



From Indenture to Ecology: Rethinking Girmitiya Literature Through Eco-Translation

Salma Begum* and Dr Sanjib Sahoo†

Abstract

This study offers a critical engagement with Rashi Rohatgi's *Blood Red Sweat* (2023), the English translation of Abhimanyu Unnuth's Hindi novel *Lal Pasina* (1977), which chronicles the experiences of girmitiya or Indian indentured labourers. While acknowledging the significance of Rohatgi's translation, this paper calls for a re-assessment of Rohatgi's translation and by extension a re-reading of Unnuth's text through the theoretical lenses of Eco-translation and Ecolinguistics, to foreground a non-anthropocentric paradigm of translation. Such an approach is necessary because existing research on Girmitiya literature has mostly concentrated on the human narrative, overlooking the disastrous impact of one of the largest migrations of humans on the ecology of the host lands. Although both Unnuth and Rohatgi engage with the socio-economic aspects of the sugar plantation economy, yet Unnuth to a lesser and Rohatgi to a larger extent fails to address the environmental concerns present in the source text. Inspired by Michael Cronin's proposition in *Eco-Translation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene* (2017) that translation must respond to the urgencies of climate change, this paper proposes an alternative evaluative framework for the translation of fictional texts, in this case Girmitiya literature, by foregrounding the (in)visibility of ecological ramifications embedded within narratives shaped by extractivist colonial capitalism.

Keywords: Blood Red Sweat, Eco-translation, Globalisation, Girmitiya, Lal Pasina, Sugar Plantation Economy.

* PhD Research Scholar, Department of English, Tezpur University

† Faculty, Department of English, Tezpur University

Introduction

This paper examines Blood Red Sweat (2023), the English translation of Abhimanyu Unnuth's classic Lal Pasina (1977) and calls for a critical re-evaluation of translation of fictional texts, in this case, Girmitiya literature through the lenses of Eco-translation and Ecolinguistics. This (re)assessment is necessary for every initial translation for it is inherently an incomplete act marked by shortcomings— following the argument of Sharon Deane-Cox while working on Antoine Berman and P Bensimon's seminal work in the French journal *Palimpsests* (1990). It is only through “the restorative, corrective, and illuminating properties of retranslation” (3) that any translation can approximate the source text and attain a sense of completion. While acknowledging the validity of the retranslation paradigm, the study prioritizes a rigorously ecological orientation in literary translation over the pursuit of mere proximity to the source text. Prior to addressing the exigencies that necessitate such an approach, one needs to illustrate the intricate interrelation between translation and ecology, and to demonstrate the manner in which the former facilitates understanding of the dynamic interplay between humans and the environment. This paper will follow the pattern where a line from Abhimanyu Knuth's Lal Padina, the first book in his trilogy on Iritis's, or indentured laborer will be used alongside its English translation, Blood Red Sweat, rendered by Rishi Rohatgi. The first entry is the excerpt along with its transliteration and below it is the English translation by Rohatgi.

Example 1.

ST: गन्ने का रस उबलते समय हवा सौंधी गन्ध से लद जाती थी। कारखाने के काले धुँएँ से वातावरण धूमिल और बोझिल प्रतीत होने लगता था। (Unnuth 37)

(Ganne ka ras ubaltey samay hawa sondhi gandhi se lad jati he. Karkhane ke kaley dhuwe se vatavaran dhumi aur bojhil pratit hone lagta tha)

TT: When sugar cane juice is heated, a sweet scent permeates the air and black smoke escapes from plant chimneys in a dense mass. (Rohatgi 39)

Eco-translation: Even though there is a sweet smell in the wind when sugarcane is boiled in the factories by workers, the air is made dusty and heavy from the emission of smoke from the factories. (Author Translation, emphasis added)

A careful reading of the above line from the Source Text (ST) and its English translation by Rohatgi reveals the erasure of the role of humans, both the owners and the workers, in the destruction of the environment. The phrase “sweet smell permeates the air” has a positive effect on the reader as the character is shown as enjoying the sweet smell of the sugarcane in the wind. There are several similar lines in both the ST and the TT, some of which would be examined later on. While the novel vividly depicts the suffering of the girmitiyas, its passages such as this that fall short in foregrounding human agency in the environmental degradation, especially that resulting from the operations of the sugar industry. “What is needed in this translation practice is not the translator’s linguistic prowess but environmental awareness, understanding, appreciating, and empathising with nature within the bounds of ecological possibility” (You 181). Therefore, there is a need to re-read/(re)translate such lines. Through the insertion of phrases such as “even though” and “in the factories by workers,” and by substituting “becomes” with “made,” the translation would foreground the deleterious origins of the sweet-smelling wind, thereby rendering visible the human agency implicated in ecological degradation, all the while preserving the narrative’s central focus on the human saga of suffering depicted in the

