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Bonded Slavery and Gender in Mahasweta Devi's "Douloti the Bountiful"*

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways tribals are entrapped in and exploited as bonded laborers and prostitutes in Mahasweta Devi's "Douloti the Bountiful" by the deep-rooted socio-economic evil of debt-bondage. Tribals, once lived in forest and mountain areas with distinctive cultures and self-sufficient economic systems, were displaced and dispossessed from their forest lands/homes by the British Empire's large-scale deforestation and the independent Indian government's projects of forest clearing and land conversion. Catapulted without preparation into the patriarchal, capitalist society, they are frequently lured by landowners/ moneylenders into the debt trap: Once in debt, escape is nearly impossible because of high compound interest rates, leading them to work for their moneylender as bonded slaves. These changes in social and economic relations transform tribals' social status from freemen to wage laborers, debtors, bonded laborers, bonded prostitutes, and ultimately bonded slaves. This transformation in turn destroys their familial and communal relations, preventing them from performing their parental roles as breadwinners and caregivers. This paper investigates these changes in identities and roles of tribals through an exploration of Devi's fictionalized villages, and the gendered division of labor represented by the exploitation of tribal men and women in the novella. Finally, dealing with the significance of Douloti's death as the *abject*, this paper considers possible antidotes to this modern form of slavery.

Key words

postcolonial condition of India, patriarchal capitalism, debt-bondage, gendered exploitation of bonded labor, tribes as the abject, class struggle

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Introduction

Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) was a Bengali journalist, writer, and activist who devoted her life to fighting injustice and inequality for the poor and marginalized of India. She wrote more than 100 novels and short stories on the subject, mainly in Bengali; they have been translated into English, Japanese, Italian, and French. Among these, *Imaginary Maps* (1995), a collection of Devi's works translated and introduced by the postcolonial critic Gayatri C. Spivak, has drawn keen critical attention from Western academe and brought worldwide fame to the author. This collection focuses largely on the subhuman treatment experienced by tribes, indigenous people of India. With Dalits and Harijans (the former *untouchables*), tribes traditionally occupy the lowest place in the caste system; although tribes constitute a substantial portion of India's underclass, their presence is often ignored in the discussions on the nation-building process of the country post-Independence.[1] Devi first became involved with tribes in 1965 while visiting the remote and impoverished Palamu district in Bihar. She saw tribes' position as India's displaced and dispossessed, subject to cruel and inhuman treatment, including exploitation through debt-bondage, sex trafficking of women and children, disenfranchisement due to government and industry bribery and corruption, and so on. All that she witnessed in this district becomes the basis for her writing about and activism involving tribes.

Three stories in this collection are closely related to real events Devi observed,[2] providing readers with imaginary maps for the unchartered, unacknowledged territory of tribal conditions in postcolonial India. Of these,

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[1] *Tribals*, referred to as scheduled tribes in India's Constitution since 1950, number 104.2 million, or 8.6% of India's population according to the 2011 Census; according to the Anthropological Survey of India, there are 461 tribal communities (Xaxa, 1999, p. 3589).

[2] These are "The Hunt," "Douloti the Bountiful," and "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha." In "The Author in Conversation," Devi (1995a) explains that all the stories in the collection are woven on the basis of true stories. Mary Oraon, the tribal protagonist of "The Hunt," kills a high-profile man threatening to rape her during a tribal women's hunting festival day; this is based on the story Devi learned through orally transmitted songs among tribals about "this light-skinned girl" she would see in Tohri market (p. xviii). Ganori and Douloti of "Douloti the Bountiful" are based, respectively, on Crook Nagesia, who was ordered to pull a bullock on behalf of an expensive steer, and "a skeletal girl" "in the local hospital who could only pronounce the name of her village" (pp. xix-xx). "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha" is "an abstract of [Devi's] entire tribal experience" (p. xx), raising a critical question of "what has been done to the entire tribal world of India" as the country progresses economically (p. xxi).

this paper explores "Douloti the Bountiful" which illustrates the severe exploitation of tribes in the form of the bonded labor system. Dating back to the British regime, bonded labor has a longstanding history in India. It is caused by debt and characterized by a long-term relationship between creditor and debtor (employer and employee) in which "compulsion into servitude is derived from debt" (Finn, n.d., p. 6; Srivastava, 2005). Once bonded to the creditor, the debtor is forced to work for them to repay their outstanding debt with little or no wages; bonded labors are also deprived of freedom of mobility, property, other employment, education, and bodily autonomy. This modern form of slavery mortgages the debtor's entire life for the loan.

The bonded labor system is a continuing socio-economic illness in post-colonial India. There are legislative limitations on bonded labor: Article 23 of the 1949 Constitution prohibits this system, and the Bonded Labour System Abolition Act was enacted in 1976.[3] However, bonded labor is still widely practiced, largely affecting the most vulnerable class, tribes—and especially tribal children and women—who have no resources but their labor.[4] As Isabelle Guérin (2013) states, bonded labor works hand in hand with capitalism: "it can be initiated and sustained by capital itself in order to accumulate surplus value" (p. 405); therefore, the "specific historical contexts, the changing nature of the economy, the evolution of political forces and modes of socialization" contribute to the bonded labor system as it currently exists in India (p. 407).[5] The harmful effects of this debt-bondage on tribes is what Devi exposes and reports in "Douloti the Bountiful."

