

# Beyond The Kala Pani: The Poetics of Trauma, Survival and Cultural Hybridity in The Indian Indentured Narratives in Abhimanyu Anath's Laal Pasina

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*Abstract- This paper explores the literary map of indentured servitude in Mauritius in the framework of the classical work by Abhimanyu Anath, Lal Pasina (The Sweat of Blood, 1977). This paper will examine how the radical cultural hybridity was achieved by synthesizing trauma theories, Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, and the theory of coolitude by Khal Torabully through the experience of the traumatic rupture of the Kala Pani (Black Water) crossing. Based directly on the text of Lal Pasina (here translated into English) the study suggests that the poetics of Anath transcends the story of a litany of pain and establishes the plantation as a melting pot of a strong, hybrid Indo-Mauritian identity. Historical trauma reprocessed into a claim of eternal belonging, the scenes of maritime horror, plantation cruelty, prison brotherhood and community ritual are all interpreted as an extended literary alchemy that creates enduring literary alchemy.*

*Index Terms- Kala Pani, indentured labor, Coolitude, trauma, cultural hybridity, Abhimanyu Anath, Lal Pasina, Mauritius, postcolonial literature, the Third Space, Jahaji-Bhai, Baitka.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century abolition of slavery and its replacement with indentured labour was commonly called the Great Experiment, and Mauritius became the most important laboratory in the organised recruitment of Indian workers by the British Empire. To the so-called "Coolie," the journey across the Kala Pani (the Black Water) was an ontological breakage - a disastrous loss of caste, kinship and ancestral geography. This movement was not a simple physical movement but a metaphysical parting with the self, the community and the divine order that formed the everyday life in the Indian subcontinent. Abhimanyu Anath is a rarely discussed figure in the Francophone Mauritian literary scene but serves an essential and little-deserved role. His masterpiece, Lal Pasina (The Sweat of Blood, 1977), is a classical work where the pain of the indentured labourer is transformed into a

right over the land itself. The novel begins with an epic prologue of the actual geological creation of the island via volcanic eruption and oceanic tempest - an origin, through which Anath is able to contextualise all the later human suffering as a sort of continuation of the violence in which the island was created. Out of that bloody birth, the story passes through the colonial history of the island, the coming of indentured labourers, and the intricate inner world of the main character, Kundan, who was a former soldier and was sentenced to life in the colonial prison system. This paper places the work of Anath at the nexus of the theory of trauma, the postcolonial hybrid, and this new discourse of Coolitude, which argues that his literary project achieves what we have termed a literary alchemy, or to rephrase it, the alchemy of traumatic fragments straddling into a new, hybrid, Coolie-Mauritian form of identity. More than just a mere account of victimhood, Lal Pasina offers indenture as the cauldron on which a specifically Indian Ocean subjectivity was created.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to sufficiently examine the complexity of the indentured experience as it is presented by Anath in his fiction, this study uses a three-part theoretical framework, based on trauma studies, postcolonial theory, and the poetics that is culturally specific to Coolitude.

### 2.1 Trauma and Memory: Caruth and Nora

In the context of Cathy Caruth, the trauma is an engulfing experience of sudden or catastrophic experience when the reaction to the said experience is manifested in the delayed, uncontrolled, and repetitive manifestation of hallucinations, among other intrusive experiences (Caruth, 1996). This

definition is essential to the interpretation of how the characters of Anath digest the violence of the plantation: not in a linear narrative, but in a cyclical intrusion, fragmented memory and mass ritual. In line with this, the spatial and cultural opposite is offered in the work of Pierre Nora, who coined the term *lieux de memoire* (sites of memory). In the narratives of Anath, the plantation, where there is brutal exploitation, is, ironically, the main place of memoir where the historical trauma is worked out with the help of fiction.

#### 1.1 The Third Space of Hybridity: Homi K. Bhabha.

According to the discussion of the so-called Third Space (Bhabha, 1994, *The Location of Culture*), cultural productiveness, therefore, arises out of the in-between spaces, which are neither the host culture nor the culture of origin, but rather the Third Space. The Third Space is not an abstract concept to the indentured worker in the works of Anath, but a reality to live in. They live in the middle ground between the lost India of the ancestral memory and the antagonistic, colonial Mauritian landscape they are physically transforming. New forms of culture - new languages, new rituals, new social relationships - are produced in this interstitial zone simply because the old ones can no longer support the burden of a new reality.

