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Alireza Farahbakhsh

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7526-2182>

University of Guilan

Peyman Hoseini

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2507-7202>

University of Guilan

## Living through Precarity: A Butlerian Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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**Abstract:** This article aims to explore Judith Butler's concept of precarity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. The questions this study seeks to find answers to are: What are the various manifestations of Butler's notion of precarity in *The Lowland*? And to what extent does the Butlerian sense of agency allow the main characters of *The Lowland* the possibility of overcoming precarity? This research shows how enforced dispossession, which is a product of globally-imposed precarity, incites violence and leads to the involuntary migration of the subjects. In addition, it is revealed that precarity plays a segregative role in escalating religious and tribal conflicts in the post-Partition India. More importantly, in the final analysis, this study suggests that Butler's reiterative sense of agency fails to account for the normative dynamics of precarity which is at work in the diasporic context of *The Lowland*.

**Keywords:** precarity, dispossession, reiterative agency, Judith Butler, Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland*

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### 1. Introduction

Whether understood as a political situation in which the state deliberately withholds the necessary support from its people to burden them with financial insecurity and unemployment, or seen as an unethical discursive threat that aims to separate certain individuals from their communally shared intersubjectivity, precarity is a relatable concept for those who aspire to more than their own well-being for the sake of populations whose lives are differentially exposed to risk and violence. Among

many groups and communities whose means of livelihood can be collectively put in jeopardy within a precarious context, immigrant populations are probably one of the most defenceless ones. Precarity can even be twice as detrimental to the immigrants who leave their homelands, particularly because they are scattered from their place of origin and might be left unprotected by the previous government at home and the host country alike.

This study aims to shed light on the significant role of precarity in Lahiri's *The Lowland*. As Carl-Ulrik Schierup and Martin Jørgensen contend, connecting discourses of precarity and migration studies may offer "a fecund point of departure for exploring the intersection of cumulative social dispossession and new subaltern struggles" (1). On that account, the objective of this research is not only to piece together the discourses of precarity, dispossession, violence and immigration, but also to bring into discussion the ways in which precarity affects subjects' modes of agency. The questions this article tries to answer are: What are the various manifestations of precarity in *The Lowland*? And how do the precarious subjects depicted in *The Lowland* manage to deal with or overcome precarity? In order to answer the first question, this research carries out a narratological reading of *The Lowland* and explores the novel through the lens of Butler's concept of precarity. For the most part, this study engages in a critical analysis of the various forms of precarity-induced dispossession and violence that caused the outbreak of communal riots and the Naxalbari uprising in the post-Partition India. The second question will be answered through a more detailed analysis of the main characters' modes of resistance and individual conduct. By focusing on Subhash and Udayan's performative resistance, this study calls Butler's reiterative sense of agency into question and evaluates the success rate of each character's performative response to precarity.

This article consists of six sections. In the following pages, first, a review of literature is presented, and then, Butler's take on precarity is briefly introduced. The second section, "Dispossession," discusses Butler's concept of dispossession by highlighting its relevance to the emergence of a new generation of immigrants as an aftermath of precarity. The third part, "Rethinking Religious Conflicts," examines the segregative role of precarity in escalation of communal riots between the Hindu and Muslim majorities. Next, "The Naxalbari Uprising" investigates the roles of precarity-induced dispossession and violence in the outbreak of the Naxalbari uprising in India. By discussing the nature of Naxalites' violent response to precarity, this section also comments on the selective narrative focus of *The Lowland* and the way it affects the manner in which the movement is represented. In the section entitled "Precarity as an Impetus for Nonviolent Resistance," Butler's concepts of reiterative agency and performativity are drawn upon to analyse the manner in which Subhash, the protagonist of the novel, attempts to deal with precarity. This part analyses the possibility of overcoming precarity in a diasporic context by calling Butler's theory of agency into question. The last section provides a brief recap of the findings and implications of this research.

Unlike most of Lahiri's fictions that have enjoyed world-wide critical receptions, the corpus of criticism about *The Lowland* has remained relatively undeveloped. Most of the studies that have so far been carried out on *The Lowland* mainly revolve around issues related to the Naxalbari uprising and Asian American identity. For instance, in "Fabrication of a Desired Truth: The Oblivion of a Naxalite Woman in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*," Moussa Pourya Asl argues that the historiographies of Naxalbari movement yield more evidence of women's participation than of the passivity that *The Lowland* represents (13). By focusing on a gendered history of Naxalbari movement, Asl suggests that *The Lowland* confines particular experiences of the Naxalbari uprising to the margins and renders them unworthy of epistemic respect (1).

