**The precarious lives of India’s others: The creativity of precarity in Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness***

Ana Cristina Mendes\*

*Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal.*

Lisa Lau\*\*

*Keele University, Staffordshire, UK.*

**\*Email:** [anafmendes@campus.ul.pt](mailto:anafmendes@campus.ul.pt)

**Abstract:** This article traces the agency of Arundhati Roy’s precariat in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. In her novel, Roy focuses on how those in the most precarious of social positions manage to retain a toehold within the system by defiant creativity, lateral thinking and alternative living. Roy’s precariat reacts not with a desperate clutching at the assumed securities of social life, but counter-intuitively, audaciously taking on more precarity, thus seizing the prerogative of choice. Through the lens of precarity as creative agency, the reading advanced in this article is inspired by the writer and activist’s refusal to depict India’s others – the poor, “apostates”, foreigners and third-gender individuals – abjectly or as victims. We argue that, by writing a cast of characters who rejoice in their precarity and overtly celebrating how creative these minorities groups have become in their conditions of acute precarity, Roy risks compromising her indictments of India’s social injustices.

**Keywords:** Arundhati Roy; India; precarity; othering; Indian writing in English

Arundhati Roy would probably be delighted to hear the warning from Raghuram Rajan’s (the former Governor of the Central Bank of India) that capitalism is “under serious threat” (BBC 2019), given her vigorous indictment of the exploitations and precarities created by an Indian system intent on ever more aggressive capitalisms. Roy’s writings have always championed those who have been systemically marginalised to the point of brutalisation. In her 2017 novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (henceforth *TMOUH*), she focuses on how those in the most precarious of social positions manage to retain a toehold within the system by defiant creativity, lateral thinking and alternative living. Against this backdrop, this article considers the extent to which this celebration of the creative agency of the precariat could compromise Roy’s indictment of the injustices of Indian systems and institutions – and the chaos and arbitrariness of some of the fallout and adverse consequences for minorities – were it not for the skill of her writing techniques and narrative devices.

Precarity has consistently been studied, since the provenance of the concept in the 1960s, in the context of the conditions for the labour forces given the economic climate and market demands. It has been seen to be driven by – and be the inevitable product of – neoliberal globalization, exacerbated by increasing labour market flexibilization and priorities of economic efficiency and competitiveness (Likic-Brboric 2011). Louise Waite (2009) credits the first employment of the concept to Pierre Bourdieu in his use of “the French term *précarité* in his 1960s research in Algeria”; as Waite details, Bourdieu “looked at the social divide separating permanent workers from contingent or casual workers (*travailleurs intermittents*) and said that the latter were *précarité*” (414). Since then, scholars such as Michel Foucault (2000), Michel Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004), Hannah Arendt (1979), Lauren Berlant (2011), Judith Butler (2004; 2009a; 2009b), Loïc Wacquant (2007) and Isabell Lorey (2015) have gone on to explore the meaning and applicability of this concept, understood to be post-Fordist and neoliberal. Currently, the most prevalent usage of the term precarity is still in relation to financial and labour markets, focusing on employment and economic insecurities (Paret and Gleeson 2016). Amongst many others, Simon During (2015) finds precarity to be a “material consequence of post-Fordist, globalised capitalism” (21). Marcel Paret and Shannon Gleeson (2016) explain that these issues encompass “a decrease in average job tenure, increases in long-term unemployment, perceived job insecurity, nonstandard work arrangements (e.g. temporary and outsourced work), and the reduction or elimination of employer contributions to pension and health insurance schemes” (279), as a result of market-driven globalization which disregards the need of humans for social protection in treating workers as commodities. Furthermore, these authors point out that precarious employment is conjoined with precarious livelihoods as they are typically associated with periods of unemployment, lower wages and fewer social benefits. These increasing exploitations are taking place within a context which During (2015) reads as demonstrating more extensive but less visible patterns of global dispossession, which he argues are gaining ground.

