Precarity in Culture

Precarity in Culture:

Precarious Lives, Uncertain Futures

Edited by

Elisabetta Marino and Bootheina Majoul

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FOREWORD

TABISH KHAIR

I am writing this foreword a few weeks after the tragic attack on Salman Rushdie by a knife-wielding fanatic, the son of Lebanese immigrants to USA. News reports depict the assailant as a "quiet man", who had read only a couple of pages of *The Satanic Verses*, and who appears to have been radicalized during a trip to Lebanon in 2018. Rushdie, who suffered serious injuries, has luckily survived, though it is reported that he might have lost an eye.

Many of us who have followed the Rushdie matter for years had feared that something like this would happen. While talking about it a couple of years ago, I had noted that Rushdie will always remain vulnerable to the individual fanatic. His existence was, in a literal sense, precarious. Actually, what surprised me was the fact that many people around Rushdie did not seem to realize how vulnerable he was, even as many people around him, and Rushdie himself, had not realized, when *The Satanic Verses* was published, that there would be a major Islamic reaction to the novel. True, without Ayatollah Khomeini's desire to posit himself as the leader of the Muslim world, the reaction would not have assumed the institutionalized dimensions that it did. But any Muslim, even a non-religious one like me, who had lived in ordinary Muslim circles could have predicted a major reaction.

Not all the reasons for it were religious, or at least not solely religious. They were mixed up with political, social and class resentments. Some of the people reacting to Rushdie considered themselves, with reason at times, to occupy a precarious position in the world: they felt, rightly or wrongly, that their cultures, nations, societies and religions were under assault by an empowered West, and Rushdie was, rightly or wrongly, associated with that West by them.

Even at a personal level, we can see how Rushdie, despite belonging to a very affluent class, remained vulnerable – at the hands of people like his assailant, who definitely did not come from the same class. One cannot even

say that Rushdie, despite his upper-class background, did not live a very precarious existence after the fatwa was issued against him. One also cannot say that an ordinary coloured or a Muslim immigrant in the West does not often lead a precarious existence, at least in terms of job security and social acceptance. This sense of precarity is enlarged when the immigrant also connects to non-Western spaces that are seen, rightly or wrongly, as suffering from centuries of Western dominance.

Or, let us look at words: Rushdie's speech was made precarious by the Islamic threat, and it remains precarious. But many religious Muslims, including those who sadly did not object to the attack on Rushdie, feel that their speech is precarious too in a world that largely turns a deaf ear to their complaints, a blind eye to the sufferings in their nations. There almost seems to be a conflict of precariousness, of vulnerability, in the world, and we are often made to choose one or the other side in that conflict.

Sometimes, this choice seems necessary. For instance, I have no doubt which 'side' I choose in the Rushdie matter despite the fact that I do look at authors like Rushdie from a position of class suspicion: their version of my world does not strike me as always convincing, though of course they can only write what they see or imagine. But my support for Rushdie, and for Rushdie's right to full freedom of speech, remains unwavering. It is not just that I find the notion of punishment for a 'blasphemy' totally indefensible, for it posits faith as a legal fact, and that is untenable. Even more than that, one needs to insist on the human right of a person, whether poor or rich, to live in safety, and with full freedom of movement and speech.

This, however, is clearer to me, because I have always enjoyed all such human rights, than it would be to a person who has fled a war-ravaged country, and probably not been easily allowed to cross some national borders. Or a person who relates personally to suffering people from such riven spaces. What right to life, he might ask? What freedom of movement? What freedom of speech? The fragility of his situation, which is a kind of precarity, might well make him vulnerable to hate – and especially hate for those who seem to him to enjoy far greater scope of life, movement and speech.

I started with this example to stress the fact that we live in a world riven with precarity. I have no desire to get into an academic discussion of precarity: there are some excellent discussions in this book, and, in any case, a foreword has to talk in general terms. What I want to highlight is the multiplicity of precarity in human existence, and how one's feeling of

fragility can lead one to make another's existence precarious. This is one of the reasons why the term 'precariat' seems to be replacing 'proletariat', for the latter focused on only certain kinds of precarity.

And yet, to my mind, the term 'proletariat' needs to remain visible, even if it is only as a shadow of the 'precariat'. In *The Fragility of Things*, William E. Connolly brings to bear a realization of what I will term precarity to geological, biological and climate systems, and illustrates how the neoliberal system repeatedly fails to address, or even at times register, the fragilities that it creates or exacerbates. The fragilities created by neoliberalism, which is a development of the kind of capitalism that gave us the 'proletariat', inform the precariousness of Rushdie, as a writer from the affluent classes with certain views that he has every right to express, and the precariousness of various kinds of immigrants, refugees, religious people, third world citizens etc., with certain lifestyles that they have every right to adopt for themselves. This should not be forgotten, even if, as we can see in discussions of Dalits or women in this anthology, some kinds of precarity go beyond the 'proletariat' to pre-Capitalist forms of exploitation. However, even in such cases, capitalism and neo-liberalism have often given the fragilities new shapes.

