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## Woman in Difference: Mahasweta Devi's "Douloti the Bountiful"

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*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*

The vast group that spans, *in the metropolis*, the migrant sub-proletariat at one end and the postcolonial artist, intellectual, academic, political exile, successful professional or capitalist at the other end is articulate in many different ways. It is not surprising that it claims, in one way or another, a paradigmatic importance in the contemporary socius. By contrast, Mahasweta Devi lingers in postcoloniality in the space of difference, *in decolonized terrain*. Her material is not written with an international audience in mind. It often contains problematic representations of decolonization after a negotiated *political* independence. Sometimes this offends

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"Douloti the Bountiful" is forthcoming in Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Douloti is the daughter of a tribal bonded worker. India has an aboriginal tribal population of nearly seventy million. A bonded worker offers free work as "repayment" of a small loan, at extortionate rates of interest, often over more than one generation. Douloti is abducted by an upper-caste (nontribal) Indian from her home with a false promise of marriage. She is sold into bonded prostitution, ostensibly to repay her father's loan. She descends down the hierarchy of "favor" in the house of prostitution. Devastated by venereal disease, she accomplishes a journey to a hospital, only to be directed to another hospital, much further away. She decides to walk home instead and dies on the way. The rhetorical and narrative details are filled out in the following essay.

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the pieties of the national bourgeoisie. A great deal can be said on this issue. Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas's words will suffice to make a closure here:

In Algeria, many of us, including myself, kept silent for ten years after Independence, not to give fuel to the enemies of the glorious Algerian revolution . . . . I will certainly admit that Western right-wing forces may and will use our protests, especially if they remain isolated. But it is as true to say that our own rightist forces exploit our silence.<sup>1</sup>

The sheer quantity of Mahasweta's production, her preoccupation with the gendered subaltern subject, and the range of her experimental prose—moving from the tribal to the Sanskritic register by way of easy obscenity and political analysis—will not permit her to be an isolated voice.

Let me explain, somewhat schematically, what I mean by “postcoloniality in the space of difference, *in decolonized terrain*.”

Especially in a critique of metropolitan culture, the event of political independence can be automatically assumed to stand between colony and decolonization as an unexamined good that operates a reversal. But the political goals of the new nation supposedly are determined by a regulative logic derived from the old colony, with its interest reversed: secularism, democracy, socialism, national identity, and capitalist development. Whatever the fate of this supposition, it must be admitted that there is always a space that cannot share in the energy of this reversal. This space had no established agency of traffic with the culture of imperialism. Paradoxically, this space is also outside of organized labor, below the attempted reversals of capital logic. Conventionally, this space is described as the habitat of the *subproletariat* or the *subaltern*. Mahasweta's fiction focuses on it as the space of the displacement of the colonization-decolonization reversal. This is the space that can become, for her, a representation of decolonization *as such*. “Decolonization” in this context is a convenient and misleading word, used because no other can be found.

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1. Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas, “Bound and Gagged by the Family Code,” in *Third World—Second Sex: Women's Struggles and National Liberation*, comp. Miranda Davies (London: Zed Books, 1983), 14.

This space is not indeterminate or uninscribed. In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, the historically invested cartography of London, charged with the task of positioning and cathecting the proper names inhabiting that novel, entails an unproduced mass variously named "India" or "Empire." Curiously enough, the structuring in "Douloti" can be compared to this. In "Douloti" too the historically produced proper name "India" is the name of a relatively unproduced and undifferentiated mass. However, in "Douloti," the alias of "India" is not "Empire," as in *Mrs. Dalloway*, but "Nation." Mahasweta invites us to realize that, in the context of this fiction, "Empire" and "Nation" are interchangeable names, however hard it might be for us to imagine it. If *Mrs. Dalloway*'s London is supported by the name and the implicit concept-metaphor "Empire" *from below*, the socially invested cartography of bonded labor in "Douloti" is animated and supported by the space of decolonization and the implicit presupposition "Nation" *from above*.<sup>2</sup> In this fiction, the space of decolonization is displaced out of the received version of the relay race between Empire and Nation, between imperialism and independence. If contemporary neocolonialism is seen only from the undoubtedly complex and important, but restrictive, perspective or explanatory context of metropolitan, internal colonization of the postcolonial migrant or neocolonial immigrant, this particular scenario of displacement becomes invisible, drops out of sight. (The solution is not necessarily to privilege the self-defensive liberal elite in the "new" nation.<sup>3</sup>)

Keeping this methodological proviso in mind, I should like now to cut the context in a different way, and focus on three points:

(1) How does Mahasweta inscribe this space of displacement,

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2. "Invested" is used here as an alternative for "cathected," or "occupied in desire." Mapping one's terrain is certainly a matter of "investment," in a whole spectrum of the senses that this meaning of the word can take on board. Preliminarily one can say that Mahasweta wants to occupy with a desire for sociality the area of "India," the general principle of whose cartography is quite different from bonded labor. In cartography "proper," by contrast, "physical geography" or "politics" do not need the effort of social investment as does "bonded labor."

3. The notion of cuts (*découpages*, not "circumscription," as in the English) is borrowed from Jacques Derrida, "My Chances/Mes Chances: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonics," in *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis and Literature*, ed. William Kerrigan and Joseph H. Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 27.

if not with the lineaments of the nation? (2) What does it mean to say “socially invested cartography of bonded labor?” and (3) How does Mahasweta suggest, even within this space, the woman’s body is the last instance, that it is elsewhere?

