

Migrant Lives, Precarious Conditions: Analysing Nepal–Gulf Labour Migration Through Greta Rana’s Novel *Hostage*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the literary representation of labour migration from Nepal to the Gulf countries in Greta Rana’s novel Hostage: Inspired by the True Story of Nepali Migrants (2018). Set against the backdrop of the Maoist Insurgency, the novel reveals the layers of precarity and vulnerability faced by Nepali workers through the fateful journey of the protagonist Hari Prasad Mahato. The paper examines how economic hardship, political instability, social marginalisation, and limited opportunities at home push workers to seek employment abroad through exploitative migration networks. It further highlights the cyclical nature of precarity and the structural factors that make migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and erasure. The paper situates Rana’s Hostage within empirical scholarship on Nepali migration and Global South precarity theory and argues that by placing Hari Prasad’s story within wider socio-political and economic frameworks, Rana’s novel offers a literary lens into the complex realities of labour migration from Nepal, a process shaped by systemic inequality, state neglect, and economic desperation. By centring migrant narratives, the paper demonstrates how literature reveals systemic injustices and opens up inquiry into labour exploitation across other Global South contexts.

Keywords: Nepal; Gulf; labour migration; precarity; vulnerability

INTRODUCTION: THE LANDSCAPE OF LABOUR MIGRATION IN NEPAL

Migration has been an integral aspect of Nepal’s history, deeply rooted in its social, political and economic conditions. Its roots stretch back to the early nineteenth century with the recruitment of Nepalese soldiers into the British Army. Over time, migration patterns diversified, beginning with seasonal and temporary migration to India after 1951 (Sapkota, 2018) and later expanding to the Middle East in the 1970s, following the oil boom that generated a massive demand for semi-skilled and unskilled labour. While the establishment of democracy in 1990 accelerated migration trends from Nepal (Adhikari et al., 2023; Baniya et al., 2023; Bhattarai, 2005), underlying inequalities still affect migrant the workers in Nepal. As one of South Asia’s least developed nations, poverty, unemployment, and regional inequality continue to act as primary push factors for migration. These structural conditions- stark income differences between domestic and foreign workers (Adhikari et al., 2023), well-established migration networks (Thieme & Wyss, 2005), and material aspirations of the migrants (de Haas, 2021; Thornton et al., 2019) -collectively account for the rapid and persistent growth of migration from Nepal. Malla and Rosenbaum (2017, p. 415) further identify five key factors for migration: financial opportunities, social status, military service, stability and safety, and education. Accordingly, migration scholarship identifies three streams of migration from Nepal: open migration to India; contract labour to Malaysia, the Gulf countries, and other middle-income nations; and migration to developed regions collectively referred to as Wealthy Western and Asian (WWA) countries (Adhikari et al., 2023, p.74; Williams et al., 2020). This complex migration landscape is characterised by a stark difference in the experiences of migrants by destination, class, and education. Adhikari et al. (2023) note that those migrating to

Gulf States and Malaysia are predominantly lower-to-middle-income workers engaged in contract labour with weak legal protections, and are highly vulnerable to exploitation. By contrast, the wealthy and educated migrate to developed countries and enjoy stronger legal protections and long-term settlement prospects; however, this stream of migration remains inaccessible to lower-income Nepalis. While migration from Nepal occurs across multiple streams, this paper focuses on labour migration to the Gulf countries, drawing attention to the brutal realities of an exploitative system that defines the experience of Nepali migrant workers in the Gulf.

