Representations of Precarity in South Asian Literature in English

Edited by Om Prakash Dwivedi
Representations of Precarity in South Asian Literature in English

“The anthology offers a range of ideas drawing from multiple registers of embodiment and life, confronting precarity and vulnerability at a time of neoliberal ascendency. It grounds these insights in contemporary literary culture and shows us how South Asian authors respond to the challenges of instrumental rationality and the logic of the market. The engrossing anthology traverses theoretical debates and traces their echoes in literature, raising questions that are familiar and quotidian. The intervention is timely, scholarship compelling and advocacy subtle.”
—Jyotirmaya Tripathi, Professor, IIT Madras, India

“Globally, the neo-liberal turn has taken away guarantees from most regarding the life they desire or imagine will ever come to fruition. This contemporary moment has intensified long-term patterns of economic disenfranchisement, the vanishing of the welfare state, the privatization of publicly held utilities, the increase in pension insecurities, and the flexible regimes of capital that are based on contractual relationships rather than long-term job security. In this important text, Om Prakash Dwivedi brings together excellent essays from contemporary fiction in order to navigate this precarious terrain pertaining to contemporary South Asia.”
—Kamran Asdar Ali, Professor, University of Texas, Austin

“Representations of Precarity in South Asian Literature in English offers thoughtful theorizations of the relationship between neoliberalism, precarity, and literary production. The essays in this anthology examine both precarious infrastructure and precarious bodies as represented in literary works and offer new insights into twenty-first century anglophone South Asian Literature. Professor Om Dwivedi has curated compelling essays by a distinguished group of scholars of South Asian, postcolonial, and global literatures. This book will be of great value for literary scholars.”
—Nalini Iyer, Professor, Seattle University, USA
Om Prakash Dwivedi
Editor

Representations of Precarity in South Asian Literature in English
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For my sons
Vedansh and Pranav
I can’t breathe. It began as a medical symptom, an oppressive blockage in the respiratory system that put the word “ventilator” on everyone’s lips. Then it was a cry of desperation, the last words from George Floyd, turned into a rallying cry by millions of others. And finally, in an outsized sequel, the words have become elemental, apocalyptic, with raging wildfires and plumes of orange smoke extending from British Columbia to Southern California, pollution so far-flung as to block the sun in Central Europe (Leibniz Institute of Tropospheric Research).

It is not entirely accidental that the three crises should converge in a space of months. Nor is it accidental that all three should rest on a simple physiological fact: our need to have free and unrestricted access to oxygen. Oxygen is the one resource on the planet we’ve always counted on. It gives us life even as it connects us to other living things. Keeping the oxygen flowing is not always easy. Humans happen to have a highly evolved respiratory system that can be easily sabotaged, making us precarious as a species, likely to become oxygen-deprived on any number of fronts.

Even at rest, the average human breathes 10 to 20 times per minute. Between 2100 and 2400 gallons of air pass through our lungs every day. This nonstop oxygen intake exposes us to a growing list of pathogens and pollutants. COVID-19 is a respiratory disease, and so too are many other newly emerging infectious diseases, like SARS and MERS. As for wildfire smoke, we know now that it is rich in tiny toxins called PM2.5 – particulate
matter of less than 2.5 microns – that can travel thousands of miles and damage our immune system from afar (Herschlag, 2020). In the twenty-first century, every breath we take is a risk taken, a risk shared with every other creature on the planet.

Precarity, seen through the lens of oxygen, is at once monstrously tangible and complexly diffused, with many of its causes coming from afar, and many of its downstream effects also not materializing until some distance into the future. Not limited to a single outcome, it is also not analyzable by a single metric. Evolving across space and time, it is shaped at every turn by forces both large and small, some of them human and some not.

