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*But the "imaginary" in our
title—"imaginary maps"
—points at other kinds of
divisions as well. (Imaginary
Maps xxiii)*

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Mahasweta Devi's stories in *Imaginary Maps* focus on the issues of exclusion and inclusion in the third world's colonial and postcolonial situation.¹ With reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's statement in her preface to *Imaginary Maps* that the imaginary in the title refers to more than only geographical divisions (xxiii), the stories help us break down these geographical boundaries and discover the formation of inclusion and exclusion of individuals and their dispersed identities. The title suggests that *Imaginary Maps* is about imagining maps as well as about mapping imagination. It is not only about dividing lines or drawing maps and signs on the face of the earth, but also about the invisible yet indelible marks of socio-economic transitions affecting human minds.

In light of the inclusive versus exclusive dynamic, *Imaginary Maps* articulates in many ways what Kathleen M. Kirby calls our "[thinking] through the boundary."² Although our thinking through geographical boundaries, imaginary or real, complicates the visible division of land and space in *Imaginary Maps*, it enables us to discover the changing profiles of individuals in the places of their birth or growth within

national and international politics of cultural and economic systems. The stories in *Imaginary Maps* enable us to explore the ideological constituencies of the tribal interior of South Asia and its struggling populations.

As we think through and around boundaries, and the possible divisions they constitute, *Imaginary Maps* implies cartography of resisting bodies and minds and their struggles against multilayered oppressive forces operating at local and global levels. The text describes some of the political and economic factors that shape human relationships in the underdeveloped regions of the subcontinent. *Imaginary Maps* ironically places together the capital based conditions of developed and developing countries to highlight the darkness of less developed areas against the glamour of traditional and contemporary means of capital accumulation.

The stories in *Imaginary Maps* originate in the tribal heart of India. Our journey across the Indian Ocean over to Central India—Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, and Bihar with tribal populations of Oraons, Mundas, Santals, Lodhas, Baigas, and so on—“mimes” what Spivak describes as “the historical sedimentation of colonialism” in order to offer a “deconstructive embrace” through postcolonial and neocolonial encounters (*Imaginary Maps* xxxi). *Imaginary Maps* is a world full of predators hunting for women’s bodies, overseers monopolizing the tree felling, and brokers deploying manpower. Its eye-opening geography exposes the torturing tehsildars, corrupt contractors, and power-hungry police officers. We meet here the fighting and dancing gypsies who celebrate their self-acclaimed triumphs around fires to feast over human blood.

Imaginary Maps foregrounds the toil of bonded untouchables as well as the gruel of merchandized and marketable girls. The text brings to surface the socio-religious issues related to caste-ridden discriminations and illiterate electorate, zealous missionaries and bribing, bargaining brahmins, boozy brothel houses as well as deadly and mythical caves. The monstrosity of the colonial, postcolonial, and predatory patriarchal capitalism in *Imaginary Maps* portrays all these entangled economic and ecological interconnections into an extinct flying reptile, a pterodactyl. Our voyage through the

jungle is transformed almost into a chimerical exploration through the Jurassic era.

“Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha” (cited as “Pterodactyl” from now on) connects old myths with modern civilized materiality and primitiveness with today’s psychology. Pirtha, a region representing today’s economic exploitation of the caste-ridden population, shapes into pterodactyl, the mythical extinct beast. Both pterodactyl and Pirtha map out the bestialities built around multilayered power lines of global capitalism, tracing its effects on the poverty lines of subservient nationalities or groups. The story highlights divisions and maps the pre-historicism of pterodactyl to critique the conquests of the contemporary capitalist market and its demands for cheap labor from the exploited bodies of bonded men, women, and children. We come to know not only about the geographical division of the land, but also the psychological splits and tensions built around such divisions. Though focusing only on the lifestyle of Nagesia tribals, “Pterodactyl” is “an abstract” of what Spivak and Devi sum up as the author’s “entire tribal experience” (*Imaginary Maps* xxi). The story explains the habits and rituals of the whole tribal world. Like a continent unexplored, our transitions through forests and rivers in the story unfold the silenced potential of the invaded people. Traveling with the tribals reveals their secret means of honoring dead values and ancestors.