Judith Butler rightly considers all life to be precarious, because all life can be curbed or expunged at any moment. At the same time, she also correctly describes precarity as a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler 2009, 25). Butler, of course, has much more to say about precarity, and also about what 'life' might mean. But here I allude to this division – that all life is precarious but precarity is a politically induced situation suffered (more) by certain populations and individuals – as a matter central to our concerns, and the concern of a book like this. To say that Rushdie has not lived a precarious existence since the infamous fatwa is to utter a lie. But it is also an error to ignore the precarious existence of many of those who support or ignore the essentially fascist threat posed by the fatwa, and any attempt to silence an idea with a knife. One has to maintain a constantly vigilant position in the thin space allowed between such large errors. I think the papers in this anthology, read together, allow access to this thin and necessary space.

As scholars have noted, the notion of precarity is connected also to the idea of agency. The precariat has less agency than other classes. And yet, when a fanatic, in the name of exercising agency on behalf of his faith or co-

religionists, performs an act of violence, we are again pushed into a space where we need to take a stand. This stand is different from having to take sides in a world where fragilities are exacerbated by a global structure of power in which all of us, including its opponents, share to some extent, and in which experience of precariousness can shift from person to person, group to group. This stand can only be a contextual stand, not a sweeping definition on the one side or the other, which remains blind to shifts in how people "become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death". If agency is what one is talking about then, perhaps, to my mind, it is worthwhile to remember how agency is also required for violence, and to recall, as Emmanuel Levinas argued, that "[v]iolence is to be found in any action in which one acts as if one were alone to act […]. Violence is consequently also any action which we endure without at every point collaborating in it" (Levinas 1990, 6).

It is obviously not sufficient to say that life is precarious. That is not what precarity as a concept means. What one needs to look at is how the essential precariousness of life is exacerbated for some, for a group or an individual, using structures of power that often, if not always, are neoliberal or a consequence of neoliberalism. The precarity of "certain populations", then, is not something that can be resolved by the exercise of sympathy or empathy, essential though such emotions are in ordinary life. It requires a more disciplined and intellectual effort. For that reason, too, such an anthology of papers is absolutely necessary.

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INTRODUCTION

FACING PRECARIOUS FUTURES

JOHN MCLEOD

In two autobiographical films, *First Person Plural* (2000) and *In The Matter of Cha Jung Hee* (2010), the Korean-born American adoptee Deann Borshay Liem explores the circumstances which made possible her journey in 1966, aged only eight years old, from a South Korean orphanage to a new life as part of a white American family in California. As a transnational adoptee she was, to borrow David L. Eng's phrase, part of 'one of the most privileged forms of diaspora in the late twentieth century' (2010, 94), sponsored by wealthy new parents and readily furnished with the paperwork that sanctioned her emigration. But as she grew older, Borshay Liem found it difficult to negotiate between her Korean past and American present, and her enquiry into her adoption uncovered tales of deception and impoverishment which threatened to undo her sense of self. She had travelled to America as Cha Jung Hee, an orphan with no surviving relatives, but this was a falsehood. The real Cha Jung Hee, whom the Borshay family had agreed to adopt several months earlier, had suddenly left the orphanage, so the staff swapped her with another child and glued her photo into Cha's passport. Borshay Liem was stunned to discover that she had actually been born Kang Ok Jin and had several surviving relatives, including her birth-mother who had reluctantly surrendered her infant daughter to the orphanage because at the time she was in a highly perilous financial position. As her films explore, and as is the case in nearly all tales of transcultural adoption, the seemingly humanitarian provision of a new family for a vulnerable child – the age-old 'rescue narrative' of adoption– masked a story of global inequality, bureaucratised deception, and economic precariousness.

Borshay Liem's work exposes how the seemingly secure future promised by her adoption depended upon – indeed, was engendered by – the precarious economic circumstances of her Korean birth family that directly facilitated her adoptability. But it also explores another, related, precariousness. *First*

Person Plural begins with the same visual scene repeated three times, but each time accompanied by a different voiceover. Borshay Liem looks directly at the camera as she is introduced, respectively, as Deann Borshay Liem, Cha Jung Hee, and Kang Ok Jin. Who is she? All of these identities, or none? An amalgam of these three different selves, or suspended somewhere within the discontinuous ruptures that separate them? When we, as the film's viewers, face Borshay Liem here, who are we seeing? And when she faces her own reflection, who can she see? Who might she be? These three faces, each bearing a different name, are ghosted by otherness. The film presents Borshay Liem's pluralised personhood split precariously across cultures, countries, and identities. Her cinematic interrogation of transcultural adoption asks searching questions about how best to bear witness not only to the deliberately secreted circumstances that the childcare economy has so often obscured but also to the violent effacings involved in the production of adoptee personhood. In drawing down the critical vocabulary of precariousness, I would hazard, we are able better to conceptualise and value her films' strategic enquiry into and representation of adoptive life. We are alerted to the concrete production of human vulnerability as well as the imposition of identity that usually results from adoption's legal contracting.

My preoccupation with these two lines of enquiry – the social manufacturing of vulnerable persons, the facing of otherness – is indebted to Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004), even though the matter of transcultural adoption is not her concern. My strategic mobilisation of Butler's vocabulary and points of focus is but one brief example of the extent to which, in Edward Said's famous formulation, her work has come to function as an influential 'travelling theory' (1983, 226), moving productively across contexts and periods, empowering critical thinking and equipping scholarly enquiry with enabling conceptual resources. This volume of essays, *Precarious Lives, Uncertain Futures*, is welcome evidence of the important questions that are raised when we centralise precariousness in our critical endeavours – although, at the same time, we might take care to remember the distinctiveness of Butler's discussion, not least so we can remain mindful of the particular contribution of the arts and humanities to the wider scholarly exploration of precarious lives.

