

Righting Precarious Lives: Violence, Vulnerability and Responsibility for the Other

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Abstract

As we live in the world today, as we experience our life in our global connectedness, we very much come witness a more vulnerable and uncertain world structured by violence (both material and ideological) across the matrix of race, class, sex, colour, nation and other identitarian and differential categories leading to the precariousness of life. In context of the governance of everyday life and in such differential arrangement certain lives are recognized as livable lives (and, so, valuable lives) while others are not in the normative frame of the “human” owing to the devaluation and dehumanization of these lives who have always been branded as (human) Others and, as a result, subjected to violence, vulnerability and precarity. The critical implication of such a state of life is profound in the sense that it imposes ethical obligation upon the global community to respond and redress with collective responsibility the specters of injustice and suffering. At the center of this (in)human state of affairs lies a certain idea and operation of the “human” or “Humanism” premised on the Enlightenment and its legacy that has come under scrutiny in recent critical humanistic scholarship. This presses the need for rethinking and remaking of the human through an alternative scheme of thought, knowledge and subject-production toward an ethically grounded collective mode of living through the acknowledgement of interdependency and relationality. Informed by this theoretical optic and drawing on the ethical scholarship of Derrida, Butler and

Levinas, specifically their critical take on violence and responsibility, this paper argues that to resist and redress violence it is critically imperative to work toward a relational social ontology by reworking the human subjectivity for the collective wellbeing of all (precarious) lives.

Keywords: Human/ism, violence, Other, vulnerability, precarity, responsibility for the Other

Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?

— Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (2004)

There is no life without the conditions of life that variably sustain life

— Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009)

I. Introduction

Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* ([1994] 2006)¹ presents a blackboard picture of the contemporary world as he addresses the question of violence, vulnerability and justice. His critique of violence and human suffering bears immense significance in the sense that the collective inheritance of the idea of progress and human happiness has in recent times been marred by narratives of violence and suffering leading

¹ All the references, quotations used in this paper are taken from 2006 edition of the book, which originally published in 1994 (English version).

to a very disturbingly precarious state of human life. Drawing attention to such (in)human state of affairs, Derrida observes that:

Never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and humanity. Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the “end of ideologies” and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth. (106)²

One would hardly disagree with the fact that as we live in the world today, as we experience our life, with scientific and technological advancement, with every attempt towards human comfort and happiness, we very much, at the same time, come face to face with a more vulnerable, troubled and uncertain world structured by the acts of violence (both material and ideological) in recent times. Most

² Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, ([1994] 2006). The book emerged out of a series of lectures which he delivered in 1993 during the conference “Whither Marxism?” on the future of Marxism. The book is an elaborative treatise on issues like violence, responsibility and justice and their attendant global implications. Derrida further responds in the book to Francis Fukuyama’s thesis on the “end of history” with the “end of ideology” and, so, (possible) end of conflicts and violence which presented in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). Samuel P. Huntington’s 1993 essay “The Clash of Civilizations” is a critical response to Fukuyama’s *The End of History* which subsequently published as a book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* in 1996. Huntington’s primary argument is that how the conflict between ideologies is being replaced by the conflict between civilizations.

importantly, what has affected the governance of everyday life in one form or the other is the “humanistic” construction and operation of violence across the matrix of race, class, sex, colour, nation and other identitarian categories leading to the precariousness of life (Butler 2004). What is important is that certain lives are differentially recognized as livable lives (and, so, valuable lives) while others are not in the normative frame of the “human” owing to the devaluation and dehumanization of these lives who, as a result, are subjected to violence and injurability. As a result, this has led to the emergence of a very precarious positioning of lives in a condition of mutual vulnerability and precarity.

Very recently, this social construction and operation of violence, both material and ideological, has raised serious inter/national concern and critical reflection. The critical implication of such a state of life is profound in the sense that it imposes ethical obligation upon the global community in its claim for a collective responsibility to address injustice and suffering. At the center of this (in)human state of affairs lies a certain idea and operation of the “human” or “Humanism” premised on the Enlightenment³ and its legacy that has come under scrutiny in recent critical humanistic scholarship. This presses the need for rethinking and remaking of the “human” through an alternative scheme of thought, knowledge and subject-production to provide a roadmap for an ethically grounded collective mode of living – toward the constitution of a community of “we” by establishing the co-constitutive social character of lives through the acknowledgement of the inevitable interdependency

³ The Enlightenment as an intellectual movement has been a dominant force in the thinking of the “human” in the West and elsewhere since the 18th century into the 20th century. Conceiving the “human” person primarily as autonomous and rational being, it believed that the “human” person with its scientific temper and questioning spirit can lead toward human progress and happiness through principles of justice, equality and tolerance. See James Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-century Answers and Twentieth-century Questions*. (California: UCP, 1996).

