

Fighting Cane and Canon

Fighting Cane and Canon:
Abhimanyu Unnuth and the Case
of World Literature in Mauritius

By

Rashi Rohatgi

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CHAPTER ONE

RETHINKING THE GLOBAL IN POSTCOLONIAL POETRY

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 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.

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 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.

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 in the collection) 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 work 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 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 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 work 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 *Lonely 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 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 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 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 work, 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.

Thus far in this chapter, I have introduced briefly the three main themes of the work: 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 work given above to introduce the coming chapters.

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 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 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 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 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 Mauritian literature would not be written for a hundred years, the island's 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 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, 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 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 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 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

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.

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-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 Bhisnadev 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 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 'Satiation', which in one reading underlines the view of Indians as docile and not at all worldly workers.⁴⁹

he brings drops of sweat
 on his forehead to the field,
 labouring, sowing-
 when the blood-smear'd 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.

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 being 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*, Unnuth's most famous novel, 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 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

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 work 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* 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 Mauritianisms 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 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.

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

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 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 'rewording'; 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.⁵⁹ Marking something as 'rewording' 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',⁶⁰

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, 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)*?'⁶¹ 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