

Figuring Resistance: Abject Temporality & Subaltern Agency in Mahasweta Devi's Short Fiction

Délice Williams

To cite this article: Délice Williams (2016) Figuring Resistance: Abject Temporality & Subaltern Agency in Mahasweta Devi's Short Fiction, *South Asian Review*, 37:2, 9-27, DOI: [10.1080/02759527.2016.11933059](https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2016.11933059)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2016.11933059>



Published online: 08 Dec 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Figuring Resistance: Abject Temporality & Subaltern Agency in Mahasweta Devi's Short Fiction

Délice Williams

University of Delaware

This essay focuses on one writer's treatment of India's disclaimed bodies, those of populations that are too often excluded from the communal imaginary in order to sustain a particular construction of the nation as modern space. Indian tribals arguably constitute one such group, as they have often been treated and constructed by official national discourses as impediments to progress, recalcitrant elements of backwardness that resist incorporation into the modernizing national body.¹ My discussion focuses on representations of tribals in the work of non-tribal writer Mahasweta Devi, whose literary reputation rests largely on her production of politically engaged documentary fiction that is deeply embedded in the material conditions of tribal peoples and India's rural poor.

Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection is central to my reading of Devi's work. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva advances a theory of subject formation in which a disavowed "founding repudiation" of the maternal body is the basis of the social self. Judith Butler extends Kristeva's schema to the realm of the social, arguing that the collective self is formed by a similar expulsion of and revulsion toward abject beings who inhabit the space of radical difference. Kristeva and Butler emphasize what I read as a crucial connection between the individual body and the larger social one, a connection that is central to my analysis of Mahasweta's fiction. In addition, my use of Kristeva and Butler is informed by the conviction, articulated by Radha Chakravarty, that "the relationship of theory and creative writing

ought to be transactional" (12). Chakravarty explains that "if theory helps us understand literary texts, those texts in turn can sometimes suggest fresh critical concepts that may enrich the space of theory" (11-12). In reading Devi "through Kristeva" (Noelle McAfee's phrase), I endeavor to draw out some of the ways that Devi's work brings about that kind of theoretical enrichment (McAfee 117).²

Specifically, I suggest the ways in which Devi's depictions of the abject tribal body serve to revise Gayatri Spivak's familiar problematic of the silent subaltern by dramatizing effective subaltern speech through what one may well call "the semiotic body": the body as vehicle of intentional communication (of protest and resistance) directed toward the powerful "mainstream" forces. In Devi's rendering, the subaltern both speaks and can be heard by her addressee when the body is her organ of communication. Moreover, I maintain that Devi strikes an important balance here, pulling back from full-throated claim that she as a "mainstream" writer can simply ventriloquize the subaltern. Rather, I contend that through her depictions of bodies that speak but yet refrain from full disclosure of subjective experience, Devi retains an element of the undiscoverable within the subaltern subject. And the element that remains cloaked within the body/text signals the limits of Devi's own ability to speak fully for her subjects, and in doing so it serves to indicate the existence of an autonomous realm of possibility from which the agency of the subaltern might emerge.

A reading of Devi's representations of tribal figures is necessarily constrained by the awareness of the multiple mediating layers that surround her texts. As a writer who is far less well known in the western academy than the woman who translates most of her work (Spivak), and as a writer who claims to represent and speak for populations that are mostly non-literate, Devi produces work that explicitly and unavoidably raises questions about voice, perspective, and translation. Indeed, a good deal of the critical literature on Devi published in English attends to Spivak's interpretations of her texts, interpretations that tend to emphasize Devi's representation of alterity, and the incommensurability between Devi's subjects and their English-speaking, Westernized, academic audience—Spivak's audience, in fact. My reading of these texts attends and gives more weight to Devi's own declarations about the thematic and political priorities of her fiction. As I note above, instead of the alterity and violent silencing of her subjects within official government or academic discourse, I emphasize Devi's efforts to use her fiction to intervene on behalf of tribals by transforming the image of them in the Indian public imagination, and by asserting that they can and do behave as agents who resist their own marginalization within the Indian imagined community: contra Spivak,

I believe that Devi's fiction moves the subaltern beyond silence and incommensurable difference. My analysis examines Devi's depiction and deployment of the abject body in three of her works of short fiction, and I explore the ways in which those depictions speak to and against the marginalization of tribal communities, marginalization which, as we will see, involves the violence of temporal dislocation.