In “Pterodactyl,” the journalist Puran Sahay, who enters Pirtha, a district in Madhya Pradesh, has been projected as a representative of the mainstream culture of capitalist India. Sahay tries to form some sort of connection through his reports and cameras, but is unable to dig deep into the history of the tribal heart. Sahay’s explorations of the land not only question representation against misrepresentation but also deal with the myth of inventing poverty. It foregrounds the politics of the so-called developmental and charitable processes of relief funds that start from international organizations to pass through many other local and regional corrupt economic bodies, ending up “inventing famine where there is no famine” (165). Sahay, the journalist, the searcher and researcher, travels over tribal tracks to find the truth between fact and fiction for mapping the systems of political economy that manipulate these low lying

areas and low caste “harijans.” His arrival at Pirtha transforms into a travel back through history. He wants to “[change] the whole system” (112) and the history of the human race in India by putting Pirtha and its mythical past on the world map. Like the tribals, he holds to the mission of resistance against corruption that is fast eroding the land, its resources and its people. In the context, the very cartographic, calligraphic, demographic, or photographic representation of Pirtha as a deadly, hybrid, and extinct “pterodactyl” (95) symbolizes its gradual erosion.

Pterodactyl, an extinct species that has crossed an evolutionary process of growth from a sparrow-size entity to a cow-size monster, keeps recurring in the story. It stands for not only the land but also the soul of a lost civilization and its dead and forgotten ancestors (154-55; 180). “Today” when the “ancient” civilization is lost, Pirtha turns out to be a place of perennial starvation with no resources but only despair, and no missionaries but only empty churches. Due to the oppressive and tactful policies of the local, provincial, state, and national governments, Pirtha transmogrifies into a morbid mythical picture of pterodactyl like a “*death-wish*” (183).

From the very beginning of the text, “Pterodactyl” offers a survey map of “Pirtha *Block*,” an agri-business region, like “some extinct animal of Gondwanaland. The beast [that] has fallen on its face . . . some prehistoric creature . . . Such are the survey lines of Pirtha *Block*” (99). The geography of this exploited cash-crop land and its mysterious historical background is developed further in the story through the picture images of cave-paintings done by a local boy Bikhia (128). His picturesque duplication of the survey map of Pirtha as a webbed winged bird-like bat with four legs and a toothless gaping horrible mouth (102) connects myth, magic, mystery, and poverty of the land and its credulous population. The tribals live in the gaping horrible “jaws” and “bite” of pterodactyl (100, 170) where drought and starvation feature immense vacuity on this side of the land.

The mythical but graphic delineation of Pirtha and its plundered forests still contain the tribals, Bhills or Baigas, the 7.76 percent of Indian population (108-110) who are least aware of their rights. Caught amid the long chain of

moneylenders, from the World Bank to the local sarpanch and sardars (leaders of the village), the enslaved tribal receiver “gets nothing,” while the government proclaims to have done every thing, which actually is done “only on paper” (192). Teams of welfare and foreign aid, local experts, and officers keep arriving to document Pirtha and its people: “Newspapers and scientists from the world over are pouring into Pirtha, extinguishing the tribals altogether. Why Madhopura, Pirtha is on the map of the world. Internationally-known foundations determine the ‘why and how’” (144).

The fact that there is no synonym for exploitation and deprivation in the traditional tribal language (118, 196) does not change the history or story of Pirtha and its people who have been plundered for centuries. Because of their historical contact first with Hindus and then with the British, the tribal population has over time been plagued by caste and class systems. Together, the two systems transcribe the tribal population as “criminal tribes” (*Imaginary Maps* xiii, 115).³ The tribal rulers are reduced to subjects due to the loss of their uncontaminated value-system. They become “deprivation’s prey” (122). The area is declared as a “‘perpetual famine’ zone” and the indigenous entrapments of the Forest Department, like the foreign allurements of the colonial masters, captivate the destined *kamiyas* or these local working people. Instead of helping them regain their lost land and power, foundations, organizations, and local bodies exploit the *kamiya* tribals as “permanent casuals” (164). Poverty prevails in Pirtha amid green revolutions in India and the ancestors’ souls wander in the shape of pterodactyl, looking for familiar spots while their offspring are pushed “fully in exile” within the modern progressive India (146).