novel. This strategy is analogous to Arran Stibbe's concept of "reframing", grounded in the understanding that a "frame" constitutes a narrative or cognitive schema activated by specific trigger words, while "framing" refers to the application of such schemas to structure perception across disparate domains. "Reframing" functions as a discursive intervention that disrupts prevailing conceptual patterns by deploying alternative linguistic cues, thereby enabling the rearticulation of domains of experience traditionally mediated by dominant ideologies and fixed interpretive structures (Stibbe 47-48). Such an ecologically informed approach to the re-reading/(re)translation of Unnuth's text would place the Girmitiya saga within a broader framework of ecological concerns while not taking anything away from the suffering and servitude of the protagonists. However, such reframing/re-reading/(re)translation immediately gives rise to two concerns. The first arises from the charge that Eco-translation alters the meaning of the Source Text (ST), in this case Unnuth's novel, raising critical questions regarding the permissible extent of translational intervention, and the potential resistance of authors/readers unprepared for such an ecologically reoriented rendering. The question of ethics and translation will be discussed later on in a separate section. A second, closely related concern is the need to re-read/translate literary works through an ecological lens.

The second concern must be dealt with first. The need for rereading/re-translation of literary texts can be found in the drastic changes made to the environment during the last two centuries and the aftermath of such changes felt all over the world. Naomi Klein argues that humanity is at "decade zero" of the climate crisis while governments are focused on economic growth over environmental concerns. She critiques society's ecological amnesia, and the lack of global mobilization compared to responses to other crises like wars and calls for radical, collective action (23). This amnesia can also be found in the literary sphere as pointed out by Amitav Ghosh who accuses

“literary journals and book reviews” of ignoring climate change and when it does appear in literary publication or discussion, “it is almost always in relation to non-fiction: novels and short stories are very rarely to be glimpsed within this horizon” (9). The drastic climate change has drawn the attention of translation theorists like Michael Cronin. Recognizing the urgent need to address imminent natural calamities, he advocates for a change in both our actions and our mindset regarding ecology and translation (9). This study is inspired by the growing realization that both literary and non-literary texts have often erased the specificity of nature to serve anthropocentric concerns – a phenomenon that, as Arran Stibbe demonstrates in *Ecolinguistics* (2015), much like Cronin, has historically supported the ideological needs of various social and political formations. If language plays an important role in influencing our thoughts and actions, then translation/re-translation is perhaps one of the ways of raising ecological concerns and awareness through language. Such an approach would have to naturally prioritize and make selective choices as it is impossible to fully preserve every element of the source text due to the focus on raising ecological consciousness. This brings us to the question of ethics and translation as mentioned above.

Translation and Ethics

Eco-translation is one of the latest paradigm shifts in the discipline of Translation Studies which has seen several such shifts over the past half a century. As mentioned earlier, this increased interest in Eco-translation is primarily due to the consequences of human actions and its impact on nature. However, very few attempts have been made to apply Eco-translation in practice. One of the main reasons being the concern of changing the meaning of the Source Text (ST). The extent to which a translator may alter a text, the preservation of its originality in the context of Eco-translation, and the potential resistance from authors or readers together raise critical

concerns for an ecologically informed translation practice. Such questions lead us to the question of ethics in Eco-translation in particular and translation in general.

Translation Studies, influenced by almost exclusively Western tradition, focused, at least, in the early stages primarily on linguistic and technical aspects of translation. The impact of Biblical translation on Western translation tradition meant that ethical considerations were often implicit, with translators expected to faithfully convey the meaning of the source text. The cultural turn in translation studies involves a shift in focus from merely linguistic or technical concerns to the exploration of the cultural dimensions of translation. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi in their seminal work *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (1999) expose the underlying question of authority over a text, highlighting how the rise of printing and the emergence of the concept of ownership brought into focus the translator's rights and agency in relation to the original work. The conceptual discrepancy between translation and so-called originals is embedded in our epistemological frameworks and gains further significance when considered alongside the historical emergence of the "original" during early colonial expansion, a period marked by Europe's appropriation of territories beyond its borders (2).

One of the most important trends in recent times is where the focus has shifted to the translator as Lawrence Venuti emphasises in *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995). Venuti claims that the translator is rendered invisible and describes the strategies through which they are made. The translated text is always taken as a second-order representation of an original. The translator, therefore, goes through a process of self-annihilation and makes himself invisible and marginalised in the process. However, meaning is "always differential and deferred, never present in original unity" (Venuti 17-18). Therefore, plurality of meaning and complexity is inherent in every interpretation of the

text. The ethics of activist translation and interpretation is central to this argument, since Eco-translation, like Ecocriticism, involves activism aiming for social change. The translator intentionally and explicitly gears towards social change and disruption of existing power dynamics/structures (Boeri and Luchner 245-46). One can cite the following words of Maria Tymoczko to defend Eco-translation.

