‘My Dark Heaven’: Hidden Voices in Orphanage Tourism

Abstract

Literature on orphanage tourism considers the motives of Western volunteers and the problematic nature of their compulsion to ‘help’ vulnerable children in the Global South. Orphanage tourism is also increasingly adopted into ‘rescue ideologies’ (Howard, 2016) and anti-trafficking/’modern slavery’ campaigns. The perspectives of children involved, however, are missing from these discourses. This article draws on original empirical data to explore the narratives of young Nepali adults who lived in Kathmandu orphanages as children. Through these narratives, the article explores the diverse complexities of the residents’ experiences of volunteer tourism and NGO ‘rescue’, and the shortcomings of recent ‘neo-abolitionist’ frameworks. The article argues that such framings are routinely oversimplified and that a more nuanced and contextualised empirical exploration is urgently needed.

Keywords

Orphanage tourism in Nepal; ‘paper orphans’; NGO rescue; modern slavery; childhood; child trafficking.

Introduction

In the past decade, volunteer tourism (or voluntourism) has emerged as one of the fastest-growing tourism markets in Asia (Mostafanezhad, 2014). Some countries, including Nepal, have become popular destinations for ‘orphanage tourism’, where foreign tourists pay to visit and/or volunteer in privately run orphanages. Orphanage tourists engage in a range of activities related to the support of orphanages. They are tourists who wish to include ‘an element of social work-oriented volunteering in their vacation or travels and who choose to do this by volunteering their time—sometimes coupled with financial or material support—to an orphanage’ (Punaks and Feit, 2014, p. XI). The vast majority of commercial orphanages in Nepal are in fact ‘sham’ orphanages, which fraudulently present children as orphans in order to solicit money from foreign volunteers and donors. It is estimated that over 80 percent of such children have at least one living parent (Ibid.), belonging to families that are financially unable to support them. Commercial orphanages produce false documentation for children they procure, including false death certificates for living parents, thus creating generations of ‘paper orphans’ who grow up in the industry.

Between 1996 and 2006, armed conflict between the Maoist Communist Party of Nepal and the Nepalese Government helped establish the market for orphanage tourism, as Maoist rebels allegedly ‘trafficked’[1] many hundreds of children from rural families to Kathmandu to pose as orphans in the lucrative orphanage tourism business. During the protracted Nepalese civil war, poor families in remote rural regions like Humla, in Nepal’s far north-western reaches, were offered the option of paying for their children to be taken to orphanages in Kathmandu or have them forcibly conscripted into armed groups by Maoist rebels. Many families opted for the former and sent their children to Kathmandu where orphanages could profit further by charging foreigners high fees to adopt an 'orphan' to take back to their home country (Punaks and Feit, 2014). In the years since the end of the civil

[1] The terms ‘trafficking’ and ‘traffickers’ are used in quotation marks to acknowledge their contested nature—a point to which I return at various points throughout the article.

war, Nepal continues to endure instabilities, such as high poverty rates, natural disasters, and family breakdown because of death, illness and domestic violence (Save the Children, 2014), and the orphanage tourism industry has grown during this period. Although international adoption is now illegal in Nepal, orphanage owners, intermediaries, and other stakeholders continue to profit from foreign donors and tourists willing to pay to sponsor children and/or volunteer in orphanages.

The phenomenon of orphanage tourism has sparked debate about the motives of Western volunteers and the ethical implications of their compulsion to 'help' vulnerable children in the Global South. Orphanage tourism has also recently been framed as a form of 'modern slavery' to be eradicated, and these areas are discussed below. But the voices of children involved in the industry are missing from this literature, in part because of ethical and other methodological barriers to reaching such a potentially vulnerable and inaccessible group, but also because the conceptual frameworks used are often too narrow to consider children's voices relevant. Indeed, the voices of children are largely underrepresented in tourism research more generally, and there is poor recognition of children's negotiations of the conditions that structure their lives in tourism settings, which often includes performing labour in order to survive. Further, recent policy, media and academic concern with 'modern slavery' and 'child trafficking' has contributed to the problematic reproduction of children involved in labour and/or displacement as captive 'victims', romantically and homogenously imagined as vulnerable and passive (Okyere and Twum-Danso Imoh, 2014; Howard and Okyere, 2015). Children are rarely, if ever, consulted by those engaged in producing the 'politics of protection' whose conceptions of childhood remain limited and hegemonic (Howard, 2016).

Better understanding of the experiences and subjectivities of 'orphans' involved in orphanage tourism is urgently needed. Drawing on qualitative data generated in Nepal in April 2018, this article aims to foreground the voices of Nepali adults who were, as children, constructed as 'paper orphans' and lived in orphanages in Kathmandu. It explores their often contradictory and ambivalent narratives, which disclose mixed and complex feelings, as captured in one interviewee's reflection on his orphanage experiences as his 'dark heaven', referred to in the article title. Of central importance to this research is exploring how children enter and exit orphanages, the latter typically occurring through NGO 'rescue' or because residents reach adulthood. The article critically explores NGO interventions and broader 'rescue rhetoric', which is problematised and enriched by the data.

The article begins with a brief overview of current debates in orphanage tourism, highlighting the omission of children's voices therein. There follows an outline of relevant debates in various child 'rescue' discourses and the largely unreliable conceptions that underpin them. Since the research is concerned with exploring the nuances of children's experiences, the article is careful to acknowledge diversity among children and differently structured childhoods. Therefore, a critique of hegemonic conceptions of childhood and their tendency to deny diversity and subjectivity is given.