Studies reveal that “Nepal represents a major labour supplier to Persian Gulf countries” (Williams et al., 2020). More than 10% of Nepal's population — primarily men between the ages of 18 and 35 — work in Gulf countries (Shivakoti, 2022). Several factors, such as the collapse of agrarian livelihoods, commodification of labour, and the decade-long Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), which stifled economic development, account for both internal and external migration from Nepal (Donini, 2013; Shivakoti, 2022). Remittances from migration have stimulated the country's economy and provide a crucial source of income for poor families, with over half of all Nepali households dependent on remittance income (Adhikari et al., 2023). This makes labour migration not only an individual choice but an important aspect of the national economy. Yet despite the economic necessity, systemic exploitation at every stage of the migration process marks the experience of the Gulf migrant. Shivakoti (2022) observes that Nepal's migration sector is controlled by private manpower agencies, with immense financial and political influence. The migrants are thus left at the mercy of migration intermediaries who play contradictory roles; while they enable migration, they also exploit the migrants by putting them into precarious low-wage employment, a phenomenon Sha and Khor (2024, p. 94) term the “middle space effect.” Studies have repeatedly highlighted the exploitation and abuse faced by Nepalese migrant workers in Gulf countries (MoLESS, *Nepal Labour Migration Report* 2020). As stated by the International Labour Organisation (2023, p. 9), workers who are “employed outside of the formal private or public sectors possess virtually no social protection rights”. Reports also show that many migrant workers are forced into “3D” jobs—dirty, dangerous, and degrading (Ahn, 2004). News reports regarding the exploitation, high mortality rates, and labour rights violations of Nepali migrant workers in Gulf countries (Karki, 2015; Pokhrel, 2015), alongside accounts of dangerous working environments and cases of workers being “held hostage for 16 years” (Karki, 2016), highlight a systemic failure to protect the fundamental rights of these workers. Donini (2013) observes that while the Nepali state benefits from remittances, it takes little responsibility for the well-being of its migrants. The government's initiatives to protect these workers, “although with some merit, have remained largely ineffective” (J. Baniya et al., 2023, p. x).

GULF -MIGRATION AND LITERARY REPRESENTATION

Although labour migration is crucial to the workers as well as the economy of Nepal, literary representations of Gulf migration are limited. Existing scholarship focuses primarily on migration economics, policy, and worker rights. No major creative narratives that explore the lived experiences or emotional realities of Nepali migrants in the Gulf have been identified. In this context, Greta Rana's *Hostage: Inspired by the True Story of Nepali Migrants* (2018) emerges as an important literary text that focuses on the human cost of Gulf migration from Nepal. Rana dedicates her novel *Hostage: Inspired by the True Story of Nepali Migrants* to:

who were murdered in Iraq on the 20th August 2004 by those who, full of hatred, mistook poverty for ambition. These were twelve among the thousands who seek work beyond our borders and support their families and the economy of Nepal, while those entrusted with its governance continue to destroy it.

The novel, a fictional narrative of the 2004 incident, is set against the backdrop of the Maoist insurgency. It refers to a time frame of 1995 to 2009, a period marked by increased internal and external migration in Nepal. The narrative revolves around the story of Hari Prasad Mahato, a *Tharu* boatman who migrates to the Gulf for contract labour. Through a close reading of the text, this paper argues that *Hostage* exposes the structural inequality, state neglect, and economic desperation that render Nepali migrant workers vulnerable to cyclical exploitation and systemic invisibility. The paper situates the discussion within a framework of precarity and labour migration theory, followed by an analysis of the fictional representation of migration, the cyclical nature of precarity and erasure that Hari Prasad experiences in the Gulf. The concluding section reflects on how *Hostage* contributes to our understanding of the specifically Nepali dimensions of short-term labour migration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within South Asian migration writing, literary representations from Nepal are sparse and have remained largely uncharted. Menon (2024) briefly acknowledges Greta Rana's *Hostage: Inspired by the True Story of Nepali Migrants* (2018) as part of an emerging body of Gulf migration literature, but there is no sustained literary critical engagement with the novel. This paper seeks to fill this gap through close reading of *Hostage* as a literary intervention into the distinctly Nepali experience of short-term Gulf labour migration. It situates the novel within empirical scholarship on Nepali migration and Global South precarity theory, and argues that the novel offers a lens through which the layered nature of migrant precarity can be critically examined and understood. Precarity theory, developed by scholars such as Butler (2004, 2009) and Standing (2011), conceptualises precarity as a politically induced condition of instability that disproportionately affects marginalised populations. Lemke (2016) extends this framework to literary texts, coining the term 'precarious text' to describe narratives that not only represent migrant precarity but implicitly demand reform of the structural conditions they depict. This paper argues that *Hostage* functions as a 'precarious text'. In doing so, it also analyses how intersecting forms of social exclusion within Nepal, like ethnicity, caste, and geography, drive vulnerable communities towards precarious labour migration.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper contextualises Rana's *Hostage* within a Global South framework of precarity. L. Lau and Mendes (2022, p. 23) argue that "although 'precarity' was coined to define an economic phenomenon related to labour conditions in the global North, there is increasing recognition of a need to appreciate the overspill of this precarity into other precarities, geographically and otherwise". Consequently, precarity has significantly expanded beyond its Eurocentric origins. Guy Standing (2011), the most influential theorist of precarity, defines the 'precariat' as an emerging global class characterised by labour insecurity, the absence of occupational identity, and