Many critics have approached this novella, through perspectives such as subaltern studies (Spivak, 1989), the novel as a "documentary/fiction" on

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[3] Article 23 "outlaws both the trafficking of human beings and forced labor"; the Bonded Labour System Abolition Act of 1976 "stipulates that the monitoring of labor violations and their enforcement are [the] responsibility of state governments" (Finn, n.d., p. 7).

[4] According to *The Global Slavery Index 2016* by Walk Free Foundation (2016), more than 18 million people, 1.4% of the total population of India, live in conditions of modern slavery, which include bonded labor, domestic service, forced begging, commercial sexual exploitation, forced marriage, and forced military service (pp. 108-110).

[5] Other factors also contribute to the persistence of the system. Finn (n.d.) attributes bonded labor and child labor to "long-standing caste-based discrimination, inequality, a lack of educational opportunities, high fertility levels among poor Indians—overall, to poverty as a self-reinforcing cycle" (p. 8).

the evils of bonded labor system (McCall, 2002), the myth of Indian Independence and development (Collu, 1999; Wenzel, 1998), and exploited bodies and sex trafficking of tribal women (Cappelli, 2016; Reinares, 2015). Drawing on these previous researches, this paper expands the discussion to the relationship between bonded labor and capitalism which becomes strengthened by the logic of national development, as it manifests in the semi-feudal rural regions described in "Douloti the Bountiful." I argue that the ethnographic reportage of the novella delineates the oppression of tribes—in particular, tribal women—through the changes in social status, identity, gender roles, and gendered division of labor that take place as post-Independence India undergoes the process of nation-building and socio-economic development. Furthermore, I also argue that Devi imbues her own ways of achieving justice for the women in the tribal areas by writing fiction through her *responsibility* and *accountability*.

To this end, I will first look into the primary spatial settings of the fiction: the villages Seora and Madhpura, where gendered exploitation of tribes pervades daily life. These villages function as a lens to view the social structure and changes among tribals and their economic production. As researchers on village studies state, the village reflects "topics such as caste, class, and social relations" as well as "economic relations, notably those concerning tenancy, credit, and labour" (Himanshu, Jha, & Rodgers, 2016, p. 2); the villages of the fiction provide a "contact zone," to borrow Mary Louise Pratt's term (1991), where conflicting powers including independence, postcolonialism, capitalism, caste, equality, and bonded labor system "meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (p. 34). How these rural areas change in accordance with the shifting economic system will be examined in light of the change of tribes' social status in the Hindu mainstream society—from free people to scheduled tribes, and from self-sufficient workers to modern economic slaves.

I will also discuss how capitalism goes hand in hand with patriarchy, and how this capitalist patriarchy establishes the gendered division of labor as an outgrowth of gendered capitalist exploitation of tribal men and women. Postcolonial and socialist feminism offer perspectives on how Indian postcolonial capitalism coupled with patriarchy secures and strengthens the inequalities within the caste-based class system, as well as the subordinate social status of women. Finally, by examining the diseased body and death

of the title character as the *abject* that disturbs the myth of Indian Independence, I will investigate possible antidotes to this modern form of slavery that Devi insinuates throughout the novella: What Spivak calls "ethical responsibility," and class struggle.

Villages as a Mirror of Tribal India[6]

What leads tribes to their present condition starts with the history of deforestation. "When did the Rajput brahman from outside come to this land of jungle and mountain? When did all the land slide into their hands?" (Devi, 1995b, p. 21). In asking this, the novella's narrator invokes the long history of deforestation and consequent appropriation of tribal dwelling places. The Hindi word *Adivasi*, another term for tribes, combines *adi* (old) and *vasi* (inhabitants); prior to British intervention, these tribes lived in forests and followed "a clan-based land tenure system which provides customary rights in land, trees, forests, etc." (Kumar & Choudhary, 2005, p. 15), based on "a close and ecologically sustainable relationship with the forest they inhabit" (Guha, 1983, p. 1882). Their environment provided "food, shelter, timber, [and] hunting" (Devi, 1995a, p. x); having no sense of private property, production was oriented for use, not exchange. All members participated in the clan society through the communal system of land-holding, childcare, and property. In addition, in sharp contrast to the Hindu mainstream, tribal communities had no sense of caste; tribal women also enjoyed some freedom from gendered roles, and were not confined by strictly gendered standards of honor. This is generally presented in mainstream Indian society as tribal "geographical isolation," "simple technology and conditions of living," and "general backwardness to the practice of animism, tribal language, physical features, etc." (Xaxa, 1999, p. 3589).

