 211 of this work.

³¹⁴ L.P. Ramyeed, *The Establishment and Cultivation of Modern Standard Hindi in Mauritius* (Moka, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1985), 172.

and subsequent conferences were held in India) and the nation was introduced to poets from the Caribbean and from Fiji. Here, Unnuth begins to be at odds with the larger trends of his society: for him, the Indo-Mauritian identity was still more important than an overarching diasporic one. For some time, this difference of opinion did not have any great effect on his position within the Indo-Mauritian literary sphere: actual global interaction was stymied by the relatively small economic power of Mauritius. Travel was generally impossible and paying for authors to visit was also difficult; this world conference was not the last in which Mauritius participated, but in subsequent conferences only one or two representatives could be sent to present literary contributions from writers across the island.³¹⁵ In 1984, Ramyead found Unnuth's poetry insightful, and Bhuckory, whose *Hindi in Mauritius* is a summary of Ramyead's research combined with Bhuckory's personal reminiscences, says that *The Teeth of the Cactus* was highly anticipated. How, then, did Unnuth's poetry go from success to failure in just one generation?

The key to the answer is that for Unnuth, success was measured differently. While Ramyead found Unnuth's work a suitable entry into the changing Mauritian Hindi canon, Unnuth wanted his work to blow to shreds the confines of that canon. His strengths were in imagery, rather than clarity of message, but this technique itself was a message connecting his work to a global literary sphere that was not centred on coolitude, but rather, reworlding more broadly. Unfortunately, in the next section, it will be shown that the modern Mauritian conception of the global literary sphere does not, and cannot, include Unnuth as Ramyead reads him. Unnuth's was becoming more estranged from his prospective audience than ever. In the penultimate section of the chapter, I will read Unnuth's poetry from the World Literature perspective,

³¹⁵ Raj Heeramun. Private Interview. August 2010. Mr. Heeramun graciously also provided me with the paperwork for the World Literature conference in which Mauritius was able to participate by sending him.

finding readers of World Literature to be, perhaps, Unnuth's intended audience all along.

III. *Poetry's Failure*

Unnuth hoped to be at the centre of a growing Indo-Mauritian literary sphere engaged with global poetic conversations about what the world could be like. Instead, today, Hindi literature in Mauritius is a literature considered even by its own readers and writers to be a marginal arm of Indian Hindi literature. This new understanding was not an intentional turn against Unnuth, but rather a misreading in light of the Hindi sphere's turn towards institutionalization. In this section, I explain the process by which Unnuth's Hindi sphere became institutionalised, smaller, and eventually adopted a different conception of its own position in World Literature by tracing the rise of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute and analyzing contemporary MGI and non-MGI poets' responses to *The Teeth of the Cactus*.

Hindi literature in Mauritius today continues to be written and read largely under the auspices of the educational system, although, as discussed, the proportion of children learning Hindi as a literary language is falling. Those children who do learn Hindi poetry at the school level are still taught Hindi poetry by Indian authors. Teachers may want to incorporate more Mauritian literature, but, they say, it is easier for teachers to pass on what they were taught, especially with the dearth of secondary literature. Mauritian authors are gradually being introduced as options for the examinations, but these options have not been embraced much by teachers. These teachers come mostly from the Mahatma Gandhi Institute's BA programme in Hindi with Education, an undergraduate course in which only two courses treat Mauritian

Hindi literature.³¹⁶ Students come to the programme having learned Hindi basically as a foreign language: one they may have a linguistic advantage in, but which has served mostly as an introduction to India and to Indian culture. The majority of the theses are on Indian authors and naturally, there just is not an obvious impetus towards the introduction of Mauritian Hindi authors to the school syllabus.³¹⁷ Thus, readers are introduced to them in conversation with Indian authors rather than in conversation with one another.

Once through the university, it is very hard for readers to acquire Mauritian books because they are not backed by any publishing house paths to distribution. The lack of publishing infrastructure for Hindi poetry in Mauritius made it difficult for poets in Unnuth's time, and still makes it difficult for poets today, to promote their work locally independent of the educational institutions on the island—and those institutions are currently rather inward-looking, not unreasonably, so as to further promote the poetry of writers they already employ. Unnuth was published first by an Indian publishing house, but this was a rare occurrence, and Unnuth noted that it made

³¹⁶ The Mahatma Gandhi Institute, established in 1976, is the most prominent institution. Unnuth was involved in setting up the school (along with many other Indo-Mauritians and Indians), but not in recent curricular developments. Now a branch of the University of Mauritius, the MGI, as it is abbreviated, has its own campus which contains within it both a school and a university focused on the study of Indian culture. At the school level, children spend extra time on studies of their chosen vernacular language. At the university, within both the language and the creative writing departments are professors of Hindi; the creative writing department is certainly dominated by the Hindi language. The focus is on teaching Hindi as a foreign language, and to that end students spend much more time reading the Indian Hindi canon than they do on Mauritian authors, who are almost absent from the school curriculum: they only form two terms' worth of study in the BA Hindi. However, for many students these classes are not only where they learn about the existence of Mauritian literature, but where they learn many of the historical details outlined in this section of *Mauritiana*: the existence of a whole history that many could not previously consider. Perhaps this is why many of the graduates of this programme go on to be teachers of Hindi, but others work in organizations like the Mauritian Broadcasting Corporation or the Apravasi Ghat Trust Fund which support discussion of Hindi (with a smaller but visible and energetic parallel set of Bhojpuri supporters) as a literary language of Mauritius, but more largely support learning more about the past kept alive in this literature. There is a danger in learning all of history from historical fiction, Jeevan Mohit, officer in charge of the Apravasi Ghat Trust Fund, along with Amada and Gikandi, reminds us, but it does act as a gateway.

³¹⁷ I saw no theses about Unnuth's poetry in the theses stacks at the University of Mauritius, and personal communication with Gulshan Sooklall and Vinaye Goodary (summer 2010) confirmed that those who wrote on Unnuth focused on the historical content of his prose works.

his colleagues, if not bitter, then wary about his success.³¹⁸ More commonly, since the beginning of Hindi literary production in Mauritius, poets have taken their work to India (via mail or with agents who come to Mauritius to scope out new talent) to take advantage of the economies of scale and cheaper labour which make the publication and production of Hindi books efficient. Self-funded publication is the norm, taking the idea of earning a living from writing in Mauritius into the realm of impossibility, and limiting the number of copies of a book actually made available. Breaking away from India without its own resources to engage with other Hindi-writing communities had made the Hindi sphere in Mauritius more insular, but now that the Indo-Mauritian population is comfortably ensconced as a powerful national majority, writers are less willing to forgo a potential Indian audience for group identity's sake. It would not be impossible to set up a publishing industry for Hindi books in Mauritius: the MGI does put out the literary journal *Vasant* and select other anthologies, and it would only have to scale up its production, but it seems that no one feels that this would be worth the labour and expense involved when those institutions which currently nurture Hindi writing in Mauritius, insular as they are, have met with relative success.³¹⁹ Various organizations like the Hindi Lekhak Sangh and the Hindi Pracharini Sabha have provided writers with places to meet, journals in which to be published, and *sammelans* to attend. *If* a reader is able to become part of this circle, then, with diligence, she can manage to get her hands on, or at least hear a part of, new Mauritian Hindi poetry.

Three poets that readers might discover are Hemraj Soonder, Raj Heeramun, and Kalpana Lalji. The first two poets, who work at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute,

³¹⁸ Abhimanyu Unnuth, Interview by author, summer 2010.

³¹⁹ Unnuth was the editor of the journal *Vasant*, in his time, and following his tenure put together a wide-ranging anthology representative of its contributors, *Vasant Chainika*, which is currently the textbook in the Mauritian Hindi courses for BA students.

are particularly successful: Hemraj Soonder, the head of the creative writing department, and Raj Heeramun, his colleague in the department. Both have poems that draw explicitly on Unnuth's work, but show a development of his ideas, and their poems illustrate how Unnuth was read by his successors. The third poet, Kalpana Lalji, is not connected with the MGI, and her poetry illustrates the narrowing of the Hindi Mauritian poetic world: her poetry is neither in conversation with Unnuth's, nor with the other writers of her generation. In many ways, though, her voice captures life in modern Mauritius: more enamoured, I will show, with love than with social progress. Together, the three poets' work illustrates Unnuth's inability to pass on the poetic voice in *The Teeth of the Cactus* to the next generation: not only asking questions to highlight shortcomings in the status quo, but questioning as a way of refining one's hopes.

In Unnuth's poem 'The Sun is Right Now Far Away', he writes,³²⁰

when will that new sun rise?
 when will his shadows be visible?
 its breaths, when will they
 not seem so foreign and strange?
 when in the sunlight
 will the flocks start to be reorganised?
 which in the darkness are
 gnawing upon my identity...

In this first stanza of the poem, he asks four questions, all of them looking towards a future which is uncertain, but of which he has specific expectations: he asks 'when will that new sun rise?' rather than 'will a new sun rise?' This new sun will be high in the sky, large enough to cast shadows, alive enough to emit breath, bright enough so that underneath, 'the flocks' can pull themselves together rather than rip the community apart. The imagery seems straightforward: the world is a political one. He

³²⁰'The Sun is Right Now Far Away.' #60. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 79.

writes of a world in need of a strong, singular leader, whose methods may be ‘foreign’ and ‘strange’ but ultimately necessary to let his flock maintain its identity. Perhaps it is his designation of the world as populated by sheep that causes us to look back at his choice of the word ‘foreign’; it resonates strangely against the universality of the sun image. Not only is the sun ‘strange’, but ‘foreign’: something somebody else, somewhere else, has. Here the world is positioned as very far away from where he writes, but due to come closer.

In the second stanza, he continues:

taking fright at the solitude
I set about groping for my shadow
then I realise that
the sun must be playing in the courtyard
where it is safe from the police’s glance
its running here is also
not possible
right now the morning is far off
when will he rise?

In this stanza, straightforwardness is left behind. Unnuth has taken a globally applicable image, the sun, and imbued it with a set of largely negative characteristics. In the previous stanza, it was ‘foreign’, and here the old sun (today’s sun, as opposed to the coming, foreign, new sun) hides from the police, seeking safety, perhaps, but also shirking its duties as the giver of shadows so that its flock does not feel so alone. This role, that of giver of shadows, connects the old to the new sun, and gives to both one positive attribute, but what exactly does it mean? It is a world where time is manifest, where today has failed and tomorrow might never come.

The poem ends:

this unanswered question’s
fat, wealthy bundle—
putting it upon my head
falling down and rising up repeatedly in the course of things
on the sun’s return
I will raise it in welcome

the sun is right now far away

The sun will be welcomed, he writes, though its absence is a ‘fat, wealthy bundle’, a burden carried on his head and causing him to fall repeatedly as he gets through today, with its shirking sun. The world, and the global, may be described as ‘everything under the sun’, but here, Unnuth describes it differently, as something divided into places domestic and foreign, living here in failure. His questions ask with hope for a different future, however, with society living in ease, together and radiant.