Consistent pressures from the administrative and political organizations to misrepresent Pirtha for earning foreign aid packages, along with his personal confusion, put Sahay the journalist in a difficult position to draw the boundaries between the history and the story of Pirtha. Sahay “witnesses his own futility”(180), as he stands exposed in front of the monstrous unfolding history of the region. He keeps questioning whether his fantasized mission would be helpful to highlight the problems of the tribal in India. All that the tribal wants is no

more documentaries, pictures, and reports about their life, but some solid means to get rid of the corrupt political and administrative influences. In the context of colonial and counter-colonial desires, the looting of the tribal land by colonial and indigenous powers offers multiple perspectives about what Homi K. Bhabha has termed as the “authentication of histories of exploitation and the evolution of strategies of resistance” (937). The postcolonial and neo-colonial truths about multinational economy highlight the resistance of the most oppressed population against the oppressive technologies that exercise power through uneven distribution and division of labor. The man-made starvation of the area (188) over centuries makes Pirtha and its population a space of intervention and a narrative of capitalism where the tribals struggle to earn “human recognition, respect” (177) and, above all, an “excruciating, explosive love” beyond the boundaries of reason “for a long time” (195-6).

In the center of this imaginary yet [geo]graphic heart of darkness, Devi’s *Imaginary Maps* smoothly introduces the issue of gender-based discrimination. The “impenetrable forest” (185) of loot and plunder mapped around economic as well as physical exploitation grows denser when body manipulation gets entangled with sexual exploitation and bonded prostitution. “Pterodactyl” talks little about women’s condition, accepting it as inevitable among other forms of tribal exploitations mentioned in the text, but it refers to the counterfeit government plans for banishing poverty and illiteracy by freeing women from rituals like “sati” to provide them with plans for financial autonomy (126). However, Devi’s other stories “Douloti the Bountiful” (cited as “Douloti” from now on) and “The Hunt” thoroughly read implications of more and diverse divisions of women, their work, their bodies, and their minds amid the regional corruption.

The two stories, “Douloti” and “The Hunt,” question the placement of women and their gender in what Susie Tharu and K. Lalita describe as “imaginative [geographies]” to challenge the “discourses of the nation [that] encode belonging and alienation” (51).⁴ The stories delineate the third world women as “guinea pigs” who are subjected to dangerous and exploitative experiments (Loomba 172).⁵ Douloti in “Douloti”

is forced to provide the cheapest labor for sex-trade and sex-industry within the specific postcolonial developments, which still have their roots in colonial legacies and their consequential multinational projects. Similarly, Mary Oraon in "The Hunt" replicates the historical images of the third world women freedom fighters (xxvii). She casts away misrepresentations about herself to identify a stronger self-representation.

The story "Douloti" deals with the problems of wage earning and exploitation of women by referring to their visible as well as invisible labor. Douloti is not only mapped out as a piece of famine-stricken land but also as a female body. With women at the center of the apparently abolished bonded labor system, "Douloti" expounds on the theme of the selling of women in a heterosexual and predatory patriarchal capitalist system. From the very beginning, Douloti's father, Crook Nagesia, a *kamiya* or free worker of Munabar Singh Chandela, the owner and moneylender of the village Seora, is forced to sell Douloti against cash. The transaction of women's cheap sexual labor on the grounds of class and caste system merchandises their bodies into brothel houses. In the story, the deal materialized between Nagesia and Chandela sums up the facts and figures about the trade of human flesh in terms of usury and compound interest.

