Postcolonial Urban Outcasts
City Margins in South Asian Literature

Edited by Madhurima Chakraborty and Umme Al-wazedi
3 “Someone called India”

Urban Space and the Tribal Subject in Mahasweta Devi’s “Douloti the Bountiful”

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In recent years, scholarship in both the humanities and social sciences has positioned urban space as the site of cosmopolitan, transformative experience for women. In an interdisciplinary study of gender in urban space, Kamran Asdar Ali and Martina Rieker note that “although women, the poor, children, and minorities in most cities have not been granted full and free access to the streets—they are not complete citizens—industrial life has brought them into public life” (2). Women, Ali and Rieker suggest, “may use the urban space for mobility, transgression, and different pleasures that they seek, in the process navigating the everyday in favorable and unfavorable terms,” a process that allows them to “survive and flourish in the interstices of the city” (2) as they “negotiate” the “tensions” of “contemporary urban landscapes” (2–3). In these assertions, there is a significant slippage between capitalist production (“industrial life”), political discourse (“public life”), and physical space (the urban). As this account of urban experience unconsciously associates spatial mobility with the advent of industrialization, it also presumes a cosmopolitan mobility based on a privileged relationship to industrialization. In other words, the subjects who seek out “different pleasures” are already able to navigate urban space with relative autonomy; a similar view of urban mobility has also surfaced in notable examples of contemporary South Asian fiction.1 Absent from these discussions, though, is the tribal subject’s relationship to the cosmopolitan narrative of Indian development. Drieskens and Mermier, for example, argue that “[t]he specific cosmopolitanism of each city becomes a universal characteristic of cities in general” (17), without putting much pressure on the potential exclusions of such a formulation.2 If public life is contiguous with industrial life, what are the consequences of such a formulation for tribal subjects who lack the material resources and cultural capital to negotiate the industrial urban environment on equal terms?

In this chapter, I read Mahasweta Devi’s novella “Douloti the Bountiful” as a counterpoint to the contemporary urge to privilege urban space, an examination of the material effect of industrialization on tribal bondslaves who cannot access the city as the site of transformative potential. This reading is informed by the economic and social marginalization of tribals in postcolonial India, where “development ... especially the growth of the core sectors, including power, mining, heavy industry, irrigation, and related infrastructural developments” has come “at an enormous cost, borne by millions of [tribals] who were displaced involuntarily or otherwise deprived of their livelihood” (Lobo 285). As Gayatri Spivak notes, if industrial development is one of the cornerstones of postcolonial India’s “regulative logic,” the tribal population, which “had no established agency of traffic with the culture of imperialism,” cannot benefit from this logic, and by association, post-independence capitalism (97), particularly when they are caught in an inheritable, exploitative system of bonded labor (Carsewell and De Neve 112). I will focus primarily on Douloti’s experience of the environment of Madhpura, interrogating the family as a naturalizing symbol in nationalist discourse, before examining the novella’s use and representation of narrative time. Douloti’s bondslavery undermines Benedict Anderson’s distinction between pre-nationalist eternal time and “modern” calendrical time, showing how both forms of time operate simultaneously within contemporary Indian nationalist discourse to ensure the deregulated exploitation of tribal subjects in urban spaces, masked by the rhetoric of capitalist development. Furthermore, this exploitation is shaped by a discourse of urban space that transcends the city as a specific locale; the deadly logic of tribal enslavement characterizes rural space as the periphery of urban space, providing “the cheap labour and necessary consumers for the globalised centre” while also playing “an active role as essential constituent of the city” (Drieskens and Mermier 16–17). Douloti is thus absorbed into postcolonial India’s urban shadow economy, which is “outside of organized labor, below the attempted reversals of capitalist logic” (Spivak 97) and thus evident even in locales, such as the Madhpura town where she is exploited, that are not large urban spaces as such. Essentially, the discourse of urban development marginalizes the tribal subject in city, town, and village. In this way, the novella positions the tribal as part of a group whose fate, within urban space, is “predetermined by a logic of productive sacrifice” (Mbele qtd. in Rao 269). On the one hand, the story offers the traditional representation of the tribal bondslave: homeless, valueless, treated as inanimate matter, a “nonself” exiled to the edges of representation. On the other hand, it also constitutes a challenge to that marginalization and reduction: Douloti’s body articulates a form of affective “knowing” in which an embodied awareness of her abuse as a bondslave becomes both the narrative and thematic means of implicating urban space in the trauma of tribal subjects. Ultimately, the female tribal body underwrites the process of urban industrialization.