Hemraj Soonder, in his poems ‘I Have Heard the Voice of Shabnam’ and ‘We Must Make the Sun Grow’, responds to Unnuth. Though they write in the same literary sphere, the way in which Unnuth and Soonder came to this space was very different. Soonder’s Hindi comes not from the field but through the classroom. A professor of creative writing at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute, a specialist non-Western studies university in Mauritius, Soonder is currently at work on a Doctor of Letters (D.Litt.) in Hindi literature in Mauritius, updating the periodizations set forth in the seminal 1984 study on the same subject. In ‘I Have Heard the Voice of Shabnam’,³²¹ Soonder uses more formal structure, with the refrain

³²¹ Full poem (my own translation):

I Heard the Voice of Shabnam

In the shine of day
In the shade of clouds
In the guise of a stormcloud
I heard the voice of the dew/Shabnam.

In the emptiness of that city
Where the killers have laid their traps here and there
Lighting up the jungle chandeliers
They’ve kept their guns close
on the tips of other guns
I have heard that city howl.

In the shine of day
In the shade of clouds
In the guise of a stormcloud
I heard the voice of Shabnam.

Sometimes he sets

in the shine of day
in the shade of clouds
in the guise of a stormcloud
I have heard the voice of Shabnam

after each stanza. In this poem, the speaker lives, now, in a landscape where every shade of light brings to mind a different poem: Shabnam's voice has made use of the natural world comprehensively. In 'We Must Make the Sun Grow', Soonder responds to Unnuth's sun imagery more specifically, writing in the first stanza:

the long-suffering sun
sends out its feverish light

Sometimes he rises
Sometimes he bumps into the waves
Wanting changes
Or does he find a labyrinth?
The whole sea killed that strain
But still those hands are empty.

I've haha!-ed looking at the sea carrying on
In the shine of day
In the shade of clouds
In the guise of a stormcloud
I heard the voice of Shabnam.

Today the light is dim
It's been telling lies
It's a trade of the black market
Who would ask about its ability?
It's the time for recommendations.

I have left behind
hat hen; I've seen it fleeing
in the shine of day
in the shade of clouds
in the guise of a stormcloud
I heard the voice of Shabnam.

I saw a hubbub in front of the curtains
The drama of domestic squabbles
Playing behind the curtain I saw
Of a long panic-filled tragedy

I've seen a lamp
Hold the flame of an almost extinguished candle
In the shine of day
In the shade of clouds
In the guise of a stormcloud
I heard the voice of Shabnam.

Original found in: *Vasant Chayanika*. ed. Abhimanyu Unnuth (Moka: MGI, 1993), 379-380.

village by village
city by city
on rivers, jungles, and mountains
crossing
every evening
before
darkness can sink it
it hides, the coward,
like some frightened leader of battle.

The stanza begins as though to vindicate the ‘long-suffering sun’, noting its travels far and wide, in towns and in the countryside. Yet soon evening comes, and Soonder writes more scornfully here than Unnuth does in his poem; Soonder calls it ‘a coward’ and a ‘frightened leader of battle’. There are no questions here, but rather derisive pronouncements. Every evening is like the one before; the old sun has hidden and kept its role, and the ‘new sun’ is still far away. This poem slips so easily into the world created in Unnuth’s poem; a world defined by its contemporaneity, its ruin, and the idea that hope is ‘foreign’, where the sun is something very different than it tends to be in the world as commonly imagined. What it doesn’t do is develop further the future world which was been conceived in Unnuth’s poems; there are no tentative creations, in question form or not, of what a better future would look like in his own imagination.

The rest of poem follows:

When it returns
Astride the night
Then, all the ocean’s shores
Are red with scattered blood
Then that very sun
In its chiselled form
Holds the tail of civilization
A streak sneaks out

Now, it will be necessary
To get rid of all of it.

And a new sun
Must be grown.

This domestic sun, it seems, will fight for its own survival, ushering in bloodshed and holding fast ‘the tail of civilization’. Soonder, however, does not question the future, or brook any uncertainty. ‘It will be necessary,’ he writes firmly and clearly, ‘to get rid of all of it.’ Rid of it, however, Soonder does not plan to wait for a new sun to come in of its own volition, with its foreign ideas. He will grow a new sun: a domestic, home-grown sun which, assumedly, will cast sufficient light and shadow so that people know their identity and do not feel alone. Soonder positions his ‘we’ as those who can, and will, grow a new, better sun: his world is one where the future is possible. His poetry conveys the optimism of modern Mauritius, which needs to imagine only one future because there is no fear that it will not come.

In Heeramun’s ‘Not Heaven—Not Hell’, too, the voice of Unnuth’s protagonist comes through, saying ‘You spoke of two heavens...’ and ‘I will not let you go to heaven...’³²² In this excerpt from the poem ‘I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven’, Unnuth describes a world buttressed by hell, heaven, and spaces in between:

...I could not be Yuyutsu
therefore I remained as Naciketas
but when Yama, death’s guardian,
did not open the door
then I became Trishanku
between your world
and his
I will circle, I will roam,
I will not let you go to heaven...

Unnuth here draws upon characters from the *Mahabharata* to define the world with and against the epic world. Like the characters to whom he compares himself, he finds himself suspended in some way. He is not like Yuyutsu, who was suspended between two sides in a horrible battle. Instead, he ‘remains as Naciketas’, suspended between

³²² ‘I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven.’ #8. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 9-10.

life and death due to a curse. Naciketas waited patiently between this world and the door of hell while Yama, the God of Death, was off elsewhere, but was able to turn this waiting into knowledge when Yama did appear and offered him a boon in apology. In the poem, our speaker is suspended without madness and without knowledge, not truly at home in this world and not yet welcomed into the land of the dead. He is indeed Trishanku, who circles between the worlds. Perhaps like in Unnuth's other poem, the key is in the 'you', the shadow figure, without whom the 'I' will be alone. Perhaps this is what the world is: a place in which there is a chance of not being alone.

In Heeramun's 'Not Heaven— Not Hell', there are echoes of Unnuth, yet the speaker here is not so sold on the oblique perspective of Unnuth's narrative, instead recasting Unnuth's imagery in a straightforward exhortation:³²³

O Lord!
I am not the partner of Hell!
Nor am I the lover of Heaven!
That is why you will never
send me to hell!
Because the hell on earth
is so much worse than your own!
You won't even send me to heaven
Just leave me hanging
between, like Trishanku!
Because the god of my earth
is so much more powerful than you.

Heeramun's question rests not on what the alternate worlds may be, but on the identity of his earthly god. He, too, divides the world into this realm and those other realms, but unlike Unnuth, and like Soonder, he approaches that other world forthrightly, with no uncertainty or fear. The Lord has lost his hold of Heeramun, for 'the hell on earth is so much worse'. He, too, finds himself suspended, like Trishanku, but he grasps not for company as Unnuth's poetic speakers did, but for a foothold on

³²³ Raj Heeramun, *Ek Zameen Asman Par* (New Delhi: Vartika, 2007), 21.

power, and he is sure to get it. As with the poetry of Hemraj Soonder, Heeramun's poetry shows Unnuth's influence in subject matter and in the use of domestic imagery to make large philosophical questions about the future relevant. However, for the two younger poets, a 'new sun' means one thing: a better future, and suspension between worlds means only lacking a foothold on power. As has been shown and will be further examined in the next section, Unnuth imbues Mauritian imagery with changing natures, expanding his vision of the past to develop his vision of the future, questioning the present to see if there are ever more meanings for each word, or possible solutions for each problem about which he writes.

Finally, Kalpana Lalji, who moved to Mauritius from India and writes from the perspective of one nostalgic for a faraway past, has fit in well into this discussion of Mauritian poets after Unnuth. She has made a name for herself, even in this male-dominated Mauritian Hindi sphere, not by working at the MGI or as a teacher but by publishing her work in the other journals and self-publishing and self-disseminating her book-length collections.³²⁴ Like her peers, she is interested in Mauritian history and the Mauritian past, even writing a verse biography of Ramgoolam and a verse Hindi recasting of *Paul et Virginie*.³²⁵ Her poetry lacks the fresh tartness of Heeramun's irony or the relative depth of Soonder's works, but it has a voice distinct amongst its peers. She was mentored by Chintamane while poeticizing *Paul et Virginie*, and his influence shows through in her adherence to a traditional poetic structure (couplets, unlike Unnuth's free verse). In lines such as these from *Amargeet*,

³²⁴ She self-published and distributed her work privately; in a pool of readers so small, not so inefficient, but clearly different than the support the women writing in English and published by the British Council are getting. The issue of gender is an important one on an island where reading is a female-gendered activity and writing in Hindi is gendered male, and where the current sites for cooperation and growth between languages seem to take note of a rising female voice.

³²⁵ Kalpana Lalji, *Amargeet* (New Delhi: Star Publications, 2000).

which describe the seductions of the material world as Virginie has money to spend for the first time,

Her name became notorious, in each village and each town
In each street they would gossip, in each cluster of houses
Her fate struck their hearts like heartburn, still they gossiped
Would that they would all have the same fate, they prayed morning and night
Dhaka's soft muslins, diamonds and jewels
Colourful silk clothing, brilliantly shining, brought by traders
Virginie became a noble maiden, buying countless gifts
Spending, her hands became be-pearled, spreading happiness far and wide³²⁶

it is evident that though Mauritius as an adopted country has had a great effect on the subject of her poems, Unnuth's style has had no discernible effect. Her poetry is structured in couplets, her supply of imagery comprised of store-bought goods. Her poem follows the love of Paul and Virginie without any of the undertones of St. Pierre's original tract dealing with class and racial tension in Mauritius; because it is a piece which has become known as epitomizing Mauritian society, such a move indicates that Mauritian society, in her eyes, is not interested in discussing these chronic problems. She has no need, as Unnuth does, to question everything about the present and attempt, through writing, to inspire new visions of the future. Unnuth has been an influential poet, but in certain circles only, and even then, not in the way he had intended. If the teachers and writers at the MGI were to be Unnuth's only contemporary audience, Unnuth's poetry would have failed. Instead, this is a chance to read his poetry from another perspective: our own, as translator-readers of World Literature.

