

## Generic Hybridity, Narrative Polyphony and Uncanny Slums in *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* by Deepa Anappara

Angelo Monaco<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Deepa Anappara's *Djinn Patrol on the Purple* (2020) centres on the mysterious disappearance of children from the basti of an Indian shantytown, thus immersing the reader into the climate of injustice, grievability and vulnerability of contemporary India. Anappara's debut novel may be described as a coming-of-age narrative with elements of fantasy and crime fiction. It uses various focal perspectives, relying particularly on the ingenuous gazes and voices of the children from the basti. In my article, I will first explore the formal texture of Anappara's novel, laying emphasis on its generic hybridity and multi-voiced narrative organization. Then, I will examine how the interface of precarity and resilience is thematised through a focus on the particular topography of the city, emblematic of the issues of grievability and vulnerability of present-day India. I will then conclude by showing how in *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* story-telling may be considered as an act of resistance in a world of social injustice.

**Keywords:** precarity; vulnerability; dispossession; resilience; slums; South Asian fiction

### Introduction: Precarity and Resilience in Post-Millennial Indian Fiction

The socio-economic transformations that have affected India since the last two decades of the twentieth century have impacted on its very literary scene. Spurred on by the economic liberal policies started in the 1990s, the South Asian country has gradually made steady progress in industrial and technological modernisation, embarking upon a rapid growth path and a further integration into global markets. The rise of the middle class has challenged existing traditions and values. In 2014, the then Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced the label “neo-middle” (Chacko 2019, 399) to describe a wave of former farmers and artisans who had migrated from rural to urban areas with aspirations of becoming entrepreneurs and consumers within the global market. Since then, Modi's pro-Hindu right-wing party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has invited lower class citizens to join the ranks of traditional middle-class values, among which the celebration of Hindu nationalism as the provider of security and well-being. During the 2004 electoral campaign, the BJP launched the national marketing slogan “India Shining” to showcase the socio-economic transformations of the country. In spite of the heavy defeat in 2004, the BJP won the elections in 2014 and Modi was sworn in

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<sup>1</sup> Angelo Monaco, University of Bari “Aldo Moro”, Italy. E-mail: [angelo.monaco@uniba.it](mailto:angelo.monaco@uniba.it)



as Prime Minister. In August 2022, while the country has celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the end of the British rule, Modi pledged to transform India into a developed country in the next 25 years (Mogul 2022).

Today, as Priya Chacko argues, the Indian middle class is associated to such values as hard work, meritocracy, and honesty, thus tapping into Modi's narrative of the "neo-middle" as a community of national builders, labourers, and honest taxpayers who "meld together neoliberalism and Hindu nationalism" (Chacko 2019, 382). As a consequence, urban areas have become the hub of job opportunities and witnessed social mobility, triggering an ever-growing migration from rural to metropolitan areas. According to the data collected by the World Bank, the shift away from agriculture to other sectors has resulted in an increase of the overall gross domestic product of 3.8 trillion dollars (World Bank 2022). Consequently, for all these reasons, it has been estimated that India is "on track to become the world's third largest economy by 2027, surpassing Japan and Germany, and have the third largest stock market by 2030, thanks to global trends and key investments the country has made in technology and energy" (Morgan Stanley 2022). In this respect, the recent successful land in the lunar south pole region exhibits the country's technological progress. And yet, the thrust for modernisation as well as household consumption have pushed up the demand for electricity, whose production has mostly been based on fossil fuels, thus creating social and environmental problems and growing inequalities throughout the country.

From a literary perspective, a certain progressive logic of "radical history and cultural change" (Tickell 2016, 3) tends to be reflected in South Asian literature from the 1990s. As Alex Tickell argues, transformative events, such as the ramifications of the war on terror in Pakistan in the wake of 9/11, the natural disaster caused by the tsunami in Sri Lanka in 2004 and the acceleration of economic growth in India and Bangladesh, "have reshaped fictional imaginaries" (3), tying South Asian countries more tightly to global economy. The rise in economic prosperity and perspectives has impacted on and shaped the literary scene by establishing what Emma Dawson Varughese sees as a "New India, New Canon" (Varughese 2013, 13) where genres, forms and modes of representation are concerned with the exploration of the contradictions of post-millennial India. According to Varughese, contemporary Indian fiction has changed significantly, moving beyond the traditional tropes of postcolonial literature and engaging with the concept of "new India" in various ways, from politics to women's rights, from the delicate matter of urban poverty to the proliferation of literary festivals. The versatility of post-millennial Indian fiction testifies to the vitality of story-telling to recreate the contradictions that permeate contemporary India. Story-telling, as I intend to demonstrate in this article, may be considered as an act of resistance in a world of social injustice, thus offering new possibilities for understanding a complex reality. This is the case with Deepa Anappara's *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* (2020), a novel that takes the reader on a journey through the precarious conditions of present-day India. Anappara's debut novel specifically addresses the urgent question of child abduction and, in this respect, writing appears as a key agent to challenge those socio-economic structures that foster abuses and inequalities, thus laying emphasis on a world beset with contradictions. More interestingly, we are invited to see this ambiguous world through the resilient eyes of the children from a basti, the slum where the novel is set.