### *1. Inscription of Displaced Space*

As is her custom, Mahasweta uses a brilliantly simple strategy to inscribe the space of active displacement of the Empire-Nation or colonialism-decolonization reversal. She names.

On the very first page we read, “In Palamu, the communities of Nagesias and Parhuas are small. The bigger communities are Bhnuias, Dusads, Dhakis, Ganjus, Oraons, Mundas.” We have not yet received the full treatment of naming or renaming. But the reader can already sense that this is different from the admittedly most urgent situation of the United States or Britain (and Australia and Canada) as unacknowledged multiracial cultures, which view India as one of the minorities that must be affirmatively acted upon or mobilized into collective resistance. Without minimizing the importance of that other metropolitan struggle, attending to this one allows the reader to grasp that the word “India” is sometimes a lid on an immense and equally unacknowledged subaltern heterogeneity. Mahasweta releases that heterogeneity, restoring some of its historical and geographical nomenclature. We will have to go a little further into the text to grasp that this naming is not an invitation to monumentalize precapitalist tribal formations. Here the reader can prepare at least to think that, if in the metropolitan migrant context the invocation of heterogeneity can sometimes work against the formation of a resistant collectivity among all the disenfranchised, in the decolonized national context, the strategic deployment of subaltern heterogeneity can make visible the phantasmic nature of a merely hegemonic nationalism. Even a further step can be taken: to apply the requirements of the first case to the second is to be part of the problem, however innocently. The two cases are perhaps, even, *différends*.<sup>4</sup>

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4. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Différend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

The *découpage* of “internal colonization”—colonization inside a metropolitan nation-state—can claim a normative globality only by leaving out this delicately outlined, displaced shadow space.

If the name “India” is undone here, the undoing is not coded in the terms regularly encountered in the international press—many languages, many religions. That scene of strife, again not to be ignored, is still within the hegemonic struggle over so-called national identity—still, that is to say, in the space of the empire-nation reversal. No Indian, expatriate or otherwise, could bypass the issue of violence in the subcontinent in the name of religious *identity*. But we must also keep our eye on the differences, where tribal animism does not even qualify as a religion.

In our childhood and adolescence, Indian history textbooks began with the invocation of “unity in diversity.” This somewhat tired slogan is, quite understandably, still on the agenda of the “builders of the nation,” even as the consumer elite is being constituted as the definitive citizen. As she inscribes this other displaced space, Mahasweta appropriates and transforms this worthy generalization by positing a unity in exploitation and domination, by giving in her story the generic name “bond-slave” (not the “miraculating” name “citizen”) in many of the modern Indian languages. This is the unity in diversity of the many named groups of tribals and outcasts. If we look at the official map of India, we can see how meticulously the territory is covered and reinscribed; I have italicized the official proper names of the spaces of the new nation:

In *Andhra* the people of Matangi, Jaggali, Malajangam, Mahar and other such castes become Gothi. In *Bihar* Chamar, Nagesia, Parhaiya, Dusad become kamiya or seokiya. In *Gujarat* the Chalwaris, Naliyas, Thoris and such others become halpati. In *Karnataka* the low of birth become jeetho, in *Madhya Pradesh* haroyaha. In *Orissa* Gothi and in *Rajasthan* sagri. The Chetty Rayats of *Tamilnadu* keep bhumidasas. In *Uttar Pradesh* the bhumidasas of the *Laccadive Islands* are Nadapu.

This is not an exhaustive list, just an indication of multiplicity. Contrasted with this is the Brahman and the Rajput, the contractor and the government, hereditary divinity indistinguishable

from more recent forms of mastery: Boss-Gormen(government)-lord-Sir-Sarkar(government)-god.

These lists are scattered throughout the text, and the effect of the reinscription is sustained. It is through the lists that we can approach the second proposed question.

## ***2. Social Investment of the Cartography of Bonded Space***

Among these passages of lists, there are a few in which Mahasweta rather unexpectedly uses the Bengali word customarily used for “society”: *shomaj*. (Since the English words are not exact equivalents, *shomaj* is quite appropriate for describing caste- or tribe-*communities*. It undergoes a startling transcoding into a broad collectivity when used in the context of the far-flung *society* of bonded labor.) The following passages are spoken by Bono Nagesia, an “unconventional personalit[y], . . . [a] fissure . . . for restructuring,” to quote Kalpana Bardhan on the “strategies of indirect power within the authority hierarchy”:<sup>5</sup> “Before I had left Seora [his village] I didn’t know how many kamiyas there were in Chiroa, Chatakpur, Ramkanda, Daho, Palda, Chandoa, Banari . . . . Oh I didn’t know before how large *my* society [*shomaj*] was” (emphasis added). And again, “that’s why I no longer feel alone. Oh the society [*shomaj*] of kamiyas is so large. Very large. If you call it a society, there is no accounting for the number of people in it.”

This access to collectivity, and the repeated use of *shomaj* to mark the access, might remind the Bengali reader that *shomaj* is also the word that gives us “socialism” in *shomajbad* or *shomajtantra*. All Eurocentric predictive scenarios to the contrary, it is not unreasonable to see here the prefiguration from primitive communism to the ground of socialism in the most general sense.