Building on During’s idea of a rising worldwide dispossession, this article advances a postcolonial reading of Roy’s second and latest novel to date through the lens of precarity as creative agency (rather than vulnerability, risk or insecurity). This reading is inspired by the writer and activist’s refusal to depict India’s others – the poor, “apostates”, foreigners and third-gender individuals – abjectly or as victims. Globally anticipated (even if “globally” actually refers to a metropolitan, English-speaking readership),[[1]](#endnote-1) *TMOUH* was published 20 years after her Booker-Prize winning debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (Roy 1997). *TMOUH* is all about multiplicity and multitudes: its teeming cast of characters is exceedingly plural. Many of the characters are in precarious societal and political situations. Inhabited by (even crammed with) many of the oft-Othered in India, this is a novel which opens up new spaces of precarity. Responding to the logic of economic rationalization that has, in neoliberalism’s “stealth revolution” (Brown 2015), led to a state of “precariousness” (Wacquant 2007, 71) and increasingly foreclosed other forms of speaking and thinking about life worlds, Roy’s novel represents with a difference the conditions of precarity experienced by the recurrently Othered in India, pushing back the boundaries of precarity. This precariat reacts not with a desperate clutching at the assumed securities of social life, but counter-intuitively, audaciously taking on more precarity, thus seizing the prerogative of choice rather than accepting relegation, insisting on the right to at least choose which precarities they will endure, if precarious their lives must be. Roy confers on her characters an agency which amounts to more than autonomy and defiance, endowing them with the capacity to rewrite social norms and “Love Laws” (described derisively in Roy’s first novel, *The God of Small Things*, as “The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” [1997, 33]).

In unpacking the representations of creative precarities in *TMOUH*, we draw on Judith Butler’s (2009a) concept of precarity as a “politically induced condition”, one that is interdependently collective, communal and political. Butler argues about the vulnerability and exposure of the individual body that is relationally attached to others, dependent on other bodies: “The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well” (2004, 26). Furthermore, through Butler’s connection between gender performativity and precarity, we rely on her argument that precarity is “directly linked with gender norms, since we know that those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk of harassment and violence” (2009a, ii). Roy’s key protagonists in her second novel (as much as her first, or perhaps even more so) clearly do not fear being at heightened risk of harassment and violence, continually transgressing and flagrantly disregarding Love Laws by daring to love those who are not societally sanctioned for them to love (as Ammu did with Velutha, and Tilo with Musa). Although these romances all come to a tragic end, Roy’s novels celebrate these lovers, making it very clear that Roy champions their self-precaritization as courageous, notwithstanding the outcomes.

Broadening the application of precarity has given rise to criticism as to why the term is needed, given that vulnerability and risk are concepts which are already in use. Waite (2009) addresses this criticism, distinguishing the concept of precarity from vulnerability and risk by usefully pointing out that the term is unique in its encapsulation of the political potential, in the sense that “experiences of precarity simultaneously create possible rallying points for resistance” (417). Precarity is, Waite observes, “both a condition and a possible point of mobilisation” which makes it particularly suitable to be “used as a central motif by various activists and social justice movements” (413). Precariousness is hence associated with increased agency, forging spaces in which creativity can flourish, freed from routine and goaded on by the lack of safety nets. Brian Holmes marks out an entire set of highly positive images relating to precarious living – “spontaneity, creativity, cooperativity, mobility, peer relations, appreciation of difference, openness to present experience” (quoted in Ferreri and Dawson 2018, 428) – which Mara Ferreri and Gloria Dawson (2018) note are subsequently incorporated into the ideology of contemporary neoliberal work and life, alongside the “urban cultural imaginary of ‘flexibility’” (428).

The emergent precariat in Roy’s novel is presented as a possible model for a new leading force in radical politics, showcasing how it is primarily the manifold Othered (women, children, transsexuals, outsiders, and the marginalized) who show the greatest will and ability to reject the system, not seeking to escape precarity by falling in line and climbing the ladder to (projected and desired) social safety, but instead by substituting one set of precarities with a different set of belongings and relationships vital to life. This article tracks how Roy’s skilful writing manages to keep the reader’s attention focused on the terrible and tragic, so as not to lose track of the exploitations and suffering of minorities, while unfolding heart-warming stories of the Othered, who manage to be original, joyous, and strong in the face of marginalisation, stigmatisation, oppression, and hardships. One key instance of such narrative balancing for characters who are outside “frames of recognition” (Butler 2009b) can be found in the wonderful whimsy of giddy abandonment of conformity by Anjum, a Muslim transgender woman (a hijra) born Aftab, in the face of violence, rejection and sorrow. In fact, Aftab/Anjum wants to be neither an “ordinary” man nor an “ordinary woman” (Roy 2017a, 18) in their “steadfast commitment to an exaggerated, outrageous kind of femininity” (Roy 2017, 26). Aftab/Anjum wants to be like the “tall, slim-hipped woman wearing bright lipstick” that caught her eye in the Matia Mahal Chowk:

No ordinary woman would have been permitted to sashay down the streets of Shahjahanabad dressed like that. Ordinary women in Shahjahanabad wore burqas or at least covered their heads and every part of their body except their hands and feet. The woman Aftab followed could dress as she was dressed and walk the way she did only because she wasn’t a woman. Whatever she was, Aftab wanted to be her. (Roy 2017a, 18–19)

Anjum elects coordinates that go beyond what her father, Mulaqat Ali, could comprehend, electing precarities beyond her parents’ imagination and lifeworlds, accepting vulnerability as a consequence. It is with Anjum’s characterization and narrative life choices (for example, in her self-exile and renunciation of domesticity), that Roy takes the experience of precariousness to extreme levels, premising that *self*-precarization is always a potential. In this respect, Ferreri and Dawson (2018) explore the by no means unusual process of self-precarization, which these authors regard as the “internalization of insecure conditions and its associated ideas of freedom and autonomy” (428). In fact, Jennifer Lawn (2017) notes that “precarity becomes valorized in terms of openness to risk and opportunity – a capability that becomes seen as necessary to expand the field of creative consciousness and authentic action” (1034). However, Lawn cautions against too-readily accepting the appearance precarity gives to choices upon a substantial underclass.

This article argues that Roy’s celebration of the agency and creativity of the precariat does not in the end overshadow the writer’s consistent representation of an India rife with aggressive capitalism, uncaring neoliberal forces, and oppressive social conformities. The extreme precarity of the character of Anjum throws into stark relief the difference in lifeworlds of other Indias, where “people (who counted as people)” might say to one another, “You don’t have to go abroad for shopping anymore. Imported things are available here now. See, like Bombay is our New York, Delhi is our Washington and Kashmir is our Switzerland” (Roy 2017a, 99). These concerns are literally a world apart from an Anjum. Her precarities, societally constructed, where stigma, vulnerability and exclusion are not mere abstractions but translate into materialities too, nevertheless prompt her into creative interstices to negotiate unusual solutions to her problems, given that she has not the option of simply drawing from western models.

Guy Standing (2011) brought the term “precarity” into further prominence with his *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, proposing that the precariat is an emergent, global class-in-the-making. Although Standing’s publication may have given global visibility to the concept of precarity, in India’s case, it is hardly a class-in-the-making, but a condition that millions have to negotiate on a daily basis. Given the extent of its informal economy, it is a given that precarity defined by employment and economic insecurities and labour conditions is widespread and prevalent where India is concerned. Indeed, Ronaldo Munck (2013) indicts the term “precariat” not only as Northern-centric and Eurocentric, but of acting as a colonising concept in the South, which has long struggled with the imposition of waged labour or even waged slavery by colonialists. He cites examples of precarities such as “marginality” in 1960s Latin America, describing underemployed internal migrants in urban slums; “informality” in 1970s Africa, accounting for self-employed workers outside of the capitalist system; and “social exclusion” in 1980s Europe, a paradigm analysing the lack of a safety net as a consequence of the unregulated expansion of finance and capitalism (750). Susan Banki (2013) flags up the exploitative relationship between the North and South, with colonialism creating “enduring imbalances in the global system whose consequence is consistent efforts by former colonial powers to maintain supremacy” (453). In fact, Samid Suliman and Heloise Weber (2018) explain that the precarity long experienced by the Global South was in no small part the responsibility of western colonising forces, given that “the fulfilment of the implied universal entitlements in the European context was by no small part facilitated by the colonial and international division of labour” (3).

In an interview, Roy vividly illustrated the extent to which Indians experience precarity by debunking “the refrain that India is a country of one billion people”; “the truth”, for the novelist, “is that we are a nation of 50 million people and the rest are not treated as people” (quoted in Tickell 2007, 81). The next sections of this article will focus on the ways in which *TMOUH* explores how those “not treated as people” explore creative interstices goaded by the precariousness of the debilitating economic and political structures under which they must survive, and how the novel’s representations manage to celebrate their agency without compromising on depicting the bleakness and oppressive landscape of Indian neoliberalism, poverty, corruption and suffocating conformity.

