Precarity and Resilience in Kavery Nambisan's *The Story That Must Not be Told*

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Abstract

In the wake of rising precarity, the pressing question that confronts thinkers is how to formulate a new form of a social contract that recognises, legitmises, and promotes systems of social infrastructures. By focussing on Kavery Nambisan's *The Story That Must Note Be Told* (2010), this article highlights the precarious class of people living in a slum area. The crux of Nambisan's account is that few lives matter more than other lives, and few spaces need more supply of resources than others, and the task of government and corporate agencies is to render agential measures to the elite class. It is a precarious tale of a place where the vulnerability and death of the marginalised feed off the privileged class. In the light of the precarious conditions rendered by the neoliberal regime, this article analyses Martha Albertson Fineman's theory of human vulnerability, underlining the urgency to recognise human dependency on social institutions inherently linked to their resilience and survival.

Introduction: Precarity and Neoliberalism

Precarity percolates neoliberal ideologies and practices thus asking us to rethink about the urgency to constitute new forms of social contracts. Social infrastructures require the state's intervention to check and control the meteoric and sterling rise of capitalist power, as they promote a commitment to protect and nourish the dilapidated living bodies – both humans and more-than-humans, including natural resources. Seen this way, social infrastructures are not merely orgainsational; they constitute the fundamental tenets of the earthly life that are vital to ensuring equitable access to resources, thus realigning our formulation and structuration of social relations. While many capitalists continue to cast aspersions on welfare measures, the cascading effect of such rapacious and self-

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serving practices has led to the emergence of precarious times. How, then, are we to believe in the euologising narratives of progress, development, and economic upliftment, when our quotidian lives are structured, shaped, and controlled by capitalist hegemony?

Precarity is everywhere, both in the global north and global south, but its ramifications are most severely felt in the global south given its long history of subjugation by colonial powers or the dilution of social welfare practices by state players. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that, as humans we are all vulnerable, and that is precisely why we need social infrastructures and care measures that prioritise society's well-being over cost-benefit analysis. The latter, however, has been the driving principle of our neoliberal times. Fed by this return of interest principle, humans are treated as machines, subjected to precarious work conditions, devoid of normative mechanisms, all central to extractive economies. Exactly the reason why the former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013), questions the relevance of society and social welfare measures. In a disparaging tone, Thatcher asserts, "[S]o they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first." Thatcher at once questions the vitality of social contract, which happens to be the essential goal of democracy. By dissolving the safety nets, neoliberal extractive ideology gave rise to the establishment of 'anarcho-capitalism', the purpose of which was to immunise itself from laws and regulations and operate coercively to generate more profit through natural resources and human bodies. Dipesh Chakrabarty offers a convincing argument that sums up the immunisation of capitalist economies and structures. Chakrabarty suggests that capitalist power is maintained by "an articulated body of rules and legislation that have the effect of ensuring an economy in the use and exercise of managerial power" (1989, 172). These biased and unfavourable regulations control and dictate the lives of the masses while rendering incentivised measures for a select few. This uneven playground of neoliberalism marks the beginning of the precarious age.

Martha Albertson Fineman provides an insightful account of human vulnerability and rightfully underlines that the urgency to recognise "dependency as inherent to the human condition, necessitating reliance on social institutions and relationships through which we build the resilience allowing us to persevere—even thrive—in the face of our vulnerability" (2022 online). The existing face-off in socialist imagination and practices arises largely due to the replacement of dependency agents with extractive structures. Instead of using democratic measures to protect, support, and engender social support, economic forces are dependent on humans to create and sustain a world for a few elites,

while throwing other regions and most species into a deep vulnerability and existential crisis. It would not be wrong to say that the world of precarity is structured and promoted to drive the unequal power play of the capital-state nexus.