Published in 1995, “Douloti the Bountiful” offers a profound critique of the industrialization of post-independence India through an examination of bonded labor, a condition that, as Nivedita Majumdar notes, is “still prevalent in many parts of the country [Patnaik and Dingwancy] [and that] constitutes the narrative crux of the story” (156). Bonded labor hinges on low-caste South Asians borrowing money from landlords or moneylenders,
then paying off that debt and its interest via labor; as Siddharth Kara notes, it is “the most extensive form of slavery in the world today,” with roughly 20 million bonded laborers worldwide as of 2011, most of whom live in South Asia (3). In theory, the agreement lasts until the worker has paid off her debts; in practice, however, the landlord almost invariably exploits the powerlessness of the workers, inveigling them into contracts that are unlimited in term, with exorbitant interest rates that they will never be able to pay off. As a result, bonded labor is not fair labor but an unending cycle of servitude that typically enmeshes the laborer’s entire family, who become “collateral” when the laborer is unable to keep up with her payments. Mahasweta’s novella begins with a lengthy genealogy that dramatizes the hegemony of this cycle, revealing how Doulitor’s father Gauri comes to be a bonded laborer. Moreover, although her uncle Bono is able to break the cycle of slavery—he murders a man while working in the mines of Dhanbad, then uses the money he finds in the dead man’s wallet to purchase a house and brie the family’s slave-owner Munab Singh Chandela—he soon finds that wage labor in the city is no better than the bonded labor of the village. This familial pattern of exploitation forms the frame for Doulitor’s “arranged marriage” to Paramananda, actually a sex trafficker who uses marriage as a cover to kidnap Doulitor and sell her into a life of forced prostitution in an unnamed market town in the district of Madhupur. This arrangement echoes Kara’s accounts of the sex trafficking trade in kothis (brothels), which is closely allied to institutionalized systems of bonded labor: in landless families that take loans, the women and children are “coerced” into performing labor that frequently involves sexual exploitation (173). After contracting tuberculosis and various venereal diseases, Doulitor travels from Madhupur to Tohari, seeking medical treatment, but the doctors, citing a lack of proper facilities, advise her to journey to Mandar. Instead, Doulitor decides to return on foot to her home village of Seora, but only makes it to a schoolyard in a Tohari village before passing away on a map of India just as the country is celebrating Independence Day.

“Mother India” and the Family

As Graham Day and Andrew Thompson observe, terms such as “Mother India,” “mother tongue,” and “homeland” associate the “intimacies and warmth of the family home” (123) with the nation. Just as the family is seen as an inevitable, “natural” unit of human organization, the nation uses the family metaphor when it wishes to “take on the same air of disinterested solidarity” (Anderson qtd. in Day and Thompson 119). However, this metaphor relies on a division between so-called public and private spheres (civil and domestic). From this division, nationalism can then “delineate supposedly separate sets of identification and agencies throughout the subject and nation’s mediating spheres of civil society” (Schultheis 73). In other words, these divisions allow the nation to regulate political functions without appearing to do so, concealing their operations within seemingly “natural” fault lines in social organization. However, the image of Mother India describes not the state actors themselves, but rather the territory of the nation which the post-independence state is always already “guarding” from threatening outside forces. The land becomes a female body, which must be protected within a discourse of post-independence Indian nationalism. The formative notion of India and Pakistan as states, Veena Das notes, arose through “the rightfull reinstating of proper kinship by recovering women from the other side” (21), exemplified by the Inter-Dominion Agreement of 1947 and the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act of 1949 (24–5). The distinction between male state actors and female national territory arises partly from what Pheng Cheah refers to as “the nationalist desire to inspirit and transform the existing state structure in the nation’s image” (3). In other words, the state must be male and its territory female in order to justify the goals of the nation. Moreover, the bourgeois state element, Fanon observes, “turns its back more and more on the interior and on the real facts of its undeveloped country, and tends to look toward the former mother country and the foreign capitalists who count on its obliging compliance” (157). To attain freedom and individual fulfillment, the nation constructs an image of the territory of “Mother India” characterized by industrial progress, modeled on the former mother country. This construction demonstrates the malleability of the family image, which is used to naturalize the political configuration of capitalism: Mother India, the supposedly inviolable and pure territory, is actually the unspoken site of industrialization.