A full methodological account then follows, before substantive sections discuss how children enter, experience and exit orphanages, discussing the various paths taken aside from organised trafficking. These sections show that the ways in which residents experience and reflect upon orphanages are rich and varied. Crucially, there is an exploration of residents' 'exit' stories as they turn eighteen and their socially and legally constructed 'childhood' ostensibly ends. The complexities of their subsequent transition into young adulthood, often in the face of profound ongoing difficulties, are revealed.

Finally, the concluding discussions stress how the data highlight shortcomings of current understandings of orphanage tourism, the rescue industry, and many of the 'remedies' in place, which connects to inadequacies in broader anti-trafficking and 'modern slavery' discourse. As discussions below will show, the realities of life as a tourism orphanage resident and therefore, in many ways, the object of commoditisation, pity and

repeat intervention, shed important light on the problematic nature of extant understandings, discourse and agendas surrounding orphanage tourism and other child labour contexts. The article argues that, despite the small scale of this research, the narratives complicate established constructions of childhood that underpin political and third-sector interventions, which largely fail to acknowledge heterogeneity in children and childhood experiences, as well as the lack of favourable alternatives to orphanage life for those born into poverty and precarity.

Orphanage Tourism, Rescue Narratives and (Mis)Conceptions of Childhood

Orphanage Tourism in the Global South

Since most commercial orphanages offer short-term volunteering placements, which can be as brief as half a day, much orphanage tourism involves what Callahan and Thomas (2015) term 'shallow' volunteering, which is characterised by a short duration, minimal skills, self-interest motives, and often academic/career gain through *curriculum vitae* enhancement. Guiney notes that 'experiences involving vulnerable children are among the most popular volunteer tourism practices', especially 'hug-an-orphan' vacations, where 'tourists crave direct contact with children in global South countries' (Guiney, 2018, p.125). Whilst such 'shallow' and self-gratifying volunteering in orphanages would be impossible in tourists' own countries, the market for volunteering with 'Othered' children in poor countries burgeons. This arguably has imperialist undertones (Ursin and Skålevik, 2018), and Reas maintains that orphanage tourism appeals to the 'rescue fantasies' of the well intentioned, yet often ill-qualified Western volunteer (2013, p. 125).

Also under research scrutiny are the depictions of orphans in tourism promotional literature, which tend to conflate stereotypical visions of passive, needy children and the helpless 'Third World' Other (Manzo, 2008). Thus, the 'orphan' is constructed as vulnerable, abandoned, and significantly 'in need of adult intervention' (Richter and Norman, 2010, p. 222). Reas argues that images of 'vulnerability and enchantment' are presented to 'objectify the poor… orphan child and to commodify their neediness and hardship' (Reas, 2013, p. 129). Reas states that for tourists wishing to help or 'give back' to poor and vulnerable children, opportunities in the Global South are plentiful. Demand is met by the many informal orphanages whose operations exploit the Western trope of the orphan as 'the quintessential child-in-need' (Reas, 2013, p.135). Simpson notes that the pervasive Western (mis)conception of the 'Third World' sustains a 'geography of need', where 'there is "need" and where European people assume the ability, and right, to meet this need' (Simpson, 2004, p. 686). Such imagery is also reproduced in non-governmental organisation (NGO) campaign literature, and the vulnerability and victimhood of 'orphan' children are widely foregrounded in third-sector awareness- and fund-raising projects.

'Rescue Ideologies' & 'Modern Slavery' Frameworks

Orphanage tourism is also increasingly framed in academic writing as a form of 'modern slavery' and 'human trade' (See Cheer *et* al, 2017; Cheer, 2018; Cheer, 2019), which is highly exploitative of, and harmful to, children and contributes to child trafficking (Saxe-Smith, 2015; Van Doore, 2016). Yet the frameworks emerging in this paradigm are largely unclear and incomplete, as typified in the below quote:

> That tourism is inherently labor intensive, provides ideal conditions for potential transgressions that leverage human exploitation, especially concerning labor and human rights. Accordingly, this should signal to tourism geographers that the association between modern slavery practices and tourism presents a potentially rich seam for critical tourism geographies research (Cheer, 2018: 728).

Indeed, tourism is often labour intensive and potentially exploitative and transgressive of rights. However, these claims can be made of many tourism contexts, including those that entail illegal land-grabs for enclave tourism, hotel and resort construction sites that employ children and adults with poor or no health and safety measures in place, family displacement and homelessness caused by gentrification and over-tourism, and so on. Neither the peculiarities of orphanage tourism, nor the 'practices of modern slavery', at least as distinct from broader exploitation in tourism, are clarified. Cheer, after Allain (2013), goes on to argue:

> Modern slavery is variously defined and broadly refers to practices and institutions that undermine, restrict or extinguish human freedoms while at the same time exploiting human assets through legal and illegal means (Cheer, 2018:730).

Again, the argument is vague and unsubstantiated, since a plethora of practices related to tourism could be classed as exploitative. Further, the 'neo-abolitionist' logic uncritically relies on concepts of freedom and exploitation, which elsewhere are debated as complex, context-dependent and poorly defined (O'Connell Davidson, 2015).