Especially at this juncture, with climate change looming ever larger on the horizon, and the COVID Delta variant still ravaging the globe, it is important to think about precarity as a human–nonhuman interface, the combined effect of chemistry, biology, and politics. Oxygen is a good index here, taking us from the physiology we inhabit, to the atmosphere we share, to the public health infrastructure of particular jurisdictions. From winter 2020 well into summer 2021, oxygen has been in short supply across the globe, though arising from different circumstances and affecting different communities. This shared lack suggests that precarity, though experientially devastating, could nonetheless be an important unifying force, the beginning of a reparative momentum cutting across political, economic, and religious divisions.

On June 29, 2021, Lytton, a village about 150 miles northeast of Vancouver, broke Canada’s all-time heat record when its temperature soared to 49.6 C. The next day, fast-moving wildfires erupted. It “took maybe 15 minutes to engulf the whole town,” said Mayor Jan Polderman. About 90 percent of Lytton was destroyed. The blazes were ignited by lightning from dry thunderstorms, so intense that over 700,000 intra-cloud and cloud-to-ground lightning flashes were recorded in 15 hours, including more than 100,000 cloud-to-ground strikes. Satellite data showed massive smoke plumes in the sky, as gigantic pyrocumulus clouds shot up 55,000 feet into the stratosphere.

These extreme weather patterns had also been observed during Australia’s devastating 2019–2020 fire season, when massive plumes also surged into the stratosphere and circumnavigated the globe. The NOAA report suggests that burning from September through March, the bushfires injected one million tons of smoke into the air, and produced the worst air quality ever recorded in parts of South New Wales, Queensland, and Victoria, with PM2.5 levels reaching 625 μg/m³ in some places, which
is to say, 62 times higher than the WHO air quality guideline (2021). The fires directly killed 33 people, but the smoke killed many times more. Four hundred and seventeen deaths, 1124 hospitalizations for cardiovascular problems, and 2027 hospitalizations for respiratory problems were due to the smoke (Cohen, 2020).

In the Pacific Northwest, the burning of Lytton, the most tangible outcome so far of the 2021 extreme heat, brings back the hellish wildfires from the last two years. It also reminds us that climate change is the main driver of precarity in the twenty-first century. “I’ve watched a lot of wildfire-associated pyroconvective events during the satellite era,” tweeted David Swain, a climate scientist at UCLA; “this might be the singularly most extreme I’ve ever seen.” While its global effects will be unfolding for months and even years to come, what becomes immediately clear is the precarity of indigenous populations.

Lytton has long been home to the Nlaka’pamux community. Chief Matt Pasco of the Nlaka’pamux Nation Tribal Council said that British Columbia government officials didn’t get in touch with him until hours after the fire began. When one finally did, it was to check on the safety of the livestock. “My cattle mean more to this province than Nlaka’pamux people,” Pasco said. Communications with First Nations “didn’t live up to expectations,” Public Safety Minister Mike Farnworth acknowledged in a public statement. Coming on the heels of hundreds of unmarked graves of indigenous children discovered at residential schools, it speaks to long-standing and ongoing discriminations in Canada, a country that prides itself on being a liberal democracy.

About 800 Nlaka’pamux tribal members were displaced by the Lytton fires. Other First Nations stepped up right away, providing food, shelter, and clothing. The Savage Society, a group of indigenous performers who use myth and fiction to create theater and film, set up a fundraising goal of $20,000, almost immediately bumped up to $50,000. By the afternoon of June 4, they had raised more than $345,000. But support networks, past and present, are by no means exclusively bound by indigeneity. In fact, the destruction of Lytton has shone an unexpected light on the opposite phenomenon: an ethics of care binding one marginalized community to another.