**Precarities endured and elected in Arundhati Roy’s writing: politicization, mobilization and creativity**

The precarious lives of India’s others (to borrow from the title of Butler’s 2004 work) have been a persistent preoccupation of Roy’s. Written in the two decades between the publication of her two novels, her non-fiction essays offer, in her own words, “a detailed underview of specific events that I hoped would reveal some of the ways in which democracy is practiced in the world’s largest democracy” (Roy 2009a, 3). For example, in the essay “How deep shall we dig?” Roy draws on the work of Amartya Sen when she states that “democracies don’t take kindly to starvation deaths. They attract too much adverse publicity from the ‘free’ press. So, dangerous levels of malnutrition and permanent hunger are the preferred model these days” (2009b, 55–56). In another essay, “The Greater Common Good”, Roy scrutinizes and condemns the “fruits of development” (such as the environmental hazards and starvation) that grew out of Jawaharlal Nehru’s project of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada river in the state of Gujarat (Roy 2002, 41). From its inception, in the early 1960s, this project displaced individuals already made precarious by the Indian caste system (Roy in Ram 2001). For Roy, projects such as these, inaugurated by Narendra Modi in 2017, stand as texts of predatory capital, of failed economic promise and of the neoliberal economy’s abandonment of the social fabric. The impact of Roy’s activism in this particular case was such that Nayar argues that a “substantial mass popularity among activists” grew out of Roy’s involvement with the Narmada dam, with her becoming “a kind of celebrity that is rare in India” (2017, 16).

Most of the public and critical reception of *TMOUH* focuses on the relationship between art and politics, in particular its politics of representation. As an example of a highly critical take on Roy’s novel, denouncing that the writer’s championing of minority rights espouses anti-national values, Sameer Rahim (2017) observes that Roy “has sought to be a megaphone for the voiceless – even if she has, at times, gone too far with her attacks on the Indian state, or been too fair to the Maoist rebels and jihadists who oppose it” (n.p.). As if anticipating these criticisms within *TMOUH*, the character of Garson Hobart, the deputy head of the Intelligence Bureau in Kashmir, ventriloquizes analogous objections made towards “grumbling intellectuals and professional dissenters who constantly carp about this great country” (Roy 2017a, 147). It has been this characteristic conflation of politics and art – namely, her involvement in anti-nuclear and land rights campaigns, as well as her environmental and anti-globalization activism – that led to the creation of Roy’s “insurgent celebrityhood”, a term advanced by Pramod K. Nayar to account for “the inextricable link of mobility with dissidence, a mobility that [ … ] enables the mobilisation of protest, sentiments and political activism” (2017, 46).

Roy’s second novel continues to reflect on the failure of democracy in India, on the rise of corruption, displacement and homelessness, poverty and starvation. *TMOUH* is written against the backdrop of the intensely political and fraught nature of quickly-developing India, what many call the “new India” – a mythical notion with massive material implications. This India is one of continuing inequality, where multiple processes leading to precarity overlap or intersect: the growing authoritarianism of Narendra Modi’s government, increasing geopolitical tensions, the exhaustion of natural resources, rampant consumerism and a crisis of systematic left-wing opposition to right-wing populism. These major upheavals, which are more visible in Delhi, are interweaved with the Maoist insurgency and conflicts in Kashmir. Entire sections of the novel are devoted to the debunking of the glitzy official ideologies around development and “modernity” or “progress”, undermining the neoliberal imagined new India which seems to be interested in corporate hubs, malls and airports. The narrative also exposes how this India in its headlong rush to “development”, with its strong consumerist and careerist baseline, is reimagined in the mainstream media discourse, entangling issues of precarity (“*Somebody* has to pay the price for Progress” [Roy 2017a, 99]) with populism.