Van Doore's landmark analysis of international trafficking law has usefully debated the legal validity of the application of anti-trafficking and 'slavery' legislation to the displacement of 'paper orphans' (Van Doore, 2016). Her analysis is, however, also somewhat myopic and one-sided. Drawing on literature from NGO and legal sources, Van Doore presents evidence of severe child abuse and entrapment by several particularly malevolent orphanage owners to make her case for the full inclusion of the institutionalisation of 'paper orphans' in anti-child trafficking and modern slavery definitions, thus enabling full recourse to legal 'remedies' to eradicate orphanage tourism. She fails to acknowledge the paucity of viable alternatives for children involved in orphanage tourism, dismissing as 'specious' the valid counter argument that definitions should also consider the degrees of autonomy of individual children and the weighing up of degrees of exploitation versus inabilities of families to feed and house their children (Van Doore, 2016, p. 398). Again, the lack of first-hand accounts from 'orphans' themselves hides the diversity of experiences and the different degrees of subordination, abuse, coercion, resistance and so on, which should be prerequisite to making sound legal definitions, decisions and interventions.

As noted above, orphanage tourism has recently been added to the 'rescue ideologies' (Howard, 2016) of anti-slavery policy, the principal aim of which is to eradicate all forms of 'modern slavery' and child trafficking. Indeed, in 2018, Australia became the first country in the world to officially recognise orphanage trafficking as a type of 'modern-day slavery', passing its own 'Modern Slavery Bill' as part of a wider scheme to eradicate exploitative forms of voluntourism. In BBC coverage of the passing of the new bill, Chloe Setter, senior adviser on anti-trafficking and voluntourism at *Lumos*, a charity working to end the institutionalisation of children, explained:

> 'Australia's legislation will help to take orphanage trafficking out of the shadows and put it in the spotlight on the global stage…We now need other countries to adopt similar measures and ensure their own anti-slavery legislation protects against this heinous type of child trafficking' (BBC, 2018).

This approach exemplifies the ambition, but also the limitedness, of the 'modern slavery' agenda in its assumption that all children in tourism orphanages have been trafficked and are held 'as slaves', against their will. Interventions based on such inaccurate labelling neglect the social, economic and cultural conditions that structure the lives of young people involved in labour (Howard, 2016). Anti-slavery discourse implies that the eradication of

orphanage tourism will automatically improve the lives and uphold the rights of children. It fails to acknowledge the painful fact that poverty remains the principal cause of the violation of children's rights because lack of resources seriously impedes, or entirely prevents, their access to basic human rights such as healthcare, water, food and education. Almost half the population of Nepal lives below the poverty line and an estimated 30% of children are not even officially registered with the Nepalese authorities (Humanium, 2017). Child labour is widespread in Nepal, especially in construction and agriculture, neither of which promises conditions that seem immediately preferable to orphanage 'work'. Both are sectors that can also involve 'trafficking' by intermediaries and harmful working conditions. Yet these forms of child labour are not at the centre of new 'modern slavery' legislation in, for example, Australia, as is the case with orphanage tourism. This suggests, as discussed above, that 'orphanhood' is imbued with particular political and emotional meanings, which, as is also the case with 'sex trafficking', appear to fit current abolitionist agendas.

Unheard Voices and Hegemonic Childhood

Children' voices are largely omitted from policy agendas and research narratives and this includes much tourism research (Carpenter, 2015; Poria & Timothy, 2014). Canosa, Graham & Wilson (2019) have questioned the silence of children's voices in tourism research, and several studies have begun exploring how children actively negotiate identity and belonging in visited communities (Canosa, 2018; Canosa, Wilson & Graham*,* 2017). Carpenter (2015) has called for the critical interrogation of orphanage tourism in conjunction with childhood studies to develop a greater understanding of the socially constructed nature of many assumptions about children and childhood that underpin the tourism industry.

Oversimplified understandings of children and childhood are also found in broader contemporary Western discourse, where children are largely conceived of, morally, emotionally, and legally, as uniformly powerless and in need of adult protection (O'Connell Davidson, 2005; Okyere and Twum-Danso Imoh, 2014). This Western childhood model is imposed on a global scale, generating a mythical 'globalised childhood', which engenders and legitimises particular interventions based on ideologies of what childhood should involve (i.e. family life, education and freedom from work and exploitation). Yet it has been argued that such an ideological version of childhood does not reflect the 'realities and life aspirations of children worldwide' (Hanson, Abebe, Aitken, Balagopalan, & Punch*,* 2018, p. 274). These arguments, however, are not informing the 'politics of protection' whose conceptions of childhood remain limited and hegemonic (Howard, 2016).

Notes on Definitions and Terminology

NGO orphanages, in a bid to distance themselves from the problematic and politically charged 'orphanage' concept, tend to call themselves 'children's homes'. However, in light of the fact that the NGOs mentioned here by participants engage(d) the services of volunteers—albeit longer-term and with better-trained volunteers—and also in acknowledgement of the terminology and ideas expressed by participants, I use the term 'NGO orphanage' to describe such institutions.

Since all five participants in this study had, at the time of their initial displacement, at least one living parent, I use quotation marks to denote the constructed nature of the 'orphan' label in this context. Similarly, the term 'orphanage tourism' is also somewhat contested because it arguably represents an oversimplification of a complex market, which involves a range of institutions and other types of care settings that are not actually orphanages. This potentially renders the term 'orphanage' outdated and inaccurate (Reas, 2013). Whilst I recognise the shortcomings of the term, it is used in this article for reasons of convenience and coherence.

Methods and Methodology

This article draws on a pilot study carried out in Kathmandu in April 2018. It forms part of an ongoing British Academy funded qualitative study of orphanage tourism in Nepal, the primary aim of which is to explore the complexities of social and economic life in Nepal, foregrounding the experiences and voices of young adults who spent time in orphanages as children. Data discussed here are derived from two sources:

- A public roundtable event held at a venue in Kathmandu aimed at tourists and involving five former 'orphans' who told their stories to an audience;
- Follow-up research with two speakers from the event. This included in-depth interviews and many conversations with these two key informants.