IV. *Unnuth as a Poet of World Literature*

In his *Conjectures on World Literature*, Moretti writes that

But the trouble with close reading (in all of its incarnations, from the new criticism to deconstruction) is that it necessarily depends on an extremely

³²⁶ Kalpana Lalji, *Amargeet* (New Delhi: Star Publications, 2000), 52-53.

small canon. This may have become an unconscious and invisible premise by now, but it is an iron one nonetheless: you invest so much in individual texts *only* if you think that very few of them really matter. Otherwise, it doesn't make sense. And if you want to look beyond the canon (and of course, World Literature will do so: it would be absurd if it didn't!) close reading will not do it.³²⁷

Moretti's argument, that readers and scholars of World Literature can only enlarge or transcend the canon by focusing on broad comparisons to the exclusion of world reading, is important because it presents a coherent alternate methodology of reading that would lead to the thesis concluding here. The very existence of a collection of poetry with the characteristics of *The Teeth of the Cactus* (in Hindi, not diasporic, not marginal, and as of yet not transnational, but with the potential for a global reading) calls for a complication of the postcolonial canon and an enlargement of the World Literature field, and the thesis has attempted to complicate and enlarge. During this analysis, I learned something new about *The Teeth of the Cactus* and gained a clearer understanding of how Mauritian Hindi literature fits into World Literature, but the goals of this thesis are in fact more extensive than Moretti's goals. Moretti's goals, which were fulfilled in the second section of the thesis, are designed for one reader to gain as clear a picture as possible. If multiple readers bring their research together, they can confirm the validity of others' findings and bring a greater variety of texts to the attention of each individual reader, but that is all. In this thesis, the perspective has consistently been that of a Western academic and a translator. Translators not only read closely, but also feel responsible for conveying their reading to the target audience. If all World Literature readers read not only widely but also closely, we could find a place for texts not only because of the characteristics that set them apart from a preconceived notion (like the centre-periphery dynamic) but also find within

³²⁷ Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature,' *New Left Review*, Volume 1, January-February 2000. <http://www.newleftreview.org/II/1/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature>, accessed 1 June 2012.

those works alternatives to the centre-periphery dynamic. After all, the existing postcolonial canon may have been limited by its lack of breadth, but it developed because of its close reading of the new writing emerging in postcolonial contexts.³²⁸ David Damrosch, in his 2011 article ‘World Literature as Alternative Discourse’ reads the book of Job as World Literature because it was influenced by a variety of foreign elements; he was able to make the argument because he read widely enough to recognise the foreign elements in the Book of Job and because he read closely enough to understand the significance of these elements to the text. Likewise, my contribution to follow is an endogamous reading of Unnuth as a world poet which shatters the assumption that *The Teeth of the Cactus* is a marginal work, and the thesis also contributes to a new, more complex understanding of World Literature.

Studies in World Literature are commonly approached from one of three directions: the interdisciplinary, the transnational, or the translation studies perspectives. As discussed in chapter 2, World Literature developed in response to dissatisfaction with the nation as the unit and language as what defines it. Casanova, Moretti, and Damrosch are by far the most commonly cited theoreticians of the new discipline, calling for new understandings of literary networks’ relationships to one another and to market forces. Interdisciplinary readings, called for by Zepetnek and exemplified in studies like *Translating the Orient: the Reception of Sakunatala in 19th-Century Europe*, contextualise World Literature within the broader scope of cultural studies.³²⁹ Historical and cultural context has been invaluable in analysing

³²⁸ It is also de rigeur in other ‘world’ disciplines such as World Religions. See, for example, Ariel Glucklich’s *Sacred Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2003) which aims to understand why people hurt themselves in pursuit of religious or spiritual goals.

³²⁹ Dorothy Matilda Figueira, *Translating the Orient: The Reception of Sakuntala in 19th-Century Europe* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1991).
Steven Zepetnek, ‘The New Humanities: The Intercultural, the Comparative, and the Interdisciplinary,’ *The Global South*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2007.

The Teeth of the Cactus, but J. Mohit's warnings from chapter 2 about the insufficiency of literary sources to understand the Mauritian past also work in reverse: *The Teeth of the Cactus* fights the colonial past, but as this thesis is entitled, it fights both cane and canon.

Transnational readings, both at the broader level of Evan Mwangi's *Africa Writes Back to Self* and the more specific, such as Brian L. Price's 'Non Serviam: James Joyce and Mexico', illustrate the limitations of the nation as centre and the centre-periphery network by drawing readers' attention to instances in which relationships are formed outside of these frameworks.³³⁰ Françoise Lionnet, both a Mauritian and a Western academic, writes in *Minor Transnationalisms* that the transnational

can be conceived of as a space of participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center. This definition of the transnational recognizes that transnationalism is part and parcel of the process of globalization, but also that the transnational can be less scripted and more scattered.³³¹

Lionnet and Moretti are in agreement about the goal of understanding non-canonical networks, Lionnet augments Moretti's aforementioned argument with her recognition of globalization as proceeding concurrently with the globalization of literature; in the previous section, Unnuth's poems were contextualised transnationally, and this chapter's discussion of the contemporary reception of *The Teeth of the Cactus* depends on an understanding of the relationship between literature and globalization in Mauritius. Just as Moretti's goals were dismissed as not enough, however, Louisa

³³⁰ Evan Mwangi, *Africa Writes Back to Self* (Albany, SUNY Press, 2009).

Brian L. Price, 'Non Serviam: James Joyce and Mexico,' *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 64, No. 2, 2012.

³³¹ Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 5.

Egbunike offers a response which is similarly grounded in calls for reading Unnuth on his own terms; she writes:

Whilst Lionnet's side-stepping of the 'centre' may set us on the right path towards a useful alternative in how to think about Africa, it is only when a theoretical framework is constructed from African realities, and not African inserted into a pre-existing theoretical framework, that a useful way of reading the continent can be utilised. The notion of 'hybridization' forms part of the post-modernist arsenal against absolutes and its deconstructionist nature undermines the margins of identity of African peoples.³³²

Sometimes understanding what is in fact an 'African reality', from which a theoretical framework can be constructed, is difficult to ascertain. In this thesis, reading has been conceptualised as understanding a set of interrelated relationships: between the author and his intended audience, between the intended audience and the real audience, between the real audience and ourselves as readers—but one relationship not yet pursued is the relationship between ourselves as readers and the author. In this chapter, a foundation of wide reading leads me to argue that Unnuth's most important literary sphere is a world sphere in which he is in conversation with magical realists and the 'new Russian poets' of the 1970s. Does asking Unnuth if he read those poets and was influenced by them constitute a slotting of Unnuth's reality into a pre-existing framework? In this case, it is the opposite: a foundation of wide reading led me to hear strong echoes of those writers' relationship to the world in Unnuth's work, and asking Unnuth afterwards whether this was, in fact, an accurate reading only confirmed that the relationship between ourselves as readers and the author was, in fact, a strong one outside of those other reading relationships, and allowed us to understand *The Teeth of the Cactus* in a new and significant way.³³³

³³² Louisa Egbunike, interview by author, London, February 2012.

³³³ The confirmation was a happy consequence of the fact that Unnuth is still alive—rather than limiting world literary readings to only living authors, I feel that this happy consequence should push readers to develop and use this methodology with confidence.

The third approach, from the perspective of translation studies, has already been discussed at length in the second chapter, as well as in response to Moretti's argument above. Translators read both closely and broadly, and their response to sifting through the various literary networks and relationships they find is to create a new one. Comparative literature posited that language difference was at the heart of the comparisons between literature, and it is easy to assume that it is at the heart of the task of the translator. However, Jusdanis, in his description of the difference between comparative literature and World Literature, illustrates that it is not language that is at the heart of the task of the reader of World Literature, but understanding:

Comparative Literature, as Haun Saussy has shown, was organized around the logic of "tree-shaped" disciplines of comparative anatomy and philology that explained typological diversity through a common historical narrative with many boughs (137). But literature lacks the shared anatomical body or trunk of one language. Modern Greek literature is not to ancient Greek literature as modern demotic is to classical Greek. When Constantine Cavafy, James Joyce, or Derek Walcott return to Homer, the relationship they establish between themselves and the original text, and among themselves as modern readers of an ancient epic, is one not of shared descent but of shared interest. The *Odyssey* does not lead ineluctably to Tennyson's 'Ulysses.'³³⁴

The magical realists and the new Russian poets were widely read, and with Unnuth, I share an interest in them. It could be said, then, that Unnuth and I share a relationship towards the world: we are readers of World Literature, and Unnuth, furthermore, is a world poet.

Unnuth himself read widely, and, in an interview in summer 2010, was pleased to confirm that those works to which I compare Unnuth's poetry here were, in fact, those which influenced him deeply. Unnuth was a world poet in that he viewed the world as his conversation partner; his poetry may have reached only a small, local

³³⁴ Gregory Jusdanis, 'World Literature: The Unbearable Lightness of Thinking Globally,' *Diaspora*: 12: 1, 2003: 106.

audience, but it brought to that audience a taste of poetic techniques and concerns from around the world. Unnuth was influenced by the continuing corruption, frustration, and poverty amongst Indo-Mauritians, and he used images and discussed events from Mauritian life to react. He, however, felt that openness to global influences would be an antidote to his native society's pervading frustration, not by giving Indo-Mauritian society a new identity but by displaying new ways to rethink its history which would allow it to find its way back to ethics and joy. A poet whose works were regularly published in Delhi, Unnuth had more conversation with India than most, and a different conversation than most other Indo-Mauritian writers who did travel to India, generally for the higher education that Unnuth never received. Travel is often associated with education in the Indo-Mauritian literary sphere, and many a writer's association with India began on scholarships to Banaras Hindu University or on other courses.³³⁵ Unnuth never studied beyond high school (a fact he both regrets and forgets in equal measure) and his connection is more purely literary. His only manner of existence there is through his poetry and his readership. As noted, his own tastes were affected by the north Indian Hindi canon, especially Muktibodh, but he also joined a larger literary openness to the outside world which characterised the writers and readers in the Indian sphere. Like them, he exposed himself to other writers who were not simply from Europe, searching for those with whom he had some goal in common, following those he admired.

The influences of Latin American and Soviet writing most likely reached Unnuth through their popularity in India, which Unnuth visited (though not to attend university). Although Unnuth openly acknowledges that his work is indebted to, and

³³⁵ Both BA Hindi teachers Vinaye Goodary and Gulshan Sooklall, along with *Garden of Flowers* poets Balwantsing Nobutsing and Ruma Bheeroo (and less notable others), attended some higher education in India.

engaged with, the work of Paz, Borges, and Yevtuschenko, modern Mauritian academics³³⁶ feel that Unnuth's real engagement is only local, and that he uses foreign trends only superficially. This is a demonstrably slanted reading from a modern, diasporan perspective, rather than an objective one. If from our own perspective readers of World Literature, coming from a postcolonial perspective, are too eager to note instances of hybridity and engagement amongst the Global South, future readers may decide the truth lies somewhere in the middle. It is significant, though, that this de-emphasis has led to a complete non-focus on these elements of Unnuth's poetry as it is taught at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute.