Among the buildings reduced to charred earth was the Lytton Chinese History Museum, opened in 2017, and housing 1600 artifacts donated by local communities, with ties going back to miners and railroad workers in the nineteenth century. These Chinese immigrants were discriminated
against from the very first – a head tax was imposed in 1885, followed by a total ban in 1923. Perhaps for that very reason, they also “had long histories of engagement and relationships with indigenous peoples,” said Henry Yu, professor of history at the University of British Columbia. “The history of Chinese and Indigenous peoples were kind of ignored as part of B.C. history,” so the loss of the museum is especially heart-breaking (Nikitha and Renouf, 2021). But the collections have been digitized, and an online fundraiser aims to rebuild. Precarity is often an energizing force, a spur to creativity. It raises the hope that solidarity among marginalized groups isn’t impossible, that oxygen in various senses isn’t a zero-sum game.

But what about oxygen coming in cylinders? Could a finite, non-shareable resource also lead to solidarity? Delhi during the months of April and May, 2021, offers an instructive example. As hospitals ran out of supplies and people stood in queues for hours to fill their cylinders, sometimes at exorbitant prices, three Sikh organizations stepped up and provided free oxygen to the best of their ability. The Hemkunt Foundation, Khalsa Aid, and the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee had this in common: a minority faith founded on “seva,” service to all, not limited by caste, gender, or religion. Sikh temples—gurdwaras—have always provided “langar,” free meals for migrant workers and others in need. Earlier this year, they had gotten into trouble when they expressed solidarity with hundreds of thousands of farmers protesting against India’s newly formulated agricultural laws. However, that hasn’t stopped them from opening up “oxygen langars” now, mindful only of the lowest common denominator: the fact that oxygen is a necessity of life, its bodily deprivation felt in exactly the same way by Hindus and Sikhs. Precarity at this human–non-human interface unites us on the level of chemistry and biology. It carries an imperative that speaks for itself. The superb chapters in this volume invite us to reanimate the world on this basis.

New Haven, CT

Wai Chee Dimock
REFERENCES


This book emerged from a series of discussions with Dieter Riemenschneider. Unfortunately, his ill health did not allow us to work together on this project. I am very grateful to Pramod K. Nayar, Janet Wilson, Tabish Khair, Aleks Wansbrough, and Roderick McGillis for their generous and unfailing support over several years. I have learned and benefitted a lot from them for many years now, and I am highly thankful to them for the path they have made possible for me. Their suggestions and insightful comments have enriched this book.

Special thanks go to K.S. Rao, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, and Dhananjay Singh, Jawaharlal Nehru University, for providing me platforms to share some of my ideas from this project. I am grateful to them for their generosity. I am also thankful to Purushottama Bilimoria, S.K. Sharma, Gurumurthy Neelkantan, Wai Chee Dimock, Claire Chambers, Dhananjay Rai, Kamran Ali Asdar, Jagdish Batra, Johan Höglund, Anu Shukla, Scott Slovic, Jorge Diego Sanchez, Elisabetta Marino, O.P. Budhola, M.S. Pandey, Binayak Roy, Rajan Welukar, Rohit Singh, Pooja Agarwal, Sebastian Doubinsky, Rimina Mohapatra, Nilanjan Chattopadhyay, Y.S.R. Murthy, Bashabi Fraser, Claudia Egerer, Shobhit Sengar, Ramendra Singh, and Praveen Gupta for always supporting my work and ideas. Emily J. Hogg and Nicklas Hallen helped me by sharing articles whenever I needed them—thanks to you both.
I wish my mentor, late Professor Avadhesh Singh, could have been around to see this book in his hands. Unfortunately, he passed away too soon, causing an irreparable loss to my world. However, his fond memories make me understand the value of relationships and empathy.

This book would not have been possible without the love and encouragement of my parents, my wife—Veena, my little sons, and my nephew—Kartikeya and niece Keshav, whom I am yet to meet but we already share a special bond, blurring the geographical distance. Finally, my thanks to Molly Beck at Palgrave for showing faith in this project, and for supporting it.
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Introduction

*Om Prakash Dwivedi*

We gave everything … to make a dwelling out of it.