Fragmented Social Structures and Precarious Lives

The reversal of the dependency network, that is, providing more security to the already privileged class, is an underlying feature of extractive economies. Large numbers of humans serve endlessly and precariously to meet the spiralling demands of what can be termed as "cannibalistic capitalism" (Fraser 2022). Its performance permeates the narrative of Kavery Nambisan's *The Story that Must Not Be Told* (2010). A palpable and extractive relation between the gated community and the illegal, neighbouring slum is set up at the very start of the story. Nambisan makes it clear that few lives matter more than other lives, and few spaces need more supply of resources than others, and the task of government and corporate agencies is to give agential measures to this elite class. It is a precarious tale of a place where the vulnerability and death of the marginalised feed off the privileged class, "Life for life. An animal must die so man can live" (56).

Sitara, the slum located next to the gated apartment, Vaibhav, is an illegal township in the heart of Madras. While the place may be illegal in the lawbook of the municipal corporation, the slum dwellers are essential to serve the daily needs of the Vaibhav residents. Nambisan's apt use of *Sitara* (star) and *Vaibhav* (majesty) as names of the two dissimilar spaces underlines the fact that stars are meant to be overshadowed by majestical powers. The shattered dreams of the tiny stars of Sitara are far too many but inconsequential for the city administration or local politicians. Mr Benny, the contractor, convinces Ponnu and Chellam to buy a piece of land in this slum by selling them a promising future, "Believe me, boys, this is the place of future,… You get it? One day it will be a star, it will be a dwelling place for stars and you will be envied" (49-50). As it turns out, the promised future is cancelled by the fixed rules of capitalism.

In order to extract work, commitment, and obedience, capitalist powers sell dreams. The individual prerogatives are dusted off and repackaged with a kind of a push-and-pull factor. While the push is to maximise working hours, destabilise contracts, and demobilise unions, the pull factor is the rampant ongoing privatisation across the world, thus compressing spaces of socialist platforms that limit the choices available to many of us. In a way, mutual aid is not only discouraged but seen as a potential enemy of capitalist economies. Once mutual aid is dissolved, networks of dependency exacerbate, which in turn are replaced by coercive structures. Therefore, it can be said that the absence of networks of dependency paves the way to divert people to seek employment

opportunities in multinational corporations, or gated communities, as witnessed in the case of *TSTMNBT*, which has become the fundamental condition of our physical survival. This new rule of the extractive neoliberal regime can only be maintained by blurring and erasing existing structures of care, mutual aid, and dependency, which are all integral to the state's moral duty. The convenience to control the masses by dissolving social infrastructures is an outcome of the emergence of the deep-state. Precarity caused by neoliberalism triggers a new way of being in the world, where the master is often invisible, and corporeal harm is replaced by slow violence of overwork, job insecurity, and compromised rules. Such is the intense precariousness of this regime that risk-prone life is embedded within the work and living spaces.

The predicament of choosing between a taxing job or freedom is the condition of the neoliberal precariat. It is not that a job can redeem our crises or render us sustainable, as many of these jobs are without any guarantee for a secure future at the workplace. If one chooses the latter, the existence gets imperilled, while the former opens gateways to modes of slow violence and uncertainty in daily life. The invocation of personal liberty and a bright future in the form of lucrative jobs is the most cannibalistic feature of neoliberal extractive economies. It is no wonder that Slavoj Zizek launched a broadside against neoliberalism for its egregious practices of borrowing "from the future" (2011).

The precarious nature of jobs is such that one is exposed to different manifestations of epistemological violence at the workplace; and because they choose not to work, their whole life, including the ones who are dependent on them, is at stake. These are precarious conditions that intensify our vulnerability because the safety nets continue to get decimated by the systemic withdrawals of the state's expenditure on welfare measures.