Unnuth took the flexibility of the 'real' in magical realism, which reached him through its popularity in India, as a call to reassess what Indo-Mauritian reality now was. Unnuth was writing just as magical realism had its moment of global recognition; most famously used in Latin American prose by Borges and Allende, it was given that multicultural boost by the popularity of non-Hispanic magical realist Salman Rushdie. Maggie Ann Bowers' description is particularly relevant; she sees it as a method for writers responding to colonialism by which those writers could discuss the reality of postcolonial life by also discussing its opposite.³³⁷ By presenting non-realistic intrusions without calling attention to the suspension of disbelief necessary to carry on (as Unnuth does with his anthropomorphised natural imagery), writers of magical realism disrupt the suspension of disbelief that many readers bring to the reality of their every day lives, an attitude that they felt perpetuated colonial rule and, during the time of Independence, an aping of colonial rule that would take the nation nowhere. The influence of magical realism on Unnuth, as opposed to other

³³⁶ Goodary and Sooklall, in these comments, were responding to my assertion of these influences, rather than any passage in which Unnuth acknowledges the connections.

³³⁷ Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, New Critical Idiom Series (London: Routledge, 2004).

Mauritian writers, can be seen in the juxtaposition in the previous section of Unnuth with Soonder and Heeramun, where Unnuth questions readers' understanding of what the world should be while the others simply work to progress from a current world to a world they felt Unnuth had laid out for them as the alternative. Here, the influence of magical realism on Unnuth is evident when reading him in conjunction with Octavio Paz, and, after a sustained discussion of Paz and Unnuth, in conjunction with both Paz and Borges together.

Paz, a Mexican poet twenty-three years Unnuth's senior, filled the postcolonial poet role more fully than Unnuth in one key aspect: he travelled. A diplomat, he spent many years in India.³³⁸ His own work was well-received there and Paz also translated many Indian works into Spanish. For Unnuth to look beyond England, France, and India for a more global 'abroad', Paz was a natural gateway poet, especially because of their shared sensibilities. Paz and Unnuth have a shared relationship to language, a shared understanding that poets can cause word-signs to be disjointed from their objects of signification—not completely severed but with a juncture large enough to inject their own significance. Thorpe Running cites Paz's poem 'A Draft of Shadows' to illustrate the use, in the poetry of Paz, of words as floating signifiers. He writes:

Such open-ended possibilities within a word can be responsible for a shattering effect upon language, as Octavio Paz shows in these lines from 'Pasado en Claro:' [*Running's translations*]

A rattling of dry seeds/ the broken letters of the names;
we have scattered the names,
we have dishonoured the names.
Ever since then I have been walking in search of the name.

³³⁸ He was in India from 1962 to 1968, so Unnuth would not have seen him, but his legacy there was longlasting. Paz wrote about his experiences in *In Light of India*, but these are not particularly relevant to the poetic relationship between Unnuth and Paz, so I will not discuss it here.

But, in the same poem, he shows that in spite of the disorienting effect of this dispersal of meaning, a continual creative process (*espiral, rotación*), is set in motion because of the inherent possibilities within words which have an 'infinite field of meaning.'

I raised with words and their shadows
a walking house of reflections,
a tower which walks, a construction of wind.
Time and its combinations:/ years, the dead, syllables,
different stories from the same account.
A spiral of echoes, the poem
is air which is sculpted and dissipates, a
fleeting allegory of true names.
At times the page breathes;
the clusters of sounds and sense,
in a magnetic rotation, connect and disperse
on the page.³³⁹

Paz's strategy of language here involves, as Running calls it, a spiralling out of the word 'name'. Initially, 'names' are described as seedlike, but when scattered, they are 'dishonoured': adding a meaning onto an initial writing of 'name' as something that holds within it the potential to give its object added meaning. Seeds are meant to be scattered, so by ascribing a negative response to the scattering of names, Paz muddies the image. Names are tied to 'words' later in the poem, shadows and reflections of poems, of strung-together words. The poem is not an argument, meant to persuade the reader that scattering names is dishonourable, but after creating a poetic universe in which such a thing is true, the reader has to question for herself in what kind of a world that would be so, and how exactly that differs from the world, with her previous understanding of names, as it is now.

In Unnuth's poetry, these similar processes are writ large as the collection takes shape. I will trace, for example, the significance conveyed in his use of the image of the 'sun' and of 'time.' These images show up early in the collection, their

³³⁹ Thorpe Running, *Borges, the Poet*. ed. Carlos Cortinez (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1986), 98-99.

Octavio Paz, 'Pasado en Claro' available <http://www.poesi.as/op16001.htm>, accessed 15 November 2012.

quotidian meanings instantly unsettled. In ‘In the Mist’, both are a part of a complex and rather obscure image, objects in some way under the control of the undefined ‘he’ who³⁴⁰

...drapes the sun with a black sheet
he has placed the newborn
upon milkweed.
he has stretched time over top
that line of destruction—...

It is clear that they are not straightforward images marking the passing of time or acting as measures of time, and nor are they the symbols of succor that would be an option for a Hindu culture in which Surya, the sun, is revered as a god, and time is seen as cyclical, perpetuating the play of life and death. Instead, they are factors to be overcome, by draping, by stretching, in order to escape destruction.

Shortly thereafter, in ‘Time, Dripping, Angry’, these two terms appear again:³⁴¹

from the angered *anjali*,
the hand cupped in offering,
morning seeps out.

smearing that sunlight on our faces
you and I run off to the horizon where
rainbows rise up like mushrooms.
on the harvested sugarcane fields
we find time’s scattered pieces
mixed with the ashes of values
on the tuber pastures and the cane fields, both,
they are scattered on the fallows for the sake of new growth;
among them, growing out from the prickly pear cactus—
are plants, yours and mine, concealed.
these times, our days—
by the fields overcome with oozing growth
full of cracks and holes—
dripping, become

³⁴⁰ ‘In the Mist.’ #2. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 2.

³⁴¹ ‘Time, Dripping, Angry.’ #4. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 4-5.

patched up, patch upon patch
a new generation is getting older
time is dripping from time itself, drop by drop.
gold found under the stone
is getting shut up in the dripping fists of time
which is neither mine nor yours
that generation, which denies
those very things which become its own,
tangled in thorns of milkweed.

Here, the words 'sun' and 'time' begin to resettle into new meanings that are significantly expanded. 'You' and 'I' here 'smear sunlight on our faces' and run off to the fields on which 'we find scattered time's pieces.' Though weakened beyond their typical extent, the sun and time are still recognised as having power, and it is the present extent of that power and what it can mean for the characters in the collection which are explored throughout.

Bit by bit I arrive at fuller pictures: in 'I Will Not Let You Go To Heaven', the sun has a proclivity towards helping the protagonist's enemy:³⁴²

... the moonlight would not let
my mango-grove blossom
even those rays of sunlight did not yield mangos.
you climbed up
onto my head
peeping here and there
drinking in
one more offering from the moonlight.
in your cupped hands
your bowl in the other direction
was filling up with the rays of the sun.
I will not let you go to heaven.

In this poem, the sun is still a symbol of an aid, but not everyone's: it neglects the speaker's mango orchard, but fills up his enemy's bowl.

³⁴² 'I Will No Let You Go to Heaven.' #8. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 9-10.

The first definite inklings of this troubling identification between the antagonist and the sun are evident at the end of ‘Last Warning...High Alert’:³⁴³

rusted by the sun
dropped into the boiling water
like a bird’s feathers:
shedding raybeams fall and are
scattered
worn away upon the earth,
shafts of light...

...the one searching for meaning loses himself.
as of yet the ants have not gotten off the walls,
bricks haven’t been fried in a bit of oil
from others’ skin
wrapped up, tomorrow
he’ll be without sunshine—
the sun melts and leaks.

revolution— bound in a fist
like the bubbling froth of lathered soap.
all the filth can’t be washed away by
the lone fairy with the water from the pond.
from the maimed sun,
new sunbeams can’t be born.
underneath the big trees,
little trees cannot grow;
therefore the little trees
have met with the hatchet.
man becomes a traitor to himself.
the sun melts
from its own warmth.

The sun is present throughout the poem, gradually becoming more central until it is the focus of the last two lines. First, the sun is falling ‘like a bird’s feathers’; birds, in the collection, being harbingers of what is to come for man. Its raybeams scatter, leaving the one searching for meaning ‘without sunshine’ as ‘the sun melts and leaks’. The sun has been ‘maimed’, and it cannot bring forth more of itself, and here in this last stanza the sun is directly compared to trees and to men: just as ‘from the maimed

³⁴³ ‘Last Warning...High Alert.’ #16. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 19-20.

sun, new sunbeams can't be born', man cannot be sure that other men will be simply new versions. The concluding sentence implies that the sun has maimed itself by trying to be too powerful, melting itself 'from its own warmth', and man, too, may not know how to handle power properly.

This new sense of the word 'sun' as very much tied up with the identity of man as someone capable of wielding power rightly or wrongly becomes solidified in the poems contrasting the city life and jungle life with the sun shut up in the fridge. In 'Queer Night', for example,³⁴⁴

in the river the jungle-sun is bathing;
the city sun is in the fridge.
... like a little piece of meat
the sun in the fridge has been saved from rotting
a man's muffled voice
has come and clung to the city
and is swinging from the branches of the jungle trees
and breaths are undergoing
the punishment of hanging.

the jungle sun, having burnt the river,
is wearing away the rocks.
the city sun is still closed up in the fridge.
the whole city is shivering from the cold...

Here, the sun is described as variable: the jungle sun is categorically different from the city sun. This echoes the 'I' and the 'you' which run through this collection, with the 'I' outside, in the fields, and the 'you' involved on the mercantile side. Against the very power they themselves control, the heat, the jungle sun partakes of the river, while the city sun sits in the fridge 'like a piece of meat saved from rotting'. They both bring harm to their surroundings, burning the river and letting the city freeze. A man's voice weaves itself into this poem, his breath hanging from its lines as from a tree's branches, and the characteristics of the anthropomorphic suns can be given to

³⁴⁴ 'Queer Night.' #18. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikhṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 22.

the man. The ‘real’ created here is certainly magical: a suspension of disbelief is required.

However, even as the image of the sun settles into an expanded set of meanings, these meanings themselves spiral outwards. In ‘White Night’, there is only its reflected light, but this, like the intrusive sunbeams and sweat-inducing heat of its previous appearances, has substance:³⁴⁵

with the dry
red bloodless bedbugs of my charpoy bed
I have struck up a friendship
they have understood
that this dearness is not my fault
that the blood of each vein
has frozen together solid like ice
even so, that night which brings sleep
does not yet reach inside my room
I get lost in open-eyed dreams
of love with a sugarcane gatherer
a village girl
but marriage was to
a white night

The poem begins by the uneasy understanding reached by the pain-filled labourer and the sun-less night; when the sun presents itself, even in such a dim way, it is due to its presence that the speaker is able to ‘get lost in open-eyed dreams’ which allow him to experience the better life he has been able to conceive but never to physically live out. In one sense a happier ending is coming than perhaps the sun’s first intrusion hinted would be possible, but in another sense, it is ‘nor with sun about my head’ that ‘here is my freedom’ (in the poem ‘Here is my Freedom’).³⁴⁶ As the turning of the meaning of the ‘name’ breathes life into Paz’s lines above, the sun, too, adds to the expanded cosmology, its own infinitely significant world, of *The Teeth of the Cactus*.