and relationality of the lives beyond the essentialist conception of “self” and with an unconditional respect and responsibility for the Other. This presses the need for rethinking and remaking of the human through an alternative scheme of thought, knowledge and subject-production toward an ethically grounded collective mode of living through the acknowledgement of interdependency and relationality. Informed by this theoretical optic and drawing on the ethical scholarship of Derrida, Butler and Levinas, specifically their critical take on violence and responsibility, this paper argues that to resist and redress violence it is critically imperative to work toward a relational social ontology by reworking the human subjectivity for the collective wellbeing of all (precarious) lives. This would pave the way for a mode of living together and better in the governance of everyday life.

Tony Davies in *Humanism* (1997) points out that “It is almost impossible to think of a crime that has not been committed in the name of humanity” (131). Mapping the growth of the figure of “Man” in the humanistic discourse starting from Renaissance Humanism until the emergence of “antihumanism” in recent times, Davies observes that: “All Humanisms, until now, have been imperial. They speak of the human in the accents and the interests of a class, a sex, a race, a genome” (131). This socio-political landscape that we very difficultly inherit in one form or the other and in which the “self” and the “Other” (“I” and “you”) live but in a state of mutual vulnerability (Butler 2004)⁴ offers a critical space for rethinking the question of “human” subject as it is “we” the human beings who are responsible for such (in)human state of affairs. Such critical work of rethinking and reworking bears immense

⁴ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004). Butler throws light in the social and ontological aspect of mutual vulnerability in the book which she further elaborated in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009). Butler’s notion of “precariousness” and “vulnerability” helps to understand how the lives are always and already precarious in their social positioning and how violence makes lives more vulnerable.

significance in the context of the problematic distribution and operation of human life in such socio-political landscape. It is certainly significant to note that this is the experiential life here, there and elsewhere around the world, in some sense or the other, as critics argue. To be more specific, the Enlightenment project of modernity and its ideological infrastructure have pushed the governance of life into crisis and have failed to deliver the desired emancipation to the human subject. “Not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty,” Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman* (2013) maintains, “that we have always been human, or that we are only that. Some of us are not even considered fully human now ...” (1). “Not if by ‘human’ we mean that creature familiar to us from the Enlightenment and its legacy” (1), she further observes, as always conceived in the dominant understanding whether as the “Cartesian subject of the cogito,” or the “community of reasonable [rational] beings” in Kantian sense, or the “subject as citizen, rights-holder, property-owner, and so on” in more sociological terms (Wolfe 2010; qtd. in Braidotti 1). Such a critical observation brings forth the inherent problematic that lies in the very idea and operation of the “human” subject in the dominant vision that, in prioritizing an essentialist (Enlightenment) notion of Human (or Man) as the measure of all things, has led to unsettle the socially grounded, shared nature of the relationship among lives, both human and nonhuman, as inhabitants of the planet who are deeply structured by the inherent relational affinity and ethical accountability. Instead, what has emerged out of such a mode of operation of life is the material precarity of lives by (in)human acts of violence, exclusion, and exploitation against the human and nonhuman Others. “No justice ... seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility,” Derrida observes. To make this possible, it is necessary to “recognize in its principle the respect for those others [victims] who are no longer or for those others who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born” (Derrida XVIII) – be they victims of wars,

or nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of violence.

II. Violence, Vulnerability and responsibility for the Other

This state of social affairs can no more remain unaddressed if we at all want a general good of human life. And in this disjointure of time, in which the living present is haunted by the specters of a violent past and possibilities of a better future, could be the very condition for a new beginning, a promise of a just future (a “future-to-come” in the vocabulary of Derrida). Derrida calls for a collective work of mourning in an international scale in this context to build a very responsive and responsible community beyond the essentialist boundaries of race, class, sex, colour, place and other identity categories. The work of mourning opens up a reflective (learning) space to engage in the consciousness of the memory of an unjust past and the possibility of a just future. As the specters of violence continue to haunt the collective mode of our being, what is important and quite urgent is that to learn how to respond and live in memory of the victims of violence (of the past, present and future). Such learning has implications for thinking and practicing an ethical mode of living, that is, to work toward a very responsive and responsible life with an unconditional respect and responsibility for the lives of human and nonhuman Other(s) who claim ethical recognition and intervention. This is a collective work that emerges out of the ethical obligations toward other lives as part of the entangled nature of our sociality. The fact is that, as Butler (2009) argues, “There is no life without the conditions of life that variably sustain life” (19) and “there can be no sustained life without [these] sustaining conditions” (23). These conditions which produce, operate, and sustain life are pervasively social – the socio-political networks and conditions of living – that has grounding, not in the discrete ontology of the person, but in “the

interdependency of persons, involving reproducible and sustaining social relations, and relations to the environment and to non-human forms of life, broadly considered” (19).