Framing the Problem: "Pterodactyl" and Devi's Myth for Modern Times

Published in Bengali in 1991 and in Gayatri Spivak's English translation in 1993, "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, & Pirtha" is, according to Mahasweta Devi, a parable that captures the essence of the world and predicament of India's tribal peoples. "If read carefully," Devi claims, " 'Pterodactyl' will communicate the agony of the tribals" (*Imaginary Maps* xxi). "Pterodactyl" deals with the irruption of an abject animal body into the space of rural tribal modernity. Inexplicably, an ailing prehistoric creature with a broken wing appears in a tribal forest during a drought. The creature at the center of the tale operates as both a disturbing sign and a sign of a disturbance in the lives of the Pirtha tribals. This quality aligns the creature with the abject in the sense articulated by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*. Not only is the creature utterly helpless, inhabiting a weak, vulnerable, "trembling" body (and thus abject in the more common use of the term), but it also, like Kristeva's abject matter, disrupts categories. One of those categories is most certainly temporal: The pterodactyl's anachronistic presence as a Jurassic-age life form in 20th-century India signals the breach of boundaries between temporal zones, and challenges the certainty of knowledge systems that assign the creature to the prehistoric time and to extinction. Furthermore, the creature seems to look backward and forward in time as an ancestral spirit from the past that also foreshadows death for the starving tribal community in the not-too-distant future. Two species of temporal rupture converge in the figure of the creature: the invasion of the present by the past, and the haunting of the present by the future. This disruption recalls Jacques Derrida's revenant specter, the ghostly presence whose appearance is the sign that "the times are out of joint," and whose presence also recalls those absentee figures who must be reckoned with if justice is to prevail (Derrida xviii).² In this case, the spectral entity of the pterodactyl appears as a representation of tribal people whose "absence" it figures forth: the tribals are in a sense politically and economically dead, erased from the India's national agenda despite being part of the nation's history. Devi introduces this spectral being to signal her call to end the injustice of that erasure. Derrida's description

of the temporality of the specter underscores the disruptive quality of this call as well:

There are several times of the specter. It is a proper characteristic of the specter...that no one can be sure if by returning it testifies to a living past or to a living future, for the revenant may already mark the promised return of the specter of living being. Once again, untimeliness and disadjustment of the contemporary. (123)

Building on Derrida's notion, I submit that Devi therefore calls for tribal justice by inventing a figure of the spectral abject, a mortally wounded bodily presence that irrupts into the present to foreground an unjust erasure and to foreshadow the deadly consequences if such erasure continues to be ignored.

The temporal disturbance signified by the pterodactyl also evokes the distorted temporality that Devi claims characterizes the tribal's existence. She has long contended that tribals in India are prevented from inhabiting a truly modern present. In her nonfiction writings, she repeatedly describes the time of the tribals as "feudal" and "medieval," for in her view, the tribals "are suffering spectators of the India that is traveling toward the twenty-first century" (*Maps* xi, 117). "The Adivasis live in the land of that primordial dusk," her narrator in "Pterodactyl" states at one point; "In some remote day they were invaded and they crawled into the earth's womb for safety, never to emerge" (109). In another discussion, Devi herself points out that even as industrial mining projects and big dams-- symbols of India's modernizing drive-- continue to be built, they often rely on systems like bonded labor in which the tribals find themselves ensnared (*Maps* xi, xii). This *de facto* slavery combines with the physical displacement and ecological ruin caused by those same industrial projects, which endanger the lives and cultures of millions of tribal people. In her view, tribal suffering results in part from being intentionally marooned in a pre-modern time.

Besides signifying this dual displacement by government, industry, and international capital, the creature's anachronistic presence in "Pterodactyl" also marks its alterity in the historical and social setting of the narrative. A more obvious marker of that difference is its non-human morphology, which remains somewhat mysterious, despite the story's title. Whether or not it is a pterodactyl, the creature clearly embodies an enigmatic difference that underscores the distance between mainstream and tribal India. That distance seems to be at the core of the problems that India's tribal peoples face, according to Devi. She suggests that the kind of alterity embodied in the pterodactyl is not ontological, but rather willed by mainstream culture: "We did not know [them]," she observes that "it was like a continent....Each tribe is

like a continent, but we never tried to know them" (*Maps*, xxi). Devi's argument here recalls Spivak's concern with the conditions of (im)possibility of subaltern speech. But while Spivak emphasizes the power of the colonizing European subject to render the subaltern mute, in Devi's formulation of the problem, it is the mainstream postcolonial Indian subject—middle and upper class, Aryan, urbanized—operating in a neo-colonial setting, that silences the Adivasi.

The prehistoric animal body remains a barrier and enclosure that prevents communication between subjects and worlds in "Pterodactyl." Devi suggests the deadly potential of this ignorance by conflating failed communication with the creature's death:

Puran, a modern man, could not read the message in its eyes. Nothing could be known, can be known... Seeing that Puran had understood nothing, its eyes were closed since yesterday. The body seemed slowly to sink down, a body crumbling on its four feet, the head on the floor, in front of their eyes the body suddenly begins to tremble steadily. It trembles and trembles, and suddenly the wings open, and they go back in repose, this pain is intolerable to the eye.... About an hour later Puran says, "Gone." (180)

In Devi's mythical creature, the cumulative effect of these temporal and spatial displacements is manifested. Connecting the pterodactyl's ailing condition to its presence in the wrong place and time, and inviting us to read the creature as an emblem of the larger tribal collective, Devi articulates an important dimension of her critique of the modern Indian as it is often construed by official and dominant discourses of progress. Via the abject subaltern body, and in rather stark terms, she links physical death to the alienation from ancestral space and to the subjugation to oppressive economic systems. The pterodactyl thus becomes the central figure in her indictment of the social, economic, and environmental practices that have placed so many tribal people in conditions that are indeed life-threatening.