³⁴⁵ ‘White Night.’ #80. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 102.

³⁴⁶ ‘Here is My Freedom.’ #85. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 107.

I left time behind, its meaning unsettled, in the previous section, but to be sure it also underwent and affected a translation of the world into the poetic world of the collection. In the penultimate poem, ‘Significance’, it comes again, after many twists and turns, to its association with the blazing, boiling world of ‘In the Mist’:³⁴⁷

after the harvest
in the empty sugarcane fields
the labourers’ hands
are sown into the earth
those hands, for which
the significance of those dividing lines was
the significance of
germinated hands
from the warm breath of memory
having drooped, scorched, withered
in the boiling cauldron of time
thriving and prosperous
meditating upon seeds
high parapets of stories are growing up
the labourers’ descendants’
black dreams
on the crags
are floundering

In ‘Significance’, the significance of the labourers’ hands and the lines upon them has fallen, withered, into the ‘boiling cauldron of time, thriving and prosperous.’ This cauldron of time is a place of power, because it is a place from which memory can be reclaimed. Those labourers’ hands can be re-membered and help bring to fruition the ‘black dreams’ of the labourers’ descendants. At the same time, it seems that time, like the sun, cannot be relied upon completely; in ‘Every Other Moment’, time works in alternating beats, to and fro, like waves.³⁴⁸

from the mountain of assurances
every other moment
life melting, melting

³⁴⁷ ‘Significance.’ #87. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 109.
‘In the Mist.’ #2. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 2.

³⁴⁸ ‘Every Other Moment.’ #20. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 24.

like a waterfall
is falling
on the system of rocks
diffused, scattered into countless drops...

Time, like the sun, causes life itself to melt. The language of his poetry is so tightly woven that the repetition of such a verb cannot be ignored. From the very first poem, life and the desire to live were the central focus; here, it is not the desire to live but life itself that time sets 'afire without a pyre'. Like Paz, words in his poems spiral outwards and create a dense, tight-knit world, yet one still very much engaged with social reality.

I juxtapose Paz's 'Between the Stone and the Flower' with *The Teeth of the Cactus* to look at the ways in which both poets use similar imagery to similar effect. In 'Between the Stone and Flower', Paz writes of labour and the desire to live in the context of the Mexican peasantry.³⁴⁹ This is a long poem, with tough but haunting imagery: burning, poison, snakes, seas. In five sections, readers go from the emergence of pain, anger, and vengeance to the very death of a desire to live as those forces burn that desire into dry ash. Paz builds up a vocabulary of the desert which also serves as a cosmology of the labourer. When, at the climax of the poem, he brings in the word 'money', he uses the imagery of the world he has built up to explore and critique the significance of the monetary system:

...that magical money!
Invisible and empty
Is the sign and the sign,
The word and the blood,
The mystery and figure
The sword and ring.

It is water and dust

³⁴⁹ Octavio Paz, *Entre la Piedra y el Flor*, 1941. <http://www.poesi.as/op02032.htm>, Accessed 10 June 2012. Translations are my own.

Rain, bitter sun
Cloud created by the lonely sea
And the fire that consumes the air.
It is night and day:
Eternity alone and grim
Biting its tail.

Money gives beautiful oblivion
Opens the doors of music,
Closes the doors of desire.
Death is death is a shadow
A dream that money does not dream...

His primary critique is stated upfront and simply: it is an 'invisible and empty' thing which controls so much. Yet he is not just speaking in slogans; he has explored its incredible power, describing it is not only 'the word and the blood' but also 'water', 'dust', 'rain', 'bitter sun' and other fundamental components of the world created thus far in the poem. Like Unnuth, Paz is especially skillful at closing stanzas; here with 'Death is death is a show/a dream that money does not dream', readers are finally faced with money's one inability: the inability to conceive of death. Magical as it is, when its greatest strength is its intimacy and significance to all the fundamental components of life itself, an inability to know death, perhaps the most defining moment of life, money loses its appeal.

I can see Unnuth playing off this poem, writing the poems of Indo-Mauritian labourers with a similar, though personalised, arc. Apart from the sun, whose significance has just been discussed, Unnuth builds up a strong cosmology from natural imagery. Mauritian images from nature which appear again and again include the mist, milkweed, dunes, the tides, the fields, the blood associated with physical suffering, bones, the act of melting, both ink and plants, especially the cactus, roses, the courtyard, banyans, mango groves, the island's famous mountains, its volcano, the channel separating the archipelago from Mozambique, the dramatic shoreline at Gri-

Gri, the lake which has become the Mauritian Ganges, the birds, the chanting priests, flags, and, naturally, the sea. In ‘Wrath’, Unnuth’s poetry is saturated with these images. ‘The Fraction Sign’, conversely, is almost entirely written in abstractions. Nonetheless, both not only form a part of the narrative arc, but do so by strengthening the structural soundness of the world in which such an arc is not only possible but necessarily true. In ‘Wrath’, Unnuth’s form echoes traditional protest poetry. ‘Listen!’ he commands:³⁵⁰

‘Listen! Bare mountain!
...Mozambique Channel!
...Deerpond Volcano!
...Gri-Gri!
...The Lake of the Fairies!’

All of these natural landmarks of Mauritius, all of the benchmarks by which Mauritians understand themselves as a whole: all of these he calls ‘betrayers of the nation.’ At one level, a metaphor for varying ruling classes who have enjoyed and wasted power over the centuries. At another, however, they rise to the level of scriptural personages, interacting without a shift in register with the Lord of the tandava dance and of the asuras. Opportunism, he notes, has a long history, and he has no messages or helpful tips of better ways to progress here. Instead, he has just a threat backed up by a history of sorts: that storms are rising up within the Mozambique Channel, that these benchmarks, these public identifiers of the nation, are undergoing revolutions from the inside. Like asuras, they will dissolve, not from anything but personal inability to act in accordance with the turnings of the wheel of fate.

³⁵⁰ ‘Wrath.’ #10. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 12-13.

In 'The Fraction Sign', the tone, the syntax, both are completely different: it is a calm narrative, and there is no direct appeal.³⁵¹ In 'Wrath', the speaker addresses his enemies: the anger is palpable as he points out their flaws; in 'The Fraction Sign', the speaker is speaking mostly about himself. There are very few adjectives in the poem, and very little commentary surrounds the statement of events, so it could be read as neutral. The poem speaks of, as seen before in such poems as 'I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven', being suspended between worlds, searching:

having been exiled
from the spheres above
for some time I've remained suspended
now in the squares of the town below
inside the boundaries' three sides
I am searching for the fourth corner
because
in triangles
it is the fourth corner that
people consider to be the measure
of my worth...

The speaker is in exile, wandering, searching for the fourth corner of the triangle. Seeing the tip of the pyramid implied in a triangle requires a perspective that goes beyond the ordinary, beyond natural imagery to abstract imagery that requires of the reader something very different. And yet neither of the two poems, 'Wrath' and 'The Fraction Sign', seems out of place in *The Teeth of the Cactus* as a collection: while 'Wrath' is expressing its dissatisfaction directly and emotionally, 'The Fraction Sign', though less emotionally charged, is no less critical of the 'you' that finally appears. The latter poem switches from straightforward telling of the narrative to an exposé:³⁵²

...which in order to find
I must take

³⁵¹ 'The Fraction Sign.' #42. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 55.

³⁵² 'The Fraction Sign.' #42. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 55.

that heavy fraction sign
away before my price lessens—
that value which
to raise your own
you have placed before me.

By the end of the poem, the speaker is no longer just searching for something which, it has been externally decided, is valuable, which ‘people consider to be the measure/ of my worth’. Instead, he is able to speak directly to those who have devalued him in order to empower themselves. Here, there are protests, too, though this poem is much more introspective as it traces a journey from acceptance to resistance. Like those of Paz and the Russians to be soon discussed, here Unnuth has written a political poem not about activism, but about resistance that each person must find the strength to put forth on a personal level.

Paz and Borges are often compared in discussions of poetry in Spanish, and this comparison is not an opaque one. Borges also had a passion for the manipulation of language in which Unnuth and Paz shared an interest, and bringing him into the discussion here allows us to introduce Ferrari’s description of Borges’s writing which, it seems, could describe Unnuth’s writing as well:

Noting that there was no such thing as ‘poetic language,’ he called for its invention through the use of new combinations of words which would transmit ‘unheard-of-visions’ of reality...Language is not expressive at all; words are not images of reality and in fact can only be used to mention or allude to, but not to express...and therefore what can be said is limited. Taking these premises as a point of departure, Borges goes on to structure a personal poetic language using such everyday words as *rio*, *noche*, *sombre*, or *sueño*.³⁵³

The integrity of the poem-world survives for Unnuth, Paz and Borges because of the strength built up in not only in words’ allusions to the world at large, but also to words’ allusions to the internal realities of the poem.

³⁵³ Thorpe Running, *Borges en Dialogo: conversaciones de Jorge Luis Borges con Osvaldo Ferrari* (Barcelona: Ediciones Grijalbo, 1985), 110.

Allusions to the world at large could themselves draw poems into a global conversation: Unnuth does so in a limited way when he discusses Hiroshima or Vietnam. The Indo-Mauritian community, however, had managed to create an identity in the world at large which survived solely based on its internal coherence, escaping from a constant referencing not only to Vietnam or Hiroshima, but also to India, to the Franco-Mauritians, or colonialism in general. In most of Unnuth's poems the community almost manages, indeed, to de-reference itself from the Creole inhabitants of the island. Indo-Mauritian Hindi writers seemingly have little to gain by referencing globally resonant images.

But as Unnuth sees it, creating a global sphere of their own picking and choosing is an act that can strengthen their identity. Rather than continued references to Hiroshima or Vietnam, his references are to those which also resonate in Mauritius: to the sun and the dust, and by allusion, to the scepticism of money, of Paz. The global recognition that writers like Paz and Borges, amongst non-Latin American writers such as Rushdie and Bulgakov, received for their works propelled the understanding of magical realism as a global movement of which writers from all over the postcolonial world could be a part. As writers across the Global South were doing at the time, Unnuth was creating a global that did not contradict the local they had worked so hard to create.