Judith Butler's formulation of precariousness took shape in the wake of 9/11 and in the shadow of the US-led 'War on Terror'. A central concern is the strategic ontological erasure of the war-mongering state's enemies: their disqualification from remembrance, the withholding of their grievability, the cancellation of their obituaries, the foreclosing of their mourning. Her

critique of the privations of infinite detention, epitomised by the Bush administration's use of Guantanamo Bay detention camp, confronts the general suspension of 'the human' (91) as a normative tactic of Western governmentality. In refusing these dehumanising manoeuvres, Butler calls for a renewed recognition of the precarious lives of the demonised as part of a resistant ethical response to state-sponsored violence. She conceptualises precariousness (Butler rarely uses the noun 'precarity') through a brief yet considered engagement with Emmanuel Levinas's discussion of the face of 'the "Other"' (131) and the ethical responsibility engendered when we countenance the Other's unreadable vulnerability. If we presume to know the Other, if we profile the Other by imposing upon them our image of their difference and hence encase them in personifications not of their making, then we obscure (and dangerously ignore) their precariousness. In other words, the divisive politics of mediating the face of those profiled as enemies, deemed unworthy of humane treatment, inhibits the moral obligation to admit the Other as human beyond received definition. 'There is a violence', Butler warns, 'in the frame in what is shown' (147). Therefore, we must learn *not* to take the concocted otherness of the Other at face value. The recovery and recognition of the Other's precariousness, it seems, is a necessary requirement for ethical action, one that requires the relinquishment of representation's imperious referentiality in the quest to refrain from violence. Accepting the limits of the known in the contemplation of the image makes possible an 'ethical outrage' and participates in a process, vital to the mission of the humanities in general, in returning us 'to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense. We would have to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense' (151). Butler's argument, then, invites us to consider how the Other is 'faced' in a doubled sense: as a figure whose humanity is effaced by the masks imposed upon them (the face of evil, the face of the infidel, etc.), and as a fellow human whose vulnerability requires us ethically to countenance the normative constraints of public perception and the violence it serves.

Butler's discussion of precariousness has serious consequences for how we confront both the politics and the ethics of representation. But like many travelling theories which have captured the imagination of scholars working across the disciplines – one thinks of Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial redrafting of hybridity and ambivalence in *The Location of Culture* (1994) pursued a decade before Butler's *Precarious Life* – the itinerant dissemination of precariousness creates both possibilities and problems. On the one hand, the articulation in terms of precarity of a range of lives

rendered vulnerable this century thanks to the statecraft of the Global North – refugees, asylum seekers, those displaced by environmental catastrophe – mounts a robust challenge to these peoples' pejorative representation as menacing interlopers, dangerous foreigners, sinister strangers who threaten the security of those to whom they appeal desperately for help. The malign dismissal of these latest constituencies of the wretched of the earth is significantly countered by scholars who refuse to collude in the wider expulsion of their humanity or efface their plight with manufactured terms. On the other hand, the expanding currency of terms such as 'precarious' and 'precarity', their application to myriad examples of structural inequality, runs the risk of effecting an unwitting and unwanted homogenisation of diverse phenomena through the use of a common rhetoric.

Tina Shrestha has recently explored how '[a]sylum-seeking, with all its legal and documentary procedures, is about participating in everyday labour precariousness with a keen interest in a future-oriented potential legality' (2019, 4). In a different context, Sarah Burton and Benjamin Bowman have critiqued the increasingly neoliberalised university sector for its creation of a two-tier structure of secure, elite professionals and an often fixed-term, precarious staff – an academic precariat – whose lives are blighted by 'precarity as both a set of structures which (re)produce inequalities but also as a pervasive and dominating culture or atmosphere' (2022, 499). These scholars take scrupulous care in bringing a finely turned conceptual understanding of precarity to their distinctive contexts and disciplines. They do not generalise. And while we might conclude that these essays offer local examples of the global reach of capitalism and neoliberalism which connects both contexts, the precarities endured by those seeking asylum or providing casual labour in higher education clearly are not fully commensurate. Yet the common conceptual vocabulary used to describe these distinctive conditions may give the erroneous impression of an emerging trans-disciplinary metadiscourse of precariousness that overrides specificity and smooths the striated terrain of precarious life into a uniform plateau of homologous vulnerability. Consequently, we require a vigilantly comparative approach to the diverse manifestations of global precarity to mitigate this risk – as well as a properly granulated understanding of how precariousness may be articulated distinctly *within* different disciplines. We should not, perhaps, expect anthropological or sociological scholarship to prioritise matters of mediation and representation when using the vocabulary of precariousness. The arts and humanities, however, certainly *are* readily equipped to make this particular contribution to the wider interdisciplinary reckoning with precariousness, not least because the

business of representation is often a primary concern, as Butler's enriching work makes plain.