the erosion of social protections. While Standing's framework foregrounds the conditions that produce labour vulnerability, it has been widely critiqued for its Eurocentric assumptions. Suliman and Weber (2018, p. 11) insist that the dominant discourse of precarity associated with Guy Standing's framework "projects quite specific experiences as universal" and is consequently inadequate for understanding labour insecurity in postcolonial contexts. Suliman and Weber (2018, p. 4) stress that this precarity "cannot be delinked from colonialism and its legacies". Ronald Munck (2013, p. 751) further argues that the concept of the precariat acts as "a colonising concept in the South in classic Eurocentric mode", noting that for the millions of workers in the Global South, precariousness is not a new condition but a historical norm: "from a Southern perspective work has always-already been precarious". This is particularly relevant to the Nepali context, where the collapse of agrarian livelihoods and the commodification of labour have pushed rural workers into exploitative migration networks (Donini, 2013).

This paper draws on precarity not merely as labour insecurity but as involving multi-dimensional conditions encompassing economic, social, legal, and existential vulnerabilities. Waite (2009, p. 421) argues that precarity has the analytical advantage over related concepts such as vulnerability and risk because "it more explicitly incorporates the political and institutional context in which the production of precarity occurs rather than focusing solely on individualised experiences of precarity", noting that the analytical power of precarity lies in "exploring blame for the production of precarity"—in holding systems, institutions, and states accountable rather than individualising suffering. This structural focus is essential for reading *Hostage*; rather than treating Hari Prasad as a tragic individual, this paper traces the institutional and political forces that produce his precarity at every stage of the migration process. This paper further draws on Lemke's (2016) concept of the 'precarious text', arguing that *Hostage* uses the conventions of fiction to expose and implicitly challenge the systemic forces that render migrant lives disposable. Butler's (2009, p. 14) conceptualisation of 'precariousness' as "the unavoidable vulnerability of social existence—the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other" resonates with Hari Prasad's condition, as his survival is entirely contingent on forces that remain indifferent to his life. As Lau and Mendes (2022, p. 45) observe in their reading of South Asian literary fiction, "the textual spaces of fiction usefully open up precarities for scrutiny, including the precarity of home and the slow violence of precarity on identities, communal bonds and societal fabric". Through the narrative of Hari Prasad's journey, *Hostage* opens up for scrutiny the migration industry in Nepal. This paper therefore employs precarity as a multi-dimensional analytical framework that is grounded in the Global South contexts, specifically Nepali historical conditions of exclusions based on caste and region, the Maoist insurgency, and exploitative migration infrastructure.

DISCUSSION

PRECARITY OF MIGRANT LABOURERS: READING *HOSTAGE*

In the opening chapter of the novel, set in 1995, the reader is immediately ushered into the dark reality of the poor and uneducated migrant in Nepal. Hari Prasad Mahato has to mortgage his land to finance a trip for what he hopes will be a lucrative job on a construction site in Arabia. He is further exploited by his brother-in-law, an MP in Kathmandu, to ensure a smooth immigration process, where the officers "found fault with everyone's papers – a ploy to get their palms oiled" (Rana, 2018, p. 3). To get him through the migration process, the broker passes him off as ten years younger, another nexus that runs from the bottom up to the party leaders:

The broker needed to fill his quota and the MP, who happened to be Hari Prasad's brother-in-law, was happy to be bribed to oil the way through... All the big party leaders took a cut from the brokers on a head-count basis.

(p.11)

The private migration agencies, collectively referred to in Nepal as 'Manpower companies', are registered agents who facilitate migration. Kern and Müller-Böcker (2015, p. 159) point out that these agents "are gatekeepers as they select the employees and employers". While these agents facilitate migration through established "migration infrastructure" and "broker" networks (Lindquist et al., 2012, p. 9), this very system paradoxically increases migrant vulnerability. Consequently, migration transforms into a cycle of exploitation, debt, and uncertainty sustained by the very infrastructures that facilitate mobility.