This culture and lifestyle was first attacked when the British Raj initiated a large-scale deforestation to increase revenue from timber exports and land conversion, and ultimately destroyed by the post-Independence government accelerating these projects in the name of national development and economic growth. A study on the history of land use in India from 1880-2010 (Tian, Banger, Bo, & Dadhwal, 2014) shows a significant loss of forests,

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[6] Devi refers to the rural villages depicted in her stories as "a mirror of tribal India" (Devi, 1995a, p. xii).

from 89 million ha. to 63 million ha.; the rate of deforestation is greater in the years under British rule and the early decades after Independence (1880-1960) than in the more recent decades covered by the study. Cropland area has consequently increased from 92 million ha. to 140.1 million ha., with a particularly high rate of cropland expansion during the 1950-1980s with the introduction of "farm mechanization, electrification, and introduction of high yielding crop varieties" (p. 78). In this process of large-scale land transformation, tribes have been alienated and expelled from their forests, deprived of their rights and privileges within their original environment, and catapulted without preparation into a vastly different society organized by caste, gender, and capitalism.

Deforestation and national development projects based on the logic of economic growth lead to a substantial influx of contractors, traders, miners, and migrant laborers into jungle and rural areas. For those in pursuit of capital accumulation, these spaces offer profitable resources in terms of both land and cheap labor, for a minimum of investment costs. Tribal men and women, being hurled into the fledgling capitalist society, are now forced to confront the money economy with no sense of money. Displaced and dispossessed, they are forced to borrow money from the landowners; once they put their thumbprint on a bond of debt, escape is nearly impossible because of high compound interest rates, leading them to work for their landholders and moneylenders as bonded slaves. In the new capitalist Hindu mainstream in which their tribal virtues, pride, tradition, languages, and identities are devalued and degraded as uncivilized, tribes are regarded as no more than cheap, easily replaceable labor; trapped in debt, the original inhabitants of the land are subjugated and dehumanized.

The fictionalized village Seora, a backward, feudally oppressed rural village in the Bihar district, functions as a metonymy of tribal India, showing the changes in social and economic relations and their impact on the social status, culture, and economic performance of tribals. Seora is originally a tribal land of jungles and mountains that was encroached on by outsiders and converted into agricultural land. Once claimed by economic developers, the village is handed over to the emerging "Land-lender, this new agri-capitalist caste / [···] created by the independent government of India" (Devi, 1995b, p. 49). Once tribal homeland, Seora is now dominated by the landowner Munabar Singh Chandela, a Rajput, who retains the land through the help of his son, an important government officer. Munabar further secures

Seora as his own empire by taking advantage of the bonded labor system; needing cheap labor for his farming operations, he hires tribals, primarily the forest tribe Nagesia, expelled from the jungle and mountains, and subsequently makes a fortune by exploiting their labor.

The dynamics of Paramananda Mishir's whorehouse—where Douloti is sold to pay her father Ganori's debt—likewise expose the ways postcolonial capitalist society capitalizes on tribes, in particular tribal women, through the mechanism of bond slavery. This brothel is in a well-populated, urbanized town called Madhpura. Huge markets, fairs, and ongoing constructions of roads, bridges, and buildings around the area attract a large itinerant population in addition to original settlers, while the general ethos of commercialization and urbanization drive the business of prostitution; customers at Paramananda's whorehouse, like Douloti's exclusive *owners,* are largely the contractors and workers who flock to the town along with jobs. In this way, the brothel flourishes in accordance with the changing contour of the country and national development.

Just as Munabar consolidates his empire through bond slavery, the brahman Paramananda becomes more powerful as he entraps tribal women through debt and pimps them out for his own profit. While Devi's representation of Seora village is grounded in the semi-feudal relationships between landowners and tenants, that of the whorehouse is in terms of capitalist economy: It is described as a productive and profitable "factory" (Devi, 1995b, p. 62) and "enterprise" (p. 55), terms for small capitalist businesses; the manager is Paramananda's "overseer"; the eleven women in the brothel "all labor" (p. 69). Paramananda's exploitation of tribal women in the sex trade, secured with debt-bondage, reflects how money and resources concentrate into the hands of the already-capitalized in postcolonial India, while those who have lost the means of production are dehumanized and become products themselves.

In a capitalist economy practiced in these rural and urban regions, money becomes a general regulator, rearranging all social intercourse according to monetary relations, and converting obligations among people into gross sums. When all things are shaped by the language of market, and calculated and quantified as economics, there is no room for value systems prioritizing human relations, morality, and ethics. Beyond direct capitalists like Munabar and Paramananda, higher-class female characters also take part in the capitalization of social relations. Munabar's wife "can't bear others'

good luck" (Devi, 1995b, p. 23); despite her accumulated wealth, she finds it hard to endure others' good fortune and economic generosity because of her blind jealousy. The case of Rampiyari, a manager of Paramananda's whorehouse, is more sinister, revealing the self-replicating nature of debt cycles within a capitalist system. Rampiyari was a debt-prostitute until a customer-lover paid off that debt for her; she now works for the pimp as a superintendent and overseer. Unbeknown to Paramananda, she is also a usurer, establishing her own empire among the debt-prostitutes and beyond the whorehouse. Despite having herself been devastated and humiliated by debt-entrapment, Rampiyari makes use of other women when she has the upper hand; in the capital-centered logic, the empathy that might be expected of an ex-laborer is stripped off and replaced with envy, competition, and individuation.

