

### **Precarious Lives, Precarious Epistemologies: Deliberations On Grievability**

Dr. Tanuka Chatterjee Assistant Professor and Head PG Department of English

Rajendra College Jai Prakash University, Chapra Email – [ctanuka3@gmail.com](mailto:ctanuka3@gmail.com)

**Biography:** Dr. Tanuka Chatterjee is an Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of English, Rajendra College, a constituent unit of Jai Prakash University, Chapra, Bihar. In her doctoral dissertation, she has worked towards exploring the varied Ecocritical and ecological ramifications evinced in the short fiction of Canadian short story writer Alice Munro. She is a member of the Editorial Board of RAKA, the college journal, in addition to holding memberships of the Cultural Committee and Sports Committee. She has been a Programme Officer of the National Service Scheme, Rajendra College, JPU. Her thrust areas include, and cluster around, various allied conceptualizations of Environmental Humanities, the Anthropocene, Climate Fiction, Animal Studies and the theory of Affect.

**Abstract:** The modern – era geo – political climate of the world – order is grappling with a colossal challenge of mitigating accelerated biodiversity extinctions and jeopardized climate futurities. The ongoing climate crises of the planet Earth has endangered the entirety of the human, sub – human, non – human, animal and natural communities of the Anthropocene. The ontological crises of the human race is reflected in the epistemologies of crises, which thwart the ethical appraisal of the moral signification of all human, non – human, sub – human and animal lives. This paper seeks to contextualize the quagmire of ethical conundrums that enshroud the notions of ‘grievable’ and ‘lose – able’ lives adumbrated by Judith Pamela Butler in her books Precarious Life (2004) and Frames of War: When is Life Grievable? (2009). In the present era of ecological grief, the notion of vulnerability and precariousness is impacted by the partisan consideration of certain target populations as being undeserving of socio – political recognisability.



**Keywords:** Vulnerability, Precariousness, Grievable, Epistemology, Anonymous, Liminal, Recognisability, Representation.

The consumerist ideals of the contemporary late – Capitalist societies have replaced the human species as a despotic architect of the debilitating environmental depredations of the contemporary era. The ontological crises of the human race lie in the fact that the natural environments of our planet Earth have been made to bear the debris of this inveterate devastation of industrial modernity. The cataclysmic proportions of the global environmental crises have continually overwhelmed all stringent implementations of various environmentally beneficial geo – engineering measures. The desolation one experiences in the embattled natural environments is magnified by the unconscionable global violence propagated by the war subcultures. These subcultures of premeditated propagandist modes of violence build upon the notion of interdependence between the various forms of human, sub – human and non – human biotic and abiotic existences; they assist in the distribution of vulnerability across the global political communities. Such subcultures explicitly violate the irreplaceable human – environmental bond, through which the notions of precarity of human lives and the ethical consideration of vulnerable injurability are advanced. These narratives of vulnerability and loss initiate the re – imagining of a community of human or non – human interrelationships, through which the injurable lives participate in the rituals of mourning. This re – imagined community affirms the relationality implicit in the normative dimensions of our socio – moral and political lives. The act of grieving foregrounds such relational ties of interdependence, which are rendered more precarious by the differential distribution of vulnerabilities. Thus, the private expressions of grief invariably have a public socio – political dimension. The preponderance of losses and absences enveloping the conceptualization of vulnerability establish mourning as a cultural phenomenon, by which one becomes transformed through a keener focus upon the meaningful socio – moral outcomes of human existences. The geo – political distribution of corporeal vulnerability establishes grief as an important act of anchorage, through which the bereaved human and non – human forms of life are able to arrive at a common point of identification. This commonality in human vulnerability is undercut by the differential apportioning of mourning and moral regard.

The notion of Grievable or Losable lives is based upon a critical opening up of the exclusionary conceptualization of the humans, who are not normatively considered as human. These ideas have been unpacked by Judith Pamela Butler in her book *Precarious Life* (2004), where she expounds the notion of differential distribution of vulnerability and ethical regard across specific demography and target



populations. These ideas are re – examined in her book *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009), which has been conceptualized as an attempt to examine the fragility of the social bond between the communities of the world – order during the wars instigated by the Bush administration in the United States of America. The contemporary era of unbridled capitalist, industrial and technological expansion has rendered certain geopolitically contested human communities as an ancillary concern for the collective psyche of the world – order. These lives do not qualify for socio – cultural acknowledgement or public avowals of enthusiastic recognition; they are dehumanized at the outset. The socio – moral trajectories of such lives are ontologically inconceivable, since they are prohibited from constituting a public sphere of globally acknowledged grievability. Butler has observed that, “Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing these attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (Butler, *Precarious* 20). It becomes imperative here to understand the criterion by which such spectral existences can be ratified as grievable losses. The transformative power of the act of recognition of the human physical vulnerability reconstitutes the ideas of humanization of such amorphous lives. In fact, the conceptualization of the notion of recognition has an implicit reciprocity, which buttresses the appraisal of moral worth of these expendable lives. Since human lives are accorded signification through various intersectionalities of cultural, social and political frameworks of power, such unacknowledged lives are appraised through the cultural barriers which reinforce the partisan norms of recognisability. The lives which are not apprehended as living, are not conceptualized as embattled, injurable or lost. The disorienting nature of losses and mourning becomes an important part of the tradition of re – conceptualization of the precarity of such culturally constituted human lives.