Abjection & "kamiya time" in "Douloti the Bountiful"

"Douloti the Bountiful" moves away from the mythical abject form of the pterodactyl, instead directing our attention to the suffering human bodies of the tribals themselves. The title character is a 14-year-old tribal girl, sold into sex slavery by the owner of the land her family works. The sale is a double pretense: the landowner deceives Douloti's father by telling him that a wealthy Brahman, taking pity on the family, has both paid off the family's debt and agreed to marry Douloti to give her a better life. The arrangement ostensibly delivers the family from bondage and opens up new possibilities for Douloti

herself. In an economy of desire that is dominated by men, the sexed female body in the narrative becomes a commodity, its value determined by the vicissitudes of a male drive for pleasure that is as violent as it is voracious. Devi's narrative examines the cost of inhabiting a commodified body for the woman herself, who is all but deprived of agency in this scenario. One measure of that cost is the body's experience of time. Returning to the idea that tribals are caught in a destructive temporal condition, Devi figures Douloti's suffering and that of the other 'kamiya whores' in the brothel in terms of temporal disturbance. Whereas anachronism was the mode of such distortion in "Pterodactyl," in "Douloti," Devi renders tribal suffering in terms of temporal disorientation and eventually acceleration. The kamiya system, while disrupting the connection between consciousness and the time of the body, speeds up time as it is marked on and by the body, propelling the tribal woman toward death, via intense physical suffering.

As a "kamiya-whore," Douloti is brought to sexual awareness through the trauma of being drugged and thrown into a room to meet Latiaji, the customer whom she had supposed would be her husband. The horrific encounter disorients her, estranging her temporarily from her own body:

Douloti, Douloti the daughter of Ganori seemed to look on another Douloti, dressed up in a peacock-blue silk-cotton wedding sari, staring in such dread. Latia pulled off her sari, he has torn off her blouse. He has taken off his own top, is he going to be naked? Lips trembling, tears in her eyes, what is Douloti saying?
(58)

In the passage describing this encounter, Devi repeats Douloti's name and invokes Douloti's father, as if to indicate the need to reiterate that Douloti is the same person that the narrative has followed up to this point. The move underscores the idea that this is a disorienting moment in which identity has been thrown into question and must therefore be consciously recovered. In addition to repeating Douloti's name and that of her father and village, Devi conveys the trauma of this moment with verb tense shifts, from the simple past (seemed to look), to the present imperfect (has torn, has taken off), to the present progressive (what is Douloti saying?). With these shifts, the immediate dramatic present becomes un-moored from a stable temporal location as we move from the *then* of the 3rd person narrator of the story to the horrific *now* of the rape. This temporal disruption in the narrative mirrors and underscores the psychic disruption that Douloti suffers at this moment.

The alienation from time and body that Douloti experiences in that violent introduction to the realities of her status as a sex slave is symptomatic of the larger dynamic of temporal dislocation that

characterizes the lives of tribal women. Circulating as they do in an economy of predatory desire, Douloti and the other women are subject to repeated sexual assaults, beatings, hunger, forced abortions, and venereal disease. All of these forces cause the girls to age prematurely. Douloti herself is discarded when "one morning Latiaji started screaming. 'Rampiyari! Hey Rampiyari! Call Mishir. Ask him to show me a new harijan girl. I am not having fun in Douloti anymore. These goods are threadbare now'" (77). Douloti is about 20 years old. Their accelerated aging ("Douloti starts drying up fast") correlates with the intensity of the violence that a new owner of the brothel deliberately inflicts on the women in the name of profit, and out of his own desire to outdo his father (83). The conversion of these women's bodies into consumable goods results in this rapid movement of the commodified body through time, underscoring the fact that, for the kamiya-whores, economic exploitation manifests itself in a disorienting and debilitating temporal experience.

As a commodity subject to repeated acts of violation, Douloti's body is placed on a short and direct path to a premature death from tuberculosis and venereal disease. Her life is reduced to the truncated life-cycle of non-durable goods; natural aging, the temporal mode usually associated with the body, is replaced by an accelerated depreciation brought on by the repeated consumption of her body. The doctor who sees her a few days before her death is shocked to find out her age: "Twenty-seven? Just twenty-seven?" (92). By the end of the story, Douloti is reduced to a "tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease," with a "skeletal" face disfigured by red lesions (92).

Douloti's body stands in contrast to that of her father, Ganori. These gendered corpses mark time in different ways that underscore the different kinds of violence that they each suffer. In a very real sense, Ganori is frozen in time and space because he will always owe more money to the landowner, and he cannot leave because his accounts will never be settled. His body reflects the static dimension of the kamiya condition: his twisted spine, the result of his being forced to pull a plow after the steer had been killed, is a permanent injury that marks him as an arrested figure, unable to escape poverty or change his conditions for the better. The incident that caused his injury effectively inscribes his destiny on his person: Just as his spine will not return to its original position, he will never escape the servitude that forced him to have to pull the plow in the first place. The injury even earns him a new name: "Crook" Nagesia, a reference to his deformed shape. This new name emphasizes the fact that he is trapped in his social position because the name links that position to his identity. The hopeless permanence of that entrapment is voiced by the story's

unnamed narrator, who declares: "It's fate's decree to become a kamiya" (22). For Ganori and most of the other kamiyas, the system of bonded labor has the inevitability and force of a cosmic law. The two figures of temporal disruption—Douloti's accelerated aging and decline, her father's static figure unable to alter his position or status, offer two different but clearly related signs of violent temporal disturbance brought on by different forms of enslavement.