In the novel, story-telling provides insights into the erosion of certain human rights in contemporary India. Whereas the recent economic growth has drawn the attention to global capitalism, “the ascription to certain policies in the name of national security and sovereignty,” as Om Dwivedi and V. G. Julia Rajan argue, has intensified pre-existing forms of violence executed against civilians already marginalised within India’s national borders, such as Dalits, non-Hindus and women and children of all backgrounds” (Dwivedi and Rajan 2016, 10). The rhetoric of the “India Shining” propaganda has neglected the widespread condition of extreme poverty of those who are excluded from the myth of India’s economic boom. According to the report compiled by the United Nations Development Program in collaboration with the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), the incidence of poverty dropped from 55.1% in 2005/06 to 16.4% in 2019/21 (United Nations Development Program 2022). And yet, in spite of the reduction of multidimensional poverty, the report states that children are still the poorest age group, with more than one in five children being poor compared with around one in seven adults. This means that nearly 97 million children live in condition of abject poverty and that, as the data were collected before the Covid-19 outbreak, the impact on poverty might have changed. Besides, though poverty is still an important issue, greed and corruption are felt as a major challenge. In Varughese’s words, the perceived levels of corruption are widespread in the Indian society, in particular for its impact “on young people who aspire to grasp the opportunities of New India and who face issues of corruption.” (Varughese 2013, 15).

Starting from this premise, I will read *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* as a post-millennial Indian novel that navigates the reader through the ambiguities of present-day India, addressing what Varughese calls the “urban underbellies” that inhabit Indian sprawling cities like “darker avatars” (Varughese 2022). Set in the basti of a globalised unnamed Indian metropolis, which could be Mumbai or Delhi, Anappara’s narrative plunges readers into a world where poverty, corruption, child abduction and economic prosperity paradoxically coexist. *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* is mainly narrated from the naïf perspective of nine-year-old Jai Jasoos, a “good guy” (Anappara 2020, 195) with a passion for crime and detective TV shows such as *Police Patrol* and *Live Crime*.<sup>1</sup> With his classmates, Pari, a Hindu girl, and Faiz, a Muslim boy, Jai, who belongs to a Hindu family, embarks on the search of the children of their neighbourhood who have mysteriously disappeared. As Anappara herself states in the “Afterword” to the novel, her writing career is heavily indebted to her working experience as a journalist in Mumbai and Delhi from 1997 to 2008. Here, Anappara especially focused on children growing up in poverty, writing reports on children victims of “difficult domestic circumstances and [...] religious violence” (342) in a country where, according to some estimates, about 180 children are said to be missing each day. For her reportage on how poverty and religious violence negatively impinge on the education of children, Anappara has won the “Developing Asia Journalism Awards,” “the Every Human has Rights Media Awards,” and the “Sanskriti – Prabha Dutt Fellowship in Journalism.” Thus, the theme of the child abduction lies at the core of Anappara’s journalistic inquiry, becoming the key issue of her novel. And yet, the fictional account narrated in *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* combines the inequalities of a “horrific tragedy about poverty” and “the children’s resilience, cheerfulness and swagger” (343), thus eliciting the reader’s empathic response.

Given the combination of the ethical bind to facts and the transformative power of creative imagination, *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* is best positioned to uncover the coexistence of

precarity and resilience of contemporary India as it proposes a social critique of the contradictions of the South Asian country. Whereas scholarly discussions of precarity have addressed the conditions and structures that produce marginalisation, such as the retraction of the state and its inability to enhance social cohesion and sense of belonging among its citizens, slums, for instance, can be said to exaggerate existing inequalities, increasing the vulnerability of economically marginalised groups within societies. Slums raise a number of potential concerns with precarity and grievability, key terms in the ethical theories put forward by Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben, among many others. Against this background, I would like to read *Djinn Patrol on the Purple* as an example of how post-millennial India fiction can tackle conditions of precarity and resilience. In the following pages, I will first explore the formal texture of Anappara's novel, laying emphasis on its generic hybridity and multi-voiced narrative organisation. Then, I will examine how the interface of precarity and resilience is thematised through a focus on the particular topography of the basti, emblematic of the issues of grievability and vulnerability of contemporary India.

### **Generic Hybridity and Narrative Polyphony**

*Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* is a multi-layered and multi-voiced novel that easily blurs clear-cut generic divisions. The purple line the title refers to is the railway line that marks the border between the basti and the rest of the city, while the “djinn” are invisible creatures that, according to Jai and his friends Pari and Faiz, are the culprits of the children abduction. In the novel, djinns are described as spirits who like dark places where they usually drag the children they snatch. However, as we shall see, there are good as well as evil djinns, since they are believed to provide some sort of protection. The ambivalence about the djinns suggests that the perceived boundary that separates facts and fiction is creatively confounded and this is ultimately reflected in the juxtaposition of various generic conventions and by means of dialogic narrative discourse.