Roundtable Event

This public event was organised by a high-profile NGO, which had previously operated as an orphanage—or in their words 'children's home'—for children 'rescued' from for-profit orphanages, but has since ceased housing children and now has a solely advocacy/awareness-raising mission. The event formed part of the organisation's series of evening talks, which aimed to educate tourists about the problems associated with orphanage tourism. I was invited to the event by an organiser with whom I had established contact prior to my trip. This person then served as a 'gatekeeper' through whom I obtained permission from the speakers to record their stories to use as anonymised data. I verbally confirmed this consent with the speakers at the start of the evening and explained the nature of the research to them. The session was introduced and chaired by a member of the NGO staff and each speaker talked for between 20 and 50 minutes, in English, about their experiences. The speakers, three men and two women, were aged between eighteen and twenty-six years (further sample details in Table 1). The speakers described in detail their routes into, and out of, orphanages. They each discussed their experiences of living in orphanages and articulated their views on a range of issues, including rural poverty, trafficking, institutional care, education and orphanage tourism. The talks were audio recorded and later transcribed, and they inform the discussion and analysis sections below.

Interviews

My attendance at the roundtable event enabled me to seek follow-up interviews with the speakers via email. I contacted all five speakers as a group, inviting them to partake in individual and/or group interviews, giving the option of accepting or refusing whilst not putting them 'on the spot', as I felt I might have done by requesting consent in a face-to-face manner at the event. Two out of the five responded by email and we organised interviews in a public location in the coming days. Written consent was obtained for these interviews, both of which lasted over two hours and were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviews were semi-structured around themes that emerged during the roundtable so that I was able to pursue specific areas more deeply and in a more private setting. I was especially interested in the young men's experiences before, during, and after institutionalisation, and their views on orphanage tourism and third-sector interventions. The initial formal interviews with the two key informants instigated further meetings and conversations, which continue to the time of writing. I have ongoing consent from both participants to include our verbal and electronic conversations in the data set for this study. The two key informants were male and, aged 25 and 26 years, were significantly older than the other three participants. They were both almost fluent English speakers. Of the roundtable participants, they were the most vocal and most critical of orphanage tourism. These factors possibly explain their willingness to respond to my email request, when younger, seemingly less confident roundtable speakers declined. The sample is, therefore, somewhat skewed and limited, and a broader sample is needed for future research—a point to which I return in the conclusions.

The decision to interview young adults who had lived in orphanages as children was partly made in order to bypass the many seemingly irreconcilable practical and ethical implications of a white Westerner interviewing vulnerable children in potentially ‘closed’ settings in the Global South. Gaining access to ‘orphans’ via guardians and other proxy consent-givers is extremely challenging, not least because assessing the legitimacy of guardianship of children in certain settings is sometimes impossible (Kelley *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, many children in commercial orphanages suffer abuse and trauma, and, as data below will reveal, part of the ‘work’ of children in commercial orphanages is to enthusiastically engage with foreigners. Additional invasion of their lives by face-to-face research was therefore untenable, particularly in a comparatively short study where there was not sufficient time to establish relationships of trust. Further, the reflections of adults who have transitioned both into, and out of, orphanages and/or ‘rescue’ facilities as teenagers and now experience the after-effects of various points of intervention are, in themselves, very revealing. Pseudonyms have been used throughout in order to preserve anonymity.

Sample Group: Roundtable Participants

Name	**Gender**	**Age**	**Age First Entered Orphanage**	**Means of Entry**	**NGO ‘Rescue’?**
*Suresh**	M	26	12	Taken by Western ‘expat’	Yes
Mansoor	M	18	10	‘Trafficked’ by Maoist rebels	Yes
Sunita	F	19	7	Taken by relative	Yes
Mira	F	18	12	Taken by relative	Yes
*Kanak**	M	25	10	‘Trafficked’ by orphanage intermediary	Yes

Table 1: Showing roundtable participant details.

*** indicates key informant.**

Entry into Orphanages: Organised Child Trafficking and Beyond

As shown in the table above, two of the five roundtable speakers, Mansoor and Kanak, were taken as children from their rural villages to Kathmandu orphanages by organised traffickers who had approached their parents with incentives and/or threats. Mira and Sunita, on the other hand, were taken into for-profit orphanages by older male relatives, and Suresh, one of the two key informants, had a more complex entry. His story is told in Fig.1 below.