As her body succumbs to the daily attacks, Douloti, like other kamiyas and her father, remains alienated from other temporal modes that would make change and escape thinkable for herself and her fellow kamiyas. She shares her father's sense of the kamiya system as an eternal present sealed off from change by immutable cosmic laws. She also accepts the idea of mounting interest on the family loans as an economic justification for the perpetual deferral of an end to bondage. The "laws" that ordained the kamiya system for sex workers and agricultural laborers alike, and the usury that defers repayment indefinitely, combine to create a fatalistic time that forecloses other life possibilities. Douloti resigns herself to the logic of this supposedly inevitable time. For father, daughter, and most of the other tribal kamiyas, the passage of time never brings progress; it merely reiterates the laws that govern the present. His frozen body and her rapidly aging one encode the same message about their entrapment in a devastating temporal loop. Together, these two bodies signify the kamiya's fatalistic cosmos of inevitable and repeated violence that reiterates the narrative of bondage.

We never learn what happens to Douloti's father and the rest of her family, but the governing logic of the tale suggests that their stories will continue in that eternal present with its crushing spiral of debt and physical suffering. The acceptance of the inevitability of that cycle makes it impossible for the kamiyas to envision themselves as subjects free to act in ways that are not predicted and circumscribed by the slave economy. Put another way, the physical trauma they suffer and anticipate makes imagining such possibilities all the more difficult. Thus, the abject kamiya body not only encodes time, but its suffering functions as a constant reminder of the potential costs of trying to flee into a different timescape in which tribals can become agents and make their own futures. Most kamiyas in the text live and die with only a dim awareness of an alternative and potentially liberating timescape: the "empty time" of modernity, a time ungoverned by immutable laws, a time in which change is possible. This limited awareness is especially terrible because the narrative already includes characters, some of them kamiyas, who see and strive for a life outside of bond slavery. The larger critical and imaginative perspective needed to counteract kamiya

fatalism is available, although still not wide-spread in the kamiya community.

The final scene of "Douloti the Bountiful" offers a stark and powerful image of the costs of this configuration of social, political, and economic forces. In that scene, a delirious and disease-ridden Douloti, turned out by the brothel owners, abandoned by a priest and other activists who claim to want to change the condition of kamiyas and kamiya whores, tries to crawl her way back to family and her village. Too weak to do so, she collapses at a nearby school and dies, falling on a map of India that has been drawn on the ground to celebrate the country's independence. While the depiction of Douloti's corpse on the map relies on a spatial dynamic for its central message (Douloti being "all over India" suggests the pervasiveness of the problem she represents), I read the image in terms of its temporality: specifically, I interpret it as an ironic indicator of the distance between the nation's claims to bring fruits of freedom to all its subjects, and the stark reality that so many of its subjects live in bondage. That is to say, Douloti's corpse represents the termination of time—Douloti's life is over—but it falls over the map on the anniversary of Independence, a day that both recalls a glorious moment of liberation and contains within it a proleptic impulse, a sense that such days will be celebrated annually into an unending future. Her final moments occur precisely on the day that the nation celebrates its beginnings and anticipates an immortal future. The abject body thus comes to represent a disruption of nation-time and a refusal of the narrative of inevitable progress that accompanies it. In place of that narrative of inevitable and unstoppable progress into a glorious future, Devi posits kamiya time, a mode of depreciation, degradation, and destruction that effectively cuts off many tribal people from the promise of the modern nation. Douloti's diseased corpse is the detritus of an economy in which tribal women's bodies are consumable goods, an economy that creates distortions of temporal experience and literally shortens the lives of those who function in it, not as producers or consumers, but as goods.

"Douloti the Bountiful," therefore, dramatizes the struggle to inhabit modernity, and Devi represents that struggle as a struggle to re-imagine time. The suffering abject body in the text offers us an image of the difficulty of such re-imagining, even as it reminds us of the tremendous human cost of being trapped, effectively, in another time. Devi's narrative does not succumb to the fatalism of Douloti and her father, for whom this much-needed conceptual shift is impossible. Rather, the ending serves as a warning to the would-be modernizers that, in refusing to usher in modernity through direct and immediate action on behalf of oppressed tribals and rural poor, remain complicit in

the violence that costs real people their lives. Modernization-as-liberation, Devi implies here, is the result of action springing from a convergence of imagination and (political) will. This claim has far-reaching implications, just as Douloti is “all over India” when her corpse falls on the map in the final scene of the narrative. Devi leads us to understand Douloti’s problem as India’s problem, and Devi implies that the Indian tricolor cannot be hoisted—India cannot lay claim to itself as a modern and modernizing space—while stories and people like Douloti continue to be excluded from the nation-state’s putative project of liberating its people from oppressive systems. The body on the map yokes together the fate of the kamiyas and the fate of the nation-state that would erase them from its narrative.