#### 2.2 Coolitude: the Maritime Self of Khal Torabully.

The very idea of being a sea voyager is glorified as a creative act of identity in the Coolitude concept by Khal Torabully in *Cale d'etoiles-Coolitude* (1992). In contrast to the recuperative Negritude reclamation of the pre-colonial African identity, Coolitude perceives the Indian Ocean not only as a place of trauma, but also as a place of relation - a connective tissue between Indian, African, Malagasy, and European. The Coolie in this context is not a displaced person, but a maritime subject, and this subject sets into motion a process of radical becoming when it crosses the Black Water. To adequately analyse the complexity of the indentured experience as rendered in Anath's fiction, this study employs a tripartite theoretical approach, drawing on trauma studies,

postcolonial theory, and the culturally specific poetics of Coolitude.

### III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Historical debate on indenture has been swinging back and forth on two inadequate poles. The former and led most vehemently by the seminal work of Hugh Tinker: *A New System of Slavery* (1974), were to interpret indenture as an extension of plantation slavery by juridical means, and to focus on the aspects of exploitation, coercion and abjection. The second pole, the "Success Story" of voluntary economic migration, forgets the very existence of structural violence of the system. Both structures fail to sufficiently take into consideration the subjective, interior and poeticization of the traumatic experience of the Coolie.

The main issue of this study is thus: How does the literature of Anath make use of the aestheticisation of trauma to create a hybrid identity that goes beyond the victim narrative and makes loss a perspective of a kind of territory and cultural belonging?

### IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is guided by three interrelated research questions:

1. How does the metaphor central to Lal Pasina (*The Sweat of Blood*) work both as the sign of unrecoverable trauma and as the sign of territory?
2. What is the way in which the linguistic hybridity of language is created by Anath in his prose, the mixing of Hindi, Bhojpuri, and Mauritian Creole registers, performs and represents the "Third Space" of the Indo-Mauritian culture endurance?
3. How can the passage across the Kala Pani be understood, with the prism of Coolitude, as a baptism of hybridity - an inception event that opens up new subjectivity instead of simply annihilating the old?

This study hypothesises that the stories by Abhimanyu Anath represent a continuous practice of what could be called literary alchemy; the traumatic pieces of the plantation experience are actually being reconstituted in the structure of a hybrid identity of Coolie-Mauritian. Such hybridity is not an effect of

the dilution of culture but an advanced and historically requisite manoeuvre of survival. The indentured labourer turns Mauritius into a Bhumi, a sacred motherland taken to the island by blood and hardship, literally and metaphorically bleeding into the soil of the island, making the island a site of colonial extraction.

## V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1 The Poetics of Rupture: The Kala Pani as Liminal Threshold

Anath also does not begin *Lal Pasina* with indentured workers arriving on the island but has a mythic, cosmic preface the violent birth of the island of Mauritius itself, out of the floor of the Indian Ocean. The catastrophic eruption of the island as a result of a volcanic eruption is observed by two Buddhist monks sailing between Tamraparni (an ancient Sri Lanka). The novel makes this unforgettable:

“Terrifying waves rose mountain-high before them. A sudden, pitch-black darkness enveloped the entire atmosphere. They could not see their own hands. The heartbeat quickened but could not be felt. As the boat continued to reel, both monks clasped each other's hands in that dense, invisible atmosphere. The sea around the boat seemed to boil. Lightning flashed! With it, the darkness burst open.” — Anath, *Lal Pasina* (trans.), pp. 11–12

This mythical creation scene does not happen to be ornamental. Anath starts the novel with the volcanic origin of the island, two voyagers who witness its birth, and Anath gives it a basic equation: the island is made of violence, and those who are exposed to it are devoured by it. The initial traumatic discontinuity is the sea itself. This primitivist terror is reawakened when the indentured man is taken away by the colonial period to the same waters. There is nothing incidental about the Kala Pani being dangerous; it is cosmologically dangerous. The sea, according to the Coolitude model suggested by Torabully, is also a space of relation at once, but this is what the text by Anath confirms. Even in the crisis, the two monks are holding hands in the dark. It is the initial sign of Jahaji-Bhai, ship-brotherhood, of the other side of nothingness. Anath is also keen on the further colonial history of the island. In an academic,

sweeping, archival accuracy, the novel follows the history of the island through the Dravidian navigators, the Arab traders, the Portuguese explorers, the French colonialists, and finally the British imperial conquest - each possessing it, each forsaking it, none their own. What leads to the finale of this overview is the conclusive statement:

Still, certain pages had been written in such an ink that no dust could settle upon them. And there were pages so thoroughly soaked in the blood and sweat of Indian laborers that they could not be wholly burned — and the ashes of the pages that did burn, destiny scattered like fertilizer across the fields. All that blood of history's sacrifice flowed and merged with the blood of the fields... and that suppressed history, struggling for breath beneath layers of silence — its testimony is even today given by the fragrant smell of the earth.— Anath, *Lal Pasina* (trans.), p. 13