As stated by Binod Paudyal in "Breaking the Boundary: Reading Lahiri's *The Lowland* as a Neo-cosmopolitan Fiction," "*The Lowland* cannot be confined to a single classification within literary studies due to its transnational and cosmopolitan nature that challenges the notion of literary canons and national identity" (17). He goes on to say that, by offering a critical recognition of the South Asian diaspora in the United States, *The Lowland* re-envisioning "an American identity that is responsive to an age of migration, mobility, and transnational connections" (19). In a slightly different manner, Kalyan Nadiminti's "'A Betrayal of Everything': The Law of the Family in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*" explores the role of Asian immigrant subjects in reorienting family formations in the United States. By highlighting the failure of Mitra family in conforming to the production of American values, Nadiminti shows how *The Lowland* disrupts the dominant narrative of Asian American family immigration and upward mobility through the replacement of reproductive labor with intellectual labor (239). Due to the paucity of academic assessments on *The Lowland*, what marks the originality of this study is the very attempt of investigating Butler's concept of precarity in the novel, which is a fresh line of inquiry that has so far not been explored in Lahiri's works before.

Placing emphasis on the rising importance of precarity, Teresita Cruz-Del Rosario and Jonathan Rigg argue that precarity as a concept has taken such an exemplary status in the academic discourse that to say we now live in the age of precarity would not be an overstatement (1). For Butler, precarity denotes a socially unstable state of living which displays an underlying lack of governmental conviction and support. In Butler's own words, precarity "designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (2). As a result, those populations who become injuriously interpellated by differential allocations of recognisability do not get to occupy the status of an intelligible subject. To avert this, Butler puts forward the idea of linking performativity with precarity and argues for undoing precarity through her performative sense of agency (4). As Amy Allen contends, Butler's sense of agency is formulated on the Derridean notion of citationality or iterability, and "consists

in the ability to introduce a potentially subversive variation on the compulsory repetition of normatively prescribed acts” (460). Drawing on Nicholas Henry’s argument, Butler’s understanding of the production of precarity can be perceived as a performative process, in that it produces frames that obscure its own existence while inhibiting political recognition of vulnerable populations (166). It can then be argued that, to use Marissia Fragkou’s words, precarity carries the promise to reshape identity politics and offers the opportunity for reinventing one’s relational responsibility, solidarity and value through performative resignification (7). Therefore, performativity can be said to be in a sense embedded in precarity as both a means that preserves precarity’s maintenance through a dangerous authorisation of its facelessness and a counteractive vehicle that can help to upset the conditional grounds it is based on. In this sense, Butler’s previously formulated theory of gender performance is transposed into a more inclusive notion of performativity that encompasses a broader spectrum of cultural norms.

The notion of “dispossession” displays one of the ways that precarity can be structurally materialised. For Butler, while *being* dispossessed is a collective sense of being that is occupied by alterity, *becoming* dispossessed entails the process in which certain populations are dispossessed of their lands, rights and other means of livelihood (5). Perceived as such, precarity as a politically induced condition aims to upset the co-vulnerability that is existentially shared by all human beings and results in the erasure of certain populations from systematic networks of support. As will be shown, critical concepts such as precarity, dispossession and reiterative agency each serve an important function in putting the literary significance of Lahiri’s *The Lowland* into perspective.

## 2. Dispossession

When it comes to overcoming precarity, those who are dispossessed must be provided with an enabling source of agency in order to performatively emerge as recognised subjects. To put it differently, in order to avoid the risk of facing state violence by holding public demonstrations, subjects should be able to form nonviolent networks of solidarity by performatively shifting the discursive patterns of intelligibility. However, in both theoretical and practical domains, the chance of success or failure of such politics of self-governance is still open to question. In light of such inquiries, the following four subsections, “Dispossession,” “Rethinking Religious Conflicts,” “The Naxalbari Uprising,” and “Precarity as an Impetus for Nonviolent Resistance” seek to trace the manifestations of precarity and the ways to overcome it in Lahiri’s *The Lowland*.

In summary, *The Lowland* gives a touching account of the Mitra family’s faithful familial attachments and traumatic losses by fixing the narration on the tale of two brothers. Born just fifteen months apart and raised in south Calcutta,

the Indian state of West Bengal, Udayan and Subhash have an ordinary childhood, most of which is spent around a lowland surrounded by two ponds. After their admission to college, their lives begin to take different turns as Udayan, the more daring younger brother, becomes involved in the Naxalbari uprising and Subhash, the more prudent and reserved of the two, decides to leave for the United States on a doctoral scholarship.

While studying abroad, Subhash stays in contact with Udayan by exchanging letters. One summer evening, Subhash receives a letter from his parents which lets him know that Udayan has been killed by the police. After years of living in the United States, in the final chapter, Subhash revisits Udayan's tragic death and wonders if Udayan's political efforts were met with any success. After a critical reflection on the violent murder of a police officer that Udayan participated in, Subhash feels pity for his lost brother and imagines what Udayan's fate would have been had he settled for a normal life.