Underlying the shared techniques of the three poets is an ideological belief that poetry is political and that, for postcolonial subjects, poetry is for this reason an imperative, but not as propaganda. What Grenier writes here about Paz holds true also for Unnuth:

Paz's idea of a mutually beneficial relation between art and politics is clearly predicated on the imperative of freedom. Art and politics must remain distinct realms, while complementing each other in the overall adventure of the human experience. Taboos and superstitions of the political sort, typically rigid and universal in their applications, tend to make for bitter and overpowering ingredients in an intellectual recipe (art, literature) made of unique, sensible, contradictory, and mortal individual characters.... The realm of art is one of problems and situations, of reflections and feeling... Paz's poetry abounds with fairly explicit social messages and implicit political ones. What Paz rejects is the sacrifice of what art could precisely do to enrich the human experience on the altar of a supposedly highest end—in this case, a political cause.³⁵⁴

Unnuth wrote politically in his poems by questioning. Unnuth's questioning—usually angry, never pleading—allows him to illustrate the progression of thought in his own poetry. 'Who can tell,' he asks, 'whether I'm grinding or being ground?' 'Do I know him at all, whose turban has fallen/ there on the feet of the promotion granter?' 'How can this corpse be mine?'³⁵⁵ His collections grow in meaning as the poems lay upon one another, and while some questions are answered, others always emerge: there are some questions—social, political questions—that personal introspection cannot alone answer. Though some of his poetry is openly protest poetry, these can be glossed over in other arguments as instances in which his didacticism got the best of him. Rather, these instances draw our attention to the way in which, in more elegant poems, he combines didacticism and interrogation to full effect. The Russian poets of the 1960s and '70s, especially, display this combination in their own work, and it is this influence which is underestimated by Mauritian poets unconcerned with this stylistic element. In fact, this style itself shapes the substance here.

³⁵⁴ Grenier, Yvon. *From Art to Politics: Octavio Paz and the Pursuit of Freedom* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 21.

³⁵⁵ 'I Will Not Let You Go to Heaven.' #8. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 9-10.

'On the Promotion *Ghaat*.' #17. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 21.

'That Incomplete Right of Action.' #46. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 59.

George Reavey called these Russian poets, Yevtuschenko and his peers, the ‘new Russian poets’, referring to an outlook which ‘is made up of a new sense of history, awareness of the need for personal responsibility, an acuter critical attitude, and a deeper insight into the emotions of the ordinary man’, an outlook which restored the rich tradition of Russian poetry which had dimmed in the preceding decades.³⁵⁶ Like the *Taar Saptak* poets, they are not connected by form but by their role in the gelling of a new zeitgeist. They refer to heroes such as Akhmatova; Unnuth refers to his own turn-of-the-century heroes, but must imagine the poetry coming out of their mouths. Along with Yevtuschenko, they include poets such as Leonid Martynov, who wrote poems like fables, their morals unsaid and alternatives that echo in the remaining silence, and Vinukurov, who plays most forcefully with the challenge of introspection and societal commitment in his poem boldly titled ‘I’.³⁵⁷ There is no ache, he writes, more deadly than the striving to be oneself, and this ache is felt around the postcolonial world, as worlds are reimagined and identities refashioned. Like Unnuth’s ‘I’ it is at the centre of all experience, but it is still most clearly articulated through its relationships with other beings: friends, father and mother, wife, fellow soldier, and travelling companions. It is held hostage by time, yet is also nourished by time, and has this same reciprocal positive and negative relationship with the imagined community. These poets have questions for their societies: in post-Stalinist Russia, the expectations of the state and for the state are close to one’s heart. Unnuth’s Mauritian experience was, in details, very different, yet the congruence in dealing with the demons of one’s society and dealing with one’s own inner demons and the exploration of this identity was something that poets could

³⁵⁶ *The New Russian Poets: 1953-1968: An Anthology*, ed. and with parallel translations by George Reavey. (New York: October House Inc, 1968), pg xvii.

³⁵⁷ *The New Russian Poets: 1953-1968: An Anthology*, ed. and with parallel translations by George Reavey. (New York: October House Inc, 1968), pg xvii.

develop together, engage in expanding. Following global trends of poetry was not about losing one's own identity but rather about being exposed to possible avenues of moving forward, of better ways to put one's nation together. Russian poets of all historical periods were popular around the literary world, but to be a part of the conversation that started a few decades before and might come to a conclusion a few decades after—being interested in others is perhaps the best possible development of self for a nation that defines itself by what it is no longer, by its Others. Perhaps, most of all, Unnuth learned from this sentiment of Yevtushenko's:

You talk to me of freedom? Empty question
Under umbrellas of bombs in the sky
It's a disgrace to be free of your own age
A hundred times more shameful than to be its slave.³⁵⁸

It is unreasonable to de-emphasise these influences on Unnuth's poetry when they seem to make up the crux of that poetry.

In Russia, as Yevtushenko put it, a poet is more than a poet.³⁵⁹ Read, loved, and discussed, their understandings of the modern age pervade and come not only to reflect but to define contemporary society's zeitgeist. In the Soviet era their poetry was popular all over the world, though this was not without its dangers, even in the post-Stalin period. In Mauritius, a poet is simply a poet. When Yevtushenko writes that

when I read certain articles about myself in the West I wonder who in the hell this damned 'Y.Y.' can be. A movie star, tanned by photographer's bulbs? A

³⁵⁸ Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *Stolen Apples*, Russian text with English adaptations by James Dickey, Geoffrey Dutton, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Anthony Kahn, Stanley Kunitz, George Reavey, John Updike, and Richard Wilbur. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1972), 154.

³⁵⁹ Yevgeny Yevtushenko, 'Prayer Before the Poem,' *The Bratsk Station*, trans. by Tina Tupkina-Glaessner, Geoffrey Dutton and Igor Mezhkoff-Koriakin. (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1967), 21.

matador, teasing his red cape in the bull's snout of the age? A tightrope walker, toeing the slack wire between West and East?³⁶⁰

he is derisive of his larger-than-life persona, and he continued to travel. Yevtuschenko developed a poetry in which introspection was central and yet so abstract as to be applicable to many similar political situations. In globalizing his work, he sent to his translators the permission to be completely free, for, as he wrote, 'only a free and unrestricted translation can in any way claim to be poetry.'³⁶¹ He was keen to be translated and to translate, to be a part of the global community of those who write about themselves but at the same time, about the world. Unnuth, with such a different experience of poeetdom, nonetheless embraced Yevtuschenko's unending questions.

As in Unnuth's poetry, Yevtushenko's questioning is most often implied by absence, rather than presented outright. In Yevtushenko's 'Ballad about False Beacons' (in its Kahn translation), he starts with a line 'from an ancient pilot's manual.'³⁶² Is he placing his speaker in the future, or is he compressing time, changing our perspective on its pace? Such different imagery from Unnuth, covered in ice, but so similar in other ways: the night, the beggars, the sea, and most of all, the understanding that there is a disconnect between what is to be believed and what can be understood to be true about the past, the present, and the future. Beacons can't be trusted, perhaps, and then what can be? Where shall we turn? In 'The Incendiary', he writes further, 'Oh the mysterious power of the past!/ You never could learn to love it

³⁶⁰ Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *Stolen Apples*, Russian text with English adaptations by James Dickey, Geoffrey Dutton, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Anthony Kahn, Stanley Kunitz, George Reavey, John Updike, and Richard Wilbur. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1972), xiv.

³⁶¹ Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *Stolen Apples*, Russian text with English adaptations by James Dickey, Geoffrey Dutton, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Anthony Kahn, Stanley Kunitz, George Reavey, John Updike, and Richard Wilbur. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1972), xxii.

³⁶² Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *Stolen Apples*, Russian text with English adaptations by James Dickey, Geoffrey Dutton, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Anthony Kahn, Stanley Kunitz, George Reavey, John Updike, and Richard Wilbur. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1972), 15-16.

Biblical currents, the speaker is the overseer, questioning the desires of those working underneath them, poking and prodding in an attempt—is it to oppress or to understand them? Writing this way implies its shockingly beautiful opposite: those who see themselves as overseen ask the same questions of the overseers. The questions can be asked and even if they are not answered, the asking itself provides room to decide whether to be wise in one’s relationships or to be cruel. Unnuth’s poems are of the overseen, but he gives depth to their history by voicing the doubts, the questions, that they must have had and that still exist. The questions grow more complex: in ‘The Shard of Glass’, one of *The Teeth of the Cactus*’s earlier poems, the poignant question: why is this shiny stone more precious to you than the wellbeing of a man? In ‘Satiation’, too, the implied question: why could you not be happy with that which you receive from nature, dew wrested from leaves? Why this fetish for pearls that carries with it such destruction?³⁶⁷ Even when the speaker begins to absorb the understanding of the structures of power, and to overturn them, the questions are different, but questions themselves remain: what is this heaven you speak about, sometimes to entice us, sometimes to distinguish us? Unnuth seems to be asking: we are clearly on the same journey in this country; why can’t we view progress in the same way? Why can’t we look back to the hard work of the labourers and emulate their faith in the land and their faith in commonwealth?

Unnuth wrote his poetry for a real audience (Ramyead and those who were appreciative of its fascinating, dense imagery) but also for an audience he hoped would develop: a readership interested in the way in which this newly independent nation asked and answered universal questions about life, death, and power. As of 2012, such a readership had not developed in Mauritius; Unnuth’s reknown as a writer

³⁶⁷ ‘Satiation.’ #11. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaikṭus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 14.

did not disappear, but any specificity in his writing, and the significance of his poetry, was lost in the refrain of Unnuth as ‘the Mauritian Premchand’.³⁶⁸ As Unnuth’s poetry is translated into English (not only here but in a version intended for publication), a new readership can access his works. Here, reading Unnuth as translators ourselves allowed us to see Unnuth’s work as it had not been seen for decades; in the next section, I explore what the future holds for *The Teeth of the Cactus*.

V. Mauritian Heteroglossia in the 21st Century

Unnuth’s poetry, along with Hindi poetry itself, continues to diminish in importance in Mauritius. French literature in general continues to be the most highly regarded, but in terms of social engagement, English and Kreol poetry are proving to have learned from the example of Hindi how to rise in importance. I believe now is the time to keep a close eye on newly published English and Kreol poetry to find innovative and engaged young poets.

Kreol poets have taken over as the voice of the socially engaged poet. Dev Virahsawmy, the Mouvement Militant Mauricien politician, is largely responsible for the development of Kreol as a literary language in Mauritius. In his preface to Roshni Mooneeram’s book *From Creole to Standard*, Jonathan Hope calls him a ‘language activist’. Mooneeram’s account traces Kreol’s growth, noting that ‘in light of the state’s laissez-faire policy regarding language-planning, efforts to standardise MC [Mauritan Creole/Kreol] resided to a large extent in the hands of individuals and non-governmental organizations.’³⁶⁹ In that light, Virahsawmy’s literary endeavours in Kreol cannot be given enough emphasis as both literary accomplishments and institutional developments. He began to write and disseminate both Kreol translations

³⁶⁸ Though I was told by several people that this was a common refrain, I first heard it used in the direct, non-referential sense by Balwantsing Nobutsing, summer 2010, in a private interview.