Hari Prasad is clueless about the nature of his job and is totally at the mercy of these agents. As Banki (2013, p. 450) observes, "Precarity suggests the potential for exploitation and abuse, but not its certain presence". Though this appears as good fortune in poverty-stricken Nepal, his job security is never assured, underscoring how precarity defines not only the economic but also the existential dimensions of the migrant experience. Despite the uncertainty, Hari Prasad embarks on this 'adventure' as the best choice for the future of his family. For many Nepalese labourers, the Gulf might not be the best option: "their desire to seek employment in Gulf countries is a consequence of limited employment opportunities in Nepal" (Malla & Rosenbaum, 2017, p. 429). With no rights or protection, Hari Prasad is pushed into precarious labour, defined as employment that is "uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker" (Branch & Hanley, 2011, p. 569), a condition mostly experienced by low-skilled and low-wage workers. However, he cannot voice his doubts as the employment is a "golden opportunity" of improving his life. His experiences encapsulate what Nancy Ettlinger (2007, p. 326) describes as "the everydayness of precarity", which "holds clues as to how people routinely, if implicitly, develop strategies that permit feelings of certainty amid uncertainty. People grope for the surety to navigate social, political, economic, and cultural life through everyday discursive and material practices". This paradox of endurance within vulnerability reveals how the struggle for certainty becomes a survival mechanism within the oppressive transnational labour structures. In the immigration office in Kathmandu, migrant workers like Hari Prasad endure harassment and bureaucratic obstacles in a system that operates primarily for profit, where every "politician has a labour quota" (Rana, 2018, p.19). This mirrors historical slave trading, reducing workers to commodities for sale. Hari Prasad later ruminates that politicians trade bodies of their own people, just like the "Europeans had traded slaves from the Dark Continent" (Rana, 2018, p. 67). Upon arrival in the Gulf, Hari Prasad finds himself disoriented and isolated, as he is moved to different locations amidst a "herd" of migrant labourers, leaving him "shell-shocked, alienated" (Rana, 2018, p. 21) and psychologically displaced in an unfamiliar environment.

Through the story of Hari Prasad, the novel depicts the huge number of migrant labourers in the Gulf engaged in precarious work "which treats workers as commodities, rather than as humans in need of social protection" (Paret & Gleeson, 2016, p.279). Hari Prasad is housed in a barrack-like building in Dubai to undergo training. Here, he finds solace and a sense of collective identity in the company of fellow Nepali migrants belonging to different castes and backgrounds. This scene also foregrounds the common perception that "Nepalis thrive once they're out of Nepal. Inside—no chance" (Rana, 2018, p. 24). Most of these workers are school dropouts who sacrifice everything to move out of Nepal as the only viable option to escape poverty. For five years, Hari Prasad lives a secluded life; his only company is a huge herd of goats in the desert. With no human

contact, no rights, or social life, he is completely out of touch with the world outside. He only recognises the stink of goats, lingering in the air, on his skin, and in his clothes. This powerfully conveys the inhumane treatment meted out to migrant workers. They are treated like animals—fed properly so that they can be made to work—but are denied basic human rights and dignity. As Paret and Gleeson (2016, p. 281) note: “[T]he migrant existence is often precarious in multiple and reinforcing ways, combining vulnerability to deportation and state violence, exclusion from public services and basic state protections, insecure employment and exploitation at work, insecure livelihood, and everyday discrimination or isolation.” Rana's depiction of the dehumanising conditions of Hari Prasad's work captures this intersecting vulnerability where violence operates through both economic systems and social hierarchies.