In formal terms, Anappara chooses two voices to tell her story instead of a third-person omniscient narrator. One is a choric commentary by children relegated to the margins of “India Shining” as they are exploited for doing odd jobs, begging and stealing. Anappara's other narrator is Jai, a boy with an overactive imagination who teams up with Pari and Faiz to uncover the mysterious disappearance of the children from the basti where they live. These voices are however interspersed with brief chapters about each of the missing children, entitled with their names, that is Bahadur (48–54), Omvir (91–96), Aanchal (170–77), Chandini (202–5), Kabir and Khadifa (251–57), and Runu (282–90), the latter being Jai's elder sister. These chapters add a further layer to the narrative as they interestingly blend worries and delights of Indian children. Their voices convey the differences in expectations and opportunities for Indian boys and girls, the tension of opposing religions leading to riots and even violence, the bribery and corruption that pervades Indian society and the thick smog of the Indian shantytown that cannot be escaped. In these chapters, readers are taken on a journey through the contradictions of present-day India as we meet a host of colourful characters, including family members, neighbours, teachers, policemen, street children in search of anything that can be reclaimed or sold, and animals, like the huge buffalo that blocks half an alley and never seems to move. Religious tensions, financial problems, school obligations, and violence are the main themes discussed in these sections. As Runu observes, the word ‘future’ itself seems “like a mere possibility, a slit in the smog that suggested sunshine



but not really” (285). In these words, Anappara embraces the points of view of Indian children, giving voice to their dreams and aspirations, thus establishing a dialogue with a world of poverty, exploitation and corruption. Such a plurality of conflicting voices conjures a polyphonic portrait of contemporary India, echoing Mikhail Bakhtin’s conceptualisation of narrative polyphony as a dialogic relationship between different voices developing in a “mutual relationship” (Bakhtin 1984, 6). Thus, *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* uses a variety of generic conventions and voices to address the complex “knot of almost insoluble inconsistencies” (Ciocca 2019, 14) that characterizes post-millennial India fiction.

Generically, Anappara’s novel exhibits influences from many fictional genres. The novel can be read as a fairy tale, a state-of-the nation novel, a detective story and a coming-of-age narrative. As Maureen Corrigan claims in her review, *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* “defies characterization” (Corrigan 2020) as its tones shuttle from young-adult fiction to urban noir. Accordingly, in this section of my essay, I will specifically scrutinise how Anappara’s novel interweaves various generic conventions, thus recalling Priya Joshi’s contention that contemporary Indian fiction “includes a wide spectrum of ‘other-world’ narratives” (Joshi 2019, 207), from magic realism to science fiction. This polyphonic quality of the post-millennial Indian novel, where various voices are made to interact, reflects the very complexity of India itself as the generic internal hybridity symbolically translates the mash-up of “languages, forms and competing priorities” (211) of postmillennial India.

Early in Anappara’s novel, the reader is guided through its very metanarrative texture, thus reflecting on the ways narratives can make sense of our lives. Interestingly, the first chapters of each of three sections in which the novel is structured is entitled “This Story Will Save your Life” (3; 121; 261). Thus, three times, we are reminded that stories can save our lives and this sentence recalls the conventions of a fairy-tale-like framing, thereby offering us some comfort and hope. In the first section, before readers become aware of the tragic reality of child abduction, we meet the ghost of Mental. The Indian version of a benign Fagin, the criminal who kidnaps orphaned children and trains them to become pickpockets in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1838), Mental continues to guide and help his boys who work as rag-pickers scattered across the city. Roy of hopes and supernatural force permeate the very first pages of the novel as we learn that the boys still invoke Mental’s ghost since gods are “too busy” to hear their prayers while ghosts “have nothing to do but wait and wander, wander and wait” (7), thus ready to listen to the boys’ requests. Here, Anappara combines irony and fantasy in ways that resonate with the contrasts of Indian society itself. In the second section, when the mysterious disappearance of the children is a bleak reality, we meet the ghost of Junction-ki-Rani. Here, as in the previous initial chapter, the narrative is recounted by the boys of the unnamed Indian city and we learn that the real name of this spirit is Mamta. The woman is known as Junction-ki-Rani since she used to stand at highway junctions, “like a scarecrow [...] uprooted from a paddy field” (121), to protect women while searching for the killers of her young daughter. In the third and final section, instead, the protagonists are the djinns, Muslim supernatural souls that can take the shape of animals and are venerated as “saints” (261).

In the pre-Islamic world, djinns were regarded as shape-shifting genes, appearing as everything from snakes to scorpions to humans. As Amira El-Zein writes, djinns are “dual dimensional” in that they can operate in “both manifest and invisible domains” (El-Zein 2009, 1). This dual dimension provides djinns with the eerie advantage to fully permeate the human world: on

the one hand, they are considered parts of the unseen; on the other, their presence is so pervasive that their souls are addressed in prayers to ensure their protection or in exorcisms to get rid of them. As we read in the novel, these spirits receive letters from people of all religious faith, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Buddhists, who wish “the safe return of missing cousin or a friend” (263). At the same time, Jai initially blames the disappearance of the children on djinns who like children’s delicious souls. These stories about ghosts, as readers gradually learn, are digressions that however tap into the fairy-tale-like frame of the narrative, even though, as the choral narrator observes, “[t]his is not the kind of story parents tell their children as they fall asleep. But it’s good that you’re hearing it. You should know what our world is really like” (126; original emphasis). These italicised comments provide a didactic structure, thus entailing a metanarrative function through which non-Indian readers may familiarise with the ambivalent reality of modern India.