Figuring Resistance

For all her claims that “Douloti is all over India,” and that “Pterodactyl” captures the story of tribal people, however, Devi leaves out of those narratives one theme that appears prominently elsewhere in her fiction: the possibility of subaltern resistance. Unlike “Douloti” and “Pterodactyl,” several of Devi’s texts feature tribal figures who resist their own subjugation by retaliating, sometimes violently. Thus, while “Pterodactyl” may go a long way toward outlining her perspective on the nature and source of tribal oppression, and while “Douloti” offers a horrific account of pervasive tribal suffering, elsewhere in her fiction Devi explores in greater depth the responses of tribal people to their conditions. As in “Douloti” and “Pterodactyl,” the Kristevan abject appears in these other texts as the human body wounded, battered, shriveled, lifeless, and otherwise deformed by violence. But this violence is not the final word about the figures. For example, in the short story “Little Ones,” which I discuss in detail in the final section of this piece, Devi mobilizes the abject body not only as an emblem of violence suffered, but also, and more importantly, as a medium through which tribal figures assert themselves as subjects, agents, and formidable opponents of “mainstream” forces of oppression. These portraits of tribals as insurgents include images of the disfigured tribal body and also involve a return to Devi’s motifs of alterity and temporal disruption.

“Little Ones” focuses on the confrontation between “mainstream” Indian subjects (in this case government officials) and abject tribal others living in an isolated, ecologically damaged community. The narrative follows an “honest and sympathetic” government relief officer dispatched to distribute food and medicine in the drought-stricken village of Lohri (Devi 1). The unnamed officer has been told that Lohri is “cursed,” “a damned terrible place” where “even the stars in the sky don’t sparkle” (1, 8). Lohri was historically inhabited by the

Aagariaya people who were “iron miners” and blacksmiths by caste, but now “their hereditary caste trade, working with iron, is no longer theirs,” so “the inhabitants have no honest way of living” (3,5, 4). Instead, they must depend on government handouts for survival. The officer also hears rumors from other officials that the village is haunted by demon thieves who steal supplies every time relief arrives at the village. The thieves are described as a band of cackling “superhuman” but diminutive beings who operate in the dark and disappear into the forests, evading capture by the armed, but still fearful, soldiers and police.

As in “Pterodactyl,” mythical elements in the narrative lend a disturbing spectral quality to the figure of the tribal and associate that figure with non-modern temporality. Indeed, the village of Lohri and its history have become shrouded in a myth that Devi proceeds to debunk as she details the harshness of the living conditions in the area. She reveals the Lohri “curse” to be an invention that meets the need for an explanation of the blight that afflicts the village and its inhabitants. The scarred, dry, barren terrain and the starvation of the people call for an account that the idea of the curse supplies. The idea of the curse thus functions as a discursive means of bearing witness to a history of violence that has inscribed itself on the land. However, the notion of a curse conceals that violence in a narrative that blames suffering on the Aagariya people, whose King Logundih, according to village myth, displays hubris by warring against a sun god who punishes him by burning him in flames (4). The king’s son Jwalamukhi attempts another battle with the sun god, “and the fever of their combat burnt the earth.” Jwalamukhi curses the sun god, and the god retaliates by telling him that “all the wealth [he earns] from iron will turn to ashes. From that time, the Aagariya have been poor” (5). The legend is supposedly the Aagariya’s, and it mystifies their current suffering by explaining it in terms that they accept: “they say they are impure” (5). Significantly, however, the Aagariya’s legend contains seeds of rebellion and rebirth: “Aagaiyasur, the demon of fire, doesn’t give them fire. But one day, their time will come” (5).

Radha Chakravarty’s observation about Devi’s story “Bayen” holds true for “Little Ones” as well: “Myth enlarges the scope of the narrative, linking its localized particularity to larger historical patterns and also [offering] a code for the reinterpretation of history” (Chakravarty 102). With its emphasis on guilt, however, that “reinterpretation” obscures the role of mainstream India in creating the conditions that distress tribal peoples in the narrative. Because the myth justifies suffering as the result of collective guilt, it impedes a critical examination of the material conditions, economic motivations,

and political rationale for government action against the unruly Aagariya. The mythical narrative thus masks the fact that the Aagariya are victims of a government effort to exploit the natural resources of their village.

The history that myth obscures is a history of a government at war with its people. As another soldier explains to the relief officer, the visible destruction of the terrain is the result of “a rebellion...fire...scorched everything.” He goes on to explain that “about twelve or fourteen years ago, the Bharat *sarkar* sent people to search for iron ore in Lohri. The villagers of Kubha were trouble-making Aagariyas. They said,—Our three demon gods live in that hillock. Don’t dig that up. Two Punjabi officers, a Madras geologist, why would they believe in these *junglee* tales of *asur deotas*? They blasted the hillock flat” (“Litte Ones” 5). We discover that one cause of the destruction is a violation of sacred tribal space in order to extract resources from the ground. That violation spawns a revolt by the tribals: “[Then] the Aagariyas of Kubha attacked and cut down everyone. Then they vanished into the jungle...they were totally lost. No one ever saw them again. One hundred to one hundred and fifty people”(5-6). Finally, we learn that the government punishes other tribal villages by imposing “punitive taxes on all other Aagariya villages” and by burning one village “to ashes” and sprinkling salt in the earth (6).