*TMOUH* is likely to be read as an intervention on many issues of contemporary globalization, including poverty, civil war, class struggles, oppression of minority groups and transgender and third-gender rights as played out in 21st-century India. Reviews of the novel have noted how “Roy wanted to bring the subcontinent’s castaways under one roof” (Lahiri 2017), with the novel described as “an anthem for the misfits and the weirdos watching on the sidelines or being crushed by oppressive forces” (Felicelli 2017). Roy explodes myths about “shining”, “new India” and undermines re-orientalistic tendencies to exoticize her country (Lau and Mendes 2012; Mendes and Lau 2015). As Kanchana Lanzet (2017) argues, in Roy’s writing, “The romantic India, the land of tolerance and spirituality is revealed as a country ridden with caste and caste atrocities” (118).

Roy’s fiction focuses attention on the precarity of transgressive sexualities, in terms of livelihoods, personal safety, spatial accommodation and identity. Making the hijra Anjum (a hermaphrodite with “boy-parts” and also “a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl-part” (Roy 2017a, 7) the protagonist of the sections of *TMOUH* set in a Muslim enclave, Shahjahanabad, Delhi, demonstrates Roy’s persistent interest in the marginalised communities of India and “figure[s] her ethical commitment to what we might call the radical postcolonial politics of ‘unclassifiability’” (Tickell 2018, 102). This is underscored by conflicting readings of transgender identity in India – between third-gendered/hijra on the one hand (where gender and sex binaries are seen as belonging to an unfamiliar western, Christian framework), and those who identify under the LGBTQ umbrella on the other, exemplified in the novel by the contrast between Saeeda, who “could speak the new language of the times” and “use the terms *cis-Man* and *FtoM* and *MtoF*” and referred to herself as a “transperson”; and Anjum, who “mocked what she called the ‘trans-france’ business, and stubbornly insisted on referring to herself as a Hijra” (Roy 2017a, 38).

As one of the hijras who had felt unrepresented in the campaigns against the Indian Government’s criminalization of homosexual sex acts, Anjum goes on to run the Jannat Guest House, a hub for outcasts including hijras who have fallen out or been expelled from the grid of hijras’ gharanas (“families” or “houses”). She becomes Delhi’s most famous hijra, courted by filmmakers, NGOs and foreign correspondents. The precarity which Anjum stands for becomes a commodity with market value. Roy thus flags up the precarity of truth claims, that stories and narratives inherently contain inaccuracies and falsehoods, in fiction and non-fiction, because they are tailored to the palates of specific audiences.

Even if some of Roy’s characters’ ambitions are left unfulfilled and their romances are doomed (Lau and Mendes 2019, 3), *TMOUH* celebrates the very position of Otherness, indicting those in mainstream positions of political and financial power while applauding the courage of the marginalized and subaltern. Roy celebrates precarity to the point of celebrating that which has no hope of success or future but nevertheless dares exist, however fleetingly and marginally. All her characters contain a marginality – which she calls a “border” – marking them out as outsiders, as others: “she [Anjum] does have this incendiary border of gender running through her – all the characters have a border” (Roy 2017b). Throughout the novel, Roy’s characterization of Anjum’s gender (and sexual) fluidity illustrates Butler’s argument that gender is a constant “doing” (1999, 33), flagging up the space for agency and creativity that the positionality of precariousness enables and even facilitates.

Roy declared *TMOUH* “a book of porous borders”, rejecting the domestication of fiction in the sense of having “to be quickly described, catalogued, put on a particular shelf” (2017b). It is likely that the porosity of her fiction’s borders facilitates the fluidity and non-categorizable nature of her marginal characters – those on the borders of groups, identities and definitions, often facing exclusion and closed doors – enabling them temporary access even if not membership to spaces and moments of non-precarity. Anjum’s “self-precarization” through non-conformism is a case in point, enabling “dissent and the production of alternatives” (Ferreri and Dawson 2018, 428), further demonstrating the creative aspect of precarity. As Lawn (2017) explains, there has been a paradigm shift amongst some circles from regarding insecurity as a constraint on human freedom, to valorizing precarity for openness to risk, opportunity, creative agency and authentic action (1034).