Anappara’s novel features ghosts, djinns and other mythological creatures, such as Vishnu, the Hindu protector of the universe, and Durga Ma, the goddess of war with her multiple arms holding weapons. These creatures are symbols of protection against evil, thereby lending a supernatural quality to the novel. In a world where the characters go through painful experiences and the State has abdicated its responsibility towards them, they turn to the supernatural to get answers and a degree of comfort. These supernatural creatures mediate the troubling paradoxes of life and they show how myths can add new meanings by retelling old stories. Thus, these three introductory chapters unveil feelings of consolation and comfort: by relying on fantasy, irony and supernatural elements, the introductory chapters work as metanarrative commentaries that help readers comprehend stories and celebrate the survival of story-telling as a means to represent a complex reality. Besides, Anappara blends various voices that, though not engaging in a direct dialogue, contribute to convey a polyphonic texture to the narrative, leaving readers with a double vision. Are djinns, hence, good or evil? Infidel or saints? This dialogic structure can be said to recall Bakhtin’s contention that polyphony, a term borrowed by music and applied by the Russian formalist scholar in his study of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s fiction, includes a “plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world” (Bakhtin 1984, 6). Here, polyphonic voices serve as a metanarrative signal that enables readers to reflect on the ways Anappara reframes facts, fiction and mythology, specifically from the point of view of children. As Anappara herself observes in an interview with the magazine *Grazia*, the narrative is ultimately also “about the stories we tell ourselves, and how these stories can offer us hope, comfort us or even fail us” (Rodgers 2020).

However, as the narrative progresses, we meet Jai, the nine-year-old main character through whose perspective much of the novel is focalised. Jai lives with his parents and his sister Runu in the basti, a suburban housing that might be easily knocked down by a JCB in one day, located close to the new station of the purple line. The metro station, with its “sparkly walls” (13), epitomises the borderline between the so called “hi-fi” area of the city and the basti. Repeatedly throughout the novel, readers are reminded that a specific characteristic of the basti is the persistent presence of thick smog that makes the air dark and filthy. The smog contributes to isolate the slum from the rest of the city where buildings, with such evocative names as “Palm Springs,” “Mayfair” and “Golden Gate” (16), are close to the basti but, as Jai observes, “seem far because of the rubbish ground in between” (16). As these comments suggest, *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* can be said to recreate the immediacy of such a chaotic



area redolent with the cries of babies, the screams of parents at their children, the smell of animals defecating before market stalls where litter and scraps of food are scattered. From this specific perspective, the novel evokes the detailed style of journalistic inquiry, which has inspired Anappara's fictional writing, thereby conforming to what has been labelled as "condition of India novel" (Moseley 2010, 159). According to Merritt Moseley, post-millennial Indian novels, such as the 2008 Man Booker Prize-winning *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, reflect on the state of things in present-day India by relying on "plenty of observations by the main character about what India is like, how Indians behave, how Indians are like" (159), thus providing insights into the socio-economic conditions of a specific historical period. Interestingly, though we are guided by Jai's voice, which is sensitive and observant, the presence of a variety of voices discloses a multi-voiced critique of the inequalities of India's economic boom.

To a certain extent, Anappara's social realism recalls the so-called "condition-of-England novel" that denotes a body fiction by such writers as Charles Dickens and Elisabeth Gaskell, among others, concerned with the contradictions of the Victorian Era. In many ways, *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* enters in a dialogue with the great tradition of the "condition-of-England novel" as it employs the estranged and naïf gaze of children and the imagery of crawling slums that were a major social concern to Victorian writers. When Jai and his close friends, Pari and Faiz, travel to the city centre in search of the missing children they realise that they feel like "in a foreign country" and that even the smog "looks tame" (99) in this part of the city. The children's immersion in the unfamiliar world of the city has the impact of a shock: as they get on the train of the purple line, they are mesmerised by what they see, staring out of the glass panels:

The train goes underground for a little while and we can't see anything but then it comes up for air. We pass hi-fi buildings, gone before we look into their windows, a clock tower, an amusement park with giant roller coasters that I have heard about, and the tops of trees going grey in the smog. Three streaks of green zoom close to the train and disappear. "Parakeets," Pari tells me. I feel like I'm in a dream. (100)

In this suggestive scene, what readers get is the estranging effect the city has on the immediate visual perceptions of the children coming from the basti. The sight of the elegant buildings where rich people live and of the amusement park conveys the impression of riding on a roller coaster. The travel to the city, hence, gives a sense of both excitement and displacement that is reinforced by the "magic" (101) opening and closing of the doors when the train gets to a station. However, this magic spell is soon replaced by the grim reality of what the children find once they get off the train. Announcements of suspicious unattended objects that might be a bomb, people wearing masks to protect themselves from the smog, CCTV cameras everywhere, policemen checking the passengers' bags and, finally, a double-storeyed building called "Children's Trust" (104) where children alone and in danger are helped. Here, the three children became familiar with the tragic reality of child abduction as they are told that children are made slaves, carried across the border to Nepal and "forced to make bricks" (106). This direct encounter with the reality of child abduction shifts the tones of the narrative, instilling a sense of danger in Jai's detective ambitions.