Against the backdrop of this utopian notion of progress projected by the multinational jobs, one can find the grim realities of life. For example, Amazon's promotional messaging to prospective employees claims that it pays "$15 an hour and provide[s] benefits from day one" (Miller 126). This is enough to expose the dark web of life within these warehouses and the risks assigned to the lucrative payment. The work atmosphere is punitive and debilitating as workers are coerced to finish work in strict deadlines, which is monitored by algorithms that calculate breaks availed by employees, even counting the minutes one spends in the bathroom. No wonder that "inside the warehouse, the domain controlled by Amazon, the worker's body becomes the company's equipment. Every breath and movement are monitored, scored, and rated, reducing the physical self to machinery managed by a company brain as opposed to one's own (126).

Our precarious modes of livelihood have left us with no choice and, therefore, the precariat is left to live in a state of continual pain and suffering. Likewise, commenting upon the gory realities of the capitalist world that we

inhabit, Judith Butler avers that capitalism lets "people die. And there are a group of people who know that they can be left to die, they can be sacrificed. And that means that they go through life feeling like they are at least in the perspective of society ungrieveable" (2022).

In Kavery Nambisan's *The Story that Must Not Be Told* (henceforth *TSTMNBT*), the slum dwellers dream of a glowing future for themselves only to be punctured and shattered by the residents of Vaibhav society and local politicians who use them conveniently, and mostly for menial jobs. The characters of Baqua, Velu, Thatkan, Chellam, Doctor, Ponnu, Swamy, Chakra, Prince, and Dayaratna that we encounter in the novel all share a commonality of a punctured dream and the subsequent precarious life. They have moved to Madras in the hope of a better future, but their future was borrowed, even cramped by the city dwellers. Baqua sums up the mirage of city life thus: "how a city grew, how five people climbed on the shoulders of ninety-five and fattened" (140). It is a city where insecurity and vulnerability breed and multiply. The secret of business and prosperity lies in the granted license that "I can fire you anytime" (126). As Dayaratna, a ragpicker who had moved from Mumbai to Madras, avers, "You can be rich only if you ensure that someone is poor" (196).

Not only do these slum dwellers do all sorts of degrading jobs but they are also degraded and loathed by the privileged class throughout the novel. The push-and-pull rendition of these slum dwellers and the degree of disgust hurled at them are contingent on the privileged members' requirements. Concomitantly, these slum dwellers turn out to be an embodiment of "wasted lives" (2003), to borrow a term from Zygmunt Bauman.

Kittan, the sweeper, coerces his younger son, Thatkan, to clean the blocked sewage system because his elder son is sick. Neither Thatkan has any interest in this kind of work, nor is he in any mood to undertake this unwanted assignment since he has no such previous experience. But because his father has no option, he is subjected to this humiliation. Kittan keeps encouraging him by positing his rants against the privileged class, "Keep going, keep going. It's our food, my little prince! My heartbeat… Our food comes from other people's shit, don't forget" (229). Given Thatkan's inexperience, he slips into the sewage system only to be discovered dead by a rescue team later.

Alexander Adkins links this approach to varying dimensions of "neoliberal disgust" (2019). He situates these precarious figures oscillating "between these two excremental rhetorics—one directed against the neoliberal Indian state's abandonment and abjection of the poor, the other against the poor as degenerate national subjects weighing down the march of progress" (173).

In the wake of a non-existing social contract or weak one, the value of society is overwritten by the force of the market. Consequently, individuals become part of these market metrics, and their life is measured on the scale of

profit and loss for the organisations, markets, and even for a few states. It has led to a kind of impasse with no alternatives available to recognise the lives of these common people. Seen this way, a case can be made that democracy in the neoliberal age has opened gateways to multinational corporations and elites to colonise citizens and workers. Apparently, precarity becomes the telos of capitalist economies because it is through a perpetual state of insecurity that zones of security and progress can be nourished and sustained for the elites. Precisely, the reason behind the phenomenological crises encountered by the slum dwellers, who live in abysmal place known as Sitara.