MAOIST INSURGENCY: THE PRECARIITY CHAIN AND ETHNIC MARGINALISATION

After toiling like an "animal" for five years, Hari Prasad returns home with enough savings to redeem his land and educate his children, but he finds that his motherland is in a state of "mess" (Rana, 2018, p.71); his village is engulfed in fear and instability under the shadow of the Maoist insurgency. He returns to another form of precarity—one rooted in political violence and social unrest. As Paret and Gleeson (2016, p. 280) observe, precarity also encompasses the “unpredictability of terror,” which may manifest in different forms. For Hari Prasad, the Maoist insurgency becomes an extension of the vulnerability he faced abroad. The Maoist insurgency in Nepal mostly affected the poor and the rural areas, and Hari Prasad's village is engulfed in this terror. According to Human Rights Watch (2007), youth and even children were compelled or manipulated to join the Maoist force during the armed conflict. The novel depicts the general scenario in the outskirts of Nepal, as young and able-bodied men had to leave the villages for fear of being recruited or killed by the Maoists. Precariousness varies “across space and time, within particular historical moments, and between groups with varying characteristics” (Paret & Gleeson, 2016, p. 281). The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal aggravated precarity and vulnerability for the Nepali populace, who were already steeped in poverty due to the failing economic and political infrastructure. Hari Prasad ruminates that the Maoists promised miracles, “a heaven on earth,” but it “brought blood and division” (Rana, 2018, p. 75). Once he is back home, Hari Prasad realises the stark truth that people were suffering and his village had changed: schools were closed, teachers intimidated, and children indoctrinated. He is worried about the future of his children, as the poor in Nepal “had always been prey to parasites” (Rana, 2018, p. 76). Hari Prasad has the least inclination to go to the Gulf once again. But the "new misfortune" of the hills and the mountains compels him to return to the Gulf a second time. Hari Prasad's situation may be analysed using the "precarity chain" framework (Silvey & Parreñas, 2019, p.3) to understand how precarity exists through the entire migration process. His financial situation at home, exploitation by recruitment agencies and employers in the destination country, and the uncertainty of a future upon returning home put him in a cycle of migration. Thus, the lives of short-term migrant workers are marked by economic precarity at home and the "precarity of labour" in the destination countries. Marko Valenta (2022) opines that Nepalese labour migration is not a static, one-time event, but a dynamic process characterised by multiple migrations and complex trajectories.

It may be mentioned here that Hari Prasad's vulnerability extends across his economic, educational, and ethnic status. Shifting attention from the individual experience of precarity to the "production of precarity" (Waite, 2009, p. 421) reveals the larger social and economic structure of Nepal, wherein precarity is "unevenly distributed" across regions and ethnicity. Greta Rana raises the larger ethnic issue in the exclusionary practices of the "hill-dominated" Nepali state. Hari Prasad's story reflects the predicament of the *Tharus*: an indigenous community in the flatlands (*Terai* region) of Nepal who were "gradually being regarded as aliens in their own land—of somehow being from India" (Rana, 2018, p. 85). The novel hints that being a *Tharu* Hari Prasad is doubly marginalised and more vulnerable to exploitation and deprivation of rights. This double marginalisation operates at the intersection of ethnicity, class, and geography, which renders the *Tharu* community structurally invisible within the Nepali state, making migration not just a choice but also a compulsion. Hari Prasad gets the citizenship certificates for his wife and children to ensure they are not deprived of their rights if he does not return or is killed. This speaks of the failure of the state to protect the marginalised communities. The delegitimisation of indigenous belonging represents a form of epistemic violence that deepens their material precarity, stripping them of both identity and place. Hari Prasad is sceptical whether the Maoists would be able to change anything for the *Tharus*, given that there were "far too many Brahmins and hill people in their rank" (Rana, 2018, p. 86). Like the *Tharus*, the Nepali Muslims also share this burden of otherness and are cast as 'other' despite generations of settlement. In Jordan, Hari Prasad meets a small group of Nepali Muslim workers and learns of the long history of migration of Nepali Muslims from Iraq, who had come for trade and "received permission to settle during Jung Bahadur's time" (Rana, 2018, p. 90). However, during the insurgency, these men were intimidated by the Maoists in their village, leaving no choice but to choose the path of migration. Both the *Tharu* and Muslim workers in the Gulf are displaced by the same structures of exclusion at home, underscoring how migration becomes the shared fate of the most marginalised communities in Nepal.