Suresh

Suresh's entry into orphanages stemmed from a combination of domestic violence from his father and a precocious sense of independence and curiosity. He repeatedly described his boredom and restlessness as a child growing up poor in a rural village, and his childhood longing for new experiences. In 1997, at the age of seven, Suresh decided one day to leave home without a plan. He walked from his village to the nearest town where he took a bus to a city 86 km away. There he was employed as a domestic worker in the house of a Nepali man he met on the street. He befriended an older child, also a domestic worker, who persuaded Suresh to travel with him to Kathmandu. The pair became separated in the chaos of civil war in Kathmandu and Suresh was alone, asking for work, but ended up homeless and living on the streets, where he survived by trading on his being 'a cute child with a big personality'. He told me 'the first English that I learned was "Excuse me sir, would you like a guide", and people used to laugh and let me show them around'. This approach was successful and meant that Suresh never had to resort to begging. He somehow also managed to avoid being recruited into a street gang and resist drugs. He was, however, frequently beaten by older street children and was forced to stay awake at night, sleeping instead during the day after guiding tourists whenever possible. He spent several years living this way and slowly lost feelings for his parents. At around the age of ten, Suresh was taken in from the street and looked after by a Western expatriate man, whose behaviour eventually became inappropriately tactile. Suresh escaped from his house during the night before any 'serious' abuse took place. After a further two years living on the streets he befriended another Western expatriate, this time a Canadian woman who arranged for him to be taken into an orphanage. There he lived comparatively comfortably with 18 other children but was soon set to work as an orphan. He explained: 'Sometimes some tourists would come and they [orphanage owners] would say "get ready, smile and look happy"… [We were] living in a big fear of doing something wrong, and then they would punish us'. The orphanage was owned by a Nepali businessman who had a tour office in Thamel, where he would recruit tourist volunteers. Suresh witnessed a lot of sexual abuse of other children at the hands of Western orphanage tourists but managed to avoid being sexually abused himself. Suresh stayed there for two years, learning English from the volunteers and hoping that someone better would come along. Eventually, he befriended a volunteer, a woman from the U.S.A. in whom he confided about the conditions at the orphanage. This was somehow relayed to the owner, who one night returned drunk and beat him then kicked him out. At this point the woman took him to an NGO orphanage, where he was offered schooling, which he turned down in favour of working and learning English through meeting volunteers, speaking and writing English, also learning computer skills and photography. He explained how the remaining 18 children from the 'bad' orphanage had disappeared and that he was always looking for his 'brothers and sisters'. Eventually they were found near a church that Suresh had visited: 'they were living in one room with pictures of naked women all over the wall, and 18 kids all living in one room, and they all had Hepatitis B, typhoid, jaundice, so when we discovered them I called [NGO] and police'. The children were then placed in care at the NGO and for next six months Suresh's job was to take them to hospital appointments to get them all well, because he was someone they knew and trusted. He explained how 'they were in a big trauma'. Suresh eventually left the orphanage at the age of 17 because he felt bored and restless, but he now regrets that decision. He currently makes a living through photography and documentary filmmaking.

Fig. 1: Suresh's Story

Suresh's complicated journey through various for-profit orphanages and finally a rescue facility (NGO orphanage) means he does not neatly fit into definitional categories such as 'victim of child trafficking' or 'modern slave'. He possessed a considerable amount of ambition, agency and perspicacity from a young age, and his capability protected him from the worst forms of abuse (e.g. sexual). Despite coming from a physically abusive family background, and whilst precariousness and homelessness rendered him vulnerable to exploitation and danger, Suresh drew on his charm and wherewithal to negotiate a path through to adulthood and towards a successful career as a photographer and filmmaker, through which he now advocates for street children in Kathmandu. Suresh also reminds us that the social and economic context of his childhood—for example being able to suddenly leave home aged seven without the launch of a high-profile missing child campaign, such as the Madeline McCann case in the UK—is rather at odds with the ideals put forward in Western notions of childhood and child protection policy.

A range of socioeconomic difficulties, including destitution, domestic violence and armed conflict were key factors in all five of the participants' departure from home and entry into orphanages, be it at the hands of older relatives or traffickers, or more independently, like Suresh. Mansoor, for example, was handed over to intermediaries at the age of ten after his father was killed in action during the civil war. The children of neighbouring families were experiencing forced conscription by Maoist rebels, and his family was visited one night by soldiers who, in exchange for money, took Mansoor and sold him to an orphanage in Kathmandu. Mansoor inhabited several different for-profit orphanages before eventually ending up in an NGO orphanage after a rescue operation. His experiences of NGO care are returned to below.

Another example is Mira, who, at the age of twelve, was taken to a for-profit orphanage in Kathmandu by her older brother because her family was destitute and she was malnourished. Mira was rejected by the orphanage on arrival on account of 'looking too old', and she found her own way into several other for-profit orphanages where she was instructed to claim orphanhood. Again, Mira's trajectory contradicts the misconception that all children in orphanages have been trafficked. Her parents had been struggling to adequately feed Mira and her siblings, despite them all working on the family smallholding. Subsistence farming in Nepal is blighted by many difficulties, including crop failure due to outdated irrigation systems, poor soil conditions, high altitudes and extremes in weather. It is not unusual for all family members, including young children, to labour for long hours in the fields, meaning that working in an orphanage can represent the 'least-worst' option for survival.

Kanak

Kanak, now aged 25, comes from a large family in a remote area of north-western Nepal. His family is dependent on agriculture and has suffered many problems, particularly during the height of the Nepalese civil war, when fighting forced families to send away their children to safety. Kanak's eldest sister, from whom he is still estranged, was sent away to India. When he was four years old, Kanak's father sent him with an intermediary to a for-profit orphanage in Kathmandu, which was common practice at the time. His father tried desperately to send his children away to school instead but could not afford the fees.

In the orphanages Kanak met many foreign volunteers and had a wide range of experiences. He describes corruption and heavy drinking amongst staff in for-profit orphanages, but also having fun and positive interactions with foreign volunteers. After two years in for-profit orphanages, Kanak was rescued by an NGO orphanage that was opened by a North American teacher and her husband, and this provided a period of happiness and stability for Kanak. Many children from his home area were sent to the same NGO orphanage where they were given good food and education.

This period of stability was interrupted when Kanak was informed he was to be returned to his parents by the NGO. Up until this point Kanak had believed he was an orphan, since he holds (false) documents to that effect and has no recollection of his parents. There were many delays to his return but eventually, aged 12, Kanak was escorted on the long journey to his village, where he stayed for three weeks. He described finding the mountain environment very harsh and strange, and feeling like an 'alien'. Unable to speak his local dialect, Kanak could not converse with his parents and so could not discuss the events of his childhood or the difficult emotions he was experiencing. His parents were both suffering chronic ill health and he met younger siblings for the first time. He promises himself that neither his siblings nor his own future children, should he have them, will be put into an orphanage, despite the potential benefits.