The large-scale exploitation of tribes and low castes is further enabled by the collusion of the privileged and powerful. Reflecting on his experiences, the migrant laborer Bono bemoans, "Government—unine—contractor—slum landlord—market-trader—shopkeeper—post office, each is the other's friend" (p. 25). Despite their differences according to power, class, caste, and job, their common goal is to secure profit, and dominance over those on the lower social levels. This is also a point where capitalism is coupled with patriarchy. Heidi I. Hartmann (1979) defines patriarchy "as a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" (p. 11). In this vein, the collusion of upper-caste Hindu males in the postcolonial capitalist society of India reveals the implied desire to maintain the state of internal colonialism through bonded slavery, because it is the easiest way to accumulate capital as well as reproduce their dominance over class and gender inferiors.

As two such internal colonizers, Munabar and Paramananda embody what Spivak (1995a) considers "the worst product of post-coloniality, the Indian who uses the alibis of Development to exploit the tribals and destroy their life-system" (p. 203). Wielding capitalist power over the bonded laborers, these characters accumulate profit by reinforcing longstanding caste-based discrimination and turning class stratification against tribes. As Hartmann (1979) comments, "Profits derive from the capitalists' ability to exploit labor power, to pay laborers less than the value of what they produce. The accumulation of profits systematically transforms social struc-

ture as it transforms the relations of production" (p. 7). In the process of India's post-Independence nation-building and the ensuing transition of economic systems, the landlord-tenant relationship of semi-feudalism is transformed into the credit-debt relationship between landowners/money-lenders and bonded laborers. Relying on the monetary quantifiability of obligations which "allows debts to become simple, cold, and impersonal—which, in turn, allows them to be transferable" (Graeber, 2011, p. 13), the debt-bondage system transforms subjective human laborers into objective labor. The changes of social and economic relations consequently transform tribal social status from freemen to wage laborers, debtors, bonded laborers, bonded prostitutes, and ultimately bonded slaves.

Gendered Exploitation of Bonded Labor

Exploitation by debt-bondage in the novella primarily revolves around Ganori Nagesia and his daughter Douloti. The loan of 300 rupees Ganori borrows from the predatory moneylender carries exorbitant interest rates and entraps Ganori in bonded labor. His value is comparable to other animals, goods, and commodities in Munabar's empire, and his labor is all-purpose. When a field steer is killed by a tiger, Munabar makes him pull the cart: "If the steer's gone you fill the cart. Take the yoke on your shoulders. Lift, lift. Pull the cart. Do you know how much a head of steer costs? I'll straighten you out with the whip" (Devi, 1995b, p. 33). Therefore, when he is disabled through an accident while lifting the cart, it means no more than a monetary loss for Munabar. Ganori becomes useless and worthless because, as a faulty commodity, Munabar no longer profits from him. Tribals' ontological value is stripped from their human dignity; they are measured and treated only according to their use value and marketability.

The inhuman and mechanical treatment of tribes is also revealed when Ganori's debt, impersonal and transferable in its nature, is inherited by the 14-year-old Douloti, entrapping her in bonded prostitution; she is handed over from Munabar to Paramananda, a relative of the local priest, to pay off her father's debt. Paramananda is a human trafficker who wanders around from village to village, looking for pubescent virgin girls to satisfy his customer's sexual appetites. He picks Douloti from the clan community of the Nagesia, which is too helpless to provide any protection for the girl.

Despite the false promise of marriage, Munabar instantly understands the trick when Paramananda pays Ganori's debt in exchange for Douloti; however, he does not do anything to stop it. The upper-caste predators connive in determining Douloti's fate, stripping her of the agency she should have as a citizen of independent India.

Exposing the subhuman treatment and condition of tribes in their relations with the moneylenders, Devi goes further to deal with female tribes' double exploitation when the focal point changes from Ganori to Douloti. Tribal women are doubly denigrated and exploited not only in terms of caste and gender but also by capitalist and patriarchal Indian society. When Douloti is handed over to Paramananda with the transference of debt, it is not only these two moneylenders who determine her fate as bond-prostitute, but also the father who lets his daughter take on his unpayable debt. The other women bonded in Paramananda's brothel are likewise the wives or daughters of bonded laborers who, unable to pay back loans, "unknowingly and knowingly sell their wives and daughters into bonded sex labor to pay off their debts" (Cappelli, 2016, "Douloti," para. 1). These women are sacrificed for their husbands or fathers in default. However, their sacrifice is easily forgotten once their role as mother and wife is soon filled by another woman to do the house chores and child rearing for the remaining family members. Even the relations of these women treat them as commodity: Their existence is reduced to gender roles and duties in their patriarchal households.