The youthful Marx suggested that, if the Hegelian system were wrenched into the sphere of political economy, its predictive morphology would prove itself wrong. Many readers still hold the implicit evolutionary assumption, sometimes in contradiction with

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5. Kalpana Bardhan, “Women, Work, Welfare and Status: Forces of Tradition and Change in India,” *South Asia Bulletin* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 3–16.

their overt politics, that the true formation of collectivity travels from the family, through society, into the possibility of the ethico-rational abstraction embodied in the nation-state. If this evolutionary narrative is wrenched into the sphere of decolonization or displaced into the sphere of transnational capitalism, the precariously manipulative *function* called “the nation-state,” coded and reterritorialized with the heavy paleonymic (historically stuffed) baggage of reason and affect, reveals how problematic this assumption might be, both from the global and the local perspectives. We hear a good deal these days about the *post*-national status of global capitalism and postcoloniality. Such conclusions ignore the ferocious recoding power of the concept/metaphor “nation-state,” and remain locked within the reversal of capital logic and colonialism. If this entire way of thinking is displaced, the formation of a collectivity in bondage can accommodate an ethical rationality. Sharing this conviction, yet taking a distance from it, Mahasweta moves us further, further even from Bono Nagesia’s access to *shomaj*, indeed to a space where the family is broken. Here the reader must recall that by the logic of the evolutionary narrative that is being displaced, the family is the first step toward collectivity.<sup>6</sup> Mahasweta moves us to a space where the family, the machine for the socialization of the female body through affective coding, has itself been broken and deflected.

### ***3. The Woman’s Body Is the Last Instance, It Is Elsewhere***

There is no avoiding this, even if the story is read by way of the broadest possible grid: in modern “India,” there *is* a “society” of bonded labor, where the only means of repaying a loan at extortionate rates of interest is hereditary bond-slavery. Family life is still possible here, the affects taking the entire burden of

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6. This is an enormous network of arguments. Let me just cite the Engels-Gayle Rubin circuit, on the one hand (Friedrich Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* [New York, Pathfinder Press, 1979] and Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter [New York, Monthly Review Press, 1975], 157–210), and the Britain-India circuit, on the other (Anna Davin,



survival. Below this is bonded prostitution, where the girls and women abducted from bonded labor or *kamiya* households are thrust together as bodies for absolute sexual and economic exploitation. These bodies are connected to bond slavery but are yet apart. Detail by detail, in a spare narrative style that often resembles the schizo's "and then . . . ," "and then . . . ," Mahasweta relentlessly emphasizes this separation.

The social system that makes Crook Nagesia [the father of the central character] a *kamiya* is made by men. Therefore do Douloti [the central character, a woman], Somni, Reoti have to quench the hunger of male flesh. Otherwise Paramananda [the boss of the house of prostitution] does not get money. . . . In the bond-slavery trade . . . the recourse to loans is the general regulator.<sup>7</sup>

Woman's body is thus the last instance in a system whose general regulator is still the loan: usurer's capital, imbricated, level by level, in national industrial and transnational global capital. This, if you like, is the connection. But it is also the last instance on the chain of affective responsibility, and no Third World–Gramscian rewriting of class as subaltern-in-culture has taken this into account in any but the most sentimental way:

[Her father] stumbled on his face when he tried to pull the cart, with the ox yoke on his shoulders, at [his boss] Munabar's command. His broken body gave him the name Crook. And Douloti has taken the yoke of Crook's bond-slavery on her shoulders. Now Latia is her client, her body is tight. Then going down and down Douloti will be as skeletal as Somni. She will repay the bond-slavery loan as a beggar.

The reader knows that Douloti will end her life not as a beggar but "destitute in quite another way." And, to begin the last

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"Imperialism and Motherhood," *History Workshop* 5 [Spring 1978]: 9–65 and *ReCasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kum Kum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid [New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1989]).

7. Let us remember that the "schizo" marks the spot where the papa-mama-baby explanations, consolidating the romance in the nuclear family, find their limit. This is somewhat different from noticing a similar structure more ag-

movement of the story, which leads to this particular end, Mahasweta marks the impersonal indifference of the space of the woman in difference elsewhere, in a simple sentence starting the shift to this last sequence: "Douloti didn't know this news."

The "news" that Douloti doesn't know is the outcastes' and tribals' plans to appropriate and transform state and national legal sanctions for legitimizing armed struggle. The regular revolutionary line here is to suggest that, if women are drawn into national liberation, feminism is advanced. I have already spoken of the precariousness of the adjective "national" in this context. Further, if one considers recent historical examples, one is obliged to suggest that even if, in the crisis of the armed or peaceful struggle, women seem to emerge as comrades, with the return of the everyday *and in the pores of the struggle*, the old codings of the gendered body, sometimes slightly altered, seem to fall into place. Mahasweta's "Draupadi" is a reminder of that.<sup>8</sup> Here she attends to the separate place of the woman's body.

In the previous paragraph, then, Mahasweta has been describing the politicization of male untouchables. Bono Nagesia has just joined Prasad Mahato's Freedom Party. Prasad, an untouchable who was associated with the now weakened legacy of Gandhian nationalism—*Harijan*, (god's people was Gandhi's new name for the Hindu outcastes)—has just broken away and founded this militant party. Mahasweta treats these men with the sympathy they deserve. Yet, she assures us:

The object of this account is not Prasad's quick transformation. Just as its object is not Bono Nagesia joining Prasad's party. Bono didn't value Prasad so much before. But the day Prasad, the son of a harijan, left the Gandhi Mission and the Harijan Association and gave witness in the Freedom Party, Bono sought him out and mingled with him. . . . Douloti didn't know this news.