As an adult, Kanak suffers financial and emotional problems. He attributes his issues with depression to growing up in care, despite the fact that much of his childhood was spent in NGO orphanages. He explains that NGO staff did their best with very little money, but nonetheless he grew up in overcrowded conditions without a proper family. He is frustrated and saddened by the fact that he was given language skills and some education in NGO orphanages, enough to instil the ambition to become a political scientist, but that educational support ceased when he reached adulthood and had to leave the NGO orphanage to fend for himself. He now struggles to study and support himself and elderly parents, and receives no ongoing help from the NGO that took him in as a child.

Fig. 2: Kanak's Story

Orphanage Life: 'It Opens Your Eyes'

In their varied and often ambivalent accounts, all five participants discussed positive aspects of orphanage life, listing opportunities for play and learning as important benefits of growing up in various kinds of orphanages. They valued the friendships they built with other children

and the opportunities they had to play football and other games—a rare luxury, they said, in their home villages, where they had been expected to labour for long hours in the house or fields. They also valued the interaction they had with volunteers and the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986) gained through these encounters:

> 'We met so many volunteers, nice people with a lot of love, and they give you their time, and they play with you and take care of you. Through the volunteers we learn a lot about speaking English and the Western ways; the Western way of seeing things and it opens your eyes' (Mansoor, roundtable).

Here, Mansoor suggests that forms of cultural capital can be acquired through interactions with Western tourists, and indeed all five participants had learned to speak English during their time in orphanages. They articulated the positive aspects of having close contact with volunteers, yet they also spoke at length of the pain they suffered when volunteers, with whom they had formed bonds, went home. A critique often levelled at for-profit orphanages is their tendency to offer very short-term volunteering placements; such volunteering opportunities are abundant in Thamel and other tourist areas. This can cause problems for children with respect to attachment and bereavement (Punaks and Feit, 2014). It is argued that long-term volunteering is less disruptive for children and most NGOs stipulate a minimum volunteering period of several weeks. During roundtable discussions and in interviews, however, participants expressed problems they were left with after forming strong bonds with longer-term volunteers who inevitably left, to be replaced by new people. Mira explains, referring first to her time in NGO orphanages and, in the second quote, for-profit orphanages:

> 'For orphan, you are the little victim, and you play a very important role. You are there to give love, so [volunteers] can give you love and help. That is why they come.
>
> 'I am away from my home, and I was missing my parents too much. When volunteers come and give you their love, and that is very important to have the love, but I am told to say I have no parents. So please don't misuse this. If you come to volunteer, do your research. We are people not products. Please don't play with our emotions' (Mira, roundtable).

Mira, now 18 years old, explained to the roundtable audience how separation from her family and subsequently from a string of volunteers (in both commercial and NGO orphanages) has left her with depression. She has difficulties socialising and finding work as a result.

The second female roundtable participant, Sunita, also in her late teens, described being brought to Kathmandu as a small child by a family member in order to escape the civil war. She was passed between several for-profit orphanages, 'some good; some bad', and a range of emotions characterise her recollections:

> 'I missed my parents a lot. Too much, and I had to learn to face life. In orphanage there is better food, better education, good qualities of life. But no love, not real love or affection from parents but from volunteer foreigners. They come and give love and money blindly, just to come for entertain and then go back. Children miss them but they never come back. This gives bad psychological effect on kids. Lots of kids trafficked because of tourists feeding market' (Sunita, roundtable).

Sunita, like the other participants, was ambivalent about orphanage tourists. As discussed above, they enjoyed connecting with foreign volunteers, but suffered heartache when those volunteers left. Kanak felt strongly that whilst orphanage tourism can bring benefits for children in terms of providing regular meals and education, institutionalisation is ultimately harmful. He expressed his gratitude to the 'kind' volunteers who had taken care of him, acknowledging their good intentions, but explained how painful it was when he wrote to

foreigners after their departure, but they did not write back. Both he and Sunita had firm ideas about how goodwill could be better directed:

> 'If you want to help, don't give money to individual NGO or person. Do more research and work out a better way of investing long term, in education. But not just in Kathmandu; it is important to find remote communities to educate young children who live with their family. Westerners should learn more, try to let people like me explain to learn about experiences and how to help us' (Kanak, roundtable).

> 'We don't want to blame volunteers, only encourage them to be more ethical. Promote other sorts of volunteering that is not with children. Volunteering in Nepal on tourist visa is illegal, so please respect law. Volunteers should help families in poverty to keep their children. Do not open orphanage!' (Sunita, roundtable).

Suresh also described his time in orphanages, and subsequently in NGO care, with mixed feelings. He reflected on how he was loved by staff and volunteers during his childhood, some of whom remain in contact with him to this day. He learned English to a good level and this has helped him to build his career. His entry into orphanages was partly self-directed, as a means of escaping the dangers and hardship of homelessness (as explained in Fig. 1 above). He described his early experiences in a for-profit orphanage:

> 'It was great at first, to have a bed and meals, and to be away from the street gangs and the drugs. But quickly it became hell. There was no school, no lessons. We were sent to church to beg for money, rice and vegetables. We were taught how to canvas for donations from tourists in the church. We were beaten every night, but when volunteers arriving, we were given two hours to prepare to look happy, to perform songs etc. We saw this as a nice break from the hell and we received treats. We were like animals in a zoo. Many volunteers are cheated and fundraising gives the boss easy money. Orphanages are an open invitation to paedophiles' (Suresh, roundtable).