Precarious Lives, Uncertain Futures is a highly significant volume not least because it responds proactively to these concerns. First, in bringing together the work of over thirty scholars it both safeguards and critically engenders a comparative (not standardising) exploration of the conceptual utility of precariousness as it transpires across a wealth of contexts. The essays in this volume engage with postcolonial tourism, the ancient world, gender and higher education, the environment and the Anthropocene, migration and citizenship, and much more besides. Second, our contributors' attention often to the role of *culture and representation* in critically facing circumstances old and new ensures that the resistant agency of aesthetic endeavours is placed firmly to the fore. From Dalit dreams to migrant fictions, Hollywood movies to cyberpunk, Ancient Carthage to the black Atlantic, the heteroglot representations of precarious life assembled by this collection ensure that a kaleidoscopic, readily dimensional envisioning of culture's manifold contribution to the wider conversation is readily forthcoming from its contributors. When it comes to how we imagine the world, form matters as much as content, of course. If the officious rendering of precarious life requires the labour of representation to produce an exclusionary order of things, then creative attempts to interrupt and scramble the malicious modes within which others are framed is a purposeful not puckish undertaking. Hence, Deann Borshay Liem's cinematic style makes a collage from home movies, old news reels, photographs, interviews, and contemporary footage of Korean and American societies in order to bear better witness to the perforated, pluralised personhood of her adoptive being. The cultural texts discussed by the contributors to *Precarious Lives, Uncertain Futures* often remind us that a different aesthetics of representation has an important part to play in the ethical refusal to constrain the discrete difference of the Other within a dehumanising rendition of their otherness.

In the preface to *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler condemns the West's eagerness to ramp up its 'security' as a response to the deathly, injurious consequences of global conflict. The dislocation from 'First World privilege' (xii) for which she calls must be joined by a different way of imagining relationality across borders, barriers, and frames, one in which our 'inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community' (xii-xiii). Almost twenty years later, and in a dark time characterised by environmental catastrophe, the consequences of a global pandemic, the ominous populism inflamed by the Trump

administration and Brexit, and the acceleration of refugeeism and asylum-seeking, Butler's demand that we reimagine relationality before it is too late remains an urgent one. As Borshay Liem's films remind us, we cannot be without others. The regulation and administration of our relations impacts irrevocably upon ourselves: our being-with is always mediated by how, and who, we face. In facing down these frames and the politics which sustains them through the modest realm of scholarly endeavour, *Precarious Lives, Uncertain Futures* pursues an important service in keeping open the promise of imagining an alternative futurity of transformed human interdependence.

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PART I

LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSES OF PRECARITY

CHAPTER 1

GOING PLACES? REPRESENTING PRECARITY, POSTCOLONIAL TOURISM AND ENVIRONMENTALISM ACROSS TEXTS AND DISCOURSES

ESTERINO ADAMI

Abstract

This contribution intends to critically read the interrelated notions of precarity, postcolonial tourism and environmentalism (Carrigan 2012; Crăciunescu 2016; Hall and Tucker 2004a) by examining some of its textual manifestations, in both literary and non-literary forms, with regard to the Indian postcolonial context, in particular the Andaman Islands. Today India is experiencing a growing emergence of tourism, thanks to a number of recent successful campaigns of promotion, but its impact upon local communities and ecologies may sometimes coincide with processes of exoticization and marginalization (Echtner and Prasad 2003), which impose, and perpetuate, a sense of (hidden) precarity, or 'ecoprecarity', especially when the so-called "minority" groups and their environment are concerned.

The case study regards the geographical, cultural and social context of the Andaman Islands (Sen 2017) in order to discuss discourses of asymmetrical power relations, and reconfigurations, of indigenous identity and the environment. In particular, the chapter aims to question the linguistic, narrative, and ideological representation of Adivasi subjects, landscape and precarity by considering: 1) the multimodal dimension of the official Andaman and Nicobar Tourism website, and its multiple attention-grabbing materials, and 2) the rhetorical strategies of the Indian English fictional domain, with examples from young adult fiction (Gangopadhyay 2010) as well as human rights literature (Garg 2016). The methodological background

is grounded on the combination of postcolonial studies, critical stylistics, and tourism discourse (e.g., Bandyopadhyay 2012; Dann 1996; Jeffries 2010).

Keywords: Andaman Islands, Environmentalism, Language and Ideology, Postcolonial Tourism, Precarity, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Suchin Garg

1. Introduction: Precarity, Postcolonial Tourism and Representation

Precarity is a notoriously difficult concept to pin down that can be viewed from different theoretical perspectives and through different interpretive filters (e.g., Bak Jørgensen and Schierup 2017; Millar 2017). Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "precariousness or instability; esp. a state of persistent uncertainty or insecurity with regard to employment, income, and living standards" (OED 2022), in reality, thanks to its wide semantic perimeter, the term covers a large spectrum of references pertaining to situations of marginality, frailty, and poverty, particularly in the present-day postcolonial scenario (Hinkson 2020; Schmidt-Haberkamp, Gymnich, and Schneider 2022). In India, such a notion is even more articulated as it encompasses a broad array of discourses, from the constant annihilation of liminal identities and human rights, for instance in terms of gender, caste or ethnicity (see Dwivedi and Rajan 2016), to conditions of vulnerability caused by environmental catastrophes (Garrard 2004) and political decisions, e.g., the 1984 Bhopal disaster, the 2020-2021 protests of farmers against new pejorative regulations, the current air condition in Delhi. Here I pick up a particular kind of precarity, or rather 'ecoprecarity', i.e., one that is tied to the effects of consumer-based tourism because the uncontrolled expansion of this field and the overexploitation of the environment generate forms of instability that perpetuate conditions of poverty and impact on the lives of millions of people. The representation of those subjects that have to cope with such conditions is an important indicator of social tensions, ethical values and new views across texts and discourses, and its exploration contributes to the critical understanding of some aspects of contemporary India.