"Douloti" opens in the drought-stricken tribal area situated in the Palamu district. Poverty rules the region where decolonization has least prevented free women from being treated as commodity. When a woman gets raped, the judiciary system does not support her because of the general consensus that only a woman with loose character gets raped. Though Douloti as a region and as a woman are deprived and destitute, they still hold value or "Doulot" in terms of fertile land as well as body and are bountifully beneficial for the patriarchal capitalistic system both in terms of production and reproduction.⁶

As the story proceeds we figure out that in the process of decolonization and a systematic *neocolonial* control, Douloti the land and Douloti the character have been shrunk to the status of a product. Land or body, Douloti is delineated as a space of intervention for its exporters and exploiters. As a land, she is vulnerable to its intruders for crossing its borders, and as

a body, she is forced to cross the boundaries of ethical values of freewill in order to benefit others through self-plunder. Within the frame of the indigenous colonial system of *begar* (free labor) or bonded labor, Nagesia is pressured to sell his daughter. Feudal lords of the region continue economic and physical exploitation of the peasants, disallowing independence of vote or voice (34) to the tribals in one of the world's largest independent democracies, Mother India.

In "Mother India" (41), the image that maps women as sacred and holy, "Douloti" ironically presents a picture of oppression and disaster levied upon women's bodies. Caught in the claws of the caste and class system, Douloti becomes an easy and ever vulnerable prey for manhunt. The caste system and its differences are portrayed as "God's rules" as well as jungle-rules where the "untouchables . . . will bear everything in silence [and where] [t]he strong oppresses, the weak suffers, this after all is the rule" (40). The weakness of women and their working bodies multiply as the gender-based differences interlock with numerous other types of divisions. We see Douloti being traded while the patriarchal god, the Brahman Paramananda, continues to play "this game from village to village" (47). Douloti is confined to a whorehouse to rot forever until her body is no longer salable. Finally, we see the tribal and government contractors hiring her forever as cheap labor.

From the physical slavery as a sex-slave to the mental servitude of insecure living for times to come, Douloti the land and Douloti the woman remain drought-stricken. Both are forced to serve as a source of wealth accumulation for others through welfare programs and foreign-aid relief funds. Bodies, beings, and lands are eroded by the perpetual famine of poverty and are recorded as a documentary film for international forums. "Douloti" concludes, raising questions around Bajinath's brothel house, its clientele, and the parrot's cage as the eternal abode of kamiya women, even if they do not get enough food: "Body! Kamiya woman's body! If the body dries up she'll depart. Famine's on the way, is there any shortage of harijan kamiya women? . . . It's profitless to make a pet of a parrot. A body like an elephant, it's very hard to keep up with food money" (79).

In the story, Douloti dies of venereal disease but the politicization of the Independence Day around the flag and “map of India,” makes the status of women problematic in free Mother India. Based on the interlocking issues of gender, sexuality, and nationality, Devi’s “Douloti” highlights a complex process of decolonizing the culture, which, as Katrak says, “continues today for most nations that have achieved ‘flag independence’”⁷ (168). Like a flag, Douloti’s thin body flutters as the vain glory of victory and questions the validity of freedom for women won through flag-politics and independence-struggles in India. While Douloti leaves no room for the flag bearers like Mohan to plant the standard of the Independence, her story flies all over India, excavating deep connections between the power structures of patriarchy, nationalism and late capitalism.

The depression of “Douloti” finds some relief in “The Hunt,” where the whole ritual of hunting as a male activity for extracting physical pleasures out of women’s bodies and work is reversed. In the story, Mary retaliates to avenge the exploiting Tehsildar, the predator capitalist and “the big beast” (16). Mary’s violence is justified against the physical harassment, mental torture, and economic violence that her gender faces at the hands of a system controlled by corrupt contractors and bribing brahmins. The emptiness of the forest resulting from the money mongering mentality of the “city bastard” (12) ends up in a hunt that harks back to the historical repercussions of unstable and unequal distribution of rights, human as well as economic. Violence generates violence and love begets love; supposedly this is the concluding note of these stories about human confinement and freedom.