Substituting her sexualized female body for her insolvent father's laboring body, Douloti is further degraded as a sexual object to be traded in Paramananda's whorehouse where customers, whether rich and connected to people in power or common, are allowed to endlessly satisfy their sexual desire by consuming the commodified women's bodies. On her first night of work, Douloti is made to put on make-up, oil her hair, and dress up in a beautiful sari to make a picture catering to the customers' needs and pleasure; she is also drugged in order to meet sexual demands without resistance. First Latia has her for three years; once Latia is tired of her body, Douloti is taken by Singh, a contractor, for another two years. After no customer claims her, she is used by daily customers of the whorehouse, whomever they may be. Regardless of how much she has earned for the moneylender, she knows that "There will be a loan as long as my body is consumable" (Devi, 1995b, p. 87), because of the high interest rate on

the principal; it is impossible to escape from debt-prostitution until the bonded body loses its exchange value, marketability.

These women's commodification for the sexual desires of upper-caste men requires their reduction to non-autonomous body parts—notably, with no rights over their reproductive power. When these women get pregnant, they are given abortifacients, often in doses fatal to them; if they give birth, "[the children] lie around in the marketplace. They beg. They don't let you live with your child, and clients come up to one month before birth" (p. 63). Ravaged and consumed, Somni has borne three sons by Latia, and Reoti one; as Latia does not acknowledge these children, they all become beggars on the street. Prohibited from playing the role of nurturing mother to their children, the women have no agency over either their production (labor) or their reproduction (children); in this brothel, they are emptied of their identity and dignity as women and human beings, reduced to sexualized body parts that function only for clients' sexual pleasure.

Once sold to the brothel, tribal women are exploited by and for the newly emerging capitalists in the business of commercial sex trade. They are unable to seek protection and security whether from their households in the tribal community or the changing socio-economic relations of the postcolonial society, and the sex trade deprives them of social roles and relationships with which to define their identities. They thus exist as victims of double exploitation, by the capitalist bonded labor system as well as by the patriarchal system in postcolonial India—what Zillah Eisenstein (1979) calls the capitalist patriarchy, the "mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring" (p. 5).

Lacking bodily agency, the tribal women in Paramananda's whorehouse raises the question of how the term *labor* excludes women from its range of usage. Douloti earns her moneylender and pimp Paramananda more than 40,000 rupees over eight years, more than ten-fold the principal. However, the women's sexual labor is not visible and recognized as *work* as in the sense of "field work, digging soil, [and] cutting wells" (Devi, 1995b, p. 59). Tribal men's labor power is a means of production with which to cultivate the soil, grow crops, and herd livestock. But tribal women like Douloti themselves become the product, the object to be exchanged and consumed in the commercial market. Describing the fate of debt-prostitutes, the narrator implores:

> These are all Paramananda's kamiyas.
> Douloti and Reoti and Somni
> Field work, digging soil, cutting wells is work
> This one doesn't do it, that one doesn't do it, the other one doesn't do it—
> The boss has turned them into land
> The boss plows and plows their land and raises the crop
> They are all Paramananda's kamiya. (p. 59)

As Sophie McCall (2002) points out, "[studies] on bonded labor in India tend to assume a gender-neutral perspective, thereby focusing on men's debt-bondage to the exclusion of women's" (p. 40). The sex industry and sexual laborers bonded in debt are shadowed by the strongly masculinized definition of *labor,* and often become blind spots when it comes to debt-bondage. Even as debt-prostitutes take up to "thirty clients a day" (Devi, 1995b, p. 63), studies on bonded slavery in India outright exclude debtors forced into prostitution from the capitalist labor force.

In addition to calling attention to the invisibility of the sexual labor force, the narrator's statement also metaphorically presents how the capitalist, patriarchal society turns land (nature) and women into passive fields to be conquered, controlled, and mined by aggressive, masculine powers. Presenting women's bodies as land for plowing and sowing connotes the sexual hierarchy and gender inequality in heterosexist Indian society. With women "traditionally regarded as the field," and men "as the seed" spread over the field, this sexual and gender relations result in and reinforces "an oppressive bondage for women" to men (Nubile, 2003, p. 23). Women's bodies exist as property to be owned, plowed, and ravaged by the men who own or oversee their existence. In this vein, Douloti's "violated, naked harijan woman's helpless body" (Devi, 1995b, p. 58) after being raped by Latia illustrates capitalist and patriarchal destruction committed on low-caste Adivasi women.