These slum dwellers are not provided with any protection and live in a very inhuman environment. In one such paragraph, we witness the brutality of life conditions in Sitara:

> 'Smoke,' Sandhya says, beating the air. 'Something's burning.'
> 'The garbage dump caught fire two days ago,' the owner informs us. It happens every year when the heat builds up inside it.' …
> 'The garbage in the city gets dumped here. Nine hundred tonnes a day or something…. the garbage rots in the sun. The built-up pressure releases inflammable gases. Methane – and something else.
> Black scattered pools of water speckling the swamp, and the smells now more putrid. (120 – 121)

The paramount sense of insecurity and instability is narrated by Chellam to the visitors. Sandhya and PK. Chellam informs them of their acute sense of precarity in having to live in the most unfavourable living conditions. "They built their lives out of the swamp. Every time the rain came, these people were flooded out of their homes, and when the rain subside, they came back" (121).

Evidently, the 'Sitara' region turns out to be a place where life is married to risks and everyday suffering. For many inhabitants, food is not a choice but a matter of destiny. For example, Swamy, who turns out to be a schoolteacher in the slum region later, has to wrestle with life. He learnt to beg at an early age of eighteen months. As the narrator puts it: "He roamed the streets, a stomach on two legs, thinking food, dreaming food, stealing, loving and hating food, which occupied every waking moment, and which was never enough" (55).

Such precarious conditions point to the fact that the neoliberal growth story is not just about sustaining few lives; it is about who can be left to die early, linked as it is to the cramped spaces of social networks and the concomitant emboldening of extractive economic structures. Exploitation and expropriation have been systematised and institutionalised our precarious times. This brings us back to the need to restrengthen our social contracts and democratic duties, and in so doing, to protect and promote equitable access to social justice welfare measures. Vulnerability arises when the state withdraws from its commitment to

uphold the citizen's care mechanism. Rightly, Martha Alberta Fineman argues that "vulnerability theory views a robust and active state as essential to both the well-being of the individual and the reproduction of society" (2022). Fineman also suggests that "vulnerability theory concedes the inevitability of law, as well as some form of governing authority, while also appreciating the potential of the state as a unique mechanism for the construction of a just society" (2022).

Resilience and Speaking Otherwise

Within the social sciences, as in literature, one can find a diverse and strong theoretical scaffolding of resilience. The etymological meaning of "resilience'" as per the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is "leaping back" or "jumping again". If one examines the Latin root verb of "to leap", (salire), it is apparent that it is linked to the verb "saltare," thus hinting at the meaning of "to leap back and forth continuously." Seen this way, one can argue that resilience is a baseline condition of our survival. It can be seen as one of the phenomenological constructs.

Skirting around the notion of resilience, Lennart Olsson et al. identify its two conceptual meanings, whereas the first meaning refers "to the ability of a system to cope with stress and "bounce back; the second refers to the ability of the system to "bounce back" and "transform" (Olsson 2). Likewise, the American Psychological Association (2014) conceptualises resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress" (Southwick 2014).

The varying degrees of the resilience theory led Breda to identify "resilience as something intrinsic to the individual" (2). Reflecting on the typology of resilience, she points out, "Some refer to resilience as the competencies or capacities of people, while others refer to it as positive functioning in the face of adversity." Accordingly, she suggests that "these multitude of meanings for the same term have led to severe criticisms about the validity of resilience theory" (2). Dwelling further on the notion of resilience, Breda argues that "the heart of resilience research is the mediating processes… which enable people to achieve better-than-expected outcomes in the face or wake of adversity" (7).

Evidently, Ana Marcos suggests that resilience has become "a pervasive idiom of global governance… denoting the capacity of nature and humans to withstand shocks by being able to adapt, renew, and even thrive in the face of adversity while keeping their essence" (2020). Fineman goes on to assign the renewal mechanism of resilience to establish a relationship between social justice and structures of resilience, and therefore argues that our immediate task should be to examine "the designated social purposes of the contrived institutions and relationships that have been established to provide essential resources or assets

of resilience to individuals and well-being to society" (2022). Furthermore, Fineman rightly asserts, "Because we are embodied beings, we are inevitably 'embedded' within these social institutions and structures—we are dependent on them." In the same vein, Ubaka Ogbogu suggests, "The survival of the vulnerable-marginalized in this state of affairs is therefore, first and foremost, an act of resilience" (2023).