Not just our earnings, we gave out the labor of our bodies to make this place. (Tabassum et al. *2009*: 146)

The above-quoted passage highlights a precarious relationship between infrastructure and bodies, embedded within the capitalist framework of neoliberalism. This introduction, along with other essays in *Representations of Precarity in South Asian Literature*, focuses on how precarity is the everyday experience of South Asia, driven and structured by different ways in which the role of government-corporate nexus has shifted from care-m mentality to generating harm, insecurity, and vulnerability in the neoliberal age. The economic force of neoliberalism is primarily based on the idea of transaction, what one *can* do—the unlimited capacity of workers—and not interaction, and its transactional nature makes it aggressively calculative to the extent that lives are categorised into liveable and non-liveable zones. This book makes a claim that neoliberal strategies of accumulation and aggrandizement are programmed in a way to generate, sustain, and
nourish selective valued lives thus rendering other lives precarious. Detached from normativity, neoliberal forces persistently formulate mechanisms to lock the circulation of resources within certain groups. The conversion of and control over almost everything as resources for this selective group of valued lives has led to the emergence of a superstructure, which only thrives on its unregulated power to dispose and eliminate weak bodies. Under such extreme life conditions, morality and social justice are no longer viable. Efficiency of unprivileged lives and their maximised risk have become the procedural codes of neoliberal regime, ensuring the supply of vital resources for selective valued lives—coercively, systematically, even legally. Life is determined by the philosophy of market, which is unregulated and uneven, hence, deprived of any welfare approach. The fractured socialist pluralism and democratic ethos thus lead to a continual precarity, foregrounding the replacement of elemental forces of life with a new, exceptional power of market.

The representations of precarity in this book make us look at the capitalist social relations that have emerged and continue to thrive in South Asia post-1990s. Anxiety, job insecurity, zero-hours employment, environmental degradation, state violence, poor healthcare system, long working hours (aided and abetted by the surveillance cultures), bioeconomies, and fragmented families are the characteristics of the neoliberal age. There is also a strong consensus on the brighter aspects of neoliberalism, which is linked to its ability to provide jobs and opportunities. However, one only has to examine the patterns of development to understand how it “borrow[s] from the future”, an ironical phrase used by Slavoj Žižek (2011, 997), not to ignore its extractive practices, and how it, cancels out the future itself. “Precarity”, “precariousness” and “precariat” are terms used to refer to such uncertain futures in the wake of neoliberal capitalism. These generalised risks and increased vulnerabilities, which this book terms as “precarity” have become symptomatic of the neoliberal age, setting out to reflect on the inequalities which are deeply embedded in our social system, particularly in the South Asian region. Examining the post-1990 social transformations in the South Asian region, which are inevitably linked to draconian policies of neoliberalism, this book sets out to identify precarious conditions and their manifestations in the recent literature of the region.

With the dissolution of social infrastructures triggered by coercive and extractive forces, Martha Albertson Fineman suggests that life continues to become increasingly vulnerable. For Fineman, social infrastructures
constitute “social assets” (2017)—the networks which are essential to sustaining life. It is for these reasons that this book looks at different dimensions of precarity in South Asian literature, linked as they are to neoliberal capitalism, increasing vulnerability with the eventual erosion of the welfare system. The contributors were not asked to adhere to a particular concept of precarity in their analysis of South Asian literature, as that would have reduced the theoretical purchase of the term. Rather, this book attempts to give space to a selection of approaches that have become prominent in South Asian literature recently.

Rather than dealing with the history of precarity as such, this book examines a range of novels and some works of non-fiction to trace the forms and effects of precarity in the present socio-political and cultural imaginary of South Asia. Although this book consists of essays by a range of contributors, there is a consistent agreement among contributors in their point of view on South Asian precarity and its relations to neoliberalism. As such, this book argues that ontological insecurity generated by neoliberal capitalism and enforced by the state-corporations complex has led to the creation and proliferation of precarity. Even a prefatory glance at the oeuvre of South Asian writings in English is enough to suggest a new kind of literary history since the 1990s—a history which is mostly dominated by dark and pessimistic stories of development in the region. Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997), Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), Aravind Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower* (2011), Nadeem Aslam’s *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* (2009), Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Asia* (2013), Neel Mukherjee’s *A State of Freedom* (2017), Tabish Khair’s *Night of Happiness* (2018) and Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* (2019) are among the novels which offer precarious accounts of the damages rendered by neoliberal capitalism.