Such an idea of the nation arises from the re-creation of the private sphere within the context of Indian nationalism. For middle-class Indian women, the new national identity both constrains and enables their subjectivity. On the one hand, they are bound by a “new patriarchy […] different from the ‘traditional order’ but also explicitly claiming to be different from the ‘Western’ family” (Chatterjee 220). On the other hand, some of the qualities that constitute their sense of place within the national imaginary—“orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting and hygiene, and the ability to run the household” (247)—presume a privileged place within a private household, securing their bodies from unrestrained use by the market. In other words, the household itself, for middle-class Indian women, is a physical and social shield against extreme forms of systemic exploitation.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that middle-class subjects are never the target of exploitative violence; rather, I want to draw our attention to how the family, as a symbolic aspect of the national imaginary, presumes and retrenches the Indian female subject along lines of caste and class. Such a retrenchment, significantly, omits the tribal subject, who gains no protection from this unit of social division. Instead, her body is “the last instance in a [capitalist] system whose general regulator is still the loan: user’s
capital, imbricated, level by level, in national, industrial, and transnational global capital" (Spivak 101–02). Douloti’s family is entirely provisional (and thus unsafe) in its structural integrity. The family’s life is one of unremitting toil. The bondservant condition pays nominal heed to capitalist phraseology in its use of terms such as wages, labor, and interest; in reality, it is an ineradicable slavery from which Ganori is unable to escape. Far from being secure from the intervention of the state, members of Douloti’s family are trapped in a continuous and omnipresent caste hierarchy that mocks the distinction between public and private spheres; the latter terms have no relevance because hegemony intrudes into every aspect of their lives, public or private. The landlord is naturalized in his oppression of bondservants:

On the high-caste boy’s forehead he writes property, land, cattle, trade. Education, job, contract. On the outcaste’s forehead he writes bondservancy. The sun and the moon move in the sky by Fate’s rule. The poor boys of Scora village become kamiyas [bondservants] of the Munabars, Fate’s rule. (22)

The family unit offers the tribals no protection from exploitation, just as it offered no protection from British colonial occupation; in both instances, the tribals remain below the register of public discourse, excluded from any participation in nationhood or the material prosperity of independence. Tellingly, Douloti herself does not surface until the reader has accessed the lengthy history of the Nagesia family, and thus, the structural condition of oppression into which she is born: the novella ironizes the presumed individuation of its own title by demonstrating the material and social constraints on Douloti herself. In other words, Douloti’s story is coextensive with the story of her family’s structural oppression as tribals. Conditions for her uncle Bono in the mines and in town are no different from being a bondservant:

Government—une [union]—contractor—slum landlord—market-trader—shopkeeper—post office, each is the other’s friend. Down in the mine! How dark down there! And at week’s end, double darkness above the mine as well. The contractor’s hoods stood with guns. They snatched the money. We got it only after they took their cut.

(Devi 25)

The collusion between industries demonstrates the problem with development projects in India: growth in “core sectors” such as mining has increased “the gap between the haves and the have-nots [tribals],” who have borne “the brunt of the development paradigm of the first four decades in India” (Lobo 285). Neither Bono, the fugitive, nor her father Ganori “Crook” Nagesia, his back broken by the cruelty of Munabar, has any hope of escaping the cycle of bondservancy.

Douloti’s lack of protection from the industrial exploitation of post-independence India is magnified when Paramananda takes her to the Madhupura district, ostensibly to marry her but actually to entrap her in a life of bondservancy. When she arrives in Madhupura, she encounters elements of urban living that have remained completely unknown to her thus far. Ill from the “stink of diesel,” she has “never seen such an arrangement … for relieving yourself, that is too surrounded by a tin wall” (51). Douloti’s unfamiliarity with urban life dramatizes the gap between rural and urban experience, foreshadowing her eventual entry into urban subjecthood as violent, not emancipatory. Industrialized images symbolize Douloti’s alienation, instances of “worked” or processed material that has undergone a radical transformation in order to be “useful” within the economy of material consumption. Diesel, a liquid fuel that powers engines of various kinds, is commonly distilled from petroleum, whereas tin is a chemical used in many alloys, such as cans and walls. To be useful, each must be transformed through a specific industrial process; it is to these details that Douloti’s cognition is drawn, not any sense of cosmopolitan possibility within the urban environment. Moreover, this description anchors Douloti’s experience to bodily sensation, both in explicit and implicit form: the body, sick from the stench of diesel, is also the body that will excrete within a confined space made of tin, before eating the kind of rich food that outcasts can only afford on national holidays. More broadly, the scene evokes the industrial waste wrought by global capitalism in India, which Rana Dasgupta describes in Capital: urban space populated by “abandoned buildings with broken windows” and steps that “just out like rusty teeth” within a “wasteland” of brick houses, permeated by “toxic black smoke” (427, 447). While Dasgupta is writing of Delhi, the resonance with Douloti’s experience demonstrates the reach and impact of industrialization even outside the city: although the town where Douloti is held prisoner is not large, it bears the hallmarks of the industrialized urban space, juxtaposing physical isolation and enclosure with the open flow of human “goods” in the bonded labor industry. Where she was once merely an aspect of her childhood household, Douloti is now in the process of changing into an “individual” within the urban symbolic register, but an individual marked exclusively by market exploitation and subjective erasure.