³⁶⁹ Roshni Mooneeram and Jonathan Hope, *From Creole to Standard* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2009), ix, 4.

of Shakespeare and other well-known works relevant to the political situation, and his own original plays. Noting that most of Mauritius is not able to read literature in any language, in part due to the English medium of instruction in schools in contrast with the Kreol spoken outside of official moments, Virahsawmy both hopes that Mauritians will be more successfully literate in a language they already speak, and has been providing reading material for this optimistic eventuality. As a playwright, he can put his work in the public sphere before literacy in Kreol is accomplished, much like Hindi was strengthened by plays and Bollywood films which transmitted the language aurally. His works are also published in written form by the press he started, Boukie Banane, single-handedly pouring his money into accomplishing the steps necessary to create a space for Kreol books, and also in the publishing section subsequently opened by Ledukasyon pu Travayer. Other small presses have since joined the field.³⁷⁰

Over time, writers such as Lindsey Collen joined the movement and the group Ledikasyon pu Travayer fostered such literature. While both Virahsawmy and Collen were well known before their prominence as Kreol poets (Virahsawmy as a political leader and Collen as a novelist writing in English), it is not that their fame enabled them to push the issue forward, but rather that Kreol literature, for which they had been agitating for decades, took longer to lead to fruition than their other endeavours. Indeed, their areas of prominence are, in Mauritius, inextricably linked: politics, literature, education, race, and class. Those for whom Kreol is the only language are often mixed race and usually poorer than the rest of the population. Education has been put forth as a counterweight. Some members of Ledikasyon pu Travayer, along with many who are not members, have joined Virahsawmy in agitating for Kreol

³⁷⁰ Roshni Mooneeram and Jonathan Hope, *From Creole to Standard* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2009), 47.

language education, just as Hindi literature and educational institutionalization moved hand in hand, but this effort had been slowed down by the need for a systematization of Kreol spelling and grammar. Roshni Mooneeram notes that in Mauritian Kreol, creative writing helped stimulate the standardization process, and finally the standard orthography put in place by the University of Mauritius can aid official teaching in and of Kreol texts.³⁷¹ Now that Kreol dictionaries and grammars have been written, and a publishing apparatus is in place, writers can choose to write in Mauritian Kreol and join a growing literary sphere, one that is still connected to activism in a way that Hindi is no longer. Lindsay Collen's work, especially, draws together the intertwined strands of politics, literature, education, class and activism amongst all races in her books, with *BOY* the most elegant and *The Rape of Sita* the richest.³⁷²

Unnuth is resigned to being a failure, and until translations are published, Virahsawmy, Collen, and other Kreol writers have no way of accessing Unnuth's or any other Hindi Mauritian works. However, Kreol writers interact more with the English and French literary communities in Mauritius and globally. Mooneeram notes that poetry is deeply engaged in this relationship: she writes that for Virahsawmy as a poet,

Writing poetry in MC [Kreol] within well-established literary norms is a means of creating further links between the new literature and those written in languages which have been established for centuries. This initiative aims at legitimizing his literary and linguistic work, hence is situated within the framework of the standardization process. Believing that imposing formal poetic rules releases the creative potential of language, Virahsawmy often writes within the confines of classic forms such as the sonnet. He observes, however, that the styles and forms of poetry in MC can only be the result of 'un grand metissage' (a great miscegenation)... Corpus planning in Virahsawmy's later poetry is achieved through lexical and syntactic creativity,

³⁷¹ Roshni Mooneeram and Jonathan Hope, *From Creole to Standard* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2009), 48.

³⁷² Lindsey Collen, *BOY* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004) and *The Rape of Sita* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1993).

while the various poetic genres experimented with enhance the status of MC, dismantling a linguistic and cultural diglossia within which MC could only exist in a L(ow) position in relation to French.³⁷³

Like Unnuth, Virahsawmy is not esteemed mainly as a poet, but he himself considers poetry to be a primary pursuit.³⁷⁴ On his website, his latest poems, including ‘The Alliance’, illustrate this cultural *métissage* in the mouth of a plural speaker:³⁷⁵

pater, patron, priest, pastor, pandits
all these P’s have hijacked power
to get growth to rhyme with oppression
and bayonet with fly; and nitwits
with gusto take, take, take and never give

mater, matron, miss, mother, mataji
give them that power and Mata Hari
inaugurates virginocracy

When God did sow in woman’s womb
the seed of love, that day He
announced the birth of life
that carries Linga’s and Yoni’s Alliance.

Patriarchy, no. Matriarchy, no.
We adore Linga’s and Yoni’s Alliance.

³⁷³ Roshni Mooneeram and Jonathan Hope, *From Creole to Standard* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2009), 53-54.

³⁷⁴ www.dev-virahsawmy.org, accessed 2010.

³⁷⁵ Translation my own; original:
‘Lalians’

papa, patron, prèt, paster, profeser
tousa bann P la finn ayjak pouvoir
pou fer devlopman rim ar domineer
bayonet ar labraget; tilespri
ar lapeti pran, pran, pran san done

mama, matronn, mis, maser, mataji
nek donn zot pouvoir, get Matahari
inpoz lor nou tou vazinokrasi

Kam enn zour Donie dan lakaz baba
ti sem zerm lamour, sa zour la li ti
anons nou nesans sivilizasion
ki sarye lalians Linga ek Yoni.

Ni patriyarka, ni matriyarka!
Nou ador lalians Yoni ek Linga

Religious ecumenism, the ‘we’ implies, is a part of Mauritian culture: it has become, out of diverse routes, a relatively strong fusion capable of interacting with and withstanding stronger ideologies. It seems that Kreol literature is presently being nourished by this cooperation with the official languages. For propagators of Hindi, Kreol can be seen as encroaching on a hard-won minority language space in Mauritius. Kreol literature propagation is especially an affront to those for whom Hindi is intrinsic to a reclamation of ancestry; reclaiming Kreol has been seen as, among the previously mentioned goals, reclaiming or strengthening the societal position of a black, Christian minority in Mauritius.³⁷⁶ Even though Indo-Mauritian Hindus have the demographic majority, they are sensitive to their position as last to arrive, and they are sensitive to the fact that their unwillingness to shed their ancestral religion has been a stumbling stone on the route to gaining success on European terms. At present there are no large-scale cooperative projects between leaders of the Hindi and Kreol literary spheres.

³⁷⁶ Roshni Mooneeram and Jonathan Hope, *From Creole to Standard* (Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2009), 43. See also Gaetan Duval’s *The Afro-Mauritians: an Essay* (Moka: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1985), 63, from which comes this example:

The Afro-Mauritians have never been able to publish a newspaper in which they could voice their grievances, aspirations, frustrations, and protests. This would have served as an invaluable forum for the assessment of the Afro-Mauritian thought, opinion, and culture. The Franco-Mauritians had their *Cerneen* (1832), the Tamilo-Mauritians *The Mercantile Advertiser* (1868), the Indo-Mauritians *The Hindustani* (1909), the Islamo-Mauritians *The Anjuman Islam Maurice* (1883), the Sino-Mauritians *The Mauritius Chinese Gazette* (1895) and the Creole Mauritians [here referring to the slightly more socially regarded, lighter skinned mixed-race Mauritians rather than a linguistic group] *La Balance* (1832) and *La Sentinelle* (1843). All these newspapers contributed in one way or another to the sharing of cultural views, social organisation, behaviour patterns and political affiliations. It is difficult to trace an article in the history of the press in Mauritius which sympathises with the Afro-Mauritians and the inequalities they suffered. *L’épée* which was created and edited by Joseph Coralie in 1953 was the first newspaper to have some of its articles published in the Creole language... but *L’épée* never became the mouthpiece of the Afro-Mauritians though some of its columns in Creole reflected some worries of this ethnic group.

Finally, see also Rosabelle Boswell’s examination of ‘le malaise creole’, a term that emerged after the surprising 1999 communal riots surrounding the death of Creole singer Kaya: *Le Malaise Creole* (New York: Berghahn Books), 2006.

English literature has yet to grow to the extent that Kreol has, but it, too, is on a trajectory of growth. English literature in Mauritius grew up in Indo-Mauritian circles, and continues to this day to be modestly popular; recently, writers have received greater support from the British Council. It has been mostly dominated by short stories which discuss national issues such as poverty. Indo-Mauritian women writers have done especially well in English, with the recent English *ELP Book of Mauritian Women's Writing* painting a portrait of a society dominated by alcohol-fuelled domestic violence: a picture not fully explored in the other literatures.³⁷⁷ Like Jay Narain Roy and his contemporaries in pre-Independence Mauritius, women writers in English in Mauritius today are bringing social issues to the fore through their work. As a growing field of postcolonial writing in English, research should and will surely be done into Mauritian English literature, but this thesis has demonstrated that this research will be more accurate, and more comprehensive, with an understanding of the Mauritian English literary sphere's relationship not only to the metropolitan centre of London, but to networks and relationships that would be deemed marginal. Indo-Mauritian women, the largest demographic of Mauritian English writers, are using a new language to carve out a space for themselves in a country dominated by other voices in other languages, just as Indo-Mauritians had done almost a century before. Perhaps the best way to understand the future of the Indo-Mauritian reader is to follow the growth of the Mauritian English literary sphere; translating Unnuth into English has the potential to be the start of a fruitful dialogue between the past and the present and between Hindi and English in Mauritius.

VI. *Conclusions*

³⁷⁷ *ELP Book of Mauritian Women's Writing* (Mauritius: Editions Le Printemps), 1998.

Yes, Unnuth's *The Teeth of the Cactus* writes back: in it, characters consistently fight against their exploitation on the sugarcane field. They are sweaty, bleeding, in pain, hungry, and they are describing their plight directly towards a powerful 'you'. But *The Teeth of the Cactus* not only fights cane; it fights canons, as well. Instead of continuing to marginalise Unnuth, as has been demonstrated, the thesis demonstrates that he does not position himself as marginal. To do so, my analysis has focused on the relationships of the poet to his audience, as mediated by the text, of the text to audience, as mediated by their concerns, and of the audience, via the text, to other audiences. I have found that Unnuth's collection can be more deeply understood by World Literature readers if it is not read as a response from the margins to the centre, nor as at the centre of a wholly insular Indo-Mauritian canon, but as a part of global literary networks even without previously having readers outside of its local context. Unnuth's poetry speaks directly to World Literature readers' interests in poetry which is global without losing contextual specificity, and this is a confirmation that such works exist and should be compiled, compared, and read together.