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gressively foregrounded in *The Satanic Verses*, a novel of identity-formation in culture/ideology/religion/nation (Spivak, "Reading *The Satanic Verses*," in *Public Culture* 2, no. 1 [Fall 1989]: 85).

8. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays In Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 187–96.

The final movement of the story will be considered later in this essay. Here let us note its place apart and continue the discussion of woman's relatedness to bond-slavery and the separateness or difference in the woman's body, by way of a few more examples.

In my view, then, there is an accession to sociality and collectivity through the male militants' survey of the cartography of bond-slavery. Yet the first invocation of collectivity is in the women's voice, through the first of the few strange "poems" in the text that resemble somewhat the ritual choruses sung at folk festivals and ceremonies, but cannot be explained away as such. They are certainly not conventional to modern Bengali fictional narrative. They are beside the site of this narrative as well, where groups or an individual customarily speak or speaks with typicality.

Thus, early in the story, it is the old *kamiya* women by the fire who provide the answer to the question: by what force does the boss turn human beings into slaves?

By force of loans, by force of loans.  
Two rupees ten rupees hundred rupees  
Ten seers of wheat five of rice.

At the end of seventy-four lines they conclude:

He has become the government [or lord, *sarkar*]  
And we have become *kamiyas*  
We will never be free.

The women and men are collectively connected by this regulative logic of loans. But, I am arguing that in this fiction, woman's body is apart, elsewhere. This is made visible by another couple of "poems."

The first "poem" gives us the sociologist, producing knowledge about *kamiyas* within his context of explanation. (*Shomajbigyani*—"social scientist"—is also built on *shomaj*.) The poem speaks the well-known fact that the so-called "green revolution" has operated the transformation of a rural economy into agri-capitalism and created a Kulak class.<sup>9</sup>

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9. The continuity between Empire and Nation can be seen in this sphere. Imperialism is regulating land—creating private property in land. See Ranajit

This poem comes from the position of the author analyzing the analysts, who wish to make a science out of structures that may be random. It is especially interesting to me that, whereas the old *kamiya* women speak the regulative cause of their condition with conviction, the author, parodying social scientific assignment of cause, first invokes “nothing” and then simply breaks off.<sup>10</sup> First the sentence about the experts: “The sociologists travel around Palamu and write in their files, every sonofabitch is becoming a *kamiya* because of weddings-funerals-religious ceremonies.” Then the corrective poem:

These savants want government support.  
 The government wants the Kulak’s support  
 Land-lender, this new agri-capitalist caste  
 This caste is created by the independent government of India  
 The government wants the support of the Kulak and the agri-  
 capitalist  
 Because of nothing, nothing, nothing  
 Bhilai-Bokaro-Jamshedpur— [again, places on the map]  
 And Kulak, agri-capitalist, the king-emperors  
 Want free labor, free land—  
 So they recruit *kamiya-seokia-haroaha*  
 One mustn’t know this, or write this, because—

When another authorial “poem,” a bit later in the text and using a similar peculiar narrative, speaks woman’s body, the narrative is not of the modes of production, land is not-yet-*and no-*

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Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 1981). For a mere sampling of the spectrum of debate around local rural self-government (Panchayati Raj), see Arun Ghosh, “The Panchayati Raj Bill,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 24, no. 26 (July 1, 1989) and Indira Hirway, “Panchayati Raj at Crossroads,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 24, no. 29 (July 22, 1989).

10. Judging from reactions to Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Larry Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 271–313; and to Spivak’s “Three Women’s Texts and A Critique of Imperialism,” in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 262–80, it seems necessary to say that such a breaking-off does not mean a bad mark for me. One might describe these break-offs as the opposite kind of *découpage* to the ones that “arise in the place where, between the movement of science—notably when it is concerned with random structures—and that of philosophy or the arts—literary or not—the limits cannot be actual and static or *solid* but rather only the effects of contextual *découpage*” (Derrida, “My Chances,” 27).

*longer-capital*, and the question is *not-yet-and-no-longer* “what is productive labor?” but “what is called work?”:

These are all Paramananda’s kamiyas  
 Douloti and Reoti and Somni  
 Farm work, digging soil, cutting wells is work  
 This one doesn’t do it, that one doesn’t do it—  
 The boss has turned them into land  
 The boss ploughs and ploughs their land and raises the crop  
 They are all Paramananda’s kamiya.

There is a break in the poem here. The next line is “They are all I don’t quite know whose *maat*.” *Maat* is one of the names for the bonded worker on Bono Nagesia’s researched reinscription of the map of the nation-state. In the case of the woman’s body defined and transformed into the field of labor, the author’s diagnostic voice, inscribing “them” into a collective sociality they already inhabit, apart, is vague:

They are all I don’t quite know whose *maat*.  
 Near the foot of the Himalayas in Jaunnar-Bauar  
 They don’t say kamiya, they are called *maat*—  
 Talsa and Bisla and Kamla  
 Kolta women are I don’t quite know whose *maat*  
 Only farm work and shoveling soil is work  
 This one doesn’t do it, that one doesn’t do it, the other one  
 doesn’t do it  
 The boss has made them land  
 He ploughs and ploughs their bodies’ land and raises a crop  
 They are all I don’t quite know whose *maat*.