The novel features two main historical periods during which dispossession leads to forced migration. The first stage takes place immediately after the story begins, only three pages into the novel, where in several instances, the sweet narrative flow of Udayan and Subhash's childhood memories is sluggishly interrupted by the undesirable presence of displaced populations who had relocated to Calcutta in the aftermath of the 1947 Partition. Taking place a decade after the Partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan, the story makes passing references to the "accommodated but ignored" waves of Hindus who had fled from Dhaka, Rajshahi and Chittagong to take refuge in Calcutta (Lahiri 12). The sudden arrival of these dispersed populations is likened to a "rapid trickle, then a flood [...] a grim procession, a human herd," with "infants strapped to parents' chests, a few bundles on their heads," making "shelters of canvas or thatch, walls of woven bamboo" (12). Certainly not the most thorough account of the large-scale population displacement during the great migration, the above description is nonetheless ghastly enough in tone and imagery to reflect the sufferings of the dispossessed immigrants. Once read through Butler's theory of dispossession, it can be understood that these territorially dispossessed populations manage to performatively resist against precarity by claiming the right to stay in one place and demanding their proprietary rights in land (Butler and Athanasiou 23). As Butler writes,

Nonviolence is less a failure of action than a physical assertion of the claims of life, a living assertion, a claim that is made by speech, gesture, and action, through networks, encampments, and assemblies; all of these seek to recast the living as worthy of value, as potentially grievable, precisely under conditions in which they are either erased from view or cast into irreversible forms of precarity. When the precarious expose their living status to those powers that threaten their very lives, they engage a form of persistence that holds the potential to defeat one of the guiding aims of violent power. (25–26)

Taking the above passage into account, the precarity of these immigrants offers, as Donna McCormack and Suvi Salmenniemi phrase it, a “potentiality to form non-dominant modes of collective existence that pose a challenge to the constraining, destructible and unbearable effects of contemporaneous living” (2). Also, it can be inferred that such nonviolent resistance depends on populations’ living assertion, a refusal to stay in their assigned “proper place,” which, according to Butler and Athanasiou, is a place of displacement imposed by imperial sovereignty that requires the territorially dispossessed populations to stay in their specified region (23). However, to use Pravin Visaria’s words, the bitter irony is that many of these populations were not even assigned a proper place, as certain parts of the extensive borders between India and Pakistan remained “undemarcated 20 years after the Partition” (323). As a result, the precarity of these immigrants can be broken down into two conditions: the first state of precarity being the politically induced condition of the imperial force over which the immigrants have almost no control, and the second, the lack of shelter and protection from the state, against which the immigrants struggle to performatively emerge as intelligible subjects. Later in this study it will be shown that, although precarity could be resisted through the collective exposure of lives to power, contesting precarity may run the risk of social death if done in a diasporic context.

*The Lowland* fixes its narrative focus on the precarity of India with a narrow scope and pays less attention to the external imperial force that fuels the precarity of India in the first place. Following the bloody division of the Indian subcontinent under the British rule, the novel showcases how the populations who are not assigned a proper place are forced to live “[i]n shanties next to garbage heaps, in any available space,” without sanitation and electricity (12). Among them, those who work for the government “received homes in the exchange program,” whereas others are differentially dispossessed of their means of livelihood (12). From a critical standpoint, while *The Lowland* does well in delivering a distressing image of the consequences of dispossession, there are no more than a few instances where it makes brief references to the forcible regimes that led India to such precarity and involuntary migration.

As argued above, the reflection of *The Lowland* on the global means of dispossession remains minimal. These observations are limited to the portrayal of the lasting socio-cultural effects of British imperialism in the post-Partition India. According to Bernard D’Mello, despite the official retreat of Britain from power in 1947, “the independent India has failed to make a break from its colonial past” (14). A very good example of Britain’s influence is The Tollygunge Club, which “was proof that India was still a semicolonial country, behaving as if the British had never left” (Lahiri 31). Serving as a symbol of deeply-rooted colonial power, the club is even added “additional walls” to keep the above-mentioned immigrants and refugees out of its territory (12). Another instance would be the portrait of the new Queen of England, Elizabeth the Second, which “presided in the main drawing room” of the club, despite Jawaharlal Nehru being the prime minister of India at

that time (14). In this context, to use Jasmine Arpagian and Stuart Aitken's words, the global dispossession in India is to a great extent determined by the empire which forces immigrants "into a state of liminal dispossession," where precarity is later "established and enhanced through destabilizing and dehumanizing processes" on a larger scale (3). In the following paragraphs, it is further discussed how the political undertone that animates the foregoing events establishes an increasingly intensifying mood that gives way to more extreme forms of precarity.