In order to protect the authenticity of her self and life, Anjum leaves various homes. She moves away from reassuring familiarity and the cosiness of domesticity that fixes her in a comfort that does not allow for difference, both in her parents’ home in Shahjahanabad, “where his family had lived for centuries” (Roy 2017a, 25) (at 15 years old) and later (at 46 years old) in the Khwabgah, or House of Dreams, where she lives with other hijras for more than 30 years, “with her patched-together body and her partially realized dreams” (29). Anjum seeks a home in peripheral, liminal spaces, such as in the Muslim cemetery behind the government hospital. This search implies a forward movement, a direction towards risk and novelty that does not yet know its own configuration. As Alex Tickell argues in his analysis of the intimate connection between Roy’s politics and her imaginary topography in *TMOUH*,

If Roy’s second novel can be categorized as a work of the living city then, it is also a work of death, one that stages the metropolis as a necropolis, and as a place of death-in-life, as much as it also explores the subjective accommodation of death and loss by the living. (2018, 101)

Anjum’s self-exile in the graveyard, a voluntary homelessness to escape further injury, responds to a desire for rest and absence of tension which can be related to infantile regression, even death, underwired by the trauma of the deaths she witnessed in the Gujarat riots of 2002.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Anjum eventually expands her tin shack into a guest house for assorted outcasts, such as the Dalit Saddam Hussein, where the living sleep next to the dead. She names the house “Jannat” (Arabic for “garden”, referring symbolically to “paradise”, the place where Islamic believers are rewarded in the afterlife). This is the second Paradise she inhabits in her flight from domesticity – when Aftab/Anjum is allowed into the Khwabgah, after leaving his parents’ home, “[h]e entered that ordinary, broken-down home as though he were walking through the gates of Paradise” (Roy 2017a, 20). Over time, Anjum’s shack at the graveyard is upgraded to a funeral parlour: “Jannat Guest House and Funeral Services” (79). Anjum haunts the interstices of the mainstream, needing to inhabit spaces of precarity which most authentically reflect her precarious positionality in order to maintain a certain authenticity to her own satisfaction. As Ferreri and Dawson (2018) note, the habituating of the self to precarity is necessary for the logic of self-precarization.

*TMOUH* depicts the embracing of certain traditional securities, such as the family unit, as a bulwark against insecurities and endless precarities. Roy’s narrative has Anjum adopting a child, a movement which upholds the family (even if an alternative family) as the primary unit of importance in a society, rather than rejecting the institution altogether. The precarity of this baby’s abandonment, left on the steps of the Jama Masjid, is overturned by Anjum when she pleads to “a spontaneously constituted Baby Welfare Committee” and inverts precarity to blessing and rescue: “She’s a gift from God. Give her to me. I can give her the love she needs. The police will just throw her in a government orphanage. She’ll die there” (Roy 2017a, 119). However, precarities are usually multiple and intersecting, and a later rejection by her adopted daughter, Zainab, “Anjum’s only love” (30), triggers Anjum’s self-exile to a graveyard.

In the development of Anjum’s quirky character, who is both beset by and embracing of precarities, the reader witnesses the inner tensions between regression and progression, between a desire for safety and motionless sameness and the impulse for change and action. These tensions are explained to Anjum (then still a boy, Aftab) by another hijra, Nimmo Gorakhpuri, the youngest hijra in Khwabgah, who illustrates how hijras are made to not only deal with precarities but actually *contain* precarities within their beings:

D’you know why God made Hijras? [ … ] It was an experiment. He decided to create something, a living creature that is incapable of happiness. [ … ] what are the things you normal people get unhappy about? [ … ] Price-rise, children’s school-admissions, husbands’ beatings, wives’ cheatings, Hindu–Muslim riots, Indo–Pak war – *outside* things that settle down eventually. But for us the price-rise and school-admissions and beating-husbands and cheating-wives are all *inside* us. The riot is *inside* us. The war is *inside* us. Indo–Pak is *inside* us. It will never settle down. It *can’t*. (2017a, 23)

Roy is demonstrating that there is a difference between inhabiting precarious spaces, and being part of the precariat; her hijras happen to be those who are or do both.

*TMOUH* shows how social networks, such as the ones Anjum forged in her newly adopted homes, “can serve to mitigate [ … ] [the] precarity of place” (Banki 2013, 455), with solidarity and support being the counterbalance to precarities. The narrative of *TMOUH* opens up space for alternative support networks and new family structures, unconventional refuges, and homes (such as graveyards) as places of shelter, protection, and belonging. Roy creates apparently endless precarities, demonstrating the fragility of love, life, and happiness, but indicates redemption can yet be achieved as Anjum does, by rediscovering the creative potential of embracing precarity.