THE DISPOSABLE MIGRANT/S

Hari Prasad toils for another three years in Jordan and just as he hopes to return home, he is identified by the Jordanian company overseers as an "excellent" worker and is hired to join another group to "work on a site in the desert... what kind wasn't clear" (Rana, 2018, p. 93). In nine years of employment in the Gulf, Hari Prasad "had asked no questions" (Rana, 2018, p. 104). The denial of the basic right to know about one's employment is, as Sha and Khor (2024) demonstrate, a defining feature of the "middle space". When he is picked up from Jordan for work, he cannot question the place or nature of work, because that is how it has always been. This indicates a systemic normalisation of withholding information. Despite suspicions, he is unable to turn down this 'golden opportunity' as the money offered for this job is a fortune. What follows for these thirteen workers exposes the complicity between unregulated recruitment brokers, Gulf employers, and a Nepali state whose indifference to its citizens abroad enables these human rights violations. The state failure in Nepal does not merely push men into migration; it pushes them into progressively more dangerous tiers of it.

The kidnapping sequence in *Hostage* depicts the series of insecurities that follow the migrant worker from origin to destination and beyond. The passports are confiscated, and they are forced to work in a prison-like camp: "Lodged in one place and taken out to forced-labour site in

the day" (Rana, 2018, p. 97). Rana here depicts not just the physical captivity, but the endpoint of a migration system that denies the workers any right to information about work. The conversation of the workers as they ruminate on their fate, and the question— "Why us?" highlights the structural production of precarity. A young Muslim in the group answers: "Because we were the least protected" (Rana, 2018, p. 99), and Hari Prasad adds, "We're not important enough to be missed for some time" (Rana, 2018, p. 99). The expendability of these men is not just a personal misfortune but a systemic condition — they have been selected because the system has already rendered them invisible. The workers, as Rana makes explicit, are "picked up as the most expendable human commodities the terrorists could find" (Rana, 2018, p. 104) because they wanted to show to the world that the American company that hired them couldn't even protect its workers. The kidnappers capitalise on a condition that the migration system had already produced. Hari Prasad's name does not appear in the official list of kidnapped workers and newspaper reports, laying bare the state's complicity in rendering migrant lives disposable. This captures what Butler (2004, p. xv) theorises as the ungrievable life: "Some lives are grievable, and others are not; what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?" One captor observes: "What kind of a shitty country do you have? Your folks can't even count. They've given twelve names, and we have thirteen of you" (Rana, 2018, p. 107). The newspapers reduce these men to "cooks and cleaners" (Rana, 2018, p. 111), not just devaluing them but producing what Butler calls the ungrievable, those whose deaths will not be mourned because their lives were not fully acknowledged. The novel deepens this critique when the workers realise that their vulnerability stems from their nationality itself: "had they belonged to any other nationality, perhaps they would have been saved" (Rana, 2018, p. 112); their "country's poverty" makes them more vulnerable and easy victims (Rana, 2018, p.112). This resonates with Suliman and Weber's (2018, p.10) argument that precarious lives in the Global South "have been integral to the constitution of development itself". While these workers are needed for their labour, they are denied rights and dignity of labour. The "middle space" of this system is voiced in another migrant worker, Siva Bahadur's warning to Hari Prasad about the exploitative practices of the Jordanian company, which accumulated fortune on the "sweat of many backs; not just Nepali backs. But Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi; and others" (Rana, 2018, p. 116). Rana's depiction of Gulf labour recruitment illustrates Munck's (2013, p. 750) observation that precarity in the Global South is a structural condition systematically reproduced through the global capitalisation of poverty. Hari Prasad's response to this structural reality is significant. He thinks he is 'picked up' for being a "good and hard worker." But faced with imminent death and anonymity, he curses himself for his "greed" to give a better life to his family. He internalises a systemic condition as a personal failing; the novel shows that his vulnerability is manufactured.

The twelve hostages, victims of political rivalry between Iraq and America, are executed in full view of the world. Hari Prasad, however, dies in anonymity; his execution is not "aired," leaving no evidence of the "thirteenth man". Five years after the murder, Hari Prasad's family finally receives 'justice' through the kindness of fellow migrants who cross his path—Arjun, Siva Bahadur, and the Nepali Muslim—and through the good fortune of drawing the attention of lawyer Hassan and his brother-in-law Fayed, who handle cases of labourers "badly treated, unpaid, and sometimes abused" (Rana, 2018, p. 143). Yet, this exposes the precarity and human rights violations faced by migrant workers. The company that employs Hari Prasad, as well as the Nepali agents who send him to the Gulf, have no records of his whereabouts. Tracing Hari Prasad's address back home and finding his family itself becomes a daunting task for Arjun. This is the precarity chain at its terminal point: the financial insecurity that drove Hari Prasad to migrate

extends, through his death, to his family, who wait five years for compensation that finally arrives only by accident.