The history of violence that materializes even in the official account works to undermine the myth of the curse. Lohri appears from the mist and myth as a territory *contested*, not cursed—a place upon which the Aagariya have asserted themselves against a government that sees them as an obstacle to progress. In the context of this history of conflict between government and this group of tribals, we are obliged to re-read the “relief” goods and understand them not as symbols of official benevolence, but rather as tools for maintaining economic dependence, and as false signifiers of goodwill that distract from the recently revealed truth that tribals are ultimately expendable in government’s view. Moreover, that same government blames the tribals, whom they have displaced from sacred ground and from their occupation as ironworkers, for not taking well to farming. One officer complains that “those damned people” sell off land that they’ve been assigned, ensnare themselves to local moneylenders, and come to the government for seeds, supplies, and water (3). This too is another obfuscating myth that hides the fact that illiterate tribals are often forced to “sign” over their land to non-tribals and then forced in debt bondage by destitution.

Devi unearths these truths at the same time as she exposes the ways that they have been mystified by official myths and by the tribals’

own narrative of their demon ancestors at war with sun gods. Moreover, she implicitly acknowledges that the tribal's own myth of the origins of their suffering incorporates the government's assault on them into a misleading narrative that makes their own guilt the cause of their trouble. The economic and political realities behind the government actions remain invisible to them, while Devi as author renders those realities visible to her readers. Devi has said in interviews that part of the problem for tribal peoples is an ignorance of the "machinations" of government, and she reiterates that idea here. Such ignorance, of course, emphasizes the need for Devi and for her fiction, which fills in this gap in knowledge, seeking to inform potential tribal allies and tribals themselves about the ways that government works against the interests of a group of citizens that it claims it wants to protect.

The history of government violence against the Aagariya inscribes itself in Lohri, a territory which Devi invites us to read as a violated human form. The land looks "as if the earth here bears a fire of unbearable heat in her womb, so the trees are stunted, the breast of the river a dried-out cremation ground." Moreover, "The earth is a strange colour [sic]. Even in the land of red earth, such a deep brownish red is rarely seen. Of course, before fresh blood dries and congeals, it turns just such a dark, lifeless red" (1). Lohri, as physical space, comes to resemble a disfigured infertile body that finds a correlate in the inhabitants themselves. After remarking to himself about the "uninhabitable place," the relief officer's next thought is that "the sight of those who come for relief, the near-naked, shriveled, worm-ridden, swollen-bellied Adivasi men and women, repels him" (2). They also disillusion him, for "films, especially Hindi films," had given him "the impression that Adivasi men played the flute and Adivasi women danced with flowers on their hair, singing, as they pranced from hillock to hillock" (2). His ignorance again underscores Devi's argument that tribals have been rendered marginalized and virtually invisible within mainstream India. Devi therefore links the violated land to the violated tribal body and reiterates her contention that both have been mystified: one by government misinformation, the other by mainstream media.

The bodies of the villagers and the body of the land certainly have a rhetorical function in that they serve as visuals to reinforce the themes and motifs of the narrative. Such bodies underscore the social, economic, and cultural exclusion of the Adivasi villagers from the vision of a prosperous and modern India. Bodies also encode their own violent marginalization. However, in bearing witness to the punishment that the villagers receive for their rebellion, these bodies also bear witness to the tribal capacity for resistance. It is useful to

recall here that the Aagariya's own myth contains the promise that, after they have suffered, "their time will come."

Devi brings about that time at the end of the narrative when she redeploys the same kind of imagery of abject tribal embodiment, this time with an insurrectionary valence. The relief officer determines to confront the rumored demon-thieves who have been stealing supplies for the past fourteen years. "Those who do the stealing" indeed arrive again, and, at first, he thinks that they are "human children of human beings. Not ghosts" (13, 17). But as the beings surround him in a tight circle and advance toward him silently, the truth begins to reveal itself: "What's this? Why are they naked? Why is their hair so long? If they are young, young boys, adolescents, then why is their hair white? Why do the girls, the little girls, have empty, sagging breasts?" Eventually it dawns on him: "Not children, adults! No sound escapes the relief officer's lips. But the impact of realization explodes like Hiroshima-Nagasaki...His hands are stuck to his sides. His mind torn by a terrible force" (18). What he discovers is that these are the last of the original rebels, the ones who had disappeared into the forest. Malnutrition and deprivation have stunted their growth so that they look like children. The group of Aagariya then attack the officer, not with weapons, but by displaying their shriveled sex organs: "Men hold out their penises, women their breasts. The old man is now very close. His penis brushes the officer's skin. Front and back. Like a cast-off snake skin. Scratchy and unclean" (19).