Another strategy Roy depicts is the substitution of one precarity for another, insisting on agency, power of choice, mobilization of political influence and a creative response to powerlessness. Deliberate and performed precarity – such as that of one who may perish in a hunger strike – subversively seizes power to step outside of the strictures of society. It is, as Ferreri and Dawson (2018) observe:

Under conditions of normalized precarization, modes of subjectification through ‘self-precarization’ can point not only towards conformist forms of management of the self but also towards modes of acting that ‘break through, refuse, or escape from appeals to functional self-government’ and that can be usefully explored to assess the potential for dissent and the production of alternatives. (428)

Hunger strikes and counter-hunger strikes, a constant throughout *TMOUH* protesting the woes resulting from the entrenchment of neoliberalism and the absence of social opportunities, are also obvious elected precarities chosen as strategies of refusal and non-assimilation by those with no other way to register protests. In the novel, far from alleviating poverty, neoliberal globalization in India widens pre-existent inequalities, especially in rural areas. Exemplifying this biopolitics of resistance, the very short fourth chapter of the novel, “Dr Azad Bhartiya”, centres on the figure of Dr Azad, who was in the eleventh year, third month and seventeenth day of a hunger strike. Readers are also introduced to a Gandhian activist who was in “the nineteenth indefinite hunger strike of her career”, having resorted to this strategy “on behalf of thousands of farmers and indigenous tribespeople whose land had been appropriated by the government to be given to a petrochemicals corporation for a captive coal mine and thermal power plant in Bengal” (Roy 2017a, 105). Dr Azad’s explains his protest in his single-page broadsheet, *My* *News & Views*, which is published by one S. Tilottama. Roy hence introduces how connections and networks, the interweaving threads of her rich tapestry of Delhi life create counter-precarities via the safety nets of community and solidarity.

**‘*Somebody* has to pay the price for Progress’: when creative precarity is not enough**

Sophie Mol of *The God of Small Things*, “the seeker of small wisdoms”, asks “Where do old birds go to die? Why don’t dead ones fall like stones from the sky?” (1997, 16). Sophie’s questions are resurrected in *TMOUH* with a chapter titled “Where Do Old Birds Go To Die”. This question is asked once again by Anjum of her old friend, Iman Ziauddin: “Where do old birds go to die? Do they fall on us like stones from the sky? Do we stumble on their bodies in the streets?” (2017a, 5). These old birds refer to Delhi’s old white-backed vultures decimated by diclofenac (a chemical “given to cattle as a muscle relaxant, to ease pain and increase the production of milk” [1]). The vulnerability of these “old birds” analogises the precariousness of humans treated as disposable utilities by “new India”, further underlining the urban precarity of the poverty-stricken on city streets.

While in her depiction of Anjum, she celebrated creativity and innovation in precarity, Roy provides a chilling illustration of the desperate levels of precarity experienced by the city homeless. She moves the focus from charming, quirky, alternative lifestyle and lives, to depict those at the rock bottom of society, daily risking death sleeping on the edges of roads with heavy traffic, not uncommonly crushed to death by vehicles speeding off the road. These homeless, who have perhaps edged past precarity into outright destitution, are attempting to substitute one precarity for another, with fatal consequences:

They had discovered that diesel exhaust fumes from passing trucks and buses were an effective mosquito repellent and protected them from the outbreak of dengue fever that had killed several hundred people in the city already.

She imagined the men: new immigrants to the city, stone-workers, come home to their pre-booked, pre-paid-for spot whose rent was calculating by calibrating the optimum density of exhaust fumes and dividing it by the acceptable density of mosquitoes. Precise algebra; not easily found in textbooks. (2017a, 256)

Roy juxtaposes the poetic with the prosaic, the lyrical with the pedestrian, exposing insincerity and hypocrisy with her unique combination of biting sarcasm and deadpan humour. Roy’s is humour is very dark when she lists the precarities these immigrants encounter:

If they hadn’t died of truck, they would have died of:

1. Dengue fever
2. The heat
3. Beedi smoke

or

1. Stone-dust. [ ... ]

Did it matter that they were mashed into the grass they slept on? To whom did it matter? Did those to whom it mattered matter? (257)