So the social conditioning of life based on respect, responsibility and social connectedness is paramount for the sustenance and flourishing of life. And it is the sustaining conditions of life that makes it possible for a life to live a “livable life” (19) as negative conditions of living conditioned by structures of violence, exploitation and suffering negatively affect the sustenance of life. As lives are constituted in and operated by the normative frames of socio-political order, arrangement and operations of power, there lies the epistemological problematic in which certain lives are perceived as lives while others fail to qualify as lives in the same perceptual frame. The normative frames, thus, work to differentiate and distribute lives by providing space for and producing specific ontologies of the subject for necessary qualification and recognition. “These normative conditions for the production of the subject,” as Butler (2009) maintains, “produce an historically contingent ontology, such that our very capacity to discern and name the ‘being’ of the subject is dependent on norms that facilitate that recognition” (4). At the same time, the operation of norms are not static and deterministic in nature, rather normative frames are also actively resisted, intervened and reworked depending on broader operations of power, and modes of living which in turn come up to provide a better living space to the normatively framed “‘subjects’ who are not quite recognizable as subjects, and ... ‘lives’ that are not quite--or, indeed, are never--recognized as lives” (4). These vulnerable lives, as Braidotti (2013) points out, are “the dehumanized social and political ‘others’ of the humanist norm” (30) such as the sexualized (woman and other gendered lives), racialized (the colonized and other native lives) and naturalized others (nonhuman animal and other planetary lives, and the environment or earth) who are reduced to the less than human status of exploitable/disposable bodies.

Braidotti elaborates that: “We are all humans, but some of us are just more mortal than others. Because their history in Europe and elsewhere has been one of lethal exclusions and fatal disqualifications, these ‘others’ raise issues of power and exclusion. We need more ethical accountability in dealing with the legacy of Humanism” (15).

On this social construction of violence, specifically the socio-political conditions that make it possible, Butler in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) explores the precarious condition of life and the possible ethical response it evokes. The book, written in the context of the 2001 U.S. war and the emergent political cultures of violence in post- 9/11 America, sheds light on the notion of precariousness, precarity and ethical responsibility. Violence has made life vulnerable and the experiences of vulnerability and loss have heightened the precariousness of life. Butler points out that “Loss [of lives] has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (20) and has affected very badly the ethical fabric of social life and community. “The question that preoccupies me in the light of recent global violence,” Butler asks, “is, Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What makes for a grievable life?” (20; italics original). The critical implication of these questions is profound in the sense that through these questions Butler wants to bring insight into the differential distribution of vulnerability “that make[s] some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others” (XII) and characterizes the precarious condition of life. At the center of this (in)human state of affairs lies a certain idea and operation of the “human” or “Humanism” premised on the Enlightenment and its legacy that has come under scrutiny in recent critical humanistic scholarship owing to its failure in delivering the desired progress and happiness to the human subject.

What is of greatest concern is, Butler points out, “Lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe” (32).

Certain lives are highly protected as their lives are conceived to be “livable lives” and their injury or death will be viewed “grievable,” (because their lives are valuable) while other lives will not even qualify as “livable lives.” And for this reason they are not “grievable lives” and are always subjected to violence, injury and suffering. As such, the injury and loss of such lives are never apprehended as injured or lost in the dominant perceptual frame and are always left out of the public grief and mourning, because their lives are never recognized as living. This programmatic act of violence not only differentially allocates and operates lives but also serves to enhance the precariousness of some lives at the cost of the others. This state of life is what makes lives mutually vulnerable and precarious in some sense or the other. It is important to note that social and political institutions and norms in their operations of power differentially allocate precariousness by maximizing it for some and minimizing for others. This implies that while all life is equally defined and characterized by precariousness, all lives are equally precarious, vulnerable and susceptible to violence.