This text is probably the most focused statement of the main thesis of the novel. The blood of the sacrifice of history becomes the blood of the fields - it is the body of the labourer, it is the body of the island, which literally becomes co-constituted. The Mauritian soil is not just a place of work, it is a palimpsest that is filled with Indo-Mauritian suffering and that suffering is what makes the greatest claim over it. It is the living testimony of the writers whose written records the archives have burned, the smell of the earth, and it is the smell of the earth that any attempt by a colonial power, however powerful, to destroy can never completely repress.

### 5.2 The Plantation as Crucible: Trauma, Resistance, and the Politics of Blood

The very centre of *Lal Pasina* is a long portrait of the colonial system of prison and plantation that was painted using the mind of Kundan, a former Indian soldier who received a life sentence after committing self-defence against a French colonist. The prison is also presented not as a confinement facility but as an intense symbol of the whole indenture system: a society of orchestrated bodies, random punishment and the planned dehumanisation of the worker. One of the most gruesome scenes in the novel is the one described by Anath concerning the prison hospital.

The circumstances are described in the most graphic manner:

The hospital had four windows in total, and they were so small that getting out through them was difficult. From time to time, a little air entered, enough that during the afternoon's oppressive heat, the guard at the door would doze off. [...] Several days without the bucket being washed, white worms would clearly become visible inside it. The jug with which one had to enter the latrine had a hole in it — just as the hospital roof had several small holes. Even in a light rain, the thatch would begin to leak and the cots had to be shifted from here to there. — Anath, Lal Pasina (trans.), pp. 26–27

In Caruthian terms, this condition is trauma as a place that will not be ameliorated - even the institution meant to heal is made an appendix of hurt. But it is not the dwelling on this degradation which is the literary genius of Anath, but the demonstration of the networks of human solidarity which develop in it. When one of his fellow inmates, Mangru, goes out to secretly make Kundan some herbal medicine using grass and leaves, and as he passes it on to Kundan in the shadows of a guard who is not paying attention, we witness the rise of a counter-order to the colonial order. The Bhojpuri folk medicine, inherited by fathers and sons, is a sort of cultural survival, which continues to exist exactly because it does not meet the colonial gaze.

The political consciousness of the prisoners is equally important as it is treated in the novel. When Rupla'al, one of the physically strongest prisoners, is discovered to be dead, almost definitely poisoned by the guards as a result of his actions against them, the prisoners hold some sort of collective grieving and opposition. The fact that Kundan demands the rites of Hindu cremation instead of burial symbolises the unwillingness to give up cultural identity, even with the extreme pressure:

Addressing Kans Mama, Kundan said: "Kans Mama, the last time too we expressed our objection to this matter. Rupla'al is also a Hindu — he cannot be buried. He must be cremated." [...] "That's fine, let preparations be made to cremate him." "Is there such a hurry? Let the doctor at least be allowed to come."

— Anath, Lal Pasina (trans.), p. 34

The fixing on cremation is not simply a matter of ritual practice - in the words of Bhabha, it is a moment of enunciation in the Third Space. The convict who demands the Hindu rituals in a South Vietnamese prison is practising cultural identity versus erasure. He is denying the colonial system the privilege to even decide on the ultimate fate of the dead. The communal prison space, similar to that of the Baitka that Anath constructed in the village of the plantation, is a place where trauma is not passively received but is recounted and disputed.

This trend is supported by the way the plantation community outside the prison walls is treated in the novel. In the evening, the women of the workers' settlement, Koosila, Pushpa, and Sandha, sit around, fan rice, and weave up stories. Their histories keep the generations alive:

She had been kept in that separate camp where ten to twenty people were dying every day. She would watch from the half-open window as those black-cloaked men carried the bodies in carts toward the cremation ground. She thought that within a few days her own corpse would also be loaded onto the cart and buried in one common pit with all the other bodies. When she found herself alive after the epidemic had passed, she was astonished. Raghusingh, treating her return as a second birth, had performed a puja to the goddess the very next day. That puja was performed in secret, yet the master came to know of it.— Anath, Lal Pasina (trans.), pp. 45–46

The mystic puja is a gesture of high cultural resistance--a renewed Indian spiritual existence against the ban on the colonial planter. This goddess worship the master had heard about, as a result of which Raghusingh was later questioned about, is exactly the type of cultural activity that Bhabha describes as functioning in the Third Space: neither exactly Indian nor allowed by the colonial regime but continuing through the fissures between them. It is also, more importantly, a group action. The sitting women holding evenings with Koosila, as the storytellers, are the custodians of collective memory -

the living Baitka upon which Anath puts the focus of cultural survival.