**Neoliberalism and Precarity**

The salience of terms such as precarity, precariousness, and precariat, according to Emily Hogg, lies in “the way” they are “put to work by individuals and groups in order to contribute to the reshaping of those social realities” (2020, 1). The day-in-the-life structure of South Asia, driven as it is by emancipatory, even progressive terms, has failed to offer much social security to its citizens. Arguably, the collusive consent between the state and corporate often results in exceptional forms of power that
invariably ignores practice of collective development. A case can be made that the development discourse advocated by neoliberal ideologues have mostly turned out to be jargons, at least in the context of rising social-inequality in the region. Life continues to become more precarious as we witness new forms of capitalist exploitations in this region. Arguably, as capitalist forces continue to expand and take control of our daily lives, a larger section of society in this region has become increasingly vulnerable. Precisely, for this reason, I have argued elsewhere that “[P]rivatization and socialism do not go hand in hand unless there is provision for the intervention of the state in meaningful ways that can keep a watchful eye on the pulse of the nation.” (Dwivedi 2022, n.p.). Hence, it is needed to conceptualise frameworks, which can provide us with a lens to examine the compromised ontological conditions of “social spaces … often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 1991, 34) in South Asia. This book undertakes the task to examine the concepts of precarity, precariousness, and precariat, building on the work of Judith Butler and Guy Standing to show how, when used as critical terms, they make us aware of the reconfigurations of neoliberal society and the nation-state.

These reconfigurations, driven by aggressive political systems and the subsequent weak social fabric, therefore, leads to precarious conditions in South Asia. A caveat needs to be lodged here that precarity as a life condition permeates both the global north and the global south, albeit in different forms and manifestations. The dominant role of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its divisive agendas, being driven largely by the United States, has concomitantly led to the undermining of social conditions in South Asia, resulting in a more intensified precariousness in the region. Raju J Das underlines this deep level of inequality that attends the discourse and practices of neoliberalism. Das critiques the unfair outcome of neoliberalism in India, which “has produced a massive amount of economic inequality, insecurity, unemployment, and under-employment, casualization, informalization, greater labour exploitation and lax version of factory act implementation” (2015, 718). Andreas Wansbrough and I have discussed the undocumented ways of the gig economy’s procedural codes, causing further damage to social security: “Many of us have become even more reliant on the exploitation of the gig economy as food and supplies are delivered on demand. … and the gig economy was nearly synonymous with precarity and contemporary exploitation” (2022, 148). The speed of supply and consumption are both integrally vital to the gig economy.
In his introduction to the book on *South Asian Fiction in English: Contemporary Transformations* (2016), Alex Tickell highlights how the 1990s marked a radical shift in the sociological performance in the region. Tickell takes recourse to fiction to examine the new contours of the region. He posits that “[S]outh Asia is now more fast-paced and competitive, more globalized and resource-hungry, more technologically networked and socially fragmented than ever before, and these transformations have proved productive for novelists, fostering … increasingly inventive literary expositions of citizenship and civic identity” (2016, 9–10). Tickell, however, does not use the term “precarity” to capture the varying degrees of social transformations, increased proletarianisation and uncertain futures that are ongoing in South Asia. In *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Arundhati Roy relates these transformations to neoliberal capitalism, which has seemingly undermined the democratic sovereignty of developing nations. Evidently, Roy could see the hand-in-glove relationship of neoliberal capitalism and nation-states. In this new kind of governance, the “realm is raw capital,” made possible by “conquests” of “emerging markets, … profits,” and “borders limitless” (2002, 145). Simon During echoes Roy’s thoughts by linking the deepened crisis emanating from the age of neoliberalism as “the politics of subalternity … largely absorbed into the machinery of emergent neo-liberal state capitalism” (2015, 57). During further argues that the subaltern politics has given way for a new class, that is the precariat. Consequently, During marks a new turn to precarity through the vertical and horizontal expansion of the subaltern class. It is in this way that During, as Janet Wilson, Cristina Gamez Fernandez and I have argued elsewhere (2020, 441), situates the dilemma of the post-1990s social reality arising out of neoliberal crisis. By examining post-millennial fiction and non-fiction, this book attempts to establish critical frameworks of precarity and precariousness as manifested in the everyday life in South Asia. It attempts to understand the ongoing social transformations and how life has become increasingly uncertain and dark due to “neoliberal rationality … [that] involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social actions” (Brown 2005, 39–40, emphasis original).