Given this patriarchal, capitalist climate, it is remarkable that the bonded prostitutes maintain some communal values, childrearing responsibilities, and compassion for others, all of which are important values of tribes but denigrated in the postcolonial capitalist society. This is especially noticeable when they can no longer make money for and are thus expelled from the whorehouse; these subjugated women retake their communal values and

roles as caregivers as well as nurturing mothers. While Paramananda turns out to be a false philanthropist who claims to marry a harijan girl out of compassion, Douloti is truly generous, helping Somni feed her starving son; Somni starts begging in her children's stead when she is finally discarded from the brothel. In the most pathetic scene, Douloti shares the single rupee she has saved with her uncle Bono; she encounters Bono in the company of a social journalist researching the issue of debt-bondage, and says, "Uncle Bono? Have a little something to eat with this, yes?" (p. 88). She even massages "his feet softly with great sympathy" (p. 87). Douloti preserves her compassion and benevolence despite the capitalized, patriarchal society, revealing the community-oriented values of tribes which prioritize humans and *life* over anything else. By representing Douloti's warm and bountiful actions towards others in contrast to the cold, impersonal, and money-oriented relationships among capitalists, Devi highlights the evils of the self-and-profit-centered capitalism driving national economic growth.

Myth of Independence and Development

The bonded laborers in Devi's novella are predisposed to believe that their subjugation is unavoidable. Douloti, like her fellow tribal women, takes her subordinate social status as fate, even embracing *sexploitation* as her destiny (Cappelli, 2016, "Giribala," para. 7). Such lack of resistance to the capitalist exploitation is partly due to tribes' fatalist attitudes; capitalists like Munabar shut off what he calls "the West Wind" and "All kinds of killer thought" (Devi, 1995b, p. 42)—enlightenment as to the fundamental injustice of their unequal treatment; and the wider society is ultimately unwilling to educate tribes on their constitutional rights as Indian citizens. Deeply affected by the unfamiliar caste and religious systems, and systematically prevented from understanding the extent of their unequal and exploitative treatment, tribal bonded laborers in particular live on the outskirts of national independence and development.

Despite this atmosphere of passive acceptance, however, Spivak (1989) comments that "Douloti is not represented as the intending subject of victimization," just as she is not represented "as an intending subject of resistance" (p. 125). Indeed, when she dies on the front yard of a school, "having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs," Douloti's lack of resistance is offset by what her "tormented corpse, putrefied with vene-

real disease" symbolizes by filling "the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas" (Devi, 1995b, p. 93). By dying on the map of India—carefully drawn to commemorate India's Independence Day—Douloti, as the *abject*, forces the country to confront those it has excluded in the process of nation-building.

Although Julia Kristeva (1982) uses the terms *abject* and *abjection* to discuss points in psychosexual development, they also aid in reading the symbolic meaning of Douloti's death in relation to the economic growth and development of postcolonial India. The abject refers to physiological reactions like horror and vomit which take place when the separation between the subject and the object or between the self and the other is lost, leading to a collapse of meaning in terms of self-identification or concepts of the self. Kristeva exemplifies the abject with viscerally repugnant images: the unclean, such as sewage, dung, open wounds, etc.; and even things causing tactile disturbance, such as the skin which forms on the surface of warm milk. These things are neither subject nor object, but carry the quality "of being opposed to *I*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). The subject fears and loathes the abject because it threatens the symbolic organization of society, and will attempt to expel the abject outside the boundary and formation of the self. However, the cast-off abject does not disappear, but "lies there, quite close" (p. 1), challenging the symbolic system in which meanings are produced, accepted, and preserved.

The force of the abject lies in the horror which it provokes in the subject. Ganori's deformed body and Douloti's corpse—covered with "tuberculosis, the sores of venereal disease all over her frame, oozing evil-smelling pus" (Devi, 1995b, p. 91)—are the abject forcing "Mother India" (p. 41) to confront what it has disinherited while defining the boundaries of India's national independence and identity. Because abjection stems from "what disturbs identity, system, order," and "[what] does not respect borders, positions, rules," it ultimately draws attention to "the fragility of the [symbolic] law" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4); indeed as "all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (p. 5), the progress of nation-building in India has specifically entailed the exclusion and ignorance of the abject tribes. Through their decrepit bodies, Ganori and Douloti—and, by extension, tribes in general—mirror the "me that is not me" (p. 5) of postcolonial India, those that the country disdains recognizing as nation members.

In light of this fear of identification with the abject, Indian Independence and the concept of *Mother India* are as much of a fairy tale for tribes as Rampiyari's story of her customer-lover paying back her debt, Paramananda's promise to marry a harijan woman, and Bono's claim that bonded slavery will be abolished: These stories can never be realized, because of the conditions of bondage and abjection. Hearing (false) news that "the government is going to abolish the bonded labor [kamyouti] system" (Devi, 1995b, p. 20), Ganori imagines a bespectacled town gentleman coming to the village and talking with him about his suffering, but failing to really understand the realities of the bonded labor system. This imagined man is realized as Father Bomfuller, a white reformist missionary from the Gandhi Mission. Father Bomfuller and his followers, Mohan Srivestava and Puranchand, are highly-educated (bespectacled) social journalists and anthropologists who diligently record the living conditions, customs, rituals, and culture of bonded laborers. Their intentions are good: They document bonded laborers because they believe that they can change the exploitative system peacefully, through government legislation and enforcement. However, their survey report ends up "imprisoned in a file" when it finally reaches Delhi (p. 89), implicitly proving that "gormen is everyone's" (p. 75) is indeed just a fairy tale.