Mahasweta’s fiction is impeccably researched. There is no “poetic license” here. But its rhetorical conduct shows me that it will not compete with “science.” I have spent so long in discussing woman’s logical connectedness and the separateness of woman’s body in that connectedness because these problems are still sometimes “scientifically” dismissed as feudal, not feminist. Some feminists have described the broad spectrum of women’s issues—from anorexia as resistance in the United States to the dowry system in

India—as subsumable under the feudal mode of production.<sup>11</sup> Such gestures are, I think, mistaken. The woman is fully implicated in the mode of production narrative and, at the same time, also distanced from it. To quote Kalpana Bardhan again:

In a stratified society, discrimination of wages and jobs/occupation by caste and sex is not a feudal remnant but perfectly consistent with the play of market forces. . . . If the wage-and-access differentials follow the lines of traditional privilege, then attention gets conveniently deflected from the adaptive dexterity of capitalist exploitation processes to the stubbornness of feudal values, when it is actually a symbiotic relationship between the two.<sup>12</sup>

I have suggested that Mahasweta displaces the woman's body even from the reversal logic of labor and capital. Kishanchand, a man who runs a house of prostitution on principles of Taylorism, says to one of the kamiya-whores: "Paramananda is boss, and this whorehouse is the factory. Rampiyari is Paramananda's overseer [in English] and you are all labor"; Jhalo, the most outspoken of the women's group, dismisses him by saying, "Again that nonsense!"

This part of my paper, then, has been an extended discussion of three points: (1) inscription of displaced space, (2) social investment of bonded labor, and (3) the woman's body as last instance, and elsewhere. I would like to go back now to the phrase I began with: "postcoloniality in the space of difference in decolonized terrain."

#### ***4. Parliamentary Democracy and Nationalism***

One of the gifts of the logic of decolonization is parliamentary democracy. Mahasweta treats with affectionate mockery the

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11. This is particularly true of the "Re-Thinking Marxism" group at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst, with whose general positions I am broadly in sympathy.

12. Bardhan, "Women, Work, Welfare and Status," 5.

kamiyas' peculiar misunderstanding of the voting booths and the census. Of the voting booth, she writes:

What sort of thing is this that each person is put into an empty pigeonhole? However much the election officer explains, shall I put the mark on the paper or on my hand? . . . The officer scolds him loudly. So Mohan Dusad says, now run away. No doubt there will be fighting. Everyone runs for their life. The representatives of the candidates run to catch the voters. The police run to help them. When the police run, then Mohan Dusad says, the government doesn't mean well. In such glory do the General Elections come to an end.

And of the census:

You'll write my age? Write, write, maybe ten, maybe twenty, eh? What, I have grandchildren, I can't have so few years? How old are people when they have grandchildren? Fifty, sixty? No, no, how can I be sixty? I have heard that our brave master is fifty? I am Ghasi by caste, and poor. How can I have more age than he? The master has more land, more money, everything more than me. How can he have less age? No sir, write ten or twenty. The 1961 Census took place in this way.

Where everything works by the ruthless and visible calculus of super-exploitation by caste-class domination, the logic of democracy is thoroughly counterintuitive, its rituals absurd. Yet here too, the line between those who run and those who give chase is kept intact.

Here, for example, is Latiya, on the occasion of the Sino-Indian war. Latiya is, among other things, a government contractor. He is also the first and sole owner and user of Douloti's body for as long as his taste for her lasts—serial monogamy pared down to its bare bones. He is noted for his physical prowess, of which an unbounded sexual appetite is an important part.

Latiya contributes a truck and gives a speech himself:

Calls out, give whatever you have into this shawl.  
 Why sir?  
 Isn't there a war on?  
 Where, I don't know.

You will never know, bastard motherfucker. China has come to contaminate India's truth.

Yes, yes? But where is China? Where again is India?

[Then the] Mye-lay or MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] says, this country is India.

No, no, Madhpura.

What! Contradicting the Mye-lay Sir?

Latiya jumps into the sea of people with his club in hand and the people run away in every direction.

Then Latiya comes again to Douloti's room.

Here, too, the women keep their distance.

Somni returned most troubled from the meeting.

No, no this is not a good circus. What's the fight?

Who knows? They're fighting some China.

Whose fight?

Someone called India, his. I didn't understand anything.

Rampiyari [the manageress of the whorehouse] said, did you see Latiya?

He is shouting the most.

Then it's the contractor's fight. Come, make some tea.

Similar to this, somewhat later in the story, is the tribal and outcaste political activists' debate: "What is to be done?" With them is the white missionary Father Bomfuller. These seriously committed men speak of the advisability of nonviolent intervention, of armed struggle, and of agitating for legislation. The conversation takes place in the whorehouse, after the group has taken statements from the women and after we have heard that Douloti, simply one example among the women, taken for three hundred rupees ostensibly to repay her father's original loan, has brought in 40,000 rupees for the boss in eight years and is still taking five to twenty clients a day. In this context, the advocate of nonviolent intervention is found to be caste-specific. The women in his caste never enter bonded prostitution. Bomfuller's careful survey, entitled "The Incidence of Bonded Labor," is filed away in New Delhi and consigned to oblivion. It is agreed that since government officers in these areas themselves keep bond-laborers and since the police will not offend the bosses and moneylenders to enforce the law, mere legislation is no use. Only the untouchable Prasad Mahato understands that the law can be effectively



claimed as justification for armed struggle. And only Bono Nagesia, with a strong affective tie to Douloti, understands the difference between the long haul and immediate action. “We will leave after hearing all this?” he asks twice, and then questions:

Who will light the fire Prasadji? There is no one to light the fire. If there was, would the kamiya society be so large in Palamu? There are people for passing laws, there are people to ride jeeps, but no one to light the fire. Can’t you see the kamiya society is growing?