### 3. Rethinking Religious Conflicts

There would probably be no better way for a precarious force to impose itself than to trick its subjects into thinking that it does not exist. In capturing the political turmoil of Calcutta in the earlier stages of the story, the narrative of the novel is often narrowed down to depictions of violence and conflicts between Hindu and Muslim majorities. Even though the religious violence between Hindus and Muslims arguably dates far back to the settlement of Muslims in medieval India, it still remains to be on the Indian state to not only take care of communal violence at any time, but to help build a common ground of interests that secures social integrity. The novel offers a highly limited account of this state of precarity and limits its narrative focus to how the followers of each group become hostile towards each other. One of the Hindu-Muslim riots in *The Lowland* is described as follows:

One morning during the riots, from the same balcony Gauri and Udayan were standing on now, her parents had witnessed a scene: a mob surrounding the Muslim man who delivered their milk on his bicycle. They were seeking revenge; it was reported that a cousin of the milkman had been involved in an attack on Hindus in some other part of the city. They watched one of the Hindus plunge a knife into the ribs of the milkman. They saw the milk the family would have drunk that day spilling onto the street, turning pink with his blood. (58–59)

As can be seen, the fact that the narrative scope of the novel is limited to such highly personal accounts of grudge-bearing attacks blocks off the light to the inability of the Indian state in stemming the rising flow of religious violence. In fact, the Hindu-Muslim religious strife has been weighed down by the precarity of the state, for as D'Mello puts it, the independent Indian state failed "to abide by its duty to safeguard individuals and corporate 'freedom of religion'" (18). This article argues that the deliberate shift of the narrative focus of *The Lowland* from the precarity of the state to the Hindu-Muslim hostilities places emphasis on the segregative role of precarity in escalation of religious and tribal conflicts. According to the novel, the lurking fear of facing violence from their Muslim neighbours eventually became a reality for Udayan and Subhash's parents (174). The following decades were

witness to bloody riots that forced many families to leave their homes for safer areas. Among them was Gauri's middle-class family who moved to a village west of Calcutta after a Muslim man was stabbed by the revenge-seeking Hindus (59). Such instances demonstrate the concealed ways in which a politically induced condition that appears to be outside of populations' control intensifies communal discrimination. Not to mention that since precarity targets people's subjectivities, the above-mentioned communal strife is certainly not limited to religious violence, but embodies ethnic and gender violence as well.

From a slightly different perspective, there is a seemingly inevitable risk that *The Lowland* has to take in order to highlight the precarity of religious communities. It is no secret that the post-Partition Hindu-Muslim hostilities were escalated by Lyndon Baines Johnson's anti-Soviet adventurism in South Asia and Richard Nixon's military aid to Pakistan, especially during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war. Yet the novel purposefully ignores these chapters of the history of India and instead swiftly alludes to events such as The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964, which "authorized America to use military force against North Vietnam" and the "military coup in Brazil" that was supported by the U.S government (Lahiri 23). Viewed as such, the novel runs the risk of downplaying the impact of the imperialistic forces on the depicted upsurging tensions by reducing them to a series of unaccountable conflicts and riots. For instance, the tone of the novel almost gets satirical when it refers to the killings of over one hundred people because of a stolen Islamic relic (23). In other words, by refraining from emphasising the more important causes of such conflicts and only focusing on certain Hindu-Muslim mob fights, the novel renders the narrative surrounding the far reaching political repercussions of the state and the imperialistic interventions rather insignificant.

#### 4. The Naxalbari Uprising

The years of indecisive post-Partition riots depicted in *The Lowland* are only glimpses of the social tensions that precarity may potentially lead to. Meanwhile, the story features no strong expression of public disapproval of precarity until the emergence of the Naxalbari uprising. Having taken its name from the village of Naxalbari, which is situated in the northern part of West Bengal, the 1967 Naxalbari uprising was initially an armed peasant revolt against the wealthy landlords who denied Naxalbari farmers their rights of ownership. Albeit bloody in appearance, it did not take the form of a violent revolt until a peasant was beaten by his landowner for trying "to plough [the] land from which he'd been illegally evicted" (Lahiri 26). The novel summarises the main reasons behind the peasants' revolt as follows:

Most of the villagers were tribal peasants who worked on tea plantations and large estates. For generations they'd lived under a feudal system that hadn't substantially

changed. They were manipulated by wealthy landowners. They were pushed off fields they'd cultivated, denied revenue from crops they'd grown. They were preyed upon by moneylenders. Deprived of subsistence wages, some died from lack of food. (26)

As illustrated, to use Colby Dickinson and Silas Morgan's words, Naxalbari peasants are among the dispossessed due to "the suffering caused by displacement, colonization [...] and land theft" (141). According to the novel, before being completely eradicated by the state, the peasants' armed resistance turns into a political movement and begins to spread across the country. From a Butlerian standpoint, it is not violence, but the growing desire for democratising the patterns of recognisability that lights a fire under the Naxalbari uprising, causing it to go beyond the foothills of the Himalayas and stir the entire India.