The demand that emerges from the condition of social vulnerability of lives, in the context of death, injury and suffering, is that there is the urgency to engage in a collective work of mourning and intervention to redress the injustices meted out to many of the lives in the normative frame of the “human.” “That we can be injured, that others can be injured, that we are subject to death at the whim of another,” Butler maintains, “are all reasons for both fear and grief ...” (XII). What is important rather, she further emphasizes, is to ask what, politically, might be made of grief/mourning. Mourning can be a very powerful political tool that can lead to critical reflection and ethical action. In this sense the collective work of mourning must be carried out in a global scale to safeguard and strengthen the keener sense of the value of life. It is because “without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence” (XVIII-IX). But if mourning is

undertaken through the mode of retributive/counter violence then such a situation can only bring on more loss and suffering. It is inevitable in this sense that the global community must respond to the claim of such a precarious state of life and start “to imagine a world in which that violence might be minimized, in which an inevitable interdependency becomes acknowledged as the basis for global political community” (XII-XIII) – the community of “we” of the human and nonhuman lives. It is because our political and ethical responsibilities are rooted not in the essentialist conception of self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty, rather in the recognition that there are larger global processes, networks and relationships on which one inherently depends for the sustenance and flourishing of one’s life. These larger processes, networks and relationships, of which one is a constituent part and from which it is impossible to part, continue form and transform the very nature of life in a relational framework. The possibility for imagining such a model of community, beyond the boundaries of the “self” or “subject” positions, emerges from the position of “our” ethical obligation and collective action in response to violence, vulnerability and loss. “One insight that injury affords,” Butler maintains, “is that there are others out there on whom my life depends, people I do not know and may never know. This fundamental dependency on anonymous others is not a condition that I can will away” (XII). An unconditional interdependency between the self and its others is what she advocates in the context of violence, injury and loss. This presses the need for the making of human subjectivity through an alternative scheme of thought, knowledge and subject-production to provide a roadmap for an ethically grounded collective mode of living – toward the constitution of a community of “we” by establishing the co-constitutive social character of lives through the acknowledgement of the inevitable interdependency and relationality of the lives – “relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which [‘you’ and ‘I’] are differentiated and

related” (Butler 22). Such a model of community based on this inherent ethical structure of relationship is directed toward the social transformation of precarious lives, specifically in the context of violence, vulnerability and human suffering. As Butler (2004) observes: “When we lose certain people, ... something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us. ... Who “am” I, without you?” (22).

This line of thinking life in the very complex but necessary structure of relationships of one to the others further finds place in Butler’s *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009) in which she elaborates that “If I seek to preserve your life, it is not only because I seek to preserve my own, but because who ‘I’ am is nothing without your life” (44). The implication is that “my survivability depends on a relation to others, to a “you” or a set of “yous” without whom I cannot exist” (44). In such a radical frame of relationality and entanglement, it is difficult to conceive one in/within the boundary of one’s “self” or “subject” position, as Butler observes that:

... my existence is not mine alone, but is to be found outside myself, in this set of relations that precede and exceed the boundaries of who I am. If I have a boundary at all, or if a boundary can be said to belong to me, it is only because I have become separated from others, and it is only on condition of this separation that I can relate to them at all. So the boundary is a function of the relation, a brokering of difference, a negotiation in which I am bound to you in my separateness. (44)

The notion of “precariousness” and “precarity” requires a mention here to make a better sense of this condition of vulnerability. Both the concepts find an extensive treatment in Butler’s recent works *Precarious*

Life (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), besides many journal papers. The concepts are interrelated and intersecting in nature and have profound critical implication for governance of life in the socio-political contexts. Foregrounding the inherent nature of vulnerability of all social existence, Butler (2009) considers all human life as precarious in the sense that all lives “can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed” (25). Precariousness is an inevitable feature of all life and there is no life that is not precarious in the sense that all lives are vulnerable to the possibility of injury and destruction. Butler points out that “there is no life without the need for shelter and food, no life without dependency on wider networks of sociality and labor, no life that transcends injurability and mortality” (24). This dependency on and exposure to the wider networks of lives and conditions of sociality makes life precarious as “its survival is dependent on ... a social network of hands” (14) – the socio-economic and political conditions and networks that are to be met for the maintenance and sustenance of a life. Butler (2009) draws attention to this aspect of existence in the following line of thought that:

Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all. Reciprocally, it implies being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others, most of whom remain anonymous. (14)