Specifically, in this chapter, I carry out a preliminary investigation of the interconnection between precarity, postcolonial tourism and environmentalism in the Indian context, by focusing on the area of the Andaman Islands, an Indian overseas territory that at once activates images of remoteness, exoticism and otherness (Ramone 2011, 4-6). In actuality, a careful critical

gaze can reveal how such alluring stereotypes were historically built at the expense of local indigenous communities, which are now forced to accept the imposition of exogenous cultural hegemony and national rhetoric, i.e., from mainland India (Sen 2017). My argument thus is concerned with the idea of asymmetry of power relations in discursive practices, namely how the discourse of instability, inequality and discrimination, in other words precarity somehow underlies forms and genres, in particular with regard to domains such as tourism, in both its non-fictional and fictional renditions. As Burns (2008, 63) holds, "the concept 'tourism' works in a number of ways: as a description of leisure activity, as global business consumed at a local level and as a condition of postmodernism", and therefore "tourism as a topic for analysis sets out to make theoretical sense of multiple mobile cultures". Not only does tourism evoke a culture of mobility thus, but it also discloses an appropriation of difference. Indeed, from a postcolonial angle, tourism revives forms of exploring and travelling, but it also conveys an imaginative seizure of the land, with the implicit discursive construction and representation of the territory and its indigenous population (Carrigan 2011; Hall and Tucker 2004a). Very often, the rise, reinvention and plural manifestations of postcolonial tourism depict (post)colonial islands as fantasies of Orientalism, as it occurs with the case of the Andaman Islands. The process of tourism appropriation, a kind of neo-colonial operation in actuality, operates through phases of promotion and exoticisation of the land, whose consequences are the exploitation and marginalisation of local communities and ecologies, thus generating a scenario of precarity (Chattopadhyay 2014). However, this type of attitude also attracts intellectual and literary reactions, for instance thanks to activism as resistance to oppressive systems, as demonstrated by new initiates, campaigns, and projects.

My research question addresses the linguistic, narrative and multimodal representations of so-called 'minority groups' (the Jarawas tribe, as part of the broader Adivasi group) and their environment against the insurgence of (postcolonial) tourism, starting from the recognition of the power of discourse to naturalise and spread ideologies (Jeffries 2010). The analysis considers two textual fields: 1) multimodal promotional discourse offered by the Andaman and Nicobar Tourism Office website[1], whose goals is to showcase the natural beauties of the archipelago as a powerful attraction for holidaymakers, and 2) narrative ('travel') fiction, specifically with two

[1] The in-text citations from the Andaman and Nicobar Tourism Office that I analyse in this contribution are taken from the official website: https://www.andamantourism.gov.in/ (last accessed January 20, 2022).

Indian novels, *We Need a Revolution*, by Sachin Garg (2016), and *King of the Verdant Island*, by Sunil Gangopadhyay (2010/1976), that employ creative strategies to speak about the autochthonous populations of the Andamans. The choice of scrutinising different text-types related to tourism discourse is justified by the power of narratives to express or react to ideologies since, as Carrigan (2011, 29) holds, "comparing portrayals of postcolonial tourism can not only enhance perspectives on the industry's function within aesthetic work, but also foreground the ways in which literary texts act as stimuli to social activism within culturally localized spheres while simultaneously constituting forms of social activism or imaginative intervention themselves". Methodologically, the positions here discussed engage with various disciplines such as postcolonial studies, critical stylistics, and tourism discourse (e.g., Bandyopadhyay 2012; Garrard 2004; Sen 2017).

2. Writing the (Post)Colonial Island: Myths, Tourism and Territory in the Andaman Archipelago

A necessary starting reflection for my argument lies in the idea that postcolonial islands can be viewed as former imperial frontiers and icons, and as such have mixed reality and imagination in their projection of a new dimension, i.e., a sort of 'islandness' that reverberates through fictional and non-fictional texts, but also fuels today's tourism marketing (Kapstein 2017). The weight of the colonial anthropology and classification systems adds more layers to such imaginary, reproducing and perpetuating instances of Orientalism. Moreover, islands represent an ideal scenario for fiction: according to Crane and Fletcher (2017) their narrative conceptualisation may take various forms, respectively suggesting crime islands, thriller islands, romance islands, and fantasy islands, and in fact the Andaman Islands appear in Conan Doyle's *The Sign of the Four* (1890). The production of such imaginative cartographies has a double effect because, on the one hand, it reinforces and updates the alternative image of (post)colonial islands as popular tourist destinations, and on the other it ignores local ecologies or micro-worlds, with their plethora of material, immaterial and living environment, thus exacerbating the sense of precarity for populations and places.