As the story goes, under the leadership of two Bengali communists, Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal, a group of revolutionaries who call themselves Naxalites launch a political party. Officially called The CPI(ML) (short for The Communist Party of India, Marxist-Leninist), the chief task of this party is to organise the peasantry with guerrilla warfare tactics (Lahiri 38). In a closer look, Majumdar is among the first Naxalbari leaders to publicly denounce the globally imposed precarity by accusing India of turning to the United States to solve its problems and accusing the United States of turning India into its pawn (30). Not to mention that this accusatory critique is also aimed at the Soviet Union for supporting India's ruling class at that time (30). As will be shown, while such anti-imperialist discourses dominated the scene of struggle for recognition in the latter stages of the transition of India from a feudal system to a semi-capitalist society, the Naxalites later drifted away from their revolutionary path by getting involved in assassinations and other violent activities.

The precarity of the Indian state plays an important part in aggravating the condition of the Naxalbari uprising. Although the police begins to impose "undeclared curfews" and makes "arbitrary arrests," it is only when the uprising starts to spread across the country that the Indian state bothers to intervene (Lahiri 27). To use Chandra Bhambhri's words, the reason behind this deliberate indifference is that the post-Partition Indian state has been the tool for and served as the facilitator of the ongoing march of capitalism by creating institutions that not only dispossessed individuals of their rightful belongings, but also crushed rebellions through a coercive state apparatus (67). Consequently, the refusal of the state to take proper measures in dealing with precarity serves as an ethical call, inviting more people to voice the sufferings of peasants and rise against the state's oppressive force. While most of these public demonstrations are peaceful protests "calling for the state officials to resign," the insurgent Naxalites launch a series of attacks on the police force in violent retaliation (Lahiri 28). This violence, as Butler asserts, is not presumptively 'outside' individuals' ongoing struggles, but it serves as a constitutive possibility that forms their subjectivity at the very start (165). To

put it into context, the cause of such acts of aggression from the Naxalites stems from the same violence which is at work in the production of their subjectivities. According to Butler,

When one is formed in violence [...] and that formative action continues throughout one's life, an ethical quandary arises about how to live the violence of one's formative history, how to effect shifts and reversals in its iteration. Precisely because iterability evades every determinism, we are left with questions such as: How do I live the violence of my formation? How does it live on in me? (170)

The Naxalites' answer to these questions would probably be mixed. On the one hand, many Naxalites gamble away their chances of fighting for recognisability by violent exchange of power and on the other hand, some abuse the aims of the first group by engaging in criminal activities. In both cases, it is wrongly assumed that if iterability evades 'determinism,' then power must be iterable through 'voluntary' means. To use Kathy Magnus's words, the Naxalites in *The Lowland* overlook the fact that performative agency is "outside of the terms of 'choice,'" and that although there is a possibility for resistance, "the social transformation can occur only 'when the conditions that produce and limit us prove malleable'" (94–101). By fuelling the uprising to run riot, the Naxalites try to advance a revolutionary agenda, ignoring the social conditions that constituted their prejudiced moral codes in the first place.

Unquestionably, Udayan and the other Naxalites' violent resistance marks them out of Butler's theory of performative reiteration. Yet there are certain aspects of the story regarding the role of Naxalites that seem to have inadvertently caused their precarious struggles to pale into insignificance. For instance, *The Lowland* does not investigate the impact of the Naxalbari movement any deeper than to repeatedly mention some of its injurious effects. Even though the movement led to the formation of the Naxalites who did not take the path of nonviolent resistance and later became involved in violent activities, the outcome of it all finally turned to be somehow greater than the mistakes the Naxalites initially made.

From start to finish, *The Lowland* does not make any references to the constructive changes that the Naxalbari uprising made to the Indian society. As Henrike Donner argues, despite the primary failure of the Naxalites which could be associated with their strategic flaws, what has later become "the praised participatory political culture of the ruling Left in Bengal" owes much of its success to Naxalites' "public negotiation of personal involvement in specific political practices, including forms of organisation, speech, authority and local involvement" (19). To put it differently, the reiterating outcome of Naxalbari had outlasted its primary impetus by continuing to induce reform. By calling attention to the possible perils of the rapidly overgrowing capitalism in India, D'Mello argues that had it not been for the "Naxalite/Maoist insurgency and the other progressive movements that were

kindled in the '68 period, capitalism in India would have by now turned barbaric" (22). As a result, while the Naxalites' armed resistance did not lead to an immediate inclusion of "more people within existing norms," it did succeed in "shift[ing] the very terms of recognisability" in the long run (Butler 6). The fact that Lahiri does not include any references to such reforms could partly be due to the limited writing space she might have had to maneuver in and around the complicated history of Naxalbari. But this issue is not limited to giving an insufficient account of the movement, as *The Lowland* ends in a way that overlooks the significance of the normalisation of violence as well.