[Eco-]Translators must make choices: they cannot capture all aspects of a source text, and their choices establish a place of enunciation, as well as a context of affiliation. Because of isomorphisms of language and asymmetries of culture, because meaning is both open and overdetermined, because texts make contradictory demands that cannot all be simultaneously satisfied (say, the demands of complex content and spare form), and because the information load associated with a source text is excessive, among other reasons, [Eco-]translators must set priorities for their translations. They must make choices about what to translate and what to silence. (453)

Review of literature

This paper has taken up the translation of a classic by Abhimanyu Unnuth (1937-2018) for close reading because he is one of the well-known authors writing on the *girmitiyas*.ⁱ His works deal with the larger community of Indian labourers relocated to Mauritius, under indenture, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to work in the sugarcane plantations due to the shortage of labour after the abolishment of slavery in 1833. His trilogy – *Lal Pasina* (1977), *Gandhi ji Bole The* (1984) and *Aur Pasina Behta Raha* (1993) – tracing the history of three generations of *girmitiyas* encompassing the ship journey crossing the ocean or *kala pani* (lit. black water) ranks among his well-known works. *Lal Pasina* depicts three generations of

girmitiyas, namely, Kundan/Devanand, Kissan and Madan as they struggle to survive and rise above their wretched lives.

The term “girmitiya” comes from ‘girmit,’ a mispronouncing of the word ‘agreement’, referring to nineteenth century and early twentieth century indentured labour from Northern India to the sugar colonies in the Caribbean and Asia Pacific regions. Though the agreement was for five years only and extended for another term, indentured labourers, mostly from lower castes/class, were a little better than slaves and most of them could never return. One of the largest mass movements in history, estimated to have 1.3 million people, and marked by issues such as displacement, alienation, culture shock etc., has been the focus of increasing attention in academic circles (Lal 1985; Dabydeen & Samaroo 1996; Kale 1998; Bharadwaj & Misrahi-Barak 2002; Carter and Torabully 2002; Mishra 2007; Kishore 2010; Kumar 2013, 2017; Rohatgi 2014; Dabydeen, Kiladeen and Ramnarine 2018; Pande 2020; Singh and Chapparban 2023)ⁱⁱ. However, even this increased attention to girmitiyas is negligible when compared to the visibility of the diaspora that had migrated to UK, USA, Canada and represented in works produced by Anglophone Indian diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and others. This body of literature has dominated academic circles, particularly postcolonial studies while the literature written by girmitiyas or on them by their descendants have not garnered much interest till recently.

Indian intellectuals of the diaspora (Appadurai, Radhakrishnan and Bhabha, among many others) presume that the lives of the Indian NRIs (the ‘new’ diaspora of ‘non-resident Indians’) constitute the self-evidently legitimate archive with which to explore histories of diasporic subjectivities. They have also tended to presume that the ‘new’ presents itself as the dominant (and indeed the more exciting) site for purposes of diasporic comment. (Mishra 4)

Vijay Mishra points out the distinction between the “old” Indian diaspora i.e., the *girimityas* and the new Indian diaspora. The first or “early modern, classic capitalist or, more specifically, nineteenth-century indenture” “occupy spaces in which they interact by and large with other colonized peoples with whom they have a complex relationship of power and privilege as in Fiji, South Africa, Malaysia, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam” (Mishra 3). The “new” diaspora or “late modern or late capitalist”, on the other hand, “traverse a different kind of topography” and “have entered metropolitan centres of Empire or other white settler countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA as part of a post-1960s pattern of global migration” (Mishra 3). The present call for Eco-translation, thus, seeks to enrich the field of Indian diasporic studies by drawing attention to works not originally written in English and serves as “a critique of the postmodern trend towards collapsing diasporic (and historical) differences” between the *girimityas* and the new Indian diaspora (Mishra 4). This paper examines select excerpts from the Source Text (ST) and Target Text (TT) while proposing alternatives of the same through the ecological perspective.