It is important to note that precariousness does not merely imply an existential condition, rather provides ground for political insights and responsive actions that can lead to the flourishing of life. But, as mentioned elsewhere, it is the problematic operation of power by the social and political orders, institutions and networks that paves the way

toward the condition of heightened precariousness which is what Butler calls as “precarity.” In Butler’s words, precarity is “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” (25). In this situation of enhanced precarity, in which certain lives are differentially exposed and are at “heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection” (25-26), ethical obligations are imposed upon the global community to critically question and explore strategies to transform the socio-political conditions in which lives are precariously implicated so that the persistence and flourishing of life can be made possible by resisting and reducing constructive nature of normative violence. Most importantly, these ethical obligations to preserve life are global in character in the sense that in our global connectedness ethical obligations do not emerge out of or cannot be confined within the established and recognized communities bounded by the geographical borders and unified by the common language, culture and nationality/locality. Butler in the essay “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation” (2012) addresses on how ethical obligations are global in character that emerges both at a distance and within relations of proximity. She points out that in the context of violence, vulnerability, and suffering, ethical obligations do transgress geographical, national, communitarian boundaries with a call to ethically respond to the precarity of life whether it occurs here (in close proximity) or there (in distance). What Butler emphasizes is the urgency of global response even if the event happens here or elsewhere, as she maintains that “... what is happening ‘there’ also happens in some sense ‘here,’ and if what is happening ‘there’ depends on the event being registered in several ‘elsewheres,’ then it would seem that the ethical claim of the event takes place always in a ‘here’ and ‘there’ that are in some ways reversible” (138).

As violence and victimality can happen “here” and “there” at the same time, so also one’s response to violence and narratives of suffering of the victims which can happen “here” as well as “there” at the same time. This means that one must respond, resist, and act on violence even if the event takes place in a distant place. The images of the victims of violence which circulate via diverse media across geographical locations impose greater responsibility on the larger public. So it would not be just to view the location of violence (either “here” or “there”) exclusively in its locatedness, rather what is required to be attended is its broader impact, implication, and connection. Specifically, global encounter with violence brings out a situation in which one cannot stick either “here” or “there,” rather, one has to simultaneously locate and act “here” and “there” by virtue of “accepting and negotiating the multilocality and cross-temporality of ethical connections we might rightly call global” (Butler 138). Butler (2012) elaborates on this aspect of global ethical obligation in the following words:

... if I am only bound to those who are close to me, already familiar, then my ethics are invariably parochial, communitarian, and exclusionary. If I am only bound to those who are “human” in the abstract, then I avert every effort to translate culturally between my own situation and that of others. If I am only bound to those who suffer at a distance, but never those who are close to me, then I evacuate my situation in an effort to secure the distance that allows me to entertain ethical feeling and even feel myself to be ethical.
(138)

Such ethical obligations, as Butler maintains, “emerge from the insight that there can be no sustained life without those sustaining conditions, and that those conditions are both our political responsibility and the matter of our most vexed ethical decisions” (23). What makes this

possible further is the inseparable and unavoidable fact that, as social being, in the nature of our sociality, “we” are dependent on “what is outside ourselves, on others, on institutions, and on sustained and sustainable environments, and so are, in this sense, precarious” (23). In this sense it is inevitable to renew and strengthen those sustaining conditions of socio-political living in order to sustain life as sustainable by resisting and reconstituting the negative conditions of life.

III. Intervention of the Other: Toward relational social ontology

Approaching the question of violence and in apprehension of the precariousness of life, Butler primarily draws on Emmanuel Levinas’ radical notion of non-violent ethics, which he offered in response to the widespread violence in the wake of World War II and its aftermath through his philosophical thesis “ethics as first philosophy” that is based on the ethics of the Other. Taking into account the primacy of the precarious life of the Other who is always subjected to the totalization/objectification of the self/subject and at the receiving end of violence, Levinas brings attention to the unconditional responsibility and ethical obligation that exists and comes into play in the experience of the face-to-face encounter of the self with its Other. For Levinas such encounter of one with another (or, to put in simply, an encounter with difference) offers a situation in which the other person’s closeness and distance are strongly felt through the face of the Other in view of the precariousness of life as Levinas acknowledges it one interview: “The other concerns me in all his material misery. It is a matter, eventually, of nourishing him, of clothing him” (155; qtd. in Tangyin). On this primacy of the ethical responsibility for the Other in Levinas’ thesis, Kajornpat Tangyin puts in following words:

For Levinas, there can be no doubt that human relation begins at the encounter with the face; this face-to-face relation is the basis for all other discourse in society. He wants philosophy to begin with this relation, and this relation comes with an ethical demand, i.e., before the face of the other you shall not kill and in fact, you have to defend the life of the other. As you encounter another's face, you cannot escape from this ethical command. It is inescapable. (155)

“This ethical responsibility,” as Levinas conceives, “is prior to any knowledge of the other; in other words: I have to be responsible for the other even though I do not know him or her” (Tangyin 157). Responsibility is always and already there for the Other and this responsibility for the Other is the basic structure of human subjectivity. It resists any autonomous status of the self/subject which sanctions false authority to “I” (self/subject) that appropriates and in a self-justificatory manner dominates the Other violating the ethical principle of life and living. Levinas (1986) says, “To be an I then signifies not to be able to slip away from responsibility” (157, qtd. in Tangyin). As Tangyin elaborates:

To be responsible for the other is, for Levinas, essentially to be a “substitution” for the other. Being a substitution means: to put myself in the other's place, not to appropriate him or her according to my wishes, but to offer to the other what he or she needs, starting with basic material needs. To be an I is to substitute for the other. To be an I does not begin and end in itself, but departs from the self to the other without any return into the self. To substitute for the other is to leave oneself for the other. It is to transcend one's egoism. (158)

The otherness of the Other is quite unique which one (“I”) must

respect and to which one is responsible. To be human, for Levinas, is to be for the other, that is, to be responsible for the other. The meaning of life and the meaning of human person begins with this ethical principle, as “The ‘I’ cannot remain in itself in order to find the meaning of itself inwardly. The ‘I’ has to leave the self for the other, the departure from the self to the other is to approach the neighbor, and this approach brings me to be responsible for the other, to substitute for the other” (Tangyin 159). Thus, responsibility in Levinasian frame of thinking is a radical departure from the centered notion of human subjectivity: from *for-the-self* to the *for-the-other*. For-the-self and for-the-other are interconnected and inseparable. As Tangyin elaborates on this ethical structure of life that Levinas emphasizes:

The self could not live without the other, and the other could not live without the self, as the other’s other; this interconnection extends to all beings in the world. Human beings should not strive for preservation of their own being, but care for all other beings because without other beings humans could not survive in the world. Neither *being-for-the-self* nor *being-for-the-other* is adequate for to be truly human; as human beings we need to understand the interconnection of all beings. If this form of understanding is realized, understanding will not lead to domination but on the contrary we will care for other beings, whether human or all other things in nature. ... To emphasize only one side of will inevitably lead to decompose the content of human life. (166)

In view of the material precarity of human life and in response to and as an interdiction of violence, Butler emphasizes, Levinas’ conception of ethics is quite useful “for those cultural analyses that seek to understand how best to depict the human, human grief and suffering, and how best to admit the “faces” of those against whom ... [violence] is waged into

public representation” (XVIII). Levinas’ notion of non-violent ethics is what Butler theorizes at length in *Precarious Life* (2004) in which she attempts to comprehend philosophically how to work toward living a meaningful life in a difficult time, when the structures of violence, both ideological and material, continue to operate and affect human life. Bringing a critical note on the problematic differential allocation of human lives – that is, how some lives are more equal than others and how some lives are livable and grievable, while others injurable and ungrievable –, Butler maintains:

Those who remain faceless or whose faces are presented to us as so many symbols of evil, authorize us to become senseless before those lives we have eradicated, and whose grievability is indefinitely postponed. Certain faces must be admitted into public view, must be seen and heard for some keener sense of the value of life, all life, to take hold. (XVIII)

Any attempt to apprehend the precariousness of life, she argues, must start with the acknowledgement of the “face” of the Other. It is important to note that the “face” of the Other and its utter vulnerability (unconditionally) demands urgent attention and recognition on a collective level as a state of indifference can never serve the desired purpose; rather, it would heighten the precarious state of life by perpetrating human loss, suffering and victimization. In such a state of affairs, we must renew our capacity to mourn human loss and suffering at a collective level and, accordingly, a collective act of resistance be undertaken to address violence and vulnerability. What is required for this is a collective will and a reflective approach to the very ontological base of human subjectivity as part of the broader social ontology. This brings to the fore the fundamental ethical interdependency of lives in our everyday act of living: between the “I”/self and the Others, beyond the

self-justificatory normative boundary of the “autonomous” self. In the name of “autonomy” one cannot separate one’s self from the Other, although the idea of “autonomy” has been and is the key to the understanding of bodily integrity and self-determination. As Butler argues:

Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life.... (26)

It is fundamental, Butler maintains, “that prior to the formation of my “will”, my body related me to others whom I did not choose to have in proximity to myself”, and any attempt to accomplish a notion of “autonomy” on the basis of the denial of this primary dependence and physical proximity with others would be a self-defeating exercise. It is because human embodiment is not an individual/personal affair; it is rather a social phenomenon, always grounded in the broader social conditions of embodiment that nurture and condition the emergence of an individuated being: “Individuation is an accomplishment, not a presupposition, and certainly no guarantee” (Butler 27). Butler offers a roadmap for imagining community in a new way for the construction of a just world where (scope for) violence is actively resisted in the mode of everyday living. The struggle for normative autonomy should not essentially be based on the idea of self that is independent and, so, separate from the Other, rather it should give way for “a conception of myself as invariably in community, impressed upon by others, impinging upon them as well” (Butler 27). That is, the self by virtue of living in a world must consider the demands that are imposed on it by

many others with whom it is intimately related and in relation to which it is variously trans/formed. This relationality is (and should be) the key to the formation of our socio-political lives and in such relation there is hardly any place for violence, “for violence is, always, an exploitation of that primary tie, that primary way in which we are, as bodies, outside ourselves and for one another” that is beyond one’s control and predictable (Butler 27). Conceptualizing “autonomy” in such a non-autonomous relational frame does not mean that the “self” is fully merged with/in others and is without boundary. Butler further elaborates:

It does mean, however, that when we think about who we “are” and seek to represent ourselves, we cannot represent ourselves as merely bounded beings, for the primary others who are past for me not only live on in the fiber of the boundary that contains me (one meaning of “incorporation”), but they also haunt the way I am, as it were, periodically undone and open to becoming unbounded. (28)

Violence creates a situation of loss, injury, suffering and grief. Mourning violence, the loss and suffering of the Other puts oneself to undergo internal trans/formation, that is how radical changes shape one’s self. In this situation, for the understanding of who and how I am (how the being comes into being), the self is no more the same self, no more contained in oneself as before and not at one with oneself. Such disintegration of the self, where one loses control over the self and subsequently one’s autonomy, offers a key to reflect upon how one’s self is not something that is constituted essentially with firm boundaries. It is rather in the act of our embodiment one’s self is always and already given over to and conditioned by others beyond ourselves. Our lives are implicated in and conditioned by other lives. It is pertinent to theorize life in such ontological fashion as part of our broader social ontology,

Butler (2009) argues, “since the question at issue is: *What is a life?* The “being” of life is itself constituted through selective means; as a result, we cannot refer to this “being” outside of the operations of power, and we must make more precise the specific mechanisms of power through which life is produced” (1; italics original). It is this operation of power that renders certain (epistemological) frames of thinking in which, as mentioned elsewhere, certain lives do not qualify as lives or are not conceivable as lives and, so, their lives are subjected to violence and injurability at the whims of other lives. To rethink violence, vulnerability, and suffering and to work toward the flourishing of lives imposes certain ethical obligation upon us and demands, what Butler calls, “a new bodily ontology,” that transverses the individual boundaries and intertwines the life of the Other with the life of the self in an ethical relation. Butler (2011) maintains “... the life of the other, the life that is *not* our own, is also our life, since whatever sense “our” life has is derived precisely from this sociality, this being already, and from the start, dependent on a world of others, constituted in and by a social world” (Butler 141). In such ethical relation “I” cannot act as a bounded being, rather “I” is undone in relation to the others. Most importantly, in view of the precariousness of our lives, the life of the Other continues to haunt the life of the “I” in its ethical relationality. In such relational position, to conceptualize human life without the ethical obligation toward each-other and on the basis of the notion of an autonomous human self (or subjectivity), which is otherwise grounded in precarity and capacity for sociality, would certainly be conceived as quite narrow, essentialist and problematically untenable. As discussed elsewhere, specifically, when our lives encounter conditions of vulnerability and move through difficult times, when an ethical obligation haunts our collective lives, there is urgency to reconfigure the fundamental structures of our (perceived-to-be autonomous) “being” and move toward the collective mode of “being” as part of our embodied nature of social belonging and

becoming.⁵ On this relational positioning of human life which constitutes and conditions the social ontology of “being” as opposed to “the ontology of individualism” (33), Butler emphasizes that “The question is not whether a given being is living or not, nor whether the being in question has the status of a “person”; it is, rather, whether the social conditions of persistence and flourishing are or are not possible” (20).

It is because such a mode of social living would only pave way for better sustenance and flourishing of human (and nonhuman) life amidst, in response, and in resistance to violence, suffering, and vulnerability. This is a collective work and certainly ontological in its critical gesture as there is the need to do away with the essentialist normative structures of ontology of the subjects that continue to produce, operate and sustain our lives through an exclusionary and differential process in which some lives are selectively qualified as livable lives and others grievable lives. This precarious state of life, the conditions in which lives are problematically produced, provides a reflective space for ethical recognition and collective action for the production of a ground for better lives.