Nambisan's *TSTMNBT* projects resilience as the underlying spirit of such marginalised people living in slum areas. Nambisan even advocates indulging in illegal activities, insofar as it does not render any physical or mental harm to others, as part of the resilience. Here "illegal" is tantamount to getting one's rights and dignity through protests, even theft. The problem that underpins Sitara is that neither the government nor the local politicians, nor the housing members of Vaibhav society did anything to alleviate their vulnerability and insecurity. So, the option left for them is to radicalise their voices to demand dignity and rights. Dayaratna scorns this contemptuous treatment:

> They say Sitara is a slum. It's illegal. We're called squatters. But the government has done nothing to stop us. *Kyon* [Because] Sitara provides cheap labour. Our workers build roads and drains and houses and those multi-storeyed mansions of steel and glass. (195)

Consequently, Dayaratna justifies Baqua's illegal activities of providing water and electricity to the slum area. The police also harbour respect for him. Dayartan believes that Sitara is safe only because people like Baqua are there to help them and protect them. "Baqua has dirtied his hands but compared to what the big people do?… They chew the meat off our bones" (195 -196).

Having got their homes and the infrastructure ready, citizens of Vaibhav society have called an annual general meeting to evacuate the slum region. The meeting posters, bearing the title of "Quality of Life. We Deserve it" (212) reek of partisan rhetoric of the wealthy people living in the apartment area. Simon, the old man, is the only one who rallies for Sitara's support but he fails because other residents cast aspersions and demonstrate concerns about the possibility of living next to a slum region citing "the environment they live. Contagious disease from the slums can come right into our homes where we have little babies and pregnant women and old parents" (218 - 219).

Nambisan's notion of resilience finds its way through a network of power and resistance. Nambisan suggests that it is through our resilience that we can offer and question hegemonic structures around us. Weak as it may appear, the resilient grabs opportunities, feeds itself with hope, and drives the empowerment process. Ogbogu underlines this redemptive provenance of resilience by identifying it as "an act of resistance against an ordained and decidedly hopeless set of outcomes" (2023). Consequently, he argues that resilience is "contingent on the presence of the condition of living" (2023).

Elsewhere, I have suggested that this resilient approach is a form of "liminality" (2022), which can be a pharmakon – both medicine and poison – depending on the degree of hope and fighting spirit that one can cultivate and advance. That is why "these liminal zones are spaces of possibility and hence, it can be added that these fertile zones demand actions for remaking a future." (Dwivedi 180)

In one such passage in the novel, the reporter, PK visits the Sitara slum to gain a first-hand experience of their precarious life. He is led to Karupswamy's illegal leather shop, which has employed young kids for "hard labour" (124). Disparagingly, PK scolds Karupswamy for disobeying the law, to which Karupswamy responds:

> Will the law feed these urchins? Will the law send them to school?... The boys come when they're eleven and by the time they're thirteen, they're grown men who can face the world with the dignity of a full stomach. They know how to take the kicks…. The world will kick them also…. My boys will kick back. (124)

Likewise, Bakua joins PK and Sandhya (Simon's daughter) to guide them through some parts of the slum. Finding them aghast with foul smell and mosquitoes in the region, Bakua points out that their resilience approach has made them adapt to these inhuman conditions. He adds, "Live in Sitara and you will know that hard work does not kill anyone. *It is not so easy to die.* The body learns to take a little more, a little more, a little more. A lot more" (135 emphasis original). Evidently, waning and waxing of life conditions turn out to be the normative framework of the Sitara residents. The desire to live nourishes hope in these weak bodies.