Such an interpretation is in line with a critical reading of postcolonial tourism, a field that, in Burns' (2008, 64) words, accounts for a "phenomenon of interlocking networks, mobilities and modern mythologies". However, an investigation of this domain requires a revision of paradigms, especially

at the methodological level. For example, Crăciunescu notices a series of paradoxes of the present-day dimension of tourism: the use of a global (usually imperial) language to define and portray places, the "tendency of the postmodern man in consuming exoticism, which comes in opposition to previous historical antagonisms or fears concerning otherness" (2013, 130), as well as the epistemological discrepancies arising from the application of west-based knowledge to non-western realities and cultures. Yet, postcolonial destinations seem to fall into three main macro-categories such as the oriental, the sea/sand, and the frontier (Echtner and Prasad 2003), which trigger and underpin a range of myths running across perceptions, beliefs and memories. The first is the myth of the unchanged, whereby the postcolonial scenario is portrayed as a romanticised, time-less location, totally anchored to its past and characterised by echoes of mysticism too. The second refers to the myth of the unrestrained, and is tied to the imaginary of a luxuriant paradise with attractive beaches, whilst the third is about the uncivilised, namely those places characterised by a wild nature (Garrard 2004, 59-84) and local populations considered primitive and untamed, by which it ideally connects with the colonial enterprise of exploration, carried out by missionaries, anthropologists and traders. In sum, the three myths govern much of the postcolonial tourist arena and constitute those "representations that replicate colonial forms of discourse and emphasize certain oppositional binaries" (Echtner and Prasad 2003, 668-669) such the modern/decadent, the industrialised/underdeveloped and the advanced/primitive. The case of the Andaman Islands, however, is different, and peculiar, because they mainly draw domestic visitors (i.e., from mainland India) and thus these myths have to be rewritten to adhere to that particular context: although they do not mirror a western approach, nonetheless they still reveal a hegemonic perspective by supporting a nationalist view against the indigenous Adivasi tribes that barely are given the right to participate in social normative discourse.

It is essential to provide some background of the Andaman Islands, which constitute an archipelago of 572 islands, in the Bay of Bengal between India and Myanmar, whose official name reads 'Union Territory of India (Andaman and Nicobar Islands)'. During the late Victorian age, they were recorded in Yule and Burnell's *Hobson Jobson. The Anglo-Indian Dictionary* (originally published in 1886) with the following definition: "the name of a group of islands in the Bay of Bengal, inhabited by tribes of a negrito race, and now partially occupied as a convict settlement under the Government of India" (1996, 29). Evidently, the symbolic value of these islands is intimately associated with a sense of remoteness, in light of their geographical position, but, because of their history, they also activate

complex discourses of cultural belonging and national identity. In Sen's (2017, 944) words, "the Andaman Islands occupy a contradictory place within the national imagination of India. Frequently excluded from popular representations of Indian territory, such as weather maps, they nevertheless play a key role within nationalist narratives as the feared Kalapani (black waters) where freedom fighters were banished to a life of exile". Ambiguously present and absent in public discourse at the same time, these islands seem to have been mythicized and turned into emblematic objects since they are functional in the glorification of national rhetoric, i.e., the collective effort to read the political independence of India through a monolithic prism. The notion of a central unitary (Hindu) state in fact reshapes, or rather devoices, local cultural ecologies, including autochthonous populations, in the name of different types of ideologies, including economic profit, hence the exploitation of the historical heritage of the Andamans, driven by "the postcolonial state's hunger for converting even more land into productive economic activity that excluded 'primitive' tribes" (Sen 2017, 960).

The islands are inhabited by four indigenous groups (namely the Great Andamanese, the Jarawas, the Onges, the Sentineleses), and in this chapter I focus on the first tribe (Sekhsaria and Pandya 2010).[2] Their right to privacy, in theory, is protected by the state, thanks to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulations (ANIPATR), approved in June 1956. In reality, the current administrative policies for this territory seem to coincide with a strategy of spatial and cultural appropriation that neglects the presence and rights of the local tribes, often relegated into specific reserves, in which people are treated and showcased as peculiar human attractions, openly described as uncivilised and primitive beings. What can be seen here, therefore, regards the perpetuation of colonial practices of dispossession, marginalisation and exploitation based on ideological perceptions and social/cultural practices, i.e., a hegemonic power manipulating the marginal subjects/territories. Inserted within this (post)colonial frame, the Andaman Islands assume different pragmatic and symbolic roles: a prison island, an icon of exoticism and a resource island, that are cumulatively covered by the tourism industry and hospitality fields with their investments and annexation of in nationalist heritage and nature.

[2] For obvious reasons of space, I cannot deal with the very complex questions pertaining to the Indian populations under the generic rubric Adivasi (see Jeffrey and Harriss 2014, 8-9). For details about the Jarawas tribe, see Sekhasaria, and Pandya (2010).