As already alluded to before, Jai is an aspiring detective, feeling "old and wise like a baba from the Himalayas" (181) in spite of his young age. When the first boy disappears in the basti, his

stuttering classmate Bahadur, Jai leads readers around the bazaar of his neighbourhood, interviewing people, eavesdropping on adults' conversations, absorbing information and trying to rely on the crime-solving skills he has picked up from the episodes of *Police Patrol*. In these passages, Jai's voice foregrounds euphoria and heroic attempts to chase criminals and restore order. A self-appointed detective, Jai gets a job at a tea shop in the bazaar, "an excellent cover for a detective" (131) as the child himself observes. Here, he can listen to gossip and collect clues, taking inspiration from the fictional detectives he watches on TV. He then adopts a stray dog that he names Samosa because he finds the animal under a samosa cart and believes the dog can track scents and smells of the children disappeared. However, Jai and his friends lack experience and their dream of becoming detectives adds a somewhat ideal aspiration to the tragic tones of the story.

Predictably, therefore, the main plotline unfolds as crime fiction as Jai and his friends face a major problem that threatens both their coming of age and collective identity. Through the prism of crime fiction, readers are invited to explore the world through the imaginative eyes of children. With its well-established tradition and popular appeal, crime fiction, as Barbara Fister suggests, is "a genre that deliberately exploits anxiety in the reader, taps into topical social concerns using familiar formulas to produce suspenseful narratives" (Fister 2005, 43). In Anappara's novel, the children's fascination with crime can be read as an attempt at "confronting and taming the monstrous" (Plain 2001, 3). As Gill Plain argues, crime fiction mobilises conflicts and tensions, a feature that is specifically relevant in a society in crisis. Moreover, *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* not only uses crime fictional elements to address power imbalances and abuses, it also exploits its commercial appeal. As Varughese contends, crime fiction is "a dominant trend in the post-millennial writing scene" (Varughese 2013, 101). Thus, by resorting to such generic conventions typical of crime fiction as the climate of mystery, suspicion and suspense, the focus on a specific community threatened by violence, and the appealing charm of Jai, Pari and Faiz as young detectives, Anappara's novel offers readers, especially non-Indian readers, opportunities to critically analyse a range of social and cultural problems that dominate our tumultuous contemporaneity, helping them connect with the world and make sense of their uncertain times.

Taking into account all these elements, we can read *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* also as a coming-of-age novel. Jai's attempts to find the children disappeared from his basti can be read as act of defiance and a struggle to reimagine social harmony in a time of rapid changes, social mobility, and neoliberal expansion that widen already-existing inequalities. In many ways, the generic format of crime fiction offers Jai the opportunity to claim for agency and by pretending to be a detective he seeks to cope with a difficult and chaotic situation. While Jai embodies the essential traits of innocent childhood, replete with optimism and ambitions, the social order against which he struggles is infused with a sense of oppression in a country where "everyone breaks the rules" (131). Illegal child work, violent fathers, police corruption, and savage urbanization are the main themes tackled in the narrative while Jai's voice swings between parody of crime fiction and traumatic testimony. Even though the temporal axis of the novel is limited, Jai's personal development is imbued with the need to find a voice of his own. A self-made detective, Jai's voice is marked by the attempts at integrating himself in a world in crisis as he seeks to solve the case of his friends' disappearances.





Ironically, he sees himself as a star, imagining the episode of *Police Patrol* where his successful investigation will be filmed and thus feeling like “Byomkesh and Feluda and Sherlock and Karamchand all at once” (74).<sup>ii</sup> His narrative voice is thus marked by irony as he realises that, being a child detective, he is not allowed to move whenever he wants while “no one ever asks Byomkesh Bakshi or Sherlock-Watson about their parents” (153). Narrative irony however reflects the cracks of Jai’s expectations, showing the incongruities between his aspirations and the cruel world where he lives. Thus, his voice assumes the tragical tones of a victim testimony against the brutal social reality where he lives. Hence, alongside crime fiction is the narrative of coming of age as Jai’s attempts at understanding what happens around himself entails a process of self-discovery. At the core of Jai’s coming-of-age tale lies the tension between his personal development and the tragic chronicle of kidnapping and other socio-political atrocities such as religious violence and corruption. This dialectic texture recalls Franco Moretti’s understanding of the structure of the *Bildungsroman* as “inherently contradictory” (Moretti 1987, 6) since it exposes the protagonist’s coming-of-age to destabilising social dynamics. The traditional nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* coincides with the rise of market capitalism and the ensuing social transformations that led to a transition from the fall of the aristocracy to rise of the middle class. As Moretti explains, the *Bildungsroman* is a genre that points to the personal integration of individuals into a society affected by changes and transformations triggered by the “new and destabilizing forces of capitalism” (4). However, the formative process of the protagonist is not without conflicts and contradictions, as exemplified by Jai’s story itself.