Apparently, the process of neoliberalism has opened up a huge set of debates. One comes across various definitional frameworks of neoliberalism, making it a vexed theory. On the one hand, we have proponents such as Jonathon Church, Henry Simons, Scott Summer, Joseph Alois Schumpeter, Jagdish Bhagwati, Louis Rougier, to name a few, who defend neoliberal practices on the grounds of their liberatory and empowering
nature. On the other, opponents such as Samir Amin, David Harvey, Wendy Brown, Zygmunt Bauman, Pankaj Mishra, Arundhati Roy, Pablo Mukherjee, Rashmi Varma, and Tabish Khair, among others, critique neoliberalism for its extractive nature, which operates to maximise profit at the cost of human life and environmental catastrophe. In academic discussions on cultural production, the term is often used as a precursor to “postmodern”. According to Michael Manley, the neoliberal economy retained “a structure of economic control whose roots went far back as the seventeenth century” (1991, 24). No wonder, then, that Aleks Wansbrough, in his book, Capitalism and the Enchanted Screen (2020), argues that “[n]eoliberalism encourages paranoia as we become aware that we are always watched—our performance at work and indeed at life more generally, in the age of social media, is evaluated and ranked” (2020, 37).

Neoliberalism is often taken for granted as a concept that equates freedom and democracy with the market. Milton Friedman, one of the main architects of neoliberalism in the USA and the UK but also Chile (where he advised Pinochet’s dictatorship), succinctly encapsulates the link between politics and economics in a doctrinaire manner: “there is an intimate connection between economics and politics, that only certain combinations of political and economic arrangements are possible, and that in particular, a society which is socialist cannot also be democratic, in the sense of guaranteeing individual freedom” (1997, 15). For Friedman, the market is “a direct component of freedom” (12), but this also explains the reason why the economies are prioritised over welfare measures.

This equation, however, leads to a jettisoning of a carementality; for example, Friedman argues against public housing, calling it paternalism (178), and complaining that it would be better to just give poor people money. Evidently, he also opposed minimum wage laws and collective structures that limited the power of corporations. For Friedman, capitalism was the source of freedom. As such, Friedman seems to provide a clear example, as one of the key proponents of monetarism, of neoliberal thought.

Yet neoliberalism remains difficult to define, because it exists at the level of economic theory, but also at the level of industrial relations. A further complicating factor is that neoliberalism is also connected to culture and forms of cultural consumption, leading to what David Harvey and others have framed as a narcissistic culture and enveloping the entirety of contemporary culture:
The commodification of sexuality, culture, history, heritage; of nature as spectacle or as rest cure; the extraction of monopoly rents from originality, authenticity, and uniqueness (of works of art, for example)—these all amount to putting a price on things that were never actually produced as commodities. (2007, 166)

Indeed, one of the more ambitious analyses of the relations and tensions between these spheres is offered by Harvey in his important book, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (2007). Harvey draws on the relationship between neoliberalism and how it has changed our very conception of space and time, through technological innovations that have “compressed density of market transactions in both space and time” (4). As Harvey contends that neoliberalism gives rise to what he calls “time-space compression” (4), connected to postmodernity.