Eco-translation

As mentioned earlier, Translation Studies has been influenced by the ecological turn in academic disciplines, particularly the rise and rapid progress of the field of Ecocriticism. Inspired by works like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) and building on “earlier environmental scholarship in Romanticism and 19th-century American Studies, focusing on themes like regionalism and landscape aesthetics” (Felluga 97), Ecocriticism emerged as a distinct field in the last part of the previous century. Viewed initially as more practical than theoretical, Ecocriticism “has evolved by incorporating various theoretical frameworks such as Cultural Materialism, poststructuralism, phenomenology, Cognitive Studies, postcolonialism, and feminism . . . [giving] rise to new hybrid fields like eco-feminism, eco-imperialism,

eco-phenomenology, eco-semiotics, and postcolonial ecocriticism” (Felluga 97). The strong political orientation, connecting to global environmental crises and advocating for green politics and conservation, of Ecocriticism aligned perfectly with Eco-translation which sought to prioritize conveying ecological themes from source to target texts, potentially fostering ecological awareness and action over strict fidelity to the Source Text. Literary works often reflect in oblique ways the environmental issues, with pollution and environmental damage serving as prominent themes, intertwining humanity with history, nature, and urban settings. Translators face the challenge of preserving these ecological elements when transferring texts to new cultural contexts.

Michael Cronin’s *Eco-translation: Translation and Ecology in the Age of the Anthropocene* (2017) deals for the first time at length with the intersection of translation and environmentalism, examining how translation practices can contribute to better understanding and building a richer and sustainable future. Cronin borrows the term “Eco-translation” from Clive Scott, who used it for the first time at a lecture given in the University of Exeter in 2015 and defines it as covering “all forms of translation thinking and practice that knowingly engage with the challenges of human-induced environmental change . . . how to comprehend the agents and objects of this change” (2). He further argues that translators have a responsibility of adopting an ecological perspective while translating and creating awareness in an age of the Anthropocene – “the new geological era of human-induced climate change” (Cronin 3) and the shift of humans from biological to a geological agent. Human history can no longer remain indifferent to the history of the planet. From this awareness comes the need to develop a post-anthropocentric identity which affects all human activities, including translation. Cronin goes on to discuss the situation of the translator which he says is invisible and needs recognition not just of his work but also of the process (9-10).

Since Cronin failed to lay out a clear-cut framework or strategy for Eco-translation of a text, the application of Eco-translation remains an emerging field. A few scholarly contributions like Rosanne Klaver's unpublished MA thesis, *Preserving Ecologically Beneficial Texts: Towards an Applied Approach to Ecotranslation* (2018), Hannah Bradley's article, 'Rumours of Nature: An Ecotranslation of Ulrike Almut Sandig's "so habe ich sagen gehort"' (2021) and Chengcheng You's "Who Speaks for Nature? Genre, Gender and the Eco-translation of Chinese Wild Animals" (2022) have begun to explore its practical implementation. Both Klaver and Bradley ground their analyses in the tripartite framework of Eco-translation proposed by Guillermo Badenes and Josefina Coisson (2015), employing it as a theoretical foundation for their respective case studies. Building upon the methodological precedents established by these works, this paper revisits and retranslates Lal Pasina, with a particular focus on the silencing of the natural world in previous translation, despite its prominent and agentive presence in the source text. Badenes and Coisson give three possible approaches for Eco-translation i.e., (a) rereading and retranslating literary works where the voice of nature was silenced in translation; (b) translating works that present an ecological vision and have not yet been translated; (c) and translating via manipulation works that do not originally present an ecological vision with the aim of creating a new, now ecological, text (362-65). Sanjib Sahoo has also used this model in his unpublished paper 'Greening the *Rāmāyaṇa*: An Eco-translation Perspective on the Translation(s) of Sabin Alun, the Karbi *Rāmāyaṇa*'.

This study also borrows from Arran Stibbe (2015), the useful concept of "stories we live by" which determine how one perceives the world. Stibbe stresses how Ecolinguistics analyses language from an ecological perspective to create new stories to live by while exposing and resisting damaging stories and contributing to the search for new stories depending on the ecosophy of the

analyst. It can play a major role in the reinvention of society as language shapes our ideologies and actions and draw attention to discourses and practical application of language to stories which appear to be ecologically destructive or alternatively to seek out or promote discourses that will help protect and preserve the ecology (Stibbe 5).

Abhimanyu Unnuth's *Lal Pasina* is a text about the plight of the *girmitiyas* – indentured labourers brought to work in sugarcane plantations between the 1830s to 1910s from Northern India and were taken to Mauritius, Natal, Surinam, Fiji, and British Guiana – and their struggle towards a better life and freedom. But Unnuth's narrative fails to highlight the fact that the exploitation of the *girmitiyas* went side by side with a policy of rapacious exploitation of natural resources. His narrative of human suffering fails to convey fully the manner in which the South Asia have been incorporated in the global capitalist economy based on the ruthless policy of "extractivism" which worships growth, focuses on ends (products), and obscures the means that produce those ends, like energy, fossil fuels, or humans (Cronin 33). It is in the context of "extractivism, sacrifice zones, and liquefaction of nature", that Eco-translation becomes important (Cronin 46). This paper proposes to foster and enhance ecological consciousness by drawing attention to the use of language which appears to be ecologically destructive and alternatively to search or promote discourses that will help protect and preserve the ecology and also broaden the scholarship of diasporic studies, which has earlier been anthropocentric, by adding the environmental perspective.