'Rescue', Other Forms of Exit, and Life After Orphanage Tourism

Exiting orphanages, whether for-profit or NGO institutions, is a fraught process. The participants described a range of emotions in relation to their exit, including regret, sadness, fear, disorientation, and anger. Suresh, who voluntarily left NGO care at the age of 17 years, regretted his decision and longed to return. He missed his peers—'my brothers and sisters'—and felt lost, without purpose and alone. Similarly, Kanak, whose full story is relayed in Fig. 2 above, experienced strong feelings of rejection as he entered his teenage years and began resembling a young adult. As a teenager, Kanak was rescued from a for-profit orphanage during a raid and placed in NGO care, where he experienced several relatively settled years in what he termed his 'dark heaven', a paradoxical and contradictory term because on turning 18 years old Kanak was 'aged out' of the system and released, or 'disowned' as he put it. He felt entirely unequipped to face an independent life as an adult. He had poor health, very little money and no home. He felt disoriented and abandoned:

> 'One day you are a kid and [NGO] wants you; next day they disown you and kick you out. You have a little education, which is a danger; better with no education. Little education means you cannot speak the same language as your family. You forget your culture and you cannot go back. I need a diploma and I want to have a medical degree, but NGO give no money for that. Like orphanage, NGO don't want to help after 18. They say "not my problem"' (Kanak, interview).

Kanak strongly believed that rescue centres and NGO orphanages should provide post-18 years care and support young people through post-diploma education. He explained how institutionalisation renders young people 'not streetwise', and that NGOs and charities need to 'wake up to the realities of Nepal'.

The 'currency' of childhood, therefore, disappears upon 'coming of age', causing or exacerbating the many issues faced by young people exiting care. The various interventions, whether for labour exploitation by for-profit orphanage owners or rescue by NGOs, cease, and the young adults are left to fend for themselves. Many are estranged from family, have emotional problems, including a sense of dislocation and, according to Suresh, are vulnerable to alcoholism, drug abuse and street gangs. At this point, feelings of worthlessness can set in:

> 'We are a product for volunteers, but volunteers do not know how we are feeling. Children learn most from being with their parents; they learn what is good and bad, they get guidance. And children have more fun in orphanage but now I regret not knowing my culture. I do not know my own festivals and religion. I know everyone else's religion but not my own. We have adjustment problems. We don't know our parents, our grandparents. [NGO] took me from orphanage but did not help with adjusting to the world, which is different after civil war. They don't teach skills, so you become a man and you are nothing' (Kanak, interview).

These quotes also highlight the problem that NGO orphanages, despite being non-profit and having children's welfare and rights at the centre of their aims and mission statements, can reproduce some of the problems associated with the for-profit orphanage tourism industry.

Conclusions

By exploring the stories of five former 'paper orphans', this article has recognised the deeply complex nature of orphanage tourism and NGO interventions. It has shown how the rich diversity of experiences among only five participants underscores the critical importance of the voices of orphanage residents. The article has presented narratives that enrich and sometimes contradict the dominant discourse of the helpless, trafficked, captive orphan, as well as illustrate the problematic nature of rescue ideology. The stories have shown that the automatic conflation of trafficking and orphanage tourism demonstrated in literature cited early on in this article is erroneous. Although many children are trafficked by organised trafficking networks, others are not. Sunita and Mira, like countless other Nepali children, were taken to orphanages by older relatives; Suresh took a convoluted, partly independent route, helped along by well-meaning Westerners. These are some of many examples from the narratives that problematise current understandings.

Discussions have highlighted the difficulties experienced by children before residing in orphanages and as adults following their exit, thus demonstrating that the assumed and especial vulnerability of children in orphanages is unhelpful. All five participants were living in adverse conditions prior to entering orphanages. Mira was malnourished; Kanak's father's inability to afford school fees for his children forced his decision to hand them over to orphanage traffickers. These histories reflect the desperate situation of poor families with few choices, yet such factors generally escape the attention of the 'highly selective lens' through which anti-trafficking and anti-slavery agendas 'view restraints on human freedom' (O'Connell Davidson, 2015, p.3).

Findings highlight the urgent need for meaningful consultation with orphanage residents, who are so glaringly spoken over and side-lined on the one hand, yet fixed as objects for intervention and rescue on the other. Their stories enrich and complicate

sensationalist abolitionist models, whose singularity and non-contextuality are inimical to critical understanding and a full appreciation of the erosion of children's rights in many poor countries. Indeed, much of the emotive language used in anti-child-trafficking discourse, which largely focuses on the 'forced' nature of children's routes into, and experience of, labour and the 'suffering' they endure, actually echoes some of the terms used by participants to describe their lives *before* they inhabited orphanages. As has been shown, childhood in Nepal can be extremely difficult and insecure, characterised by hard physical work and lack of food, or more imminent dangers—Suresh, who ran away from home because of long-term physical abuse from his father and then endured beatings whilst homeless, is a case in point. Therefore, although coercion and restraint are often applied by intermediaries and orphanage owners, the 'force' and 'suffering' that proliferate humanitarian discourse often begin at home, and this situation will not change upon the eradication of child trafficking and child labour. Anti-slavery stakeholders, including third sector, academic and government agencies, aim to abolish orphanage tourism and trafficking on account of child labour being a violation of universal children's rights. However, as this article has noted, research on children in the Global South repeatedly shows that childhood cannot be globalised in such ways (Hanson et al., 2018; Howard and Okyere, 2015; Okyere and Twum-Danso Imoh, 2014). Discussions have illustrated how an idealised (Western) childhood is simply not an alternative to orphanage labour for many.