But neoliberalism is not understood in cultural terms given Harvey’s Marxian credentials. While on a rhetorical level, Milton Friedman, for instance, associates capitalism with freedom and suggests a tension between state and capital, in practice neoliberalism has a much more complicated relationship with the state, as Harvey contends. The state must not just guarantee money, and use force, but also seek out new markets. Harvey, for instance, contends that recent wars fulfil neoliberal purposes of enriching private interests, by integrating nations into the market economy, sourcing new markets. Harvey uses the term “neoliberal state” to designate this more complex relationship between state and corporate power. Thus, neoliberalism invades cultural, political, economic, and social spheres. It is like a virus finding its way into social infrastructures, controlling and dominating, to the extent of eroding them. One can claim that neoliberalism turns everything into a commodity, right down to the very health of things—of each of us, of plants and animals and rocks and water and sand and sky—everything.

While Harvey provides a holistic critique of neoliberalism, a more pluralist analysis of neoliberalism is offered by Steger and Roy, who argue that there exist variations within neoliberalism. They comment:

Over the last quarter-century, “neoliberalism” has been associated with such different political figures as Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Augusto Pinochet, Boris Yeltsin, Jiang Zemin, Manmohan Singh, Junichiro Koizumi, John Howard, and George W. Bush. But not one of these political leaders has ever publicly embraced this ambiguous label—
although they all share some affinity for ‘neoliberal’ policies aimed at deregulating national economies, liberalizing international trade, and creating a single global market. (2010, 19)

These differences exist even for figures in close proximity: Thatcherism is distinct from Reaganism, and Blairism from Clintonism, imploring that we think in terms of “neoliberalisms rather than a single monolithic manifestation” (20). They further differentiate waves of neoliberalism, the first wave with Thatcher and Reagan—the rightwing version, and then a centre left with Clinton and Blair (159).

As such, they maintain, there exists a plural of neoliberalisms. These neoliberalisms manifest in “three intertwined” forms: “(1) an ideology (2) a mode of governance (3) a policy package.” Despite its amorphous nature, it can be agreed that neoliberalism is a form of cultural and financial control, what Fredric Jameson terms as a “colonizing of the unconscious” since an individual’s life is subject to invisible forms of control such as surveillance, biometrics, and the algorithmic pattern of one’s activities on social media. In the neoliberal process, autonomous play is outrightly rejected, in fact, the autonomy is controlled, manoeuvred, and subjugated by economic forces. This happened with the USSR when it tried to assert itself against the rising force of the USA, and in the present-day context, one can see the same pattern of conflict between China and the USA, with the latter coercing itself over the former in its endeavour to sustain and strengthen its superpower structure.

Having discussed an overview of neoliberalism, it needs to be outlined here that this book adopts the concept of neoliberalism as conceptualised by Tabish Khair in his book, The New Xenophobia (2015). Khair suggests that neoliberalism, unlike capitalism, marks a loosening up of the relations between capital, production and labour, with a relative abandonment of the traditional notion of labour. Under neoliberalism, “free play” of capital can lead to profit: much of financial capital is not invested in production or trade. In that condition, the state of the human being—someone who must work for his/her existence—is rendered precarious in ways that include the old proletariat, but also exceed it (2016, 31–40). Khair’s conceptualisation of neoliberalism makes us see that neoliberal governance has extended its control over all kinds of workers, not just the old-time labourers, and, in so doing, it has turned a large population in South Asia, into precariats. With the advent of artificial means of production (i.e. machines doing the work), the rise of a mindset that sees unions
as an impediment, the neoliberal emphasis on the self, and the internalisation of part-time work without benefits, precarity has become a pervasive condition of South Asian life.