We find a radical version of resilience offered by Nambisan that is rooted in and driven by an overweening sense of courage and firm dignity. Hers is a world where the marginalised section is ready to bend the rules if the law does not give them access to equitable resources and dignity. This exceptional nature of law comes out forcefully in this novel, and one is left wondering, even abhorred at the collusive consent of the local police and the municipal officials to declare Sitara's residents illegal, threatening and even mobs to drive them out of their neighbourhood. For example, the policeman overtly boasts: "We, the police, know how to deal with this trouble…. Up to three hundred hutments can be demolished in a few hours" (224). In the same way, the municipal authorities cut off the water supply to the slum to exacerbate their precarious conditions. Betty Joseph argues that this tussle between the marginalised and the privileged class can be enabling at times. Joseph identifies this as "'speaking otherwise'—an allegorical mode where the servant appropriates the language of his employer, the underclass the language of economic success, and the criminal the mantras of the entrepreneur" (80). Of course, Indian writing in English has already

witnessed several novels that advance and promote the "speaking otherwise" mechanism to speak to the power that has apparently lost its hearing ability.

"Speaking otherwise" can be seen as a demand to access the locked spaces of rights and dignity in the neoliberal regime. In fact, it turns out that "speaking otherwise" is an inherent feature of resilience and democracy. While resilience requires searching for modes of survival and creating better life conditions, democracy comes out stronger in the wake of negotiations, inclusivity, and a diversion from a conformist stance. In a way, "speaking otherwise" counters and questions the echo chambers of the neoliberal regime, thus advancing and stoking the claims of individual freedom and dignity. This infidelity is imperative if the marginalised groups must claim their way of being and doing in this unequal world. "The time for such silence has passed" (Wegner 24), and in the journey of restructuring the collective future, "there must be an encounter" (Badiou 51). For each regime operates in a way that ensures that evil always evades the grip of language. Therefore, the meaning of our lives and future necessitates the task of digging the gaps and silence that nourish, promote, and enable oppressive regimes. Raising fundamental questions must be tied to the act of "speaking otherwise," which may grant opportunities to mark a turn from exploitation to liberation. This kind of an event, as Badiou maintains, "cannot be communicated…. [I]t must be directly seized by fidelity" (51). Such a speaking mechanism needs to drive the emancipatory drive, linked as it is to the degree one can adopt a resilient approach.

Conclusion

Elsewhere, I have argued that the neoliberal extractive regime has compromised, severed, policed life and living conditions in unprecedented ways. It has also rendered unhealthy breathing platforms, increasingly undemocratised as they turn out to be, while governed, dictated, and expropriated by beasts of hypercapitalism. Consequently, "[d]emocracy is rendered a populist outlook rather than a societal one. It is no longer a tool to gain social justice and advocate personal autonomy rather it seems to be at ease in sleeping with the extractive neoliberal regime" (Dwivedi 1). Nambisan's *TSTMNBT* offers readers an insider's account of the challenges and existential crises that pervade the daily lives of slum people. While the elites are protected and gated, the marginalised survive on the pedestals of resilience and resistance. Megha Anwer and Anupama Arora rightly identify these raucous conditions as "the markers of neoliberal subjecthood" (2023) that compel the marginalised "to beg, borrow, and steal in order to fashion themselves differently from what their impoverished lives determine. There exists an unsavory alliance between residual-feudal and the emergent-neo-conservative impulses" (28).

The inhuman and traumatic conditions of these slum dwellers are posited by an endless cycle of the accumulation of wealth, an underlying feature of "cannibalistic capitalism" (2022). As a result of capitalism devouring, the slum lives, as we find in Nambisan's novel, are repackaged as what I term "disabled lives," constantly trying to make meaning of their precarity and groping their way in the darkness to access the healing antidotes. As a reader, one finds that most precarious conditions emerge by decimating networks of dependency and care. Hence, renewing and strengthening the decimated social contract requires investment in our resilience. The struggle in the present will determine the quality of the future for these precarious lives.

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