Whilst the participants' narratives have highlighted potential benefits of spending time in orphanages in this context, the aim of this work is not to idealise orphanage tourism or overstate some of the positive effects it can have on children's welfare and opportunities. On the contrary, the article has explored the many problems faced by children involved in the industry, including separation from families, difficulty adjusting to life afterwards, and, as Sunita explained, being positioned as the object of fleeting and artificial 'love' for voluntourists. The data suggest that these factors can have deleterious effects on children and young adults. Yet the data also show that clear-cut, abolitionist solutions that aim to eradicate orphanages as sites of child labour and child trafficking are inadequate, since the alternatives to orphanages are often so bleak.

Sunita articulated a strong sense of being used to gratify the desires of volunteers, expressing frustration at the simplistic Western compulsion to 'help' without meaningful consideration of the ethics or consequences of orphanage tourism. This compulsion, increasingly termed 'white saviour complex' in popular discourse, is readily exploited by networks of intermediaries with access to some of the world's poorest families. The promise of schooling, especially in English language, for their children, or indeed the hope of them simply being regularly fed, can be incentive enough for struggling parents.

Cole has proposed the idea of a 'white saviour industrial complex', which compels Westerners to have 'a big emotional experience that validates privilege.' According to Cole, 'the white saviour supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon and receives awards in the evening' (Cole, 2012, p.1). All participants in this study expressed concerns with the voluntourism model and both Sunita and Kanak suggested more beneficial alternatives for foreigners wishing to help, including investing in education in rural Nepal. 'White saviour' mentality is often imagined as the preserve of affluent tourists or celebrities, yet the stories told here also speak to Cole's notion of the flawed and largely ineffective 'saviour' policy agendas of global anti-trafficking and 'modern slavery' campaigns.

NGO orphanages fight difficult battles to protect children from abuse and harm. They play a vital role in providing comparatively safe and enriching accommodation for children who are at risk of harm from unscrupulous orphanage owners and foreign volunteers who are, at best, untrained and inexperienced, offering only fleeting and potentially confusing connections. At worst, they might be perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Such NGOs are greatly concerned with factors connected to the welfare of children but not, according to Kanak, with bigger questions about whether their alternative residential care can sometimes

reproduce problems associated with for-profit orphanages. Rescue ‘raids’ conducted by NGOs are problematic because they can shock and disorient children. They also rely on the assumption that children automatically need/want to be rescued and returned to their family homes. Indeed, Kanak’s inability to reconnect with his family and the distress this caused illustrates the problematic nature of rehoming/repatriation programmes. Further, NGO reliance on volunteers is questionable in a number of ways, not least in terms of the grief children can suffer when longer-term volunteers depart, as articulated so powerfully by Mira, who attributes her depression to sustained separations from volunteers in both for-profit and NGO care.

NGO orphanages are also working under the contestable notion that childhood is a discrete life-stage, characterised by vulnerability and need, which suddenly ends on a child’s eighteenth birthday when residents are normally required to leave. This leaves young people, still potentially vulnerable and often troubled, feeling even more rejected and disposable. This form of exit led Kanak, for example, to describe NGO care as his ‘dark heaven’; certainly an improvement on the ‘hell’ of Suresh’s for-profit orphanage, yet not quite the panacea promised in much NGO and anti-slavery discourse.

Orphanage tourism occupies a paradoxical position in the Western imaginary. Though received knowledge and the ideological sanctity of childhood in the West have signalled the end of orphanages, the ‘Third World orphan’ is still constructed as a worthy cause for ‘lay humanitarianism’ (Cheney and Ucembe, 2019). Meanwhile, notions of ‘globalised childhood’ in the era of child rights underpin the quest to eradicate orphanage tourism in recent anti-slavery and anti-trafficking agendas, whose discourse falls short of considering the socio-economic complexities of the lives in question (Hanson et al., 2018) and respecting the views of those it constructs as ‘victims’ (Kempadoo, 2015). The ‘orphan’ evokes an especially emphasised form of childhood vulnerability, which befits the often ‘sensationalist misinformation’ presented in ‘modern slavery’ rhetoric (Murphy, 2018). In this way, the orphan represents the ‘ideal victim’, a construction that is fed back into social perception and ultimately into the development of legal and policy frameworks (Rodríguez-López, 2018; Van Doore, 2016). Orphanhood, therefore, is commodified not only by fraudulent orphanage owners and, arguably, by NGOs and other charitable organisations eager to secure funding, but also by the architects of high-profile, often lucrative and self-serving anti-slavery and anti-trafficking campaigns.

The sample for this study was small, owing to time constraints and access difficulties that are common with such hard-to-reach groups. It is also potentially skewed since access was gained through an NGO awareness-raising event, which was conducted in English and attended by a small number of presumably comparatively confident former orphans. Some of the data are retrospective, gleaned from childhood memories and in that sense can be said to give only a limited, and possibly distorted (by the passing of time), account of the years participants spent in orphanages as children.

In other ways, however, the research, which is ongoing, has begun the process of airing previously unheard stories of orphanage tourism and its aftermath. The narratives explored are richly revealing and of wide scope, enabling a deeper understanding of the orphanage tourism industry in Nepal and the experiences of residents. Most importantly, the article has illustrated the need for further qualitative empirical work in this area and the urgency to centralise the voices of children and young people involved. This approach has global applicability and relevance across multiple contexts of labour exploitation and displacement, where interventions are conducted without consultation with social actors who are almost singularly constructed as ‘victims’. Not only does this present a distorted, incomplete and Eurocentric picture; it also distracts from the politics of ‘white saviourism’ and the broader structures of inequality and exploitation underpinning global tourism markets.

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