This analysis regards Udayan as a symbol of Naxalbari and considers Calcutta, the centre of independent movements, as "the intellectual capital of India" which encapsulates the characteristics of the depicted era by serving as a microcosm of the country's leading political currents (Panigrahi 29). In the closing pages of the novel, Udayan's actions are magnified and examined with intense scrutiny. For all his efforts to fight against the Indian state, Udayan is not a completely innocent character. Actually, the novel reveals that Udayan and his wife Gauri are both accomplices to the murder of a policeman who was getting in the way of Naxalites. Despite that, it is only Udayan whose actions go through a moral evaluation. The following passage describes the scene where Udayan and Gauri meet for the last time before he gets killed by the police:

He knew that he was no hero to her. He had lied to her and used her. And yet he had loved her. A bookish girl heedless of her beauty, unconscious of her effect. She'd been prepared to live her life alone, but from the moment he'd known her he'd needed her. And now he was about to abandon her. (310)

These lines are of particular significance, not only because of the way in which Udayan is represented – a man with not enough grace and respect who suddenly lacks Gauri's expected attributes – but also for the fact that Udayan remains completely passive toward such accusatory tone and perhaps knowingly accepts it. In these lines, instead of acknowledging the fact that Udayan is a victim of precarity-induced violence, the novel strictly focuses on his – and not Gauri's – participation in an act of murder and disfavours him for his lack of commitment to his wife. As the novel explains, Udayan becomes so guilt-ridden that he keeps anticipating his own death after the Naxalites spill the policeman's blood (311). Unaffected by any sense of guilt, Gauri looks at Udayan with a sign of "disillusion. A revision of everything they'd once shared" (310). This study argues that, since "political violence transforms the relationship between social forms and subjectivity and extends a crisis of representation into the intimate sphere," *The Lowland* ought to have fully reflected the significance of Naxalbari in detailed accounts of its characters' personal involvements (Donner 18–19). As shown above, the ending of the novel fails to fully embody the significance of the Naxalites' precarious

struggles, because it ends in a highly personalised account that attaches little importance to the “violence against those who are [...] living in a state of suspension between life and death” (Butler 36). When violence is normalised, even the most extreme systematic act of violence such as that which is incited by the Indian state in the novel “leaves a mark that is no mark” (Butler 36). Bringing this matter to light is the least thing the novel should have done. Instead, by revisiting Udayan’s memories with such belittling sense of pity and disappointment, the novel not only reduces the Naxalites’ collective resistance and sacrifice to a state-generated discourse of terrorist operations against itself, but also shifts its attention away from how precarity contributes to the normalisation of violence. This is not to say that Lahiri should have given the Naxalites more credit for their struggles, but since it is the precarity-induced violence of the Indian state that governs the subjectivity of its people, the novel was better to finish with a more emblematic ending that is unbound by the straitjacket of any impressionistic story.

## 5. Precarity as an Impetus for Nonviolent Resistance

Precarity reaches its peak when it begins to force the people of India into a state of absolute uncertainty. As stated in the novel, some of the major problems that render people’s lives precarious are the continuing rise in food prices, the lack of state protection, the uncontrolled population growth, the shortage of jobs and so on (Lahiri 61). After graduation, Subhash and Udayan are “among so many others in their generation” who are “overqualified and unemployed” (35). In a situation plagued with precarity, the two brothers decide to go separate ways in making their own future. Unlike Udayan who joins the Naxalites in the pursuit of his radical revolutionary ambitions, Subhash is quick to realise the uncertainty that threatens his career and considers leaving for the United States as a more sensible option. In Subhash’s favour, the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 in the United States makes “it easier for Indian students to enter” (35). It is important to note that, despite having passed such a seemingly generous act which later led to the emergence of a whole generation of the Indian immigrants, the United States at the same time sent thousands of American troops to fight in the Vietnam War. “How could it have come to this?” Udayan wonders in confusion over the oppressive brutality of the state and soon starts attending CPI(ML) meetings as a member of the Naxalites (28). When Subhash learns about the Naxalites’ Marxist-Leninist agenda – which, according to the novel, is heavily influenced by Mao Zedong’s ideologies, the Chinese communist revolutionary who established the People’s Republic of China – he disagrees with Udayan’s political activities, for he is not “convinced that an imported ideology could solve India’s problems” (33). Because of that, Udayan’s efforts in persuading Subhash to stay alongside him and their family are met with Subhash’s indifferent refusal. Before his departure, Subhash

warns his younger brother against the danger he is putting his life in. "What if the police come to the house? What if you get arrested?" Subhash asks Udayan, questioning his vain hopes for a change he does not live long enough to fight for (36). Even though Subhash never talks directly about the political situation of India, these lines show Subhash's perceptive insight into the precarity that threatens their lives, as he reads the situation and predicts Udayan's future arrest.