The following analysis examines selected passages from the English translation of *Lal Pasina*, exploring how they may be critically re-read and (re)translated through an ecological lens, thereby illuminating the text's latent ecological stance and articulating the rationale for privileging such an interpretive and translational approach.

The Human Role in Destruction:

The excerpt at the beginning of the paper already reflects how the human agency can be recovered in the destruction presented through translation. There are several instances where the author or the translator has erased the human agency.

Example 2.

ST: ईख के खेत ठीक सामने थे। वहाँ की हरियाली स्वतन्त्र थी। कुन्दन की चारपाई खिड़की के पास होने के कारण उसकी आँखें उस दुर्लभ स्वतन्त्रता को घूरा करतीं। कुछ वर्ष पहले यह हरियाली वहाँ नहीं थी। सभी कुछ देखते-ही-देखते हो गया था। (Unnuth 16)

(Eikh ke khet thik samne the. Wahan ki hariyali swatantra thi. Kundan ki charpai khirki ke pass hone ke karan uski akhein us durlabh swatantrata ko ghura karti. Kuch varsh pehle yeh hariyali wahan nahi thi. Sabhi kuch dekhte hi dekhte ho gaya tha.)

TT: From his bunk in the prison infirmary, Kundan looked out onto the lush green. It had not been a long time, but the plantations had wholly changed the landscape. (Rohatgi 21, emphasis added).

Eco-translation: From his bunk in the prison infirmary, Kundan looked out onto the lush green. It had not been a long time, but the plantations had wholly destroyed the beautiful landscape that existed earlier. (Author Translation, emphasis added)

Here, the Hindi sentence “Kuch varsh pehle yeh hariyali wahan nahi thi. Sabhi kuch dekhte hi dekhte ho gaya tha” does not show the ecological impact that the plantation industry had on the landscape. Even though in the English translation the addition of the word “plantation” has made the role of plantation in changing the landscape clear, yet it can be made more specific

by substituting the term “changed” with the term “destroyed” and adding terms like “beautiful” and “existed earlier” foregrounds the destructive impact of plantation culture.

Substituting genus for species/ giving wrong names:

Since the exact names of plant/animal species help to increase the salience by conjuring vivid images in the reader’s mind, translating these names requires a lot of careful work particularly in cases where there may not be equivalents in the target language. Very often, the translator substitutes the name of a species with a general name, thereby decreasing the salience of the species. While the translator Rohatgi has done justice in some places, in other places she has not given the correct names of the species. For instance:

Example 3.

ST: अभी बहुत दिन नहीं हुए थे। उस दिन वह गेंदे के पौधे रोप रहा था। अभी तो गेंदे के उन पौधों में पहले फूल भी नहीं आए थे। एक आदमी पगडण्डी चढ़ता हुवा ऊपर आ गया था। (Unnuth 185)

(Abhi bohut din nahi huye the. Us din woh gende ke podhe rop raha tha. Abhi to gende ke unn podhon mein pehle phul bhi nahi aye the. Ek admi pagdandi chadhata huwa upar aa gaya tha)

TT: A few weeks later, Kisan was busy planting dandelions in front of his cabin when a man appeared (Rohatgi 173).

Eco-translation: A few weeks later, Kisan was busy planting marigolds. *Those marigold plants hadn’t even flowered yet.* He climbed up the steep path/ trail. (Author Translation, emphasis added)

Example 4.

ST: मूँगफली के पौधों की जड़ में तीतरों ने बिल बना दिए थे। (Unnuth 245)

(Moongphali ke podhon ki jard main titaro ne bill bana diye the)

TT: Partridges had pecked at the roots of pistachios . . .
(Rohatgi 225, emphasis added)

Eco-translation: Partridges had pecked at the roots of peanut plants. (Author Translation, emphasis added)

In the above examples, the names of the flowers or plants have been wrongly translated. In Example 3, we can see that ‘*gende*’ has been translated as ‘dandelions’, whereas the correct name is ‘marigold.’ Similarly, in Example 4, ‘*moongphuli*’ has been translated to ‘pistachios’, which should have been ‘peanuts.’ Rohatgi has also dropped out the sentence “अभी तो गेंदे के उन पौधों में पहले फूल भी नहीं आए थे।” which may be because it seems like an unnecessary sentence yet such details about the plants should not be ignored, even if it feels like they do not add any value to the human story. Apart from such wrong translations and omissions, there are also the erasure of species as evident from the examples given below.