Father Bomfuller's futile documentation raises the question of why more *enlightened* members of mainstream society would remain ignorant of the predictable violations of human rights through bondage and similar conditions, such as the collusion of the upper castes in victimizing those lower down. Preying on low castes, the rich, the powerful, and the capitalizers take the position once occupied by the colonizer, reinforcing the oppressive colonial system. Even if some higher-class people are more enlightened, the existing power structure will not tolerate a threat on their group's privileges or interests. From their experiences with the internal colonialism of independent India, tribes know that, however well-meaning, those reformers who are the "counter-hegemonic representatives of the corrupt democracy" (Reinares, 2015, p. 84) will always fail to carry through.

Beyond his naivety, Father Bomfuller's peaceful reform fails because of the lack of *ethical singularity* with the Other. According to Spivak (1995b), understanding the subaltern requires establishing "ethical singularity" with them (p. xxv), through intimate and individual encounters and engagement with the subaltern within the context of interaction and exchange. This is

"neither 'mass contact' nor engagement with 'the common sense of the people,'" but ethical "responsibility and accountability"; ethical singularity calls for a relationship in which "the object of ethical action is not an object of benevolence, for here responses flow from both sides" (p. xxv).

By contrast, the intellectuals represented by Father Bomfuller and other researchers treat tribes as the object of knowledge, and make no ethical efforts to encounter and engage with the experiences tribes might want to share with them. Spivak comments, "ethics is the experience of the impossible" (p. xxv); in other words, ethics is tireless efforts to respond to, and to receive a response from, the Other. This is also what Devi (1995a) means by "to learn to love" (p. xxii). The sociologists who merely examine and observe bonded workers can conclude that "People become kamiyas because they borrow for weddings, funerals, festivals" (Devi, 1995b, p. 74), insinuating that tribes overspend on luxuries, and ignoring Bono's point that the new situation of landlessness drives people to borrow money for ceremonial rites of passage: "Only the person who has no land and not a cracked penny in the house borrows for a social function" (p. 74). This failure to engage with tribes' concerns on their own ground reveals a fundamental lack of awareness of tribal singularity.

Awareness can however be forced; Douloti's abject corpse becomes a symbolic bullet that finally penetrates the consciousness of Mohan, a prim schoolmaster with faith in the law, the police, and the government as capable of—and interested in—stopping bond slavery. Confronting Douloti's disintegration from a sexualized and objectified body to a putrefied corpse, Mohan "jerked again and again, as if his arms and legs were tied and a *machine-gun* was being emptied into him" (p. 93). The modesty and belief in the social orders he maintained despite the sight of bonded laborers and prostitutes are now threatened by Douloti's horrific exhibition.

The novella thus ends with the authorial voice posing a conundrum: "Today, on the fifteenth of *August*, Douloti has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India" (p. 93). Spivak (1989) explains, "The word doulot means wealth. Thus douloti can be made to mean 'traffic in wealth'" (p. 128). Douloti's corpse, covering the entire Indian peninsula, exposes the "traffic in wealth" as a national disease, acting as a wake-up call for the upper-caste intellectual compatriots who glorify the independence of India yet dawdle in rectifying the country's ex-

ploitative economic systems. Through Douloti's abject body, the author shakes these Mohans out of their fancies, the fairy tales of the country's independence and national identity.

Emphasizing the necessity of disillusioning and enlightening the well-meaning but naïve intellectuals through Douloti's death, Devi also highlights class struggle as a way to create real independence for bonded laborers. Attempts to abolish bonded slavery through peaceful and democratic means allow "some apparent room for opposition (as in a real democracy) but [maintain] deep structure untouched": They result in the invigoration of the capitalist exploitation (Reinares, 2015, p. 85). To move beyond the systemic limitations of *reform*, Devi invites serious consideration of class struggle from the bottom of Indian society. When Father Bomfuller's group revisits Paramananda's brothel for in-depth interviews about the condition of debt-prostitutes, Devi delineates her solution to ending bond slavery through the characters' debate on the issue:

> Mohan said, "Let there be a law. If the law is not obeyed, there's the *police*. The *police* will look out."
> Bono said, "This Mohanbabu you have said like a gentleman. *Police* never raise their guns toward the boss or the moneylender. The *police* kill us."
> Prasad said, "We want the law! And we want organization. Not an organization like the Harijan Association or the Gandhi *Mission*."
> At last, Puranchand opened his mouth, "Try to think by way of peaceful means, Prasadji. You spoke of Bhojpur. But is it the way to a solution to take up arms to keep the honor of harijan women?"
> Bono said, "Puranchandji? Is the honor of our women not honor? The boss lifts our wives and daughters, so you are saying 'Peace peace—Shanti Shanti.' If someone lifted daughter and wife from your family, would you have said 'Shanti'?" (pp. 85-86)

Devi's characters here argue for her statement in "The Author in Conversation": "When the system fails, an individual has a right to take to violence or any other means to get justice. The individual cannot go on suffering in silence" (Devi, 1995a, p. xvii). When laws for the rights of

bonded laborers are not enforced and implemented, the laborers need to have their own organizations—for instance, political parties or unions of the sort the *Socialist* Prasad follows—that can help "end the pain and the suffering of the tribals" (p. 86).