For instance, short contracts, small start-ups, work-from-home etc., can all lead to states of precarity—not just the old ‘exploitation’ of the proletariat by capital. Then, one can find other forms of precarity—based on power/politics, as Butler notes—where entire groups are more easily marginalised, on the basis of race, religion, sexuality etc.—because they are not needed (emphasis mine) as much as in the past by capital, which can now grow without investment in production or trade. In this topsy-turvy situation, some theorists have argued that neoliberalism has shed its rhetoric of individualism. Aleks Wansbrough frames neoliberalism’s pretence regarding the emancipation of the individual as a vestige of the Cold War (42). He notes that “it is not unusual to see Soviet language and cultural significations of progress echoed in corporate activity. The corporate world speaks of goals less realistic than ‘five year plans,’ and engages in cleansing public confessions but in the corporate language of ‘self-assessments’ or ‘self-evaluations’” (95).

**Defining Precarity, Precariat, and Precariousness**

Precarity, precariat, and precariousness are theoretical tools, employed in a range of contexts ever since Judith Butler used the terms to denote a shared ontological condition of exposure and interdependency of bodies (2004). She writes, “[l]ife requires various social and economic conditions to be met in order to be sustained as a life”, and precariousness for Butler indicates living socially, open to “the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other” (2009, 14). The notion of co-vulnerability or interconnectedness lies at the heart of Butler’s theorisation of precarity. This conforms to the definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which points out that the Latin word “precarious” means “given as a favour”, or “depending on the favour of another person” (n.p.).

As a term and a concept, precarity predates Butler’s work. Critics like Andrea Muehlebach define precarity as “a shorthand for those of us documenting the multiple forms of nightmarish dispossession and injury that our age entails” (2013, 297). Allison relates precarity to a “psychic sense of unease, uncertainty, and a darkness about the present in a state of not becoming a future” (2015, 346).
The word “precarity” finds its etymology in the French term *précarité*. The sociological provenance of precariat, precarity, and precariousness was rendered by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu used these terms to reflect on the overall socio-economic life in Algeria under French rule where everything was:

stamped with precariousness. No regular timetable, no fixed place of work; the same discontinuity in time and space. The search for work is the one constant factor in an existence swept to and fro by the whim of accident. … The whole of life is lived under the sign of the provisional. (1963/1979, 66)

Bourdieu formulates precarity as a condition marked by an immense degree of uncertainty. This pervasiveness of uncertainty, according to the famous anthropologist Maribel Casas-Cortes, led to the EuroMayDay, which marked the eruption of protests against insecure job markets and borders in Italy in 2001 and, subsequently, spread to other parts of the world. The (Euro)MayDay activists have tended to use “precarity” to describe “a generalized condition.”

Later, in her book, *Frames of War* (2009), Butler links “precarity” to citizens’ loss of agency, deprived of even grief and mourning. Suggesting ways to counter and erase global hegemonic regimes, Butler advocates a normative turn toward the framing of effective social policy to include issues of shelter, work, food, medical care, and legal status. Butler sees the ineffectuality of bodies to have control over themselves in the light of pernicious forces: “[w]e are acted upon, violently, and it appears that our capacity to set our own course at such instances is fully undermined” (2009, 16). Butler situates conditions of precarity emanating from “the institutions of temporary labour, of decimated social services, and of the general attrition of social democracy”, resulting in “a heightened sense of expendability or disposability that is differentially distributed throughout society” (2011, 13). She uses the term “precariousness” to highlight Levinas’s argument on the coercive relationship between the self and the Other: “[t]he face as the extreme precariousness of the other (167), leading to “the worldless vocalization of suffering” (114) by “a new group in the world, a [global] class-in-the-making” (Standing 2011, vii). Standing’s reference to this vulnerable group as precariats justifies Banki’s argument that “precarity of one kind may aggravate other precarities” (2013, 451).

Standing goes on to argue that the precariat are “a detached group of socially ill misfits living off the dregs of society” (2011, 8), concurrently a