THE PRECARIOUS TEXT: MIGRATION, SOCIAL CRISIS, AND SHARED PREDICAMENT

Through a fictional representation of a true incident, Greta Rana points out the illegal practices in the labour recruitment and migration process to the Gulf countries from Nepal, particularly during the years of Insurgency. All twelve migrant workers, except Hari Prasad, pay for this illegal job in Iraq, a country where Nepalis are forbidden to work: “Nepalis were not supposed to travel to Iraq: the Nepali government didn’t allow it” (Rana, 2018, p. 97). Several characters in the novel voice the illegality and corruption in the labour trade between the Gulf and Kathmandu, where “politicians took commissions: commissions for those going to Iraq were particularly generous” (Rana, 2018, p.166). With a motive to earn much profit in a short time, these workers are illegally hired by an American company through the Jordanian agents, as “legal labour didn’t quite meet the target, but there were plenty of dirt-poor Nepalis who would work for a pittance” (Rana, 2018, p. 109). The observation made by Baniya et al. (2023) hints at the fate of the migrant workers depicted in the novel:

Besides the issues faced in Nepal vis-à-vis recruitment fees, deception and fraud from the recruitment agencies or agents, procedural hassles, ineffectiveness of government training programmes and other issues and challenges, migrant workers may face completely different circumstances than as promised (by sub-agents, recruitment agencies and/or employers), planned or imagined.

(pp. 1-2)

Moreover, the remittances that Nepali workers employed in the Gulf sent back home were essential for the faltering Nepali economy during the intensifying Maoist War. The Maoist insurgency, government corruption, and widespread protests affected the poor the most. They either sold their land or borrowed money to become labourers abroad. A huge number of Nepali men were employed as domestic staff, drivers, and construction workers during this time.

Through the story of Hari Prasad and other migrants, Greta Rana captures the larger picture of the ‘labour market’ in Nepal during years marked by political and economic instability. Donini (2013) observes how these push factors made migration not a choice but a structural compulsion. Rana (2018, p.137) opines: “Nepal’s political classes mismanaged the affairs of the state—failing to deliver jobs, development, education, social security, health care and even drinking water ... For poor Nepal, human rights were a myth” Throughout the novel the reader is reminded of the chaotic state of affairs in Nepal during the 1990s–2000s, where the poor were plagued by “terrorism in different guises: police, army, Maoist, landlords, moneylenders” (Rana, 2018, p. 151). Stories of abuse—especially of Nepali women being “physically abused ... wages withheld ... rape by male employers”—do not deter this migration. These workers endure and stay on; the supply of labour from Nepal remains continuous. If someone leaves a job, many more in Nepal are willing to take it, no matter how harsh the working conditions or how bad the reputation of the employer, as it is “better than having no employer at all” (Rana, 2018, p. 137). Their belonging to a nation ruled by corrupt politicians indifferent to the welfare of its people only adds to their vulnerability. The novel hints at the shared predicament of these countless migrant workers from Nepal. The disparate yet interconnected lives of Hari Prasad, Arjun, and Siva Bahadur together constitute overlapping precarity chains. Arjun’s intelligence and hard work are recognised not by

the Nepali state but by his foreign employer Fayed, who acknowledges that "Nepal's loss of a bright, intelligent human being is definitely my gain" (Rana, 2018, p. 139). Siva Bahadur's story, set in 2000 against the intensifying Maoist insurgency in Nepal, adds a further dimension. An engineer turned Maoist, Siva is imprisoned and then rehabilitated through the very minister whose house he bombed. Boastful of his engineering degree and Maoist past, Siva returns to Nepal only to be silently killed and disposed of by the Maoists. His trajectory maps the intersection of political violence and economic desperation.