While writing provides a figural alternative to geography in *Imaginary Maps*, the stories in the text bring out the power politics of location for identifying displacement of persons and populations in South Asia. In the text, Pirtha and Palamu clearly represent barren lands and their dislodged populations. Within the context, *Imaginary Maps* looks into postcoloniality and its entrenched boundaries, as described by Bhabha:

. . . salutary reminder of the persistent ‘neo-colonial’ relations within the ‘new’ world order and the multinational division of labor. . . a perspective [that] enables the

authentication of histories of exploitation and evolution of strategies of resistance. (937)

A representation of various forms of identity, historical, cultural, imaginary, or psychological and even pathological, helps us examine the division of contested territories. The text raises the question of border formation as well as border crossing. Paper maps get converted into mind-maps, mindscapes, and even “dreamscapes” for multiplying difference into distance.⁸ In “Pterodactyl,” the modern survey map of Piritha takes the shape of the primitive, extinct beast fallen on its face (99), while in “Douloti,” the land and the female body combine to outline the economic disaster of the region. *Imaginary Maps* describes the geo-political as well as psychological and social manifestations of the intersecting relationship within changing postcolonial control lines.

In terms of division and exclusion over difference and distance, *Imaginary Maps* incorporates and intertwines the issues of gender, race, class, caste, ethnicity, and nationality. The text chalks out the multiple, marginalized positions of women in the third world countries to draw different “Cartographies of Struggle” for women’s bodies and minds.⁹ Focusing on the body politic of women like Douloti and their invisible or non-wage work, *Imaginary Maps* raises issues related to what Marie Mies terms as the “materialist and historical understanding of the *interplay* of the sexual, the social, and the international divisions of labour” (11). In doing so, *Imaginary Maps* looks below the surface of sketched frontiers to highlight divisions caused within the exploited bodies and minds of women. Mary’s violent retaliation and her desire for freedom in “The Hunt” hints at the possible undermining of the ideological context of what Mies terms as the predatory “capitalist patriarchy and its conquest of the world” (11).

Within the framework of feelings to be fashioned by vested monetary ends in *Imaginary Maps*, we observe the exploitation, suffering, and abject poverty of the most discriminated group of India, the Adivasis. Amid the violently primeval setting of unexplored jungles and caves, the political, the social, and the economic progress mingles with the agony of the aboriginal communities of India who travel through the

global capitalistic mentality of the twenty-first century. *Imaginary Maps* portrays these aboriginal communities as “suffering spectators of India” in terms of what Bhabha defines in as the “new internationalism” as well as inter-nationality (937).¹⁰

The longitudes and latitudes of Devi’s *Imaginary Maps* extensively incorporate the local and global economic factors as the shapers of human relationship. The uprooted eco-graphs of Devi’s *Imaginary Maps* offer a deeper look into territorial mobility. Devi writes with a mission to launch a compassionate crusade against injustice and inequality. In the stories, macro and micro economies combine in terms of foreign aid and local money lending to test the social and communal spirit of debt-bonded slaves.

In the context of elimination and maneuvered extinction of forest life in India, the ecological catastrophes of the third world countries and their territories of grief serve as a painful background to the stories of resistance in *Imaginary Maps*. The struggle of the tribal people against exploitative strategies of the local money-lending elite connected with international capitalism reveals the well-planned conspiracies working behind the politicization of philanthropic agencies. In “Translator’s Preface” to *Imaginary Maps*, Spivak traces this connection of the manifold economic “power lines” that work as an axis between local, regional, national, and international structures of financial manipulations in collaboration with the deep-rooted forces of patriarchy and nationalism (xxiii-xxix).

Our journey through the small but stony Wall Streets of the postcolonial ramifications in *Imaginary Maps* promotes our thinking through the boundary. The jungles and forests in *Imaginary Maps* grow global as we cross the tracks made out of coins as well as concerns. The imaginary travel through myth and reality reveals various forms of resistance to the multilayered oppression and economic exploitation. The cartography and politics of the global economy in *Imaginary Maps* raise issues related to the subdivision of land into human categories of distance and difference. In doing so, the text highlights the secret routes of international transactions. From the world-renowned organizations to the unknown regional slums in Indian villages, Devi has ironically compressed the

expanding margins of local poverty within the shrinking borders of global prosperity. *Imaginary Maps* foregrounds the hypocrisy operating behind the inclusive-exclusive dynamic and records its effects on the resisting bodies and minds of the most discriminated populations in the world village.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2000 annual convention of the South Asian Literary Association, held in Washington, D.C.