And, as we have heard, “Douloti didn’t know this.”

The alternative to this is not simply electoral education. And the most appropriate critique of that position does indeed come from migrant resistance in the metropolis.<sup>13</sup>

Let us move to the women’s house, away from activist national debates, where Mahasweta meticulously charts a diversity of positions. First there is Rampiyari, who manages the house and is herself a former bonded prostitute. Bardhan’s statement can be used to analyze this character’s situation:

Female conservatism . . . is often explained in terms of ‘false consciousness’ (or cognitive dissonance, an euphemism for underdeveloped psyche). . . . However, female conservatism develops logically out of women’s strategies of influence and survival within patrilocal, patriarchal structures. They are . . . the product of resourceful behavior under extremely disadvantageous circumstances.<sup>14</sup>

For example, when her power is taken away from her by the man, she leaves, “promising to open another business.”

The other women are differentiated not only in terms of themselves but also in terms of their attitudes to their children. As Mahasweta writes, “Even under such circumstances, children are born.” Jhalo saves money. She says, “My husband is a kamiya, I am

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13. Since this piece was first written, the use of the rational abstractions of “democracy” as “alibis” has become so abundant that this point is either not worth making or has been disproved if placed against the rational abstractions of communism.

14. Bardhan, “Women, Work, Welfare and Status,” 12.

a kamiya, but I don't want my children to be kamiyas." Somni wants to put them in Father Bomfuller's mission, since she is not allowed to keep them with her.

The affective coding of mothering extends from sociobiology all the way to reproductive rights. Before the mobilization of the reproductive rights debate began in the West, demanding the full coding of the woman's body in constitutional abstractions, Simone de Beauvoir had suggested that, in the continuum of gestation, birthing, and child-rearing, the woman passes through and crosses over her inscription as an example of her species-body to the task of producing an intending subject.<sup>15</sup> Of gestation, Beauvoir remarks that, however much the woman might want a child, however much she may bestow an intentionality upon it, she cannot desire *this* child. Beauvoir suggests that the rearing of the child, once it is born, is a chosen commitment, not the essential fulfillment of a woman's being.

I defer here the necessary critique of Beauvoir's existentialist notion of commitment, in order to use her figuration of mothering as a site of passage.<sup>16</sup>

Among the women of this fiction, pregnancy as the result of copulation with clients allows the working out of the inscription of the female body in gestation to be economically rather than affectively coded. The obligation to abortion is deflected into that code, of maximum social need, and not written into the rational abstraction of individual rights. Children are not written into mother right. Somni scrupulously distinguishes between my man's or husband's children and Latiya's children. Yet these women are absolutely committed, in the best sense of *engagement*, to the future of their children where they "can never do more than create a situation that only the child . . . can exceed."<sup>17</sup>

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15. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1952), 541–88.

16. For a study of international feminist theory that stands the test of decolonization, it is useful to see which bits of metropolitan theory can retain their plausibility "outside." This is not ahistorical theorizing about universals "from above" but contact with a space so intimate that it is both random and inaccessible "below." (See Spivak, "French Feminism Revisited: Ethics and Politics," forthcoming in anthology, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan Scott).

17. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 583.

As is usual in Mahasweta's fictive texts, we are allowed an (impossible) step before the already coded value. (In "Breast-Giver," for example, we see cancer rather than the clitoral orgasm as the excess of the woman's body. There, too, the minute particulars of mothering are under scrutiny by way of foster-mothering as labor.<sup>18</sup>)

How do such gestures show up the fault lines in critiques that must assume a civil society to posit struggle and in the efforts to recode? Let us consider Teresa de Lauretis's recent powerful essay "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation."<sup>19</sup> One of the logical consequences of de Beauvoir's figuration of the mother is the possibility of reading gay parenthood as philosophically normative.<sup>20</sup> De Lauretis, implicitly presupposing a multicultural Euro-American agent for the political struggles of this century, proposes:

The discourses, demands, and counter-demands that inform lesbian identity and representation in the 1980s are more diverse and socially heterogeneous than those of the first half of the century. They include, most notably, the political concepts of oppression and agency developed in the struggles of social movements such as the women's movement, the gay liberation movement, and third world feminism, as well as an awareness of the importance of developing a theory of sexuality that takes into account the working of unconscious processes in the construction of female subjectivity. But, as I have tried to argue, the discourses, demands, and counter-demands that inform lesbian representation are still unwittingly caught in the paradox of socio-sexual (in)difference, often unable to think homosexuality and homophobia at once separately *and* together.<sup>21</sup>

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18. See Spivak, "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: Mahasweta Devi's 'Breast-Giver,'" in *In Other Worlds*, 241–68.

19. Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 2, (May 1988): 155–77.

20. This argument is developed in Spivak, "French Feminism Revisited." I also argue that, unlike Sartrean existentialism, which must presuppose man with a European history as agent, Beauvoir's figuration of the mother as existentialist is not race-specific.

21. Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference," 175–77.