5.3 Linguistic Hybridity and the Living Third Space  
The linguistic plurality of the narrative texture of the story by Anath is also one of the most dramatic. The novel is mainly in Hindi but features Bhojpuri conversation, some Creole, folk songs in Awadhi, and even some pure sound of the alha oral tradition of Bihar, birha songs of longing that were sung by other prisoners in adjoining cells ("Prizonye de san buwa" — the French/Creole prison roll-call, the alha oral tradition from Bihar, the birha songs). This is not a simple variation of style; this is an actual performance of the Third Space on the page

That Bhojpuri folk song, of which Mangru gives a sample on his sickbed, when he quotes it: "Din more ohi divas bhaye aan, baat rahli mewa piyat rahni gur paan" (Those were other days, when words were spoken with sweet fruits and jaggery and pan) serves both as a certain nostalgia over the India that was abandoned and as a claim to a common cultural property, to a common oral archive that the whole barracks community could identify. The sardonic smile upon which he sings it is said not to be based on delight, but on that stinging irony with which one regards one's own self, which proves that Anath has mastered the doubleness of register: grief and continuance, loss and continuance are in the same word.

This linguistic and cultural silencing has political implications, which are expressed by the younger generation of the novel personified in the character of Kishan. Continuous interior interrogation of his own imposed passivity by Kishan is the psychological cost of the plantation system:

Was his cowardice the same as others'? His hands and feet were bound in his own thoughts just as others' were. Why? What was the reason that whenever he wanted to question those whose faces he should question, his tongue would go silent in their presence? The day he had seen with his own eyes his father dragging a load of sugarcane in place of an ox, all the questions inside him had melted and taken the shape of rage. But that rage too came out wet.  
— Anath, Lal Pasina (trans.), pp. 38–39

One of the most psychologically accurate formulae of the novel, however, is "rage that comes out wet", a description of the process of how the coercion of the plantation system permeates not just the behaviour but also the inner speech. Even the grammar of his own revolt, Kishan is unable to finish; the questions are shot into being and fall apart before he can speak of them. Such is what Caruth refers to by the inability of the traumatised subject to possess his or her own experience - the violence has taken possession of the interiors. And yet the very process of Anath narrating this interior, of giving it language, the countermove is done. The novel itself is the voice which cannot be found by Kishan.

One of the most touching moments of the novel, obviously, is connected with the relationship Kundan has with a couple of myna birds, which we can see in the prison hospital window. These, Kundan hears, were introduced to Mauritius with the indentured workers in the same ships, to guard the crops against locusts. They are, in turn, diasporic:

Kundan laughed and said: "Bravo, O myna of my country! Where your countrymen are scraping and rubbing the barren land to turn it into fields, there you too are eliminating the locusts that ravage the crops and contributing in your own way to beautifying this country." [...] In their chatter there was, for him, intimacy that was found nowhere else. He would watch the mynas for a long time and contemplate them. In their chatter there were stories for him. In them were the rivers of his village, the chatter of women at the well. All those memories of the village that he had forgotten — the greenery there, the drought there — all came rushing back.  
— Anath, Lal Pasina (trans.), pp. 28–29

The myna scene summarises the arrangement of Coolitude in an impressive manner. The bird simultaneously serves as a symbol of the homeland (Bihar) and an animal that has adjusted to its new surroundings and owns it. The love that Kundan has towards it - In Bharat I did not even dare to glance at a myna. To this place, however, I had grown to love this same bird beyond measure" - traces the psychic geography of the diasporic Indo-Mauritian: alienation to the original, and a novel sort of intimacy created by distance. A palimpsest of meaning can be found in

the song of the bird, village rivers, women at the well, drought and greenery, which are all now involved in the Mauritian landscape. The concepts of memory and belonging are not opposite to each other; on the contrary, they are inseparable, and both concepts are grounded in the soil and sky of this island.

#### 5.4 The Malagasy Brotherhood: Hybridity Beyond the Indian Diaspora

Among the most startling and conceptually important is the fact that Lal Pasina insists that the hybridity that is created in indenture does not confine itself to the borders of the Indian diaspora. The prison world of the novel introduces Kundan to long-term interaction with Malagasy prisoners, African slaves who have become part of the colonial system, and the relationships between the two are brought out with very delicate finesse. The text ends on a mordantly ironic note: Two men who are guilty of oppressing become brothers; two men who are oppressed cannot be brothers. The Malagasy captives never recognised the straight-haired, dark prisoners as their brothers.