Devi invests a glimmer of hope into the character Bono, who, unlike other tribals in the community, has been in the larger society and gradually enlightened himself on the unequal treatment and status of tribes. Bono attempts to have his own property, and, when this is denied, escapes Munabar's bondage and assists Father Bomfuller in his work towards ending bonded slavery. Disappointed with the failure of Father Bomfuller's research work, Bono joins the Liberation Party along with Prasad to demand the bonded laborers' rights as wage workers. His continuous search for igniters of and participation in the revolutionary struggle proves his "unconventional personalit[y], ⋯ [a] fissure ⋯ for restructuring" (Bardhan, as cited in Spivak, 1989, p. 110).

Critically, however, for any direct struggle for the rights of bonded laborers to succeed, it cannot be gender-neutral. While bonded prostitutes are implicitly included within the category of bonded laborers, a fight that neuters the particular struggles tribal women face is bound to fail, as these women will continue to be exploited in gendered ways by the capitalist system. In order to stop *traffic in wealth* (Douloti) *all over India* and realize the true meaning of India's independence, revolutionary class struggles for tribes should transcend class and gender stratifications and equally embrace tribal men and women, bonded laborers and bonded prostitutes, in their every action.

Conclusion

The basic premises and logic behind deforestation, land reform, and national development entail—and dramatically deliver on—the exploitation of the tribes who formerly lived on that land. Socio-economic changes caused by national development and rapid economic growth ultimately result in economic imbalance as capital accumulates in the hands of the upper castes. As Vandana Shiva (1989), India's renowned ecological and feminist activist, explains:

> The paradox and crisis of development arises from the mistaken

> identification of culturally perceived poverty with real material poverty, and the mistaken identification of the growth of commodity production as better satisfaction of basic needs. In actual fact, there is less water, less fertile soil, less genetic wealth as a result of the development process. Since these natural resources are the basis of nature's economy and women's survival economy, their scarcity is impoverishing women and marginalized peoples in an unprecedented manner. Their new impoverishment lies in the fact that resources which supported their survival were absorbed into the market economy while they themselves were excluded and displaced by it. (p. 13).

These contradictions and conflicts within development and progress are vividly represented by the tribes entrapped in debt-bondage in "Douloti the Bountiful." In postcolonial India, where colonial power is handed over to upper-caste men, tribes, displaced and dispossessed from their lands and homes, are degraded by the capitalist and patriarchal economy. As bonded laborers, prostitutes, and slaves, both tribal men and women are objectified and treated as disposable commodities; the agri-capitalist market economy changes their social status from freeman to bonded slaves; and debt-bondage prevents them from performing their familial and communal roles as breadwinners, caregivers, and nurturers. Controlled by "local, regional, and national patriarchal and capital arrangements," they are deprived of their basic rights of production, reproduction, and livelihood (Cappelli, 2016, "Introduction," para. 1). Consequently, national development and economic growth reduce tribes to the components of market economy; they are dehumanized, stripped of human rights, and merchandised for the material benefit of the upper castes.

What Devi illustrates in this novella is what Father Bomfuller, the representative of outside researchers, fails to respond to and account for in his survey documents. Devi's illustrations of the harms of national development projects, critiques of the inseparable relations between patriarchal capitalism and exploitation of bonded slaves, and illumination of the invisible and unacknowledged social relations and laborers are possible because she establishes ethical singularity with tribes. Despite being an outsider to the tribal community, Devi engages with and pursues responses from tribals, "*learn*[ing] to learn [from tribes], through the slow, attentive, mind-changing

(on both sides), ethical singularity that deserves the name of 'love'—to supplement necessary collective efforts to change laws, modes of production, systems of education and health care" (Spivak, 1995a, pp. 200-201). Her literary representation of tribes is "a witnessing love" supplementing her activism (pp. 200-201).

Devi's approach of ethical singularity deliberately counteracts the compelled assimilation that tribes undergo—erasing their tribal language, religion, tradition, culture, and so on—in the process of national development and economic growth. Stripped of their singular tribal identity, they are exposed to epistemic violence in forms ranging from broad Othering to the socio-economic entrapment of debt-bondage. What Devi exemplifies through *loving* tribes and Spivak theorizes by the term *ethical singularity* is the radical act of creating space for tribal experience and existence without patriarchal, capitalist intervention. Encountering and engaging with people under the principles of ethical response-ability and account-ability makes it possible for outsiders to get closer to tribes and restores tribal self-identification and autonomy within the socio-national system of post-colonial India.

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