To unpack the cultural entanglements of the Andamans, Sen (2017) proposes to bring in the *terra nullis* paradigm, namely the notion, typically applied to Australia, of an empty 'space' because regarding autochthonous populations as primitive, backward, or uncivilised subtly leads to the colonial justification for exploitation, and even extermination. Constructing and promulgating categories of otherness, in terms of primitivism and liminality (Ramone 2011, 80), naturalises discourses of ethnic and social hierarchy, which identify local populations such as the Jarawas as subjects with no rights, and thus condemned to a permanent condition of precarity. For Sen, this is a *de facto terra nullis* principle that sets up "instances of state-led appropriation of tribal land that is enabled by an *implicit* denial of indigenous land rights or ownerships" (2017, 970, emphasis in original). Once the landscape is culturally and ideologically appropriated, it is then textually rendered as a sort of trope, or metaphor, with the image of the tropical, paradise-like island that modern tourism celebrates to attract national and international visitors, at the detriment of autochthonous communities. The way in which the Andamans are linguistically pictured across texts, therefore, may help us understand how the discourse of power, and relations between centre and periphery, operates towards minority 'tribal' groups, which in India have always been stigmatised and attached to images of backwardness, poverty and liminality.

In the following parts, I investigate how the ideas and intentions discussed above intertwine in various different textual materials, bearing in mind that the strategic use of certain language forms and patterns "reflects a particular socio-political view" (Jeffries 2010, 9) and naturalises ideological messages. I start with the non-fictional domain of digital promotional literature by considering the Andaman and Nicobar Tourism Office website. In parts 4 and 5, I expand my discussion of precarity, the environment and postcolonial tourism and I look at two fictional representations of the Andaman Islands, specifically observing the linguistic style and forms through which the territory and the indigenous populations are portrayed. The inclusion of the literary domain in my investigation aims to shed light on how texts and genres can treat stereotypes, metaphors and myths, i.e., how authors can reinforce them, but also creatively respond to and refashion such frames. Obviously, Gangopadhyay (2010) and Garg (2016) differ for many aspects such as type of fiction, language and period, but nonetheless they offer interesting portrayals of the Andaman context, reflecting or contesting the discourses of derivative exoticism, exploitive tourism and marginalisation.

3. The Andaman and Nicobar Tourism Office: Attracting Tourists, Feeding Precarity

My first case study, the official, government-supported Andaman and Nicobar Tourism Office website (abbreviated as ANTO), represents a contemporary, virtual version of the traditional promotional literature, such as brochures and leaflets, namely those texts that typically function as sociocultural tools since they convey specific ideas and try to persuade readers to turn into visitors of specific locations. In symbolic terms, these narratives offer a promise (a dream-like holiday) and therefore, by virtue of persuasive linguistic devices such as emphasis and hyperbole, they prompt imagination and expectations. Naturally, the ANTO website is grounded on a multimodal rendition of the Andamans through the strategic use of different semiotic and intertextual resources, including texts, colours, and images. The very name of the website is given graphological prominence by juxtaposing the state emblem of India (the three lions) with an apostrophic slogan ('Emerald. Blue and You') that seems to directly address and foreground the reader (i.e., the ideal visitor). The website is organised in a traditional format, with a number of sections such as tourist information, e-booking services and photographic gallery that cumulatively contribute to a broad picture of the territory.

To analyse the language of the portal, I take into account two short extracts from the pages entitled 'About Andaman' and 'History', which offer some introductory information about the islands. Yet, a critical reading of this material permits to observe a form of overlapping between heritage discourse and nationalist view, in particular when the descriptions of tourist attractions become instrumental for the development and spread of ideological values. As an illustration, let us briefly consider the cellular jail originally designed as a strict colonial prison, in the capital of the Andamans, Port Blair. Now transformed into a postcolonial museum that celebrates the rhetoric of the nation, this sight in reality embodies "how tourists and recent non-indigenous residents impose their heritage values on the host community" (Fisher 2004, 127).

But the text-producer's intention to suggest certain images is also detectable in the very positively connoted description of the archipelago via numerous evaluative expressions, as shown by the following excerpts from the 'About Andaman/ History' page of the ANTO website:

> The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located in the east of the Indian mainland geographically, float in splendid isolation in the Bay of Bengal. Once a hill range extending from Myanmar to Indonesia, these picturesque undulating islands, islets numbering around 572, are covered with dense rain-fed, damp and evergreen forests and endless varieties of exotic flora and fauna. Most of these islands (about 550) are in the Andaman Group, 28 of which are inhabited. The smaller Nicobars, comprise some 22 main islands (10 inhabited). The Andaman and Nicobars are separated by the Ten Degree Channel which is 150 kms wide.
>
> These islands also boast of freedom fighting days' historically significant landmarks viz. Cellular Jail, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Island, Viper Island, Hopetown and Mount Harriet. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands have been declared as two of the 218 endemic bird area of the world. As many as 270 species and sub-species of birds have been reported existing in these islands, 106 of them being endemic. The Andaman Wood Pigeon, Andaman Padauk and Dugong are declared as State Bird, State Tree and State Animal respectively. There are about 96 Wildlife Sanctuaries, nine National Parks and one Biosphere Reserve in the islands. These islands are blessed with the bounties of both south-west and north-east monsoons.
>
> The Andaman & Nicobar Islands have been inhabited for several thousand years, at the very least. The earlier archaeological evidence yet documented goes back some 2,200 years; however, the indications from genetic, cultural and linguistic isolation studies point to habitation going back 30,000 – 60,000 years, well into the Middle Palaeolithic. In the Andaman Islands, the various Andamanese people maintained their separated existence through the vast majority of this time, diversifying into distinct linguistic, cultural and territorial groups. By the 1850s when they first came into sustained contact by outside groups, the indigenous people of Andamans were: the Great Andamanese, who collectively represented at least 10 distinct sub groups and languages; the Jarawa: the jungle (or Rutland Jarawa); the Onge; and the Sentinelese (the most isolated of all the groups).