Devi reads the scene for us: "In the wasteland burnt by Jwalamukhi's battle with the sun, the terrible glee of a few adult children. The glee of revenge realized. The glee of hacking off the enemy's head in revolt. Counter-violence, revenge. Against what? Against his 5-foot 9-inch being. Against the natural growth of his body" (20). All of Devi's argument is distilled into this climactic confrontation between abject tribal bodies and the healthy mainstream body. Significantly, the confrontation involves not an attack with a weapon, but rather an intrusive and earthshattering *proximity* that solidifies the connection between the officer's robust health and these people's deformation. The officer is forced to acknowledge that there is an undeniable relationship between the two, that the former is predicated on the latter, and that he carries about in his person his complicity in his society's violence against these groups. Devi's narrator states it for us in no uncertain terms: "the undernourished body and laughable height of the ordinary Indian male appear a heinous crime of civilization. [The officer] feels like a criminal condemned to death" (20). What Devi dramatizes in this moment is the anxiety-ridden crisis of the nation-subject. Norma Claire Moruzzi's statement that "abjection contradicts the self's (national or individual) claim to unity

and knowledge” (144) provides another insight into the nature and cause of the officer’s reaction. Elizabeth Grosz’s formulation about the function of abjection also sheds light on the element of sexual tension in the scene:

[T]he abject entices and attracts the subject ever closer to its edge. It is an insistence on the subject’s necessary relation to death, to animality, and to materiality, being the subject’s recognition and refusal of its corporeality. The abject demonstrates the impossibility of clear-cut borders, lines of demarcation, divisions between the clean and the unclean, the proper and the improper, order and disorder. (89)

In theorizing the abject, Kristeva emphasizes that abjection is about policing boundaries between clean and unclean, between self and other, allowing the subject to maintain a stable and coherent self-image. Devi stages the intrusive breach of those all-important boundaries by the insurgent tribal other. The realization that the abject is part of the self—that is what pushes the officer so far to the edge that “his only liberation lies in going mad, rending the atmosphere with the howl of a demented dog” (20). As a result, he finds himself paralyzed and speechless. The story ends as he stands frozen in the circle, and “tears stream from his eyes” (20). The assault on the officer is a clear violation of the “borders” that shield the subject from the kind of psychic breakdown that Grosz, following Kristeva, describes. As a sexual violation (how could we not read it as a species of rape?), the assault takes place in a social and psychological register that gives it tremendous significance.

“Little Ones” thus presents us with a vivid illustration of Kristeva’s notion that the abject is the disturbing irruption of a repressed element into the field of vision of the subject. Devi’s depiction of the interaction between the two groups alerts us to an important truth: the coherent vision of India as an orderly, modern, liberated space—a vision held by mainstream subjects—is predicated on the effacement of those whose interests and rights have been over-ridden by the nation-state’s construction of itself as a modern (predominantly Hindu) Aryan entity. The confrontation with the abject other in the narrative reveals this suppressed truth, leading to a destabilization of the mainstream subject, who can no longer maintain a coherent vision of itself in the face of such realities. Moreover, the disturbing confrontation between subject and abject other opens a space for the emergence of tribals as subjects who assert their own self-definition over and against the one imposed on them by the dominant construction of the nation-state. “Little Ones” thus figures tribal resistance as a forced confrontation between that subject and its abject tribal other, which resists

marginalization by producing a crisis in the individual mainstream subject. This crisis is precipitated by an encounter with the Kristevan abject that reveals and dramatizes the previously obscured intimacy between the two figures. In that confrontation, tribal abjection takes the form of the sexed body, vulnerable, threatening, and disruptive. As a figure for the insurrectionary tribal, such a body also intimates a sinister aspect to Devi's construction of insurgent subaltern subjectivity.

This act of vengeance by the "little ones" at the end of the narrative is a crime of enormity. The irony is that the assault takes the form of an exhibitionist display of sexual *inadequacy*. The Aagariya simply confront the officer with the physical evidence of the violence in which he has failed to see himself implicated. Their "assault" on him amounts to a forced recognition of themselves as victims. In figuring resistance as the imposition of the abject on the mainstream subject, Devi also reframes the problem of the tribal condition within India. Whereas in "Pterodactyl," as in much of her other prose, she has emphasized the separation or alienation of the tribal from the mainstream and has figured that alienation in "Pterodactyl" as both temporal dislocation and somatic difference encoding social distance, here she emphasizes the intimacy between the tribal abjection and the mainstream subjectivity. She points out, both to the officer who has the breakdown, and to the reader who witnesses it, the artificiality of the previously assumed social distance. Devi reveals that each body is bound up in the destiny of the other. The apparent contradiction here between Devi's focus on proximity in this narrative and her emphasis on alterity in "Pterodactyl" can be resolved if one recalls Devi's idea that tribal alterity is a phenomenon intentionally produced by a mainstream culture that is more interested in extracting resources from tribal territories than in ensuring that tribals are included in the imagined community. According to Devi, the exploitation of tribal lands and peoples in the interest of industrial modernization results in their being treated as outsiders and as obstacles to progress. By both using the body to assert the tribal claim to be part of the national corpus, and highlighting the contrast between flourishing mainstream bodies and stunted tribal ones (a contrast resulting from state violence and malign neglect), Devi forces us to see radical tribal difference as the result of discursive violence. The abject body thus proves to be a crucial term in the portrait of subaltern resistance that arises in these important works from Devi's substantial oeuvre. Representing that body allows her to bear witness to the history of violence against a marginalized group while simultaneously carving out spaces for the exercise of agency by a refashioned, though still obviously violated, subaltern subject.