In response to the ethical haunting of violence, it is urgent to reconstruct our social lives, which demands respect and responsibility toward the lives of the precarious Other(s). This informs and gestures toward a radical notion of human subjectivity, a deconstructive subjectivity (to put it in Lavinas’ and Derrida’s line of thinking), that is responsive, responsible and accountable in its ontological orientation and ethical trans/formation. The focus on subjectivity is paramount as the

⁵ The concepts like “being,” “social belonging,” and “becoming” are very important to understand the ontological base of human subjectivity, which Judith Butler and other thinkers of new materialist feminism and posthumanism like Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti etc. have dealt in depth on these highlighting on the relational, contingent, and becoming nature of subjectivity. See *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, ed. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin. (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012); Also see *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samanta Frost (Durham: Duke UP, 2010).

crisis of human, in the operation of our everyday lives, lies in the problematic conceptualization and execution of human subjectivity. Deconstructive subjectivity is the very ethics of subjectivity in which the human subject operates its own “being” with and in relation to the Others in an ethical plane. This deconstructive/reconstructive engagement of the human subject is better informed by the Levinasian ethics (as Derrida expresses an unconditional debt towards the former).⁶ In intellectual rigour a deconstructive human subject/ivity offers a philosophical and pragmatic approach to the world that has been engulfed by the narrative of violence and suffering.⁷ It is important to note here that the philosophical oeuvre of Derrida and Levinas, like many other thinkers, has been shaped by the all profound negative experience of violence in the recent times—the World Wars, the rise of fascism, the horrors of Holocaust, the discontents of capitalism and many other forms of totalitarianism. The question that has severely impacted their mind as thinker and most importantly as human is that how can humans go against the very principle of human lives and what possible remedy philosophy can (or should) urgently provide for this problem. A deconstructive subjectivity, as they propose, radically works towards unsettling and subverting the processes of ontological totalization that at

⁶ For a detailed understanding of the ethical engagement of deconstruction, see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburg: Edinburg UP, 1992). The book is an important contribution to the Derrida scholarship from the perspective of Levinasian radical ethics as Critchley in his “Prefatory Note” very firmly argues how “Derridian deconstruction can, and indeed should, be understood as an ethical demand, provided that ethics is understood in the particular sense given to it in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas’s work, whose full philosophical importance is only now beginning to be recognized, exerted a powerful and continuous influence on the development of Derrida’s thinking, and by following the intricate textual dialogue between Levinas and Derrida, one can see how the question of ethics can be compellingly raised within deconstruction” (xiii).

⁷ For deconstruction’s practical engagement with politics, democracy, violence and justice against the negative critiques of it as just philosophical game, free play, nihilism, abstract and many more, see *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996).

its center operates in an exclusionary manner that separates and differentiates one from the Other and facilitates the ground for oppression and violence against the Others. As elaborated by Butler through Levinas, this mode of construction of the human subject/ontology is an essentialist, constructivist, and absolutist in its operative design. Such ideological programme that lies at the center of the totalizing nature of our thinking and living needs to be actively deconstructed through what Butler calls a “new bodily ontology” – an alternative way of operating subjectivity through reconstruction of social relationships. In this sense the deconstructive critique of the very subject-centered notion of ontology (the critique of “the ontology of individualism” as Butler puts it) opens up the unconditional respect and responsibility for the Other or a livable possibility for the life of the Other. In view of the question of violence of the human subject against the Other or on the question of the life of the Other, the possible solution is certainly be a return to the radico-ethical mode of living through the redoing our subjectivity. This means the absolutist subject has to deconstruct itself and inaugurate its death (“death of the subject” as poststructural thinkers conceive it to be) for the life of the Other. What is important to understand that the embodied nature of lives makes the subject positions non-absolutist, open-ended and relational than founded on fixed categories having rigid boundaries. Such a mode of life through a restructuring of the relation of the subject with the Other in an accountable, non-absolutist and non-coercive, climate would only work towards a just life. This radical sense of subjectivity as a model for ethical life is a prerequisite for a just and livable future. It is because the possibility of such a future lies in our collective capacity for living together and better, with respect and responsibility for the Other. It is because the global injustices which we collectively inherit, the memories of violence and large scale violation of human rights, continue to haunt the living present and the weight of such injustices certainly gestures

toward a better future for which the work must start “now” and from the learning from the injustices of the past, present and possible future. What is important is the critical insight that it is impossible to escape from the ethical obligation that “we” collectively have toward the remaking of human/ity, as Tony Davis (1997) maintains that:

Humanity is neither an essence nor an end, but a continuous and precarious process of becoming human, a process that entails the inescapable recognition that our humanity is on loan from others, to precisely the extent that we acknowledge it in them. For those ‘westerners’ whose humanness is mortgaged to the suffering and labour of an innumerable ‘Other’, the recognition cannot be comfortable or merely reflective. The humanity of Prospero is defined – conferred, conditioned – by Caliban; and the implications for both are political no less than philosophical. (132-133)

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