Example 5.

ST: पहाड़ के काफी ऊपर तक देवदारु के पेड़ थे, जो बहुत घनी दीवार का काम कर रहे थे। (Unnuth 183)

(Pahad ke kafi upar tak devadaru ke ped the, jo bohot ghani deewar ka kaam kar rahe the)

TT: The trees growing on the mountainside sheltered him from view. (Rohatgi 171)

Eco-translation: The cedar trees growing on the mountainside sheltered him from view. (Author Translation, emphasis added)

Example 6.

ST: गौतम राव का बेटा जामुन के डाली पर बैठा जोर से गाकर लोगो के हौसला को बढ़ा रहा था I (Unnuth 245)

(Gautam Rao ka beta jamun ke daali par betha jor se gaakar logo ke hosla ko barha raha tha.)

TT: Sitting on a branch, Gautam's son sang out loud to encourage those who worked. (Rohatgi 224)

Eco-translation: Sitting on a branch of a malabar plum tree, Gautam's son sang out loud to encourage those who worked. (Author Translation, emphasis added)

In both these examples, one finds that even when the author had used exact names of trees (debbaru) and (jamun), it was erased during translation by Rohatgi. Language has the power to translate the existing biological diversity into more specific terms instead of erasing or ignoring them when equivalent terms are not found. While both Unnuth and Rohatgi can be critiqued for a lack of eco-vision, and although the source text may be manipulated to some extent as Badenes and Coisson suggest (362-65), it is difficult to overlook the significant lapses in Rohatgi's translation, particularly evident in the above cited examples of omissions and misnaming. Such erasure of plants and animals as may have served the ideological purpose of different social and political formations, but in the present times, there is a need to reverse this destruction of language. From an ecological perspective, Unnuth's text suffers from the erasures of specificity creating "blandscapes" which can be removed with specific places, names, and vocabulary in place of large generic units and an attempt should be made to situate them in real-time

by creating a timeline. Through this strategic move, there will be a shift from the ideology of ‘blandscape’ to an ideology of regeneration. “. . . to use language well is to use it particularly: precision of utterance as both a form of lyricism and a species of attention” (Macfarlane 11). Roger Deakin talks about the necessity to “bring people not to just think of ‘trees’ as they mostly do now, but of each individual tree, and each kind of tree” (qt. Macfarlane 10-11).

Renaming the ‘blandscape’:

Through Eco-translation, the translator can rename the places that have remained un-named both in the ST and Rohatgi’s translation which can save them from lexical abandonment or what MacFarlane calls ‘blandscape’ (23).

Example 7

ST: जब वे लोग...उस दूसरी कोठी से इस इलाके में आए थे, उस समय किसान दस-ग्यारह का रहा होगा ... उसके पार्श्व की पहाड़ी तो उसी समय से उसे मोहे हुए थी। ... अगर उसकी बस्ती नदी के करीब और पहाड़ी के एकदम नीचे होती तो कितना अच्छा होता! (Unnuth 39)

(Jab woh log . . . us dusri kothi se is ilake me aye . . . uss samay Kisan das gyarah ka raha hoga . . . uske pass ki Pahari toh usi samay se use mohe huyi thi . . . Agar uski basti nadi ke karib aur Pahari ke ekdum niche hota toh kitna acha hota!)

TT: He was twelve years old when his parents had left the village where he was born to come here. It was only four years later that Kissan had discovered the river...the mountain that stood in the background was beautiful. Kissan, since that day, often asked why the village hadn’t been built there. (Rohatgi 41)

Eco-translation: Kisan must have been eleven or twelve years of age when they had moved from the other house to Triolet . . . The Peiter Both Mountain (Mudiya Parvaat) had attracted him since then . . . If his village had been near this river Tombeau and close to the hills, how wonderful it would have been! (Translation ours, emphasis added)

Example 8.

ST: मालगासी कैदी जाते रहे, कुछ मालाबार कैदी भीतर आनेवाले थे। ... लेकिन मालाबार नाम से भारतीयों को कैद के भीतर पाकर उसे जितनी हैरानी हुई भी, उतना ही हर्ष भी। (Unnuth 25)

(Malagasy kaidi jatey rahe, kuch Malabar kaidi bhitari ane wale the . . . lekin Malabar naam se Bharatiya ko kaid ke bhitari paakar usey jitni hairani hui bhi, utna hi harsh bhi)

TT: And when they departed, other prisoners took their place: mostly Indians from various provinces but all called Malabars . . . (Rohatgi 28)

Eco-translation: And when they departed, other prisoners took their place: mostly Indians from various provinces such as Awadh, Chota Nagpur, Bihar, Agra, Oudh etc. but all called Malabars. (Translation ours, emphasis added)