“Douloti the Bountiful” shows us that it is possible to consider sociosexual (in)difference philosophically prior to the reversal of the established codes, before the bestowal of *affective* value on homo- or hommo- or yet heterosexuality. To think therefore that the story is an evolutionary lament stating that *their* problems are not yet accessible to *our* solutions and that they must simply come through into nationalism in order then to debate sexual preference is a mistake. On the other hand, this prior space, prior to the origin of coded sexual difference/preference, is *not* the neutrality of the Heideggerian *Geschlecht*.<sup>22</sup> This space is “unmotivated” according to the presuppositions of naturalized sexuality. (It reveals the lingering presence of such presuppositions even in our resolutely nonfoundationalist discourses.) Although unmotivated, this space bears the instituted trace of the entire history and spacing of imperialism.<sup>23</sup>

It is not inappropriate to consider here the question not only of lingering presuppositions of naturalized sexuality but of naturalized subject-agency. I am referring, of course, to the use of psychoanalysis in the study of colonialism and postcoloniality.

Frantz Fanon and O. Mannoni set the model for the diagnostic use of psychoanalytic types produced by colonialism. Both were practicing psychoanalysts. We must put their written work in the perspective of the limits set by Freud’s classic essay “Analysis Terminable and Interminable.”<sup>24</sup> By the logic of that essay, all psychoanalytic practice is founded in an originary limiting “mistake” about the presuppositions of psychoanalysis as a “science.” When we use psychoanalysis in the production of taxonomic descriptives in literary and cultural critique, the arena of practice, which persistently normalizes the presuppositions of psychoanalysis, becomes transparent. Put another way, the shifting dynamics of the ethical moment in psychoanalysis, which is lodged in the shuttling of transference and countertransference, is emp-

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22. See Jacques Derrida, “Geschlecht: différence sexuelle, différence ontologique,” in *Psyche: Invention de l’autre* (Paris: Galilee, 1987), 395–414.

23. This is an illegitimate thematization of Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 47.

24. Sigmund Freud, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” in vol. 23 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Writings*, trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 210–53.

tied out.<sup>25</sup> What, apart from intelligibility, is the ethico-political agenda of psychoanalysis as a collective taxonomic descriptive in cultural critique? Lacan's simple and playful admonition to Anika Lemaire comes to mind: "Each of my *écrits* is apparently no more than a memorial to the refusal of my discourse by the audience it included: an audience restricted to psychoanalysis."<sup>26</sup> The current work being done in France on the implications of negative transference should also be kept in mind. And, finally, the powerful suggestions made by Deleuze and Guattari should generate an auto-critique. Their suggestion, summarized, is that since capital decodes and deterritorializes the socius by releasing the abstract as such, capital-*ism* manages the crisis by way of the generalized psychoanalytic mode of production of affective value, which operates via a generalized system of affective equivalence, however spectacular in its complexity and discontinuity.<sup>27</sup>

By active contrast, the relationship between Marxist cultural critique and postimperialist practice is a thoroughly foregrounded theatre of contestation, not only in Western Marxism, but also in China, South and Southeast Asia, Central and South America, and central and eastern Europe. I have attempted to indicate how Mahasweta's representation of woman in difference is apart even from this negotiation. I will now quote an example of how she makes visible a certain critique of a marxian axiom against romanticizing "the rural commune." This will take me back to the idea of mothering as commitment among the bonded-labor prostitutes.

Douloti is the only member of the group of bonded-labor prostitutes who does not share in this commitment. She has only been a child, not a mother. Her relationship to her mother, who is

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25. On the other hand, if we see this move toward literature and culture precisely as marking a substitute-wish for "the dramatic character that one has so often wished to have lie down on the couch," we can say "literature [or culture] perhaps need not resist this clinic" (Derrida, "My Chances," 28). To this wish the nationalist backlash to expatriates writing about postcoloniality is an unacknowledged accomplice rather than an adversary.

26. Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Macey (London: Routledge, 1977), vii.

27. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

still in the village, is filled with affect. In terms of the critical implications of our argument, it has to be admitted that this affective production, fully sympathetic, is yet represented *within* rather than prior to an accepted code. Here are mother and daughter when Douloti is about to leave with her powerful abductor by way of a fake proposal of marriage:

Douloti and her mother were two stones clasping each other. The mother was running her hand gently and constantly over her daughter's body. A split broken hand. Running her fingers she was weeping and humming, what is this, my mother, I never heard such a thing? The Boss-moneylender always takes away our daughters-in-law from field and barn. When does a Brahman marry a daughter of ours?

Douloti, like the unresisting majority of the male outcasts, comes to terms with her existence by accepting bond-slavery as a law of nature. Mahasweta does not represent Douloti as an intending subject of resistance. Her ego splits at her first rape and stays split until nearly the end. We will see at the end that Douloti is not represented as the intending subject of victimization either. The coding of intention into resistance and the resisting acceptance of victimization animates the male militants and the fierce bonded prostitutes, for whom there is no opportunity for collective resistance.

Let us follow the buildup of Douloti as "character" through to the end. Like the affection between mother and daughter, Douloti's affect for her village, again gently and beautifully written, is *within* a recognizable coding of sentiment. And indeed, as we see in the following passage, this unresisting nostalgia, dismissing planned resistance as futile, seems to rely on a conservative coding of the sexual division of labor.

Bono has come with the white missionary and other militants to take depositions from the bonded-labor prostitutes. Here is Douloti's silent communion with him:

Douloti sat by Bono and started rubbing his feet with great sympathy. . . . Douloti's fingers said, why grieve Uncle Bono? . . . Why don't you rather speak to me silently just as I am speaking to you in silence? Let the gentlemen twitter this

way. Those words of yours will be much more precious. Remember that banyan tree. . . . Speak of it. When winter came . . . mother would put the little balls of flour into the fire. How sweet the smell of warm flour seemed to me. . . . Then I didn't know Bono Uncle that the world . . . held Baijnath, that it had so many clients. I lost those days long ago. I get all of it back when I see you.