The modernity of global capitalism, which middle-class Indian citizens presume they can inherit without consequence (Dasgupta 435), here gives way to nothing but the detritus of industrialization that marks Douloti’s own violent transformation. As is characteristic of Spivak’s translation, English words for which there are no easy equivalent in Bengali appear in italics (diesel, tin), a way to call out the absorption of capitalist rhetoric into the schema of bondservant oppression: the visibility of these words in the text corresponds to their intrusion into Douloti’s narrative experience. The tin wall that has previously inspired wonder now takes the form of the tin box that Paramananda hands to her, along with saris, necklaces, bangles, and
other items of dress (56). At this point, Douloti begins to question the plans of Paramananda, just as the third-person narrative voice provides Douloti with a sense of the larger social context as conceptually impenetrable, a thing from which she stands apart and in which she can find no image of herself: “It’s hard to understand this god’s plans. Will he keep Douloti here after marriage? In this kind of room with brick walls all around and clay tiles on the roof?” (52). Later, Douloti’s body becomes the object of transformation: her hair is knotted, “white stuff rubbed on her face, on her hands, and feet designs with red dye, finally that fine sari, fine blouse” (57). The narrative drops into the imprecision of “stuff” to indicate Douloti’s lack of comprehension, then switches to a form of irony through the mocking repetition of “fine sari, fine blouse.” The novella invokes the language of daily commerce while also reinforcing the pervasiveness of the discourses at work, shaping Douloti, in this moment before her trauma. When the process of dressing is complete, Douloti is handed a mirror, but cannot recognize herself (57). Douloti, the raw material, has undergone the first stage in industrial transformation, faced with the abiding alienness of the image that mirrors and doubles her, an image clothed in a wedding sari, linking marriage with the act of rape. The image of herself in the mirror, which she has failed to recognize a short while ago, now becomes the target of assault, as she is raped by Latia, the wealthy government contractor whose “sexual hunger is boundless” (58):

Douloti the daughter of Ganori alias Crook Nagesia of Seora village seemed to look upon another Douloti, dressed up in a peacock-blue silk-cotton wedding sari, sitting 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)

The violence of urban transformation surfaces in the juxtaposition of the old Douloti, from the rural village of Seora, with a new self that she does not recognize, produced in the environment of Madhupura where the logic of urban exploitation is now brought to bear directly on her body. Although the space is not itself urban, it partakes of the same discourse in which tribal bodies are part of a national-wide capitalist “flow.” The rich apparel, the wedding sari, is both the symbol of Douloti’s entrapment—Paramananda represents himself in Seora as a wealthy philanthropist—and coextensive with her status as a commodity to be exploited through sexual violence. Moreover, this violence alludes to her family history, the economic and caste hierarchy of the Nagesia family, in which her father acquired the name “Crook” through an act of cruelty on the part of his owner. Through this allusion to the family history of bondservancy, the novella allows Douloti, in her “dread,” to recognize the violence of her abduction by Paramananda, and thus her presence in this unmarked urban environment where she will be the repeated target of routine sexual assault; this is a trauma that, as a low-caste subject, she is expected to endure as a matter of course (Kara 174). The narrator asks: “Are the spectator Douloti and the tortured Douloti becoming one?” (Dev 58). Immediately, we receive the answer: “The two Doulotis became one and a desperate girl’s voice cracked out in terrible pain” (58). No dissociation is possible for Douloti, as urban discourse allows the elite to use money to enact and naturalize the trauma of the tribal kamiya: “Here everybody fears him. Latia has behaved like this before. This way is natural for him” (58). Latia, the wealthy contractor, is able both to “redefine social frontiers within the city” and to create “exclusive spaces for the rich and powerful” (Driekens and Mermer 16).