Subhash is not the only one who challenges Udayan's political motives. Their father, who is a government employee, also "dismissed Naxalbari," saying that "young people were getting excited over nothing" (29). One could argue that Naxalites did not come up with the best ways to overcome precarity, that had they taken the path of nonviolent resistance and sought peaceful discursive reformations, the widespread constitutional reforms could take place sooner and perhaps with fewer casualties. But to shut their eyes to the struggles of the most precarious populations of their country, Subhash and his father seem to share an innocent insensitivity, if not ignorance. However, this article contends that Subhash's non-involvement is different from his father's, in that it is in fact a form of nonviolent resistance against precarity. As Butler writes,

Under such circumstances, when acting reproduces the subject at the expense of another, not to act is, after all, a way of comporting oneself so as to break with the closed circle of reflexivity, a way of ceding to the ties that bind and unbind, a way of registering and demanding equality affectively. It is even a mode of resistance. (184)

The above passage explains the possibility of living through precarity and even resisting against it precisely by refusing to be a part of its performative reproduction. Not to mention that since power functions as an effect, precarity's exerted influence renders Subhash's subjectivity more precarious. Therefore, Subhash as a subject is in a position where he has to deviate from the reiterative performance in its conventional Butlerian sense and instead adopts a personal set of principles and morals in order avoid the risk of social death.

Subhash's migration to the United States exemplifies how precarity gives birth to a new generation of immigrants. Yet even after settling in the United States, precarity continues to pose threat to Subhash's life in equally precarious but less visible forms. For example, Subhash refuses to comment on the Vietnam War when talking to his roommate because he knows that "he could get arrested in America for denouncing the government, perhaps even for holding up a sign" (Lahiri 42). On another account, when Subhash is asked to join a group of friends in a peaceful protest, he passively rejects the offer by saying it is not his place to object (46). This article argues that the form of precarity in the United States that is depicted in *The Lowland* has masked itself by betraying the intrinsic precariousness and relationality which is shared by all human beings. To use Maurits van Bever Donker et al.'s words, to be an immigrant in the United States for Subhash means to not

“be ‘interrupted’ by otherness, by relationality” (93). From a Butlerian standpoint, in order to occupy the discourses of intelligibility within which he can be recognised as human, Subhash says nothing to upset “the vocabulary of kinship that is a precondition of the human” (Butler 82). Understood as such, Subhash’s precarious experience of exile can be translated into an ethical resistance, which as will be discussed, mirrors a problematic paradox in Butler’s notion of reiterative agency.

Subhash’s ethical resistance does not seem to be as effectively subversive or enabling as Butler’s theory of reiterative agency suggests. As illustrated, Subhash’s agency is restricted to the precarity that constitutes its iterative freedom. To use Stephen White’s words, Subhash’s ethical resistance is not as much a sign of his ethical concerns as it is an indicator of an unnameable desire for maintaining a “linguistic survival” (163). While his performative resistance does earn him the intelligibility he is after (from being dehumanised and abject in Calcutta to being recognised as human in Rhode Island), it ultimately cannot, when done in a non-collective manner, contest the precarity that puts his and everyone else’s lives in danger. Upon his arrival, he finds Rhode Island a “majestic corner of the world” where he can finally breathe, disregarding the fact that what had consumed India, what had altered the course of their lives and shattered it, was not reported there (Lahiri 67). For Butler, nonviolent resistance is manifested in the “struggle of a single subject” who is “in the process of avowing” his/her social ontology (166). On that account, the very basic terms of Subhash’s subjectivity “involve an originary vulnerability and, indeed, ‘unfreedom’” in which he is never able to speak in his own voice, but only in the terms by which he has been conferred subjectively (Lloyd 157). Subhash’s performativity betrays this unfreedom to retain a precarious subjectivity from which he cannot break loose in a diasporic context. As a result, his passivity towards precarity does not mirror his submission to power, but a desire to ‘be’ in the linguistic realm of intelligibility.

While Butler’s performative resistance might sound fairly convincing from an ethical perspective, it fails to account for the normative dynamics through which subjects come to existence. In accordance with this point, Lloyd takes issue with Butler’s idea of the normative and addresses the problem as follows:

Butler leaves herself with an overly narrow concept of normativity, because she circumscribes normativity within a dyadic field of ‘recognition.’ It is as if Butler comes to see normativity as itself a ‘structure,’ and while she grasps the structure of normativity as incapable of accounting for everything – because, as she so often shows, every structure always and necessarily fails in its efforts at structuration – Butler misses out on the failure of any structure to account for its own historicity. (214)

Subhash’s inability to performatively trouble the precarity he is normatively inflicted with mirrors this inherent paradox which is at the heart of Butler’s theory of subject formation. Addressing the paradoxical nature of this theory from a different

perspective, Edwina Barvosa-Carter writes that Butler's sense of autonomy has left many unconvinced as to how the iterative agency of subjects is enabled or constituted in the first place (126). As exemplified, Butler's notion of reiterative agency does not account for those dynamics of power that can supposedly help the subject to reiterate the precarity s/he emerges from. Likewise, the agentic gap in Subhash's mode of performativity makes it different from Butler's idea of gender performativity. While gender performativity, as Butler understands it, allows bodies to undo the conditions of their subjection, Subhash's performativity is inevitably changed, if not reduced to an ethical resistance that runs the risk of reproducing precarity at the expense of avoiding social death.