Roy’s pressing questions find an echo in Butler’s *Precarious Life*, which demands “What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade?” (2004, 33), and in *Frames of War*, where she considers lives “whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable” (2009b, 24). This flags up how precarity is a slow violence, an imposition on the precariat which they may not even be consciously aware of, nor even of its encroachments and impacts, until their precarities have reached unsustainable levels. Butler discusses the conceptualising of humans in terms of not only grievability and precariousness, but also of exclusion, which she argues casts them as “interminably spectral” (2004, 33–34), just as Roy’s roadside sleeping immigrants are, so precariously balanced in positionality (as well as on the edges of roads) that they have fallen off society’s register of human beings altogether. Roy’s beloved Delhi contains multitudes of precarities to be navigated on a daily basis. In a sense, the novelist’s relentless questioning at the end of this comic-tragic list is her equally relentless pushing at Indian institutions to take responsibility for exposing its residents to so many precarities that life becomes untenable.

In *TMOUH*, precarity lies in the seemingly arbitrariness of tragedy and casualness of violence. Chapter 9 of the novel, entitled “The Untimely Death of Miss Jebeen the First”, tells the story of how this first Miss Jebeen (daughter of Musa and Arifa Yeswi) and her mother died by the same stray bullet which hit them when they were amongst the by-standers watching from their balcony, as thousands of mourners carried the body of Usman Abdullah (a popular university lecturer) through the streets, after being shot by what authorities declared an unidentified gunman, whose identity was an open secret.

The most precarious of all precarities in this novel is possibly the situation of Kashmir, Roy remarks in *TMOUH*, one of the few places in the world where a fair-skinned people are ruled by a darker-skinned one. So precarious has life now become in Kashmir that Tilo says to Musa, “These days in Kashmir, you can be killed for surviving” (Roy 2017a, 310), to which Musa later replies that in Kashmir “Only the dead are free” (355). In a letter to his dead daughter, Musa enlarges on this theme: “What I know for sure is only this: in our Kashmir the dead will live for ever; and the living are only dead people, pretending” (343). And in the face of such extremities of precarity, Musa explains the coping strategy, the creative reaction to perpetual-precarity which he terms Kashmiri duplicity:

*You have no idea how a people like us, who have survived a history and a geography such as ours, have learned to drive our pride underground, Duplicity is the only weapon we have, You don’t know how radiantly we smile when our hearts are broken. How ferociously we can turn on those we love while we graciously embrace those we despise. You have no idea how warmly we can welcome you when all we really want is for you to go away.* (335–336; original italics)

In these representations of the increasing precarities for Indians and India, in a spectrum ranging from economic precarities of widening class differentials and levels of affluence and destitution, to precarities of the dispossessed and disempowered, to the precarities of individuals’ rights, even stretching to embodied and imagined precarities, *TMOUH* contributes to the “struggle against those forces that seek to regulate affect in differential ways” (Butler 2009b, 52). Relevantly, Roy’s novel shows that precarity and vulnerability are no longer confined to the underworld or the underbelly of society but seem increasingly rife at all levels, in all spaces and penetrating into all spheres of life, rendering all uncertain, insecure and changing.

**Notes**

**Notes on contributors**

Ana Cristina Mendes is assistant professor in English Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon. Her areas of specialization are postcolonial and migration studies, with an emphasis on the cultural industries and exchanges in the global cultural marketplace. Her publications include the book *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics* (2011), co-edited with Lisa Lau.

Lisa Lau is a lecturer at Keele University, specializing in postcolonial theory and literature of the Indian Subcontinent, investigating issues of representation, identity politics, diaspora and gender. She developed re-Orientalism theory, has been developing re-Orientalism discourse in collaboration with Ana Mendes and published the volume *Re-Orientalism and Indian Writing in English* (2014).

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1. Similarly, Nayar (2017) notes about the success of *The God of Small Things* in India that it “was, indisputably, within the elite English-speaking classes” (47). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In the introduction to her non-fiction book *Field Notes on Democracy*, Roy indicts the current Prime Minister of India for this calculated attack: “In February 2002, following the burning of a train coach in which fifty-eight Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya were burned alive, the BJP government in Gujarat, led by Chief Minister Narendra Modi, presided over a carefully planned genocide against Muslims in the state” (2009a, 12). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)