Both Latia and Paramananda use the symbol of the family as a cover for the maintenance of unrestrained market capitalism in the relative anonymity of the Madhupura brothel. No trace exists here of urban space as the “site of personal autonomy and political possibilities” (Ali and Rieker 3). Instead, Douloti’s dislocation becomes evidence of the cultural and economic possibilities that are mutually exclusive of rural tribal subjectivity. In other words, she is exiled to non-presence, enmeshed in a deregulated system of urban traffic in which her body circulates freely as a commodity. Both her body, in the function of prostitute, and the circulation of her body within a closed system of traffic between male “customers,” are part of the unstated foundation for the material prosperity that informs the narrative of urban development. In this configuration, the town of Madhupura acquires the urban “character” of a city space. Following Douloti’s first rape, Rampiyari, the administrator of the brothel, naturalizes the exploitation of tribals: “They catch you to make you a kamiya ... This is called bonded labor” (59). This conversation takes place in a room reserved for the valued clients (59), the same space in which Latia has just violated Douloti, but which subordinates, in the text, to the equivocating language of capitalism, using the client-server exchange to describe rape. Douloti thus falls outside of the nationalist discourse of productive development; she cannot situate herself within a benign family collective that would normally allow the ideal urban citizen-subject to constitute herself, in her elite consumer status, as the “definitive citizen” (Spivak 99). The tribal men are severely oppressed but have some limited access to the social registers as consumers; however, badly Douloti’s uncle Bono suffers in the mines (Dev 24-5), he is still able to escape. By contrast, the female bondslaves of Mahaweta’s story have no money of their own, and are consequently invisible as citizens in the urban consumer economy. Moreover, they do not have homes distinct from their place of “work”: the same place that would normally constitute the “private” sphere of a family dwelling is now a place where the woman’s body is completely exposed to unrestrained market forces. Effectively, their bodies are “the last instance on the chain of affective responsibility” (Spivak 102). This exposure works in conjunction with coercion at the level of the experience of time, which is crucial to the naturalization of bondservancy.
In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson famously traces the formation of national consciousness to the eighteenth-century rise of print culture (specifically, the novel and the paper). For Anderson, this formation involves a break from an older, medieval notion of “messianic” time in which “the here and the now is no longer a mere link in an earthly chain of events” but instead “simultaneously something which has always been, and will be fulfilled in the future” (Auerbach qtd. in Anderson 24). By contrast, the new time is homogenous, empty, and blank, defined by “temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar” (Anderson 24); in this way, it is “a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history” (25). The novel, for Anderson, amply demonstrates the pervasiveness of empty time in its tacit assumption of shared cultural and national knowledge, as well as “the absence of those precatory genealogies, often ascending to the origin of man, which are so characteristic a feature of ancient chronicles, legends, and holy books” (26, ft. 39). Arguing that modern nations progress sequentially from eternal time to empty time, Anderson engages in a close reading of the opening pages of Rizal’s *Noli me Tangere*, in which he notes that

> casual progression ... from the “interior” time of the novel to the “exterior” time of the [Manila] reader’s everyday life gives a hypnotic confirmation of the solidity of a single community, embracing characters, authors and readers, moving onward through calendrical time. (27)

My reading of “Douloti the Bountiful” demonstrates that in the context of postcolonial India, *both* forms of time are key components in the urban trauma of the tribal subject, the means by which the national narrative consigns the body of the kamiya (bondslave) to non-presence. This demonstration surfaces both in Douloti’s experience of time as a kamiya and in the novella’s narrative mode, which formally undermines the comfortable sense of progress that undergirds Indian nationalism. Eternal time is not, as Anderson suggests, an outmoded form of apprehending history that modern nationalism has eradicated, but rather in active partnership with empty homogenous time, providing the unspoken yet crucial means of conducting the business of industrial exploitation in urban spaces. Paramananda, Latia, and Munabahr, representatives of the new capitalist regime, consciously deploy the rhetoric of divine ordination within eternal time to justify tribal enslavement, a notion that the tribals themselves internalize: “It’s fate’s decree to become a kamiya. Our Lord Fate comes to write fate on the forehead of the newborn in the dress of a head-shaved brahman. No one can evade what he writes down” (Devi 22). When the women of the brothel discuss Bono’s exhortation to end bondslavery, Rampiyar claims that “it is written in the great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata that ending bonded labor is against religion” (81). Here, we see supposedly antiquated notions of eternal time operating side by side with notions of progress, education, and the calendrical march of the nation through history. When asked why he does not take his business into town, Latia scornfully retorts: “What an idea! In the jungle area everything is profit. Tribal and outcaste labor is so cheap” (65). However, it is quite clear that Latia does indeed take “his business” into town by consuming tribal bodies in anonymous urban spaces; moreover, the logic of unrestrained capitalism—exploitative profit from tribal “labor”—is itself a product of the industrialization of urban space. Douloti and the rest of the female bondslaves are conditioned to perceive time as eternal, rather than sequential, even though it