Though the stories of the migrant workers depicted in the text are not directly connected, a sense of shared precarity and vulnerability ties their fates. Through the disparate yet interconnected lives of these workers, Greta Rana poignantly invites attention to pressing social, economic, and political concerns in Nepal during the 1990s–2000s—a period marked by large-scale migration to the Gulf. To this extent, this paper argues, the novel qualifies as a ‘precarious text.’ In *Poverty, Inequality and Precarity in Contemporary American Culture* (2016, pp. 18-19), Sieglinde Lemke suggests that a ‘precarious text’ does not merely present the experience of precarity but “begs, implicitly or explicitly, to reform the precarious conditions (outside the text) it describes”. Through the thoughts and feelings of Hari Prasad and other characters as they ruminate on their predicaments and the injustices surrounding their lives, Greta Rana represents the precarious existence of migrant workers, defined by marginalisation and insecurity both at home and abroad. Lemke (2016) further notes that a precarious text employs a “fragmented” and “jagged” narrative to produce an “unsettling effect”. Reading *Hostage* evokes a similar experience—an attempt to depict fragmented lives stretched between Nepal and Iraq. This is indicated by a subtle hint at terrorism and its impact on the youth and families of Iraq through the story of Hassan and Karim’s brother, Faisal, who becomes involved with a terrorist group. Similar dialectics of victimhood and responsibility have been examined by Alosman and Raihanah (2024) in their analysis of 2003 Iraq War narratives. Thus, a climate of vulnerability and unavoidable insecurity pervades the lives of all the characters in the novel, despite their differences in class or geography.

Arjun’s reflection on Hari Prasad’s journey of migration, death, and injustice encapsulates this reality: “This man, this man and many like him, women too, had gone over the oceans into unknown lands to keep the rice bowls in the villages of Nepal full... others had migrated as part of a massive brain drain” (Rana, 2018, p. 220). Under the Foreign Employment Rules, 2008, brokers and migrants have been made illegal, and several other restrictions have been imposed to ensure protection of migrant workers (Baniya et al., 2023, p. 14). But this has made the migrant workers even more vulnerable, compelling them to take irregular channels because of “a compulsion to migrate owing to lack of opportunities at home” (Baniya et al., 2023, p. 16). Reflecting on the continuous migration from Nepal, even after the “horrendous executions”, Arjun sadly opines, “What is left but institutions destroyed, a nation fractured and more of young who should be rebuilding Nepal leaving” (Rana, 2018, p. 212). This encapsulates the existential dimension of Nepali migrant precarity and reflects the corruption and mismanagement that continued, leaving the poorest and most marginalised communities with little alternative but to opt for labour migration to the Gulf, despite dangers.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Greta Rana's *Hostage* (2018) as a literary intervention into the specifically Nepali experience of short-term labour migration to the Gulf, elucidating the structural, institutional, and existential dimensions of migrant vulnerability. The primary finding of this study is that migrant precarity in *Hostage* is not confined to the workplace alone but operates across the entire migration cycle, defined by a series of precarities at home and in the destination countries, which operate through the exploitative recruitment infrastructure. Hari Prasad's tragic end underscores the vulnerability of the unskilled, marginalised migrant labourer from Nepal. The paper examines *Hostage* as a significant contribution to Nepali literature, as it refuses to treat migrant suffering as exceptional or invisible. By fictionalising the systemic forces that produce vulnerability, Rana transforms a nation's tragedy (The execution of twelve Nepali migrant workers in 2004) into a critique of the migration industry, the Nepali state, and the global labour hierarchies that render workers like Hari Prasad expendable. By applying a Global South framework of precarity, this paper demonstrates how labour insecurity in Nepal can be understood not as an exceptional condition but as a historically continuous and structurally embedded phenomenon.

Through the novel, Greta Rana depicts that in the specific context of Nepal, migration represents not just an opportunity but a calculated risk against an already-precarious existence, what may be termed the 'precarity of living'. Therefore, as demonstrated in this paper, when analysed through the precarity framework, Hari Prasad's suffering is not just a personal tragedy but a systemic failure that produces and perpetuates migrant vulnerability. This analysis reveals that precarity, understood through a Global South lens, operates structurally and existentially across experiences of Gulf migrants. Rana's novel, through its jagged, unsettling narrative, provides a powerful critique of these systemic conditions, highlighting the importance of literary narratives in holding states, systems, and structures accountable for the precarity they produce and sustain. This study thus underscores the role of literature as a critical tool for exposing systemic injustices, opening new avenues for scholarly inquiry into migration narratives across other Global South contexts where labour exploitation remains unexamined.

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