These passages exemplify the performative aim of tourism discourse (Dann 1996) and its perlocutionary effect of persuasion because they intend to appeal to, and generate interest in, the potential traveller/visitor by deploying a series of rhetorical techniques, in particular appraisal patterns, which have "the power to influence whether people think of an area of life positively or negatively" (Stibbe 2015, 83). In the extracts, emphasis is laid upon environment and history by means of different stylistic devices such as verb constructions ('float', 'boast', 'blessed with'), premodified noun phrases ('picturesque undulating islands', 'historically significant landmarks'), and hyperbolic qualifying adjectives ('endless'). It is evident that, when these lexical items cluster together, they amplify their effect in the

projection of a tempting and stereotypical image, devoid of tensions as the local populations are remotely portrayed, or perhaps even turned into a commodified sign of alterity that would further enrich a sense of Orientalism. To corroborate this goal, the two texts also employ technical elements such as dates, numbers and percentages to provide the impression of a rational and objective evaluation of their information.

The world of tourism as a social activity unfolds as a discursive construction that regulates and prescribes specific social roles (i.e., the non-resident tourist versus the almost invisible indigenous inhabitant) with the aim to display a twofold representation of the islands: a sort of postcolonial paradise for visitors and a testament to discourse of nationalism. Although the excerpts adopt a descriptive tone in the attempt to insist on categorical assertions, there are some clues of modality, a language system that can be explained as "as the potential of language to project the speaker's or writer's attitude about the proposition expressed" (Nørgaard, Montoro, and Busse 2010, 113). As a matter of fact, some modalized items such as emphatic evaluative words or positively oriented terms reinforce the exotic, and almost dream-like, dimension of the Andaman Islands, which reverberates across the depiction of the environment and its actors/subjects. Moreover, the recurrent use of past tenses ('maintained', 'were', 'represented') related to the indigenous tribes seems to suggest their contemporary invisibility, relegating them to the archive of history, in spite of the ostensibly 'politically correct' style that superficially characterises the passages.

Globally, the extracts from the ANTO website here considered demonstrate a subtle, and yet enduring, process of 'rewriting' the land, which implicitly leads to and justifies the exploitation of the archipelago: the natural resources of the territory are viewed as mere sights to attract tourists whilst their belonging to a specific environment is neglected by virtue of discursive practices of control and hegemony. The indigenous populations too are subjected to this operation and transformed into fetishes of national Orientalism that enshrouds them with a sense of alterity, in this way representing them as wild, brutal and even folkloristic figures, incompatible with the modern life-styles supported by the 'dream' of progress. As Sen (2017, 970) claims, this is a display of those "conjoined discourses of emptiness and primitivism to naturalize such appropriations and erase the violence they involve", whereas the presence of the autochthonous population is altogether silenced, or at most turned into a sign of marketable exoticism. Thus, the three myths of the unchanged, the unrestrained and the uncivilised hypothesised by Echtner and Prasad (2003) intermingle productively and sustain a discourse of orientalised representation consumed

by a domestic tourist public, which in spite of the celebration of postcolonial idea of freedom and independence perpetuates models and messages of exploitation, with the final result of overarching social, cultural and environmental precarity. As Burns (2008, 63) argues, "tourism both as business and cultural phenomenon extracts value from destinations for the benefit of metropolitan tourism corporations", but the linguistic makeup of the narratives I have considered betrays a neo-colonial agenda because uneven power relations are subtly constructed and justified by postcolonial policies. In other words, the Indian discourse of tourism to a certain extent revives colonial feelings of exoticism and marginalisation in the public depiction of the Andaman Islands.

4. Adventures, Tribals and the Environment in Young Adult Literature

I now move on to the young adult novel *King of the Verdant Island* (2010), authored by Bengali novelist, poet and journalist Sunil Gangopadhyay, and originally published in Bengali as *Sabuj Dwiper Raja* in 1976. The narrative reflects the emphatic and hyperbolic features of the genre in terms of implied readership, thematic choices and ideological implications as it translates questions pertaining to the natural and human local context (Garrard 2004) through the genre of young adult detective fiction, also thanks to its paratextual scaffolding (such as the use of colours for the cover or the illustrations accompanying the story). The book feeds itself by elaborating typical elements of young adult literature such as the sense of adventure, the coming-of-age experience and youth perspective as it follows young Santu and his uncle, the famous detective Kakababu, who are sent to the Andaman Islands to solve the mystery of some missing scientists. The role of the villains is taken up by some secret agents (probably foreigners), who come in contact with the Jarawas, the indigenous tribes that live in special areas set apart from the main towns. If the representation of the exotic island and its native populations on the one hand clearly drive the youth's idea of discovery, on the other they are also indicative of how marginal places and subaltern subjects are perceived, and whose ideologies lie behind their narrative form.

Although tourism does not constitute a major theme here, it nonetheless surfaces across the layers of the story since the territory exercises its role of attraction as "people from all over India and even Burma could be seen" (Gangopadhyay 2010, 31), while Kakababu and Santu stay at a hotel called the Tourist Home, which evokes images of comfortable hospitality surrounded