But this is what Anath cannot accept as the last word. The way Kundan interacts with the Malagasy prisoners also develops as they learn the Hindi words to describe objects, and they learn the Creole. One of the other inmates, Gabriel, refers to Kundan as *frer*, brother in Creole, and Kundan thinks, if only, as Gabriel had told him, all workers had been brothers. This unity, which was reached over time over linguistic and racial barriers, is the forerunner of the multicultural Mauritius that Anath describes as the real legacy of the indenture period. It is specifically the vision of Torabully Indian Ocean as a relational space where new collectivities are made on the traumas of colonial displacement.

Today, seeing all those Creoles engaged in light work, Kundan would sometimes praise their courage, sometimes curse them for their laziness. Once or twice the thought had even come to him that if Indian laborers, like these Malagasy slaves, also refused to work in the fields, the condition of the masters could become pitiable. But that was not going to happen. He knew the Biharis very well. After all, he himself was one of them! A community that never tires of labour — why would they flee from the fields?

— Anath, Lal Pasina (trans.), p. 24

In this passage, in its mixture of self-consciousness, community pride, and withering comment, Anath shows that he rejects cheap heroism. Kundan is at once adoring, reproving and condemning himself. The community of the Bihari laborer which never grows weary of labour is not only a real cultural feature, but in the plantation, a kind of conspiracy in the self-exploitation. Anath maintains both senses in suspense; in this insoluble suspense, he has placed the highest intellectual level of his literary and political thought.

#### VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Lal Pasina by Abhimanyu Anath is one of the most important pieces of historical reclamations in the Indian ocean literary culture. As the passages that are analyzed in the course of this article reveal, the novel functions at several levels at the same time: mythic, historical, psychological, linguistic, and communal. It makes the trauma of indenture not something that happened safely in the past but a palimpsest, the irony in a folk song, the two diasporic myna birds who are bearing the memory of the rivers and women and drought of Bihar to Mauritius.

The intersecting arguments presented in this work have contended, based on the interlocking perspectives of the theory of trauma by Caruth, the theory of the Third Space by Bhabha, and the theory of Coolitude by Torabully, that the text by Anath is a literary alchemy whereby suffering is the source of belonging, displacement the source of rootedness, and cultural breakage the source of a new synthesis. Jahaji-Bhai relationship was not restricted merely to the caste and regional boundaries, but as the Malagasy passages show, it was also limited to the racial and linguistic boundaries. Baitka of communal memory is preserved in the forms of evening conversation of women, in secret puja, in folk songs of a deathbed, in the care a caged man takes of a myna bird. They are not consolations; they are, in the most profound level, cultural production acts. The above work of Anath ultimately endorses the fact that hybridity is the hallmark feature of the Indian Ocean identity - a Coolitude, highly inclusive, oceanic and

responsive to the rigidity of both the colonial categorisation and cultural essentialism. His pages, stained, as they are, with the blood and sweat of Indian workers, are neither a nostalgic estoppel to an imagined Indian homeland but an imaginative assertion of the multilayered world, brought into existence by indenture, despite all its cruelty.

The current discussion identifies several important directions to be followed in the further academic research: Comparative Maritime Trauma: A long term comparative study of the Indian Ocean narratives of Anath and the literature of the Middle Passage of the Atlantic especially the literature of Edouard Glissant would help not only reveal the particularities of maritime trauma in the colonial context, but also reveal the shared grammar of trauma. Ecological Indenture: An ecocritical interpretation of the way the violent culture of the Mauritian landscape - forest to sugar monoculture - models and ratifies the violent culture of the body and psyche of the labourer as described by Anath in his detailed writings about the cane fields. Gender, Indenture: A feminist reading of the women characters in the Anath corpus of Koosila, Pushpa, Phoolwanti, who have an oral narrative, folk tattooing and a hidden religious practice that forms an alternate and hardly theorised archae of resistance. Translation and the Third Space: This paper will analyze the issues and moral interests of translating multilingual, culturally dense prose by Anath, a Third Space text itself, into either English or French, and what cannot but be lost and gained in that excursion. Note on Translations: All quotations from Lal Pasina cited in this article are translated from the original Hindi by me. The passages appear in the first four chapters of the novel (pp. 11–51 of the Hindi edition). Where Bhojpuri, Creole, or Awadhi phrases appear within the Hindi text, these have been retained in transliterated form with English glosses supplied.

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