1. Citations of the primary text are made from Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps* (1995).

2. For a detailed study belonging, exclusion and subjectivity in postcolonial and postmodern times, see Kathleen M. Kirby, "Thinking through the Boundary: The Politics of Location, Subjects, and Space." Though Kirby is mainly interested in the issue of subjectivity, her article sheds enough light on the political configuration of identity and its various representational forms of class, race, and gender through cartography.

3. For research on histories that debate the declaring of tribals as "criminal tribes," see G. S. Ghuyre, *The Scheduled Tribes of India*; Anand A. Yang, *Crime and Criminality in British India*; Pauline Kolenda, *Caste in Contemporary India: Beyond Organic Solidarity*; and Philip McEldowney, *Colonial Administration and Social Development in the Middle East India, 1861-1921*, dissertation-online. In terms of historical background, the development of the idea of the "criminal tribe" was a result of the merger of two intellectual traditions, both with deep roots. First there was the tradition of Hindu brahmins and their plainmen's fear of the forest and their fear of non-Hindus. To this was added the strangely parallel British tradition of legal association of the migrating population with "vagabondism," fixing forests with crimes and outlaws. The two traditions join hands to institutionalize the outcast position of the tribal population in India even today. The tribal solidarity, their pristine homogeneity and unity, has been broken by these two distinct agencies.

4. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India, Vol. II*. Tharu and Lalita trace the political history of nationalism and gender [dis]placements since India's independence. They deconstruct the polyphonous nature of Indian nationalism by reviewing the false promises made by secularism and democracy. Though placed in "imaginative geography," women were ensured "some rights" which they could not secure and thus the question of women writing the nation asks for restructuring the boundaries of nationhood and nationalism. For further study of old and new patriarchal configuration of the question of women and nationalism in Indian Bengal around the issues of global capitalism and modernization, see Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question."

5. For details, see Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism* 150-172.

6. Quite ironically, Douloti, a poor woman, and the arid region have alike been termed "bountiful" in the title. The local linguistic formulation of Douloti connotes "Doulot," meaning wealth.

7. Katrak elaborates her point by thematizing Fanon's concept that colonization perpetrates violence—not only physical but also, and more crucially, linguistic, cultural, psychic.

8. The blurring intersection of boundaries and space in the stories interpret reality and its zonal versions like the paradoxes of heterotopia. Such imaginary divisions and dreamscapes are at work particularly in Devi's "Pterodactyl."

9. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle." Mohanty foregrounds a geographical configuration of gender difference based on its social and cultural construct that places the experience of women's labor into set categories of private versus public and domestic versus commercial spheres. Such a compartmentalization of the female body and the labor attached to it refers to the politics of location and representation, drawing on a different cartography of the struggling female bodies.

10. Bhabha describes the postmodern condition and the demography of new internationalism as "the history of postcolonial migration of the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees" (936). In delineating the problems of lower castes or untouchables and exploited women of the outcast Indian tribes, Devi claims to be representing a deep-rooted love for the marginalized humanity everywhere in order to voice their human rights and understand human relationship amid growing global economic advancement. In order to understand Devi's task as a "creative writer," we need to understand that she writes with a "social conscience," and a duty towards society to fight for the tribal and the unprivileged. She declared in one of her interviews: "I will continue to work for the tribals, non-tribal poor and people in distress and write for them." For references, see online resources: Shri Satyasadhan Chattapadhyay. "Inspiration: Mahasweta Devi." 25 Feb. 2001.

<http://www.foil.org/inspiration/maha_devi.html>. Shibani Baksi, "Mahasweta Devi," Spring, 1998. 25 Feb. 2001.

<<http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/Devi.html>>. "Mahasweta Devi wins Magsaysay Award." 25 Feb. 2001.

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