In his study of abjection in Northern Irish poetry, Scott Brewster contends that “the abject body provokes a crisis of witnessing or, rather, it stages the act of witnessing in or amidst crisis.” He adds that such a body “marks a struggle between traumatized articulation and muteness, between the ethical responsibility to testify and an aversion to the exploitative, even pornographic, exposure to suffering and privation” (309). Brewster’s formulation is helpful in reading these moments in Devi’s text, for Devi stages the confrontation with the abject not only as a moment of psychic breakdown, but also as a moment of ethical crisis. At this moment in “Little Ones,” the officer comes under the weight of his own implication in systemic violence that requires both a realization and subsequent action in response. However, whereas Brewster’s notion of a “struggle” between possible responses to the abject body suggests room for future ethical action, Devi seems to foreclose such action by suggesting that the crisis provoked by the abject in the text is severe enough to paralyze thought and action in the mainstream subject. Emphasizing the trauma of the encounter may certainly be Devi’s way of assigning a greater degree of power to the tribal community represented by these figures, so the real ethical moment happens for Devi’s reader, who, having witnessed these bodies (albeit mediated through Devi’s text), must decide whether or not to offer her testimony to another audience.

The texts I discuss above speak to the intensity of one artist’s commitment to representing contemporary realities and to seeking out the means of liberation of mind and body for those consigned to the economic, social and political margins of modern India. Each of these works registers the tension between the need to acknowledge the very real violence of adverse material conditions and the equally strong imperative to envision and prepare for livable alternatives by imagining forms of agency. Mahasweta Devi’s work in these texts demonstrates that attending to the bodies that suffer violence can be enabling for both aspects of her overall project. Her treatment of the abject body also reminds us that, despite the real and serious violence that must be actively resisted, the positions from which agency can be exercised remain available.

Notes

1. Of course, there is also a rich tradition of idealizing tribal figures in film and fiction, as well as in official discourse. Such idealizations often feature familiar tropes about “uncivilized” indigenous peoples as innocent, free, and authentic. However, as I suggest in the rest of my discussion, these works by

Devi are responses to another discursive tendency, one that emphasizes tribal "backwardness" and alterity.

2. In her own study, *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers*, Chakravarty suggests that the women novelists whose work she examines offer a more expansive construction of the subjectivity: "Ideas of 'individual', 'subject,' 'identity' and 'self,' for instance, are largely premised on 'western' notions of individualism, but the writings of women novelists across the world often suggest alternative versions produced by varying cultural locations and discontinuous histories" (Chakravarty 12). Chakravarty also argues that "in textual constructions of female subjectivity, the 'western' valorization of reason is challenged, and the body is used as a figure for other ways of knowing....It also serves as trope with multiple significances, relating female subjectivities to a range of concepts." Although I do not share Chakravarty's conviction that the body in Devi's fiction is "a figure for other ways of knowing," I do agree that Devi employs the body to articulate her vision of various aspects of tribal subjectivity.

3. Radha Chakravarty and Gayatri Spivak also link tribals with another kind of disruption as well. Chakravarty argues that because tribals "are seen to inhabit a space outside the conventional evocations of 'unity in diversity' usually summoned to describe contemporary India," their position "disrupts the opposition of 'empire' and 'nation on which much postcolonial theory is based" (190). She adds that this fact, in turn, "points to the existence of cultural spaces that cannot be contained by the rhetoric of a simple reversal in which 'empire' is replaced by 'nation' at a moment in history defined as 'independence'" (190). Spivak advocates a similar position in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. There she states that "Mahasweta Devi lingers in post-coloniality and even there in the space of difference *on decolonized terrain* in the space of difference" (Spivak 77).

Works Cited

- Brewster, Scott. "Rites of Defilement: Abjection and the Body Politic in Northern Irish Poetry." *Irish University Review* 35.2 (2005): 304-319. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of Sex*. London, New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- "The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva." *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. New York: Routledge, 1993. 164-178. Print.
- Chakravarty, Radha. *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers: Rethinking Subjectivity*. London, New York, Delhi: Routledge Taylor Francis Group, 2008. Print.
- "Reading Mahasweta: Shifting Frames." *Mahasweta Devi: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Nandini Sen. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2011. 103-107. Print.

- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York, London: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Devi, Mahasweta. *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi*. Ed. Gayatri Spivak. Trans. Gayatri Spivak. New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- , "Little Ones." *Bitter Soil*. Trans. Ipsita Chanda. 2nd. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1998. 1-20. Print.
- , *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi*. Ed. Maitreya Ghatak. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997. Print.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. "The Body of Signification." *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*. Ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin. New York: Routledge, 1990. 80-104. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. Print.
- McAfee, Noelle. "Abject Strangers: Toward and Ethics of Respect." *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. New York: Routledge, 1993. 116-134. Print.
- Moruzzi, Norma Claire. "National Objects: Julia Kristeva on the Process of Political Self-Identification." *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. New York, London: Routledge, 1993. 135-149. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "The Author in Conversation." *Mahasweta Devi: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Nandini Sen. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2011. 35-48. Print.
- , "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 243-261. Print.
- , "Woman in Difference: Mahasweta Devi's 'Douloti the Bountiful'." *Cultural Critique* 14 (1989-1990): 105-128. Print.