By the end of the novel, when even Runu disappears, idealism and optimism are replaced by horror and anxiety. Jai’s passion for crime stories fades away, developing a sense of oppression “as if someone is trying to strangle” (334) him. According to TV reports, those who have been eventually arrested are charged with kidney racket and child pornography and such a bleak reality impinges on Jai’s personal growth as he tries to come to terms with the fact that our lives are just “specks of dust [...] glimmering for a moment in the sunlight, and then into nothing” (335). Thus, unlike the traditional happy ending of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*, Anappara’s tale ends on a negative note. While readers will never be told the truth about the mysterious disappearance of the children, suspense and then tragedy negatively impact on Jai and the community of his neighbourhood, unveiling the profound contradictions of modern India. Whereas detective novels tend to offer climax and resolution, in *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* readers are left stranded. This ambiguous conclusion, hence, expands on the novel’s emphasis on the healing force of story-telling, which can still cast some light on the precarious living conditions in India. By the end of the novel, it becomes apparent that Jai and his close friends are victims of institutional injustice, cruelties and atrocities. This suspension of rights recalls Agamben’s conceptualisation of “homo sacer” that designate a category of people whose precarious lives are largely unquestioned by the institutions. The “homo sacer,” in Agamben’s words, inhabits a state of exception that has become “the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics” (Agamben 2005, 2).<sup>iii</sup> Whereas Jai appoints himself “the Greatest detective on Earth” (59), he eventually realises that being a detective is “too-tough” (234) and this conclusion testifies to the acknowledgment of the socio-economic disparities produced by globalization and economic boom.

Thus, as I have tried to demonstrate, *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* plays with its own generic status by combining mythology, fantasy, social critique, irony, detective fiction and coming-

of-age conventions, all of which contribute to the polyphonic texture of the narrative. From a linguistic point of view, Anappara creates a rich tapestry of different voices, which make the narrative “utterly and wholly distinctive, inventive, and immersive” (Goyal 2020). What makes Anappara’s story distinctive is the combination of both English and Hindi words, which remain un-italicised and thus constitute, as Sana Goyal observes, the “the life-blood” of her prose. Interestingly, Jai’s centrality as narrator, with his naïf “okay-tata-bye” (10) language, creates estrangement and is in marked contrast to the serious language of parents who warn Jai and his friends that the real world is not like a TV show. By seeing the contradictions of present-day India through the eyes of children, the narrative echoes a world of exaggerations as this plurality of voices stretches from the ingenuous gaze of children to the depiction of the screams and violence that breaks out when a woman living in a high-fi flat is accused of protecting those who have kidnapped the children of the basti. The overall effect of this plural dimension instils a polyphonic quality to the narrative in which innocence and corruption, extreme poverty and prosperity, passive acceptance of socio-economic precarity and active resilience paradoxically coexist.

### Questioning “India Shining”: Uncanny Slums and Precarity

The bulk of Anappara’s novel is set in a noisy and filthy basti. The neighbourhood is more than a backdrop as it infiltrates the very fabric of the novel with his sounds, screams and physical specificity. In this respect, slums exemplify a space where socio-political inequalities materialise as forms of violence perpetrated by neoliberal policies, thus echoing Agamben’s conceptualisation of “bare life” as new kind of inhuman life that “modernity necessarily creates within itself” (Agamben 1998, 11) and that simultaneously attempts to eliminate because it can no longer tolerate its presence. Urban poverty and the inherent vulnerability of the poor is clearly evident in slums where the lack of sanitation, facilities and basic services exposes the slum dwellers to a conditions of precarity. “Precarious” is the one of the first word that would come to our minds to describe the living conditions of a slum. As Butler argues in *Precarious Life* (2004), certain categories of people live in precarious conditions as they suffer from what she calls “ethical poison of prejudice” (Butler 2004, 22). This condition disqualifies them as citizens as they witness forms of “hermeneutic injustice” that deprives them of grievability. To be grievable, Butler explains, lives must be considered as such; un-grievability, instead, emerges when there is an erasure of what life is. In Butler’s words, “the un-grievable are those whose loss would leave no trace, or perhaps barely a trace” (Butler 2020, 75).

This condition of un-grievable life is particularly relevant in India where slums represent spaces of exclusion, while practices of demolition date back to the colonial period and continued in the wake of independence. Under the 1956 Slum Areas (Improvement and Clearance) Act, the Indian government tried to demolish slums areas in the country, a phenomenon that rose during the Emergency (1975-77). However, the constant high levels of migration into cities has triggered a new proliferation of urban poverty. Paradoxically, while people move to larger cities because of the appeal of jobs and for improving their living conditions, slums expand and become physical and symbolic traps where lives are deformed and distorted in their most basic needs. More broadly, slums are key issues in our times of crisis. In *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis draws a comparison between the urgent appeal to stop climate change and the question



of slums. According to Davis, the challenge of slums “sounds and equally authoritative warning about the worldwide catastrophe of urban poverty” (Davis 2006, 21).

From the very beginning, images of urban poverty abound in *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line*. As the novel opens, readers are invited to follow Jai on a typical day before going to school. We find the child staring at the five holes in the “tin roof” (9) of his one-room house, while a next-door baby is “howling” and neighbours “squabble everyday” (10) about the water stolen from the barrel. In spite of the only room that Jai shares with his Pa, Ma and sister Runu, the house, as Jai’s father affirms, “has everything [...] for happiness to grow” (10), including the TV where Jai watches his favourite crime series. As we follow the main character on his way to school, the child shows us what it means to live in slum: a giant buffalo blocks the street, a multitude of people wearing trousers, saris and dhotis rush through the streets, the pervasive smell of kerosene, food, sweat and metal permeates the air while tall hi-fi buildings are visible in the distance. Significantly, Anappara stretches the distance between the slum and the elegant area of the city by resorting to the binary contrast between darkness and light. While the basti is in the dark, hi-fi buildings, as Jai observes, have lights on because they use “diesel generators” (16). Then, as Jai queues before the toilet complex, close to the rubbish ground that separates the slum from the rest of the city, he ingenuously simulates adults spitting, making “boom-boom explosions” (18) with his mouth, while all around people carry pots and jerrycans of water and buckets in which they throw soaps, towels and mugs. Thus, early in the novel, readers familiarise with the precarious living conditions of poor people, getting a glimpse of the state of things and of the contradictions of present-day India.

As the narrative progresses, there gradually emerges the ambivalent nature of the slum as a space where governmental negligence, economic interests, marginalisation and strategies of resistance converge. Demolition and displacement are always potential as policemen menace people of putting down their houses with bulldozers. On the one hand, the basti dwellers mistrust each other and pay out police bribes, “hafta payment” (38), to avoid problems.<sup>iv</sup> On the other, when the first children go missing, a feeling of connection emerges as adults, and particularly children, seek to discover more about the mysterious disappearances. And yet, whereas Jai and his friends display optimism, imagining that djinns are the main culprits, adults instead gradually resort to violence as we observe escalating tensions between Hindus and Muslims, the latter being accused of kidnapping the children. As these comments suggest, the basti is redolent of the very same social, economic and religious problems as in other fictional and non-fictional Indian slums, such as in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012), a non-fiction book by Pulitzer-Prize winner Katherine Boo and, more recently, in Mathangi Subramanian’s novel *A People’s History of Heaven* (2020).<sup>v</sup> What these places share are problems related to housing, lack of water, electricity and sanitation. According to the data collected by the German platform *Statista*, India shows an increase of urbanisation “by almost 4 percent in the last decade” and it has been estimated that by the end of 2021 one third of the population will be living in cities (O’Neill 2022). As a consequence, in present-day India the number of slums has increased quickly and the increase in urban population implies major social problems, such as diseases, poverty, pollution, legal and social exclusion. Likewise, the basti in Anappara’s novel displays the very inequalities, even though a strong sense of community and kinship characterises those who live in the slum, especially the children who engage in the search of their mates.

The basti is located close to the new station of the purple metro line where the slum dwellers themselves, including Jai's Pa, had worked as builders. Beyond the metro line, we find the hi-fi buildings where women from the basti, such as Jai's Ma, work to clean the messes of the wealthy. In between, a ground of stinking rubbish and wall with barbed wire on the top isolate the slum from the hi-fi area. Moreover, we learn that the area where now hi-fi buildings have been built was once empty: the land was "full of boulders" (98) and farmers worked to grow mustard. Then, the farmers sold the land to builders that transformed the area. Thus, the topographical organization of the slum is a physical expression of the socio-economic inequalities it embodies, recalling Ankhi Mukherjee's contention that the term "slum" is porous and it ought to be understood as "interstice, under-city, leftover space, urban township, tenements, shantytowns, tent cities, shitholes" (Mukherjee 2018, 89). According to Mukherjee, postcolonial slums, such as the notorious slum of Dharavi in Mumbai, lend themselves to a reading through the lens of the "uncanny." If the concept of the "uncanny" is usually associated with a disturbed visual representation of a place where what must be hidden is instead brought to light, slums are hence a hunting manifestation of the Freudian *unheimlich* since "stark inequalities and divisions are at once exposed in plain sight and yet continually hidden" (102). This visual centrality is also at work in *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line*. Jai's investigations, for instance, make visible the darkest sides of contemporary India. The good and bad things of living in the basti, Jai observes, "is that news flies into your ears whether you want it or not" (220). However, perceptions seem to become vague. While following Jai, Pari and Faiz, readers are allowed to go through the interstices that make up the basti, while all around uncanny visual sensations arise:

[...] a man washes his backside with water from a mug. Pigs dive into the grey-black rubbish, their pink-white bellies splotched with dirt. Cows with dried dung on their backsides chow rotting vegetables, blinking their eyes to bat away flies. Dogs nose through the filth for bones, and boys and girls collect cans and glass. Smoke rises from the smelliest piles that people have set on fire to make them stink less. (140)

Here, we observe the slum from Jai's position and what we see is a place where sanitation is inadequate and microbes evolve while people and livestock live in similarly precarious conditions. More interestingly, what we find in the basti is the distinctive presence of the smog, which badly damages sight and breathing. People wear handkerchiefs to protect their mouths, ears and noses, while the smog makes the leaves of the trees "black with soot" (141). In this uncanny environment where what is familiar becomes unfamiliar, perceptions are distorted: Jai's nose, for instance, "grows longer" (23) because of the various smells that percolate through the air. Similarly, his ears "get bigger" (23) as an orchestra of sounds, ladies cleaning pans, butchers chopping meat and rickshaws rushing by, proliferate in the slum. Significantly, the sight is affected by the smog since the "bright reds and greens and blues of the namkeen wrappers look dreary in the smog" (21). Thus, the smog is almost personified here, "sulking" (19) above Jai and the people that populate the basti. The smog refracts the precarious condition of the slum, adding a further element of confusion to an already ambiguous space redolent of the numerous contradictions of "India Shining."

In postcolonial theory, the slum, as Mukherjee explains, "is a projection of the psychological apparatus, which confounds inside and outside, or self and other" (102). Interestingly, in Anappara's novel, the space of the basti juxtaposes uncanny feelings to a certain Dickensian



fascination with fear and dread. What I have in mind here is the depiction of Tom-All-Along's slum in *Bleak House* (1852), which evokes the squalor of London's notorious slum of St. Giles. Just as the fog is everywhere in Dickens's opening scene of *Bleak House*, "creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs" and "in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners" (Dickens 2003, 3), so the smog infiltrates Anappara's narrative. In Dickens's novel, we find not only the fog, but also smoke and soot ensuing from the chimneys of a city in continuous expansion. The fog/smog is in metonymic connection to the city as it "materializes the networks, ideologies, and interconnections of the metropolitan economy that are literally but otherwise invisibly responsible for the fog's material composition" (Oak Taylor 2016, 37). Likewise, the smog in *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* is a disturbing presence. Like "the devil's own breath" (52), it steals the colours of the place, distorts perceptions and eventually unveils the tragic risks of neoliberal policies.

## Conclusion

As a postmillennial novel engaged with the representation of the inherent forms of precarious lives, *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* provides readers with a kaleidoscopic tale about the conditions of ungrievability to which some categories of subjects are submitted, such as unprotected children. In formal terms, the structure of the novel can be said to hinge on a multi-layered hybrid form that weaves connections between the plurality of voices and the various motifs thematised. Readers are exposed to the childlike vision of Jai and his friends, to their aspirations of restoring order in the basti. And yet, we also deal with the precarious lives of the slum dwellers who seem to be excluded from society and made invisible by the rhetoric of "India Shining" and Modi's evocation of "neo-middle" class aspirations. By combining various generic conventions and linguistic tones, from the ingenuous tones of the fable to the radical critique of social realism, *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* lays emphasis on the phenomena of invisibility and exclusion in places, like contemporary India, where economic growth and increase in gross domestic product widen existing inequalities. By insisting on the precarious typography of the basti as a symbolic and physical space where such contradictory trajectories converge, Anappara's narrative gives voice and visibility to the silent and persistent resistance by the basti dwellers. As we filter the world through the gaze of Jai, Pari, Faiz, Runu and the other kidnapped children, our understanding of these displaced people and of the space they inhabit comes to be complicated. The slum dwellers are victims who, paradoxically, are also agents of their own lives according to forms of knowledge acquired at the margins of a postcolonial state in continuous economic expansion. Though scared by the threats of demolition and shocked by the mysterious disappearances, this community is however aware that the basti will be never demolished. As Jai's father observes, the basti "has been here for year. We have identity cards, we have rights. We're not Bangladeshis" (57). What these words convey is that the Indian State needs these precarious subjects as they represent a necessary outcome of globalization and that these citizens can reclaim their right to exist. By the end of the novel, Jai, who has come to terms with the darkest sides of human existence, eventually sees a star in the sky, reading it as sign for care and protection, which "can fire past the thickets of clouds and smog" (341). The persistent smog that marks the basti seems less thick now, thus refracting some form of consolation.

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<sup>i</sup> Subsequent references to this edition of *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text. The TV shows described in the novel are probably inspired by *Live PD: Police Patrol*, an American TV series aired on the A&E Network from 2016 to 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> Byomkesh Bakshi is the protagonist of the eponymous Hindi television series created by the Bengali writer Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay (1899-1970). The character first appeared in the detective story *Satyamveshi* (1932), which means "truth-seeker." Feluda is a private investigator that first featured in the children's magazine *Sandesh* in 1965 and was later turned into various films and TV adaptations. Sherlock Holmes is the well-known fictional detective invented by British author Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930). Sherlock Holmes first appeared in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and the detective's popularity became widespread in Conan Doyle's following detective stories and in the various additional cinema, stage and TV adaptations. Karamchand is the protagonist of the eponymous detective TV series first broadcast in 1985.

<sup>iii</sup> For the Italian philosopher, the formula *homo sacer* was employed in Roman law to describe "an obscure figure" (Agamben 1998, 8) dwelling in a marginal position between culture and nature. *Homo sacer* represents a form of exclusion from the law "stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide" (183).

<sup>iv</sup> According to the *Collins Dictionary*, in India "hafta" is the money paid to gangsters to secure protection. See <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-hindi/hafta>.

<sup>v</sup> Boo's book chronicles the life of the slum dwellers in Annawadi, a squatter slum located between the Mumbai International Airport and five-star airport hotels. In *A People's History of Heaven*, instead, Subramanian chronicles the lives of five girls and their close friends who live in a slum located on the outskirts of Bangalore. The slum, which is at risk of demolition, is symbolically called *Swarga*, Sanskrit for 'heaven.'