Alongside the reading of Unnuth as a World Literature poet, the English translation of *The Teeth of the Cactus* is, perhaps, the largest original contribution of this work. Neither such a reading nor such a translation has ever been done before, because local readers found sufficient resonance in the way in which Unnuth presented the labourers' struggle against exploitation. For World Literature readers, the echoes of Paz and Yevtushenko in the text will be significant. The English translation does more than present this reading to an Anglophone readership, however; with an English translation of *The Teeth of the Cactus*, Unnuth's poetry will be able to circulate more broadly in the multilingual Mauritian literary sphere and in

the Indian Ocean. During the research period for this work, the Indian Ocean emerged as a modern region worthy of study in literary studies, parallel to the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean regions. Because of the fascinating and influential sea trade, the region has always been of interest to historians and economists, and with the controversy surrounding Diego Garcia, the Indian Ocean islands have been relevant politically. The success of recent novels such as Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* and Romesh Gunasekera's *Prisoner of Paradise*, has paralleled the rise of interest in Mauritian literature. Attentions have focused, whether based on the pragmatism of her linguistic choices or the strength of her writing, on Lindsey Collen, and not only scholars of English literature, but scholars of French literature, too, are positing the existence of a regional specificity or identity in Indian Ocean literature.³⁷⁸ I've illustrated *The Teeth of the Cactus* to be engaged with both the local and global; further research may find regional engagements as well.

In *The Teeth of the Cactus*, Unnuth has put forward an idea of what World Literature can be: a literature of people using similar language and techniques for complementary political purposes, without necessarily responding only to a history which puts colonial powers at the centre. Unnuth's idea of World Literature certainly coincides with the ideas put forward by Damrosch and Moretti in that he sees it as transnational, but he also sees a purpose in this literature that has not necessarily been theorized. He sees participation in these networks as a way to retell national history without constantly encountering colonial references: Unnuth's fights the name 'coolie', but he also fights the relatively more positive stereotype of Indo-Mauritians as 'little Britishers' who would perpetuate the suffering of the many for the economic

³⁷⁸ See, especially Helen Cousins. 'Banana Rebellion: Food and Power in Lindsey Collen's *Mutiny*,' *Kunapipi*, xxxvvi: 2, 2006 and Véronique Bragard and Srilata Ravi, eds. *Écritures Mauriciennes au Féminin: Penser l'Altérité* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011).

wellbeing of the few.³⁷⁹ My thesis is about one specific thing (Unnuth's *The Teeth of the Cactus*) and one large thing: how World Literature readers should read unfamiliar texts. Unnuth's poetry answers a third, unasked question: authors may seek out writing from around the world for inspiration, but why? His question allows World Literature readers to ask: does it matter simply why writers create global networks, or simply that they do? If it matters why, what reasons do scholars expect to hear? Are the writers' reasons the same reasons that inspire World Literature scholars to read from around the world, or is there a significant difference?

Another step worth taking in this research actually covers much of the same ground, but with a different emphasis: this time, on Unnuth as a prolific writer who develops motifs throughout his work. I wanted the thesis itself to be about his second collection of poetry, because in my opinion it represents his best work, and when it to a decision between comparing the imagery in *The Teeth of the Cactus* to, for example, a poem by Rajkumari Singh, which would allow for a conversation about coolitude, or comparing an better Unnuth poem (from *The Teeth of the Cactus*) to a not-as-good one (from his earlier or later collections) which would allow the reader to trace his journey as a writer, I felt that his personal journey was less immediately relevant to a World Literature reader's concerns. If, however, the focus were to be less about readers' relationship to his work, and more about Unnuth's individual trajectory as a writer, a comparative study of his corpus could trace the ways in which the images so central to this analysis were developed and eventually discarded. Moreover, Unnuth is not merely a poet, or the writer of one novel. He has written multiple novels, short stories, articles, and is also a painter. Now that he has been presented as a relevant

³⁷⁹ Jay Narain Roy, *Mauritius in Transition* (Allahabad, 1960), 169. For a further discussion on this stereotype, see footnote on pages 23-24.

World Literature writer, there is much more that should be said about Unnuth's artistry.

This thesis began with a poem in which the speaker had lost the will to live. Reading Unnuth's poetry in the context of the Indo-Mauritian history of suffering, an overall tone of despair would have been understandable, but *The Teeth of the Cactus* is not about despair. Instead, it is about re-membering. The thesis traced how Unnuth found a new purpose in the redefinition of his identity as hyphenless and national (in the third chapter), and in the redefinition of his society as progressive (in the fourth chapter). In the fifth chapter, Unnuth redefines his world, not so much as postcolonial as completely free of colonial delineations. In 'In Accordance With Nature', Unnuth writes about the failure of a post-colonial Mauritius to escape the economic problems created by the colonial powers.³⁸⁰ In it, he does not shirk his self-appointed duty as teller of the truth about the past, but he seems to understand that only the readers of the future will fully understand that he is writing about his present, too:

history would have escaped
from the false testimony
that this present is mine

That present was not his (as explored in the fifth chapter), but this present is. Unnuth's work, though written years ago, is significant in current World Literature discourse. Who is Unnuth, such that his poetry speaks to readers finding it only thirty years later? He himself says it best in 'Wind and Wind':³⁸¹

I am that wind from which
fire
becomes even more blazing

May this work be such a wind.

³⁸⁰ 'In Accordance With Nature.' #44. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 58.

³⁸¹ 'Wind and Wind.' #53. Abhimanyu Unnuth, *Kaiktus ke Dānt* (New Delhi: Gyaan Bharati, 1982), 70.

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Appendix A: Excerpt from *Lal Pasina* (my own translation)

'He has not yet returned?' Kissan asked abruptly, arriving almost next to the two fishermen.

He received no other answer than the murmur of the river singing softly. They stood there listening to the freshness of the morning. Drops of bright dew showed themselves on the new leaves, like his thoughts, which at times flowed into an unpredictable stream. But his thoughts now remained dull and wavering in the darkness of his bereaved soul.

A cardinal perched on a tree on the other side of the river held his attention for a moment. But soon he looked away. In the dense foliage of the mango trees, the invisible birds twittered. Their trills resembled the sobs that burst inside of him, as the impatience gnawed. Dawood took from a corner of his dhoti a few tobacco leaves and crushed them to pieces in his hand. Then he rolled up the tobacco in small piece of paper and threw a glance at Dhanlal, who brought out a lighter he had made. Dawood offered a cigarette to Kissan, who refused. Dhanlal refused accordingly: it was impossible to smoke in the presence of Kissan, in the same way it would have been impossible to smoke in front of his father.

'Dhanu, you think he will not come back?' Kissan asked in a low voice.

There was a long silence, then Dawood decided to speak. 'Perhaps because of this nasty business ...'

'What business?'

Dhanlal took over. 'It appears that there were mass arrests recently. Of the one thousand labourers who gathered in the courtyard of a temple, seven hundred were arrested. '

'When did this happen?'

'The day before yesterday.'

'Were you there?'

'Thirty labourers from here were there.'

'What for?'

'To speak out against the abuses and excesses.'

'And you were not? Why didn't you tell me?'

'Next time we will take you; just let us know.'

For a few moments nothing was heard but the murmur of the river, which flowed behind them.

'How does this relate to Madan's release?' Kissan finally asked.

'Kissan, it was Madan who organised the first meeting of labourers in the temple that we built. It was the first building of its kind, and it is possible that they arrested him, right? I see two possibilities: either they decided to postpone his release as a result of this incident, or Madan joined the protesters once he was out of prison. '

'You mean he was arrested again?'

'Maybe.'

'Even before he came back?'

No, that he refused to believe. Moreover, Dhanlal was speaking nonsense. Had he not predicted the return of Madan the next day for days? So why say it wasn't true this time? No, it

was ridiculous.

They heard a noise coming from the undergrowth. A mongoose? They had focused their attention when they saw a figure approaching from the trail. Although he was still far off, they recognised his helmet as that of the foreman Anthony. In one bound, they disappeared and fled down a path that led to the village. Kissan did not utter a word. The two men wanted him to accompany them to the village.

'Zinat would love to see you,' pleaded Dawood.

'It will be a distraction for you,' insisted Dhanlal.

Kissan did no reply—he was already on the path sloping down to his cabin. In the distance, they could hear the boss's dogs barking. They were silent, then continued ... The boss was deer-hunting with his pack of howling dogs. The very ones who had shred the poor Sunuwa. He had been gathering wood in the forest when the son of Mr. Constant, hearing the warning sound of broken branches, had fired. Dogs, maddened by the smell of blood, fell upon Sunuwa and had set upon him, devouring his flesh. The daughter of Mr. Constant, touched by the plight of the widow and Sunuwa's five children, had sent them seven rupees. She had also given the police officer who wrote the report her oath that Sunuwa was solely responsible for the accident he had suffered.

Sunuwa was the man who succeeded Gautam in teaching the children the story of Rama. When Mr. Maurel, with his battalion of guards, had appropriated the land of the village, Sunuwa's told his students, smiling, 'This country belongs to you. It is the land where you were born, and where you will die. The papers of this gentleman perhaps prove that this land belongs to him, but tomorrow it will carry the mark of your feet and your labour. And that, no one can take away. It's a dream that you must cherish, awake as much as asleep.'

He did not know to what extent the children understood his message, but he told them what he thought was important. On the day of his death, Kissan tirelessly repeated these words. But even the older ones did not understand the sense behind his speech, and as for the younger ones, it was an illusion to think that they were listening. Sunuwa had also said that it was necessary to abolish the old law and replace it with a new, fairer law ...

But who would draft the new law? What would be the new text? And who would cancel the old one? Kissan was never able to answer these questions; they remained outstanding, like so many others.

Appendix B: The X Family's Language Use

The case of the X family shows a typical experience: in a family with four daughters, with two parents working lower-middle class jobs, there is not enough money to take risks in education. The two youngest daughters currently attend school and tutorials. The oldest daughter, in the top ten percent of her class in school, attended the University of Mauritius and began working the week after graduation, even though, like most Mauritian youths, both male and female, she will live at home until marriage. Much of her paycheck funds Saturday sessions for the advanced qualifications she will need to get a higher paying job in her field. The remaining daughter, just out of school, scored highest in the nation in her favourite subject, sociology. She did not get one of the thirty scholarships, however, provided for overall toppers to attend university abroad. Disdaining the overcrowded and not globally prestigious University of Mauritius, she works full time and takes correspondence courses in law with the University of London, for which she also attends Saturday tutorial sessions. Relatives have advised her to consider tutoring in sociology, and she is seriously considering doing so. While Hindi is the home language for these girls—both of the two older generations in the family speak it, and the girls understand enough to follow Indian soap operas—none can speak it well.