The author, Unnuth describes the landscape in general terms such as ‘river’, ‘mountain’, forest’, etc., and avoided naming any of the places specifically or placing them in a particular timeline. In Example 7, we can replace the “blandscape”, by providing the places with specific names in place of large generic units. Since the text is inspired by the author’s family history, we can use the author’s birthplace, i.e., Triolet to name the localities such as the rivers and the mountains. The translator could name the mountain, for e.g. the Peiter Both Mountain, which is also known as Mudiya Pahar, shaped like the head of a man, has a very interesting folktale related to it. Similarly, in Example 8,

the translator can use the name of various provinces from where the girmitiyas migrated. Through this strategic move, there will be a shift from the ideology of blandscapes to an ideology of regeneration.

Renaming marginalised characters and giving them dialogues/ active speech:

The absence of names or generalised names of characters from the other marginalised groups in Lal Pasina can be substituted with proper names to increase their salience.

Example 9.

ST: मालगासी था वह काला परिचारक, जिसने उसके पास पहुँचकर उसके खयालों को झिंझोड़ दिया। (Unnuth 18)

(Malagasy tha veh kaala paricharak, jisne uske pass pohunchkar uske khayalo ko jhinjor diya.)

TT: He observed the Malagasy servant, a big, beefy woman . . . (Rohatgi 23)

Eco-translation: He observed the Malagasy servant, a big beefy woman . . . named Andria. (Translation ours, emphasis added)

Example 10.

ST: रेमो साहब के थक जाने पर बगल में आ खड़े हुए रामजी सरदार ने कहार को लात से पीठ के सहारे उलट दिया था। वह निश्चल था। एक-दूसरे मालगासी सरदार ने उसे पेट के सहारे कर दिया था। (Unnuth 147)

(Remo Sahab ke hath ke thak jane par bagal mein aa khare huwe Ramji sardar ne kahar ko laath se pith ke sahare ulat diya tha. Woh nischal tha. Ek dusre malagasy sardar ne use pet ke sahare kar diya)

TT: He whipped the man with a vengeance and then Raymond and Ramjee approached the man, who was lying face down. With one foot, Ramjee turned him on his back. He remained unconscious . . . Another foreman turned him on his stomach. (Rohatgi 137, emphasis added)

Eco-translation: He whipped the man with a vengeance and then Raymond and Ramjee approached the man, who was lying face down. With one foot, Ramjee turned him on his back. He remained unconscious . . . Razafison supervisor turned him back on his stomach. (Translation ours, emphasis added)

Example 11.

ST: पर किसी से कुछ नहीं हो सका था क्योंकि दो सिपाही क्रिओली में गालियाँ देते हुए सामने आ गए थे। (Unnuth 19)

(Par kisi se kuch nahi ho saka tha kyunki do sipahi creole me galiya dete huwe samne aa gaye.)

TT: The other prisoners looked on in silence, and no one had the audacity to rescue their comrade. (Rohatgi 23)

Eco-translation: However, no one had the courage to do anything because two soldiers came forward and started shouting in Creole, “bouss to liki, Taler mo Kass to liki/fees.” (Translation ours, emphasis added)

The author while highlighting the marginalised lives of the *girimityas* and their struggles in *Lal Pasina*, knowingly or unknowingly, marginalised the other non-European people. Unnuth uses the collective noun for individuals of these groups and deprives them of a name or identity. In Example 9, there is no description of the servant, and the gender is male in *Lal Pasina*. Rohatgi adds personal details of the servant making her singular, not an anonymous mass, but she has not given her a

name which can also be added to increase the salience. In Example 10, the translator can add proper names in place of the collective noun and thus in a way provide them with an identity. In Example 11, reported speech has been used in the text which is a strategy of making the marginalised characters invisible. Hence, there is a need to redeem such erasure in translation which can be achieved by changing reported speech into active speech, thereby, recovering the minority voice. Unnuth's novel subscribes to the ideological view of settlers, that the host country or "non-European lands inhabited by indigenous people or wildlife . . . [are] 'spaces', 'unused', 'underused' or 'empty' (Plumwood 53) and made fertile and productive by the hard labour of the settlers, in our case girmitiyas.