Faithful to this characterological style, Douloti is here a catalyst to the passion of male militancy. It is at the end of *this* movement that Bono is made to burst out: "There are people for passing laws, there are people to ride jeeps, but no one to light the fire. Can't you see the kamiya society is growing?"

Douloti's affect for her home is thus staged carefully by Mahasweta as the regressive bonding that works against social change and ultimately, against the achievement of national social justice, a project in which the author is deeply involved as an activist. Mahasweta dismisses neither side, but presents Douloti's affect and, ultimately, Douloti herself, as the site of a real aporia. You cannot give assent to both on the same register. I am also arguing that, in terms of the general rhetorical conduct of the story, you also cannot give assent, in the same register, to the evocation of a space prior to value-coding, on the one hand, and the sympathetic representation of Douloti as a character, recognizable within a rather banal value-coding, on the other.

(An aporia is *not* a statement of preference, certainly not a dismissal. One genuinely cannot decide between the two determinants of an aporia. It is the undecidable in the face of which decisions must be risked.)

Mahasweta sublates both the coded nostalgia and the separate space of Douloti at the end of her story. The movement of sublation or *Aufhebung*, destroying the nostalgia and the space of displacement as well as preserving it, transformed, starts working through a lyrical celebration of the nostalgic affect. With a body broken by absolute exploitation, Douloti is stumbling home at night. "The smell of catkins by the wayside, around the necks of cattle the homecoming bells are chiming. Gradually the fireflies flew in the dark, the stars came out in the sky! People had lit a fire, the smoke was rising."

Marx wrote that Hegelian *Aufhebung* was a graph of the denegation of political economy.<sup>28</sup> Derrida has suggested the undoing of the *Aufhebung* by setting wild the seedbed of the *seminarium* through acknowledging the Saturnalia—progressive parricide—of Absolute Knowledge.<sup>29</sup> In “Douloti the Bountiful” the *Aufhebung* of colony into nation is undone by the figuration of the woman’s body before the affective coding of sexuality. This can be seen as follows: the rural schoolmaster, again sympathetically portrayed, tries to teach his students nationalism by inscribing a large map of India in the clay courtyard of the school, in preparation for Independence Day. Douloti finds the clean clay comforting in the dark and lies down to die there. In the morning the schoolmaster and his students discover Douloti on the map.

As she reinscribes this official map of the nation by the zoograph of the unaccommodated female body restored to the economy of nature, Mahasweta’s prose, in a signature gesture, rises to the sweeping elegance of high Sanskritic Bengali. This is in sharpest possible contrast to the dynamic hybrid medium of the rest of the narrative, country Hindi mixed in with paratactic reportorial prose. Echoes of the Indian national anthem can also be heard in this high prose. Contemporary Bengali, although descended from Sanskrit, has in its historical elaborations by and large lost the quantitative measure of the classical parent language. In this sentence, however, the manipulation of the length of the vowels is to be felt. Mahasweta’s sentence is scandalous in the planned clash between content and form. Not the least of the scandal lies in the fact that most of these words are, of course, so-called Indo-European cognates: “Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labor spreadeagled, kamiya-whore Douloti Nagesia’s tormented corpse, putrified with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in her desiccated lungs.”

The space *displaced* from the Empire-Nation negotiation now comes to inhabit and appropriate the national map, and makes

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28. Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 324.

29. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. Richard Rand and John Leavy (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 236 ff.



the agenda of nationalism impossible: “Today, on the fifteenth of August [Indian Independence Day], Douloti [not as intending subject but as figured body] has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan [the schoolmaster] for planting the standard of the Independence Flag.”

The story ends with two short sentences: a rhetorical question, and a statement that is not an answer: “What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India.”

In his book *Through Our Own Eyes: Popular Art and Modern History*, Guy Brett has described a kind of art

that cross[es] over between . . . [the] silence . . . [for which] Paulo Freire invented the term “the culture of silence” to describe the condition in which the impoverished majority of the world’s people are living—powerless, and with little access to the means of communication. . . . there is also [Brett continues] the silence and ignorance in which the affluent minority of the world is kept.<sup>30</sup>

In these last appropriative moments, I believe we are witnessing such a crossover. “Paradoxically,” Brett says further, “the more intensely these images express a local reality and a local experience, the more global they seem to become.”<sup>31</sup> And indeed the last sentence of the story pushes us from the local through the national to the neocolonial globe.

The word *doulot* means wealth. Thus *douloti* can be made to mean “traffic in wealth.” Under the last sentence—“Douloti is all over India” [*Bharat jora hoye Douloti*—one can hear that other sentence: *Jagat* [the globe] *jora hoye Douloti*. What will Mohan do now?—the traffic in wealth [douloti] is all over the globe.

I end, somewhat abruptly, with a text for discussion: Such a globalization of *douloti*, dissolving even the proper name, is not an overcoming of the gendered body. The persistent agendas of nationalisms and sexuality are encrypted there in the indifference of superexploitation.

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30. Guy Brett, *Through Our Own Eyes: Popular Art and Modern History* (London: GMP Publishers, 1986), 7–8.

31. *Ibid.*, 8.