## 6. Conclusion

This article examines Lahiri's *The Lowland* in terms of Butler's concepts of precarity, dispossession, performativity and reiterative agency. It was shown that the major historical events of *The Lowland* such as the great migration, the communal riots, the Naxalbari uprising and the post-1965 migration of Indians to the United States all take place against the backdrop of certain precarious conditions that appear to be outside of populations' control. In highlighting the consequences of global dispossession, it was illustrated that the state of India in *The Lowland* fails to provide the displaced refugees during the post-Independence mass migration with the required humanitarian protection such as accommodation and basic means of livelihood. In addition, it was noted that through an unequal share of narrative focus, *The Lowland* pays less attention than it should to how imperialistic interventions sowed the seeds of the precarity of India in the first place. As demonstrated, another important occurrence in *The Lowland* that displays an underlying lack of governmental conviction and support is the unrestrained perpetration of communal violence by the Hindu-Muslim majorities. While such mob fights and riots may appear to be kindled by religious hatred to a casual observer, it became evident that they are in fact heavily pressurised by the precarity of the state, as well as the adventurism and military interventions of imperialistic regimes. Moreover, due to the absence of any clear reference to what causes such violence, it was noted that *The Lowland* runs the risk of downplaying the segregative role of precarious forces in escalation of Hindi-Muslim religious strife.

As shown in *The Lowland*, the political actions and inactions that govern the scene of recognition during the Naxalbari uprising are distinctly in character with the states of dispossession and precarity. The unlawful eviction of peasants from their lands, the failure of the state in maintaining a social equilibrium, and the arbitrary arrests and suppression of protesters all were shown to be the results of the emergence of postcolonial capitalism in India. Furthermore, it was argued that the Naxalites' armed retaliation, albeit hostile in nature, is not as analogous to

the coercive apparatus of the state as the novel portrays it to be, precisely because of the fact that the Naxalites' acts of aggression are developed out of the same violence which is at work in the production of their precarious subjectivities. As concluded, through a complete shift of narrative focus from the normalisation of violence to Udayan's murder story and accusation, the ending of *The Lowland* not only misconstrues and misrepresents the movement by reducing the Naxalites' collective resistance and sacrifice to the state-generated discourse of terrorist operations against itself, but also clouds the rest of its narrative brilliance by failing to do justice to the reformative outcome of the movement.

Regarding Butler's sense of reiterative agency, this article showed that, having been impelled by the need to have a livable life, the disposable populations of the post-Independence great migration in *The Lowland* attempt to collectively emerge as intelligible subjects by claiming the right to stay in one place and demanding their proprietary rights in land. Considering the fact that such plural forms of performative persistence and resistance may offer a possibility of overcoming precarity, this finding implies that the togetherness and thereness of precarious 'bodies' as living assertions can give them the advantage of forming nonviolent assemblies, by the help of which they are enabled to speak their subjectivities into existence and redefine the conditions of recognisability.

Furthermore, the analysis of Subhash's nonviolent resistance in the United States in terms of Butler's sense of reiterative agency gave insights to certain theoretical inadequacies. As exemplified, Subhash's performativity is inevitably reduced to an ethical form of self-governance that runs the risk of reproducing precarity at the expense of maintaining a linguistic survival and avoiding social death. This marked an agentic gap, and therefore a significant difference between Butler's previously known concept of gender performativity and a form of precarious performativity that fails to offer enabling possibilities for political contestations. On that account, it was concluded that Subhash's inability to reiterate the precarity he emerges from is symptomatic of the fact that Butler's notion of agency is incapacitated by a naive removal of normative complexities.

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ALIREZA FARAHBAKSHSH is from Iran. He received his Ph.D. in English Literature from The University of Sussex, UK, in 2004. He is currently Associate Professor and a member of the board of education at the University of Guilan, Iran. He has published numerous translated articles and several literary articles in domestic as well as international literary and social journals. Some of his published books on English and English Literature include: *British Drama for the Students of English Literature* (2009), *A Handbook of Critical Approaches* (translation, 2008), *Aristotle's Posterior Analytics* (translation, 2008), *A Short History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to Derrida* (2006), *Passage through Life* (two volumes, translation, 2006), and *Robinson Crusoe* (translation, 1995).

PEYMAN HOSEINI received his M.A. in English Literature from University of Guilan, Iran. He has so far presented several literary articles in national and international conferences. His research areas include Butlerian studies, precarity studies, feminist studies and postcolonialism.