The precariousness of such unacknowledged existences is premised upon the failure of self – representation, which further aggravates their dehumanization. The absence of any form of self – representation of these identities is indicative of their loss of agency in cultural, biological, socio – political and discursive frameworks of symbolic identification. Butler’s contention may be reiterated at this juncture, where she opines: “Violence against those who are already not quite living, that is, living in a state of suspension between life and death, leaves a mark that is no mark” (Butler 36). The normativization of such existences operate on the principle of effacement from all modes of public acknowledgement (and, therefore, public accountability), by which their categorisation as recognisable humans remains disputed. This principle, therefore, establishes that since no human identification was ever publicly apprehended, no modicum of livable recognisability or grievable mourning could be attached to their existences. This is because these spectral lives have been evacuated of any humanizing manner of emotional identification, through which they scarcely qualify as a livable life or a grievable loss. Thus, violence against such peripheral identities is continually perpetrated through the repeated denial of agency and self – representation. The remorseless denial of the ethical accountability towards such precarious existences exposes the ontological frailty of the epistemological frames of representation, by which all aspects of moral worthiness are emptied out of these set of liminal lives.



The preceding discussion establishes that such precarious existences usually offer a resistance to normativity, since they do not follow the ratified epistemological modes of knowing and recognizing. The cultural difficulty which ensues in according recognition to these suspended existences pertains to the absence of any epistemological frames of global references, which can elevate their social belongingness to be classified as grievable lives. It maybe reasoned that the condition of precariousness obfuscates the hegemonic field of representation as well as the cultural norms of geopolitical recognisability. These luminal lives are, thus, not acknowledged to even have been birthed or ever belonged to the socio – cultural spheres of public accountability, since they are shrouded by an anonymity which is coextensive with their birth itself. Thus, their lives are understood to be non – lives from the outset. The domains of socio – biological significance of these anonymous lives destroy their perceived individualism and their positioning in the colossal network of interrelated biotic and abiotic life forms of the planet. All lives are inherently deserving of being protected against the epistemological destructions of their social ontology. The anonymous lives are excluded from any modes of socio – ecological protection, which makes them vulnerable to perpetual decimation. Their extermination begins, even before they have started living and belonging to the set of reproducible social relations of the world – order. The premature demolition of these lives precludes them from any ethical consideration of grievability, which, in turn, augments their occlusion from the global modes of apprehension of injurability. Butler contends that, “Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life” (Butler 15). Contentious forms of political domination usually condone deliberate exploitations of such ungrievable populations, since they are not ‘living’ yet.

The cultural devaluation of such suspended existences does not, in any way, justify the premeditated acts of violence against such unrecognisable lives. Since the condition of their precariousness bespeaks their dependence upon a network of social – political orders, the global dimensions of ethical accountability are complicit in the deliberate differential apportioning of moral regard for these existences. The condition of precariousness is shared across such target populations in order to facilitate their inexcusable erasure from the annals of public memory. Such effacement leads to an unjustified forfeiture of these lives to ensure geopolitical protection to the valuable (i.e. grievable) lives. The rationale behind the permitted relinquishment of such suspended lives is indicative of the ethically indefensible necessity to sustain the socio – politically grievable ‘living’ lives. This assertion raises some important questions – what is the rationale behind the ethical consideration of grievable lives being worthier of global compassion and norms of cultural preservation? The partisan consideration of specific lives as ungrievable does not take into cognisance that all human and non – human forms of life require food, shelter and protection from environmental depredations. Thus, it may be inferred that grievability is a presumption for valuable lives to sustain their public modes of recognisability. The shared nature of precariousness imposes ethical obligations upon the grievable lives to reckon with the irredeemable effacement of all losable populations. This consideration becomes more pertinent in the contemporary sphere of Biopolitics, where the notion of ‘living’ lives is reconstituted within newer intersectionalities of global power equations. The social bonds of



belongingness between different communities of the world – order is re – conceptualized during the emergent times of war to ensure the precondition of a grievable life. Such bonds of belongingness engage in the simultaneous dismantlement of the amorphous populations as well.

There exist no forms of life, which transcends mortality – and, by extension, precarity, vulnerability, injurability and dependence upon interrelated socio – political networks of significations. The act of grieving is an isolating experience. The process of grieving becomes a process of learning, un – learning and re – learning. However, the epistemologies of crisis highlight the conundrum of grieving and grievability as a shared form of public recognisability of the specific amorphous human lives, which are yet to be born into the wider socio – political consciousnesses. Thus, the notion of grievability is usually conceptualized as a politico – cultural phenomena, which profess the potential to modify the socio – biological pathways of global ethical accountability.

### References

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