They [girmitiyas] could no longer consider Mauritius to be a foreign land after all that sweat and blood. If the country was now flourishing, fertile, and rich, it was thanks to the arms of labourers who had contributed to its prosperity. And did it not belong to them a little? 'The pride of knowing that this land is ours is worth a few difficulties,' said Kissan. 'We have suffered to make it more beautiful and now it's time to reap the fruit of our efforts'. (Rohatgi 101)

Here the use of words like "flourishing, fertile and rich" makes it seem as if the plantations or the human intervention by the girmitiyas was beneficial to the environment. The idea that by changing what was once a "barren" land, they have done a favour to the land and so they see themselves as owners/or that they should be rewarded for enriching the land. Several questions arise from such an ideology. Was the existing ecology not "flourishing" before human beings took it on themselves to change the landscape? How is it "rich" now? Who is benefitting from the present crops? We are aware of the extinction of the dodo bird by the year 1861 due to deforestation, hunting and the introduction of endomorphic species by the Dutch soldiers in the seventeenth century. This loss had affected the ecology of

Mauritius as most of the native fruits disappeared since no other bird was large enough to swallow their seeds. James Ashworth (2023) gives a list of other animals like saddle-backed Mauritius giant tortoise, the domed Mauritius giant tortoise, the Mauritian giant skink, the Round Island burrowing boa, the small Mauritian flying fox and the snail *Tropidophora carinata* doomed due to human intervention. Eco-translation is a corrective to this view while not taking away anything from the traumatic history of the girmitiyas. In fact, Eco-translation would encourage a broader understanding of the girmitiya experience and the history of these post-colonial lands.

Conclusion

To sum up, there is an urgent need for re-translation of texts like *Lal Pasina* to tell the narratives around exploitation, not just of the girmitiyas but of “small communities” (Rymer 2012) present in the novel. Cronin agrees with Ross Rhymer that without translation, the voices of all these people will forever be silenced. The right to translation is more of a broader ecological struggle as the silencing of human voices and the erasure of nature go hand in hand (147-48). Re-reading/(re)translation of girmitiya literature highlights not merely the rich historical and cultural history of the indentured labourers but brings to the notice of the Western powers whose actions had brought about anthropogenic changes in these regions whose effect continues till this date. Thus, the proposed Eco-translation would not only help to push Unnuth and other girmitiya authors into the postcolonial canon but also expose the harmful ideology of global capitalism which has survived in the prevailing shibboleths of unlimited economic growth built on dominion over natural and human resources.

We reiterate once again that giving precedence to ecological considerations might “conflict with other areas of attention that the translator may want to preserve in the

translation, such as style and internal cohesion” (Klaver 39) and may result in a different target text. If classics like Tolstoy’s War and Peace can be translated and retranslated into English, several timesⁱⁱⁱ over the last hundred years then surely, Abhimanyu Unnuth’s classic Lal Pasina deserves one more translation.

End notes

- i. Unnuth, a descendant of girmitiyas in Mauritius, began working in sugarcane fields at the age of twelve. Despite limited formal education, mostly acquired at home and in local community halls, he became a teacher and renowned writer, earning the nickname “the Premchand of Mauritius” for his resonance with the working class. Influenced by Munshi Premchand, Unnuth viewed fiction-writing as a form of resistance. With over sixty novels and various prose, poetry, and essays, he was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship in 2014 for his significant impact on Indian literature.
- ii. Brij V Lal’s *Kunti’s Cry: Indenture Women in Fiji* Plantation (1985); Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji (2000); *Mr. Tulsi’s Store: A Fijian Journey* (2001); Bittersweet: The Indo-Fijian Experience (2004); On the Other Side of Midnight: A Fijian Journey (2005). David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo, ed. *Across the Dark Waters: Ethnicity and Indian Identity in the Caribbean* (1996); Madhavi Kale’s *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor Migration in the British Caribbean* (1998); Ashutosh Bhardwaj and Judith Misrahi-Barak (ed.) *Kalapani Crossings: Revisiting 19th Century Migrations from India’s Perspective* (2002); Marina Carter and Khal Torabully’s *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora* (2002); Vijay Mishra’s *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing*

the Diasporic Imaginary (2007); Ashutosh Kumar's Anti-Indentured Bhojpuri Folk Songs and Poems from Northern India (2013); *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920* (2017); Rashi Rohatgi's *Fighting Cane and Canon: Abhimanyu Unnuth and the Case of World Literature in Mauritius* (2014); David Dabydeen, Maria del Pilar Kaladeen and Tina K. Ramnarine (ed.) *We Mark Your Memory: writing From the Descendants of Indenture* (2018); Amba Pande (ed.) *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora* (2020); Neha Singh and Sajaudeen Chapparban (ed.) *Literature of Giritiya: History, Culture and Identity* (2023).

- iii. Tolstoy's monumental *War and Peace* has been translated into English by Clara Bell (1886), Nathan Haskell Dole (1889), Constance Garnett (1904), Leo Wiener (1904), Aylmer and Lousie Maude (1922-23), Rosemary Edmonds (1957), Ann Dunnigan (1968), Anthony Briggs (2005), Richard Peaver and Larissa Volokhonsky (2007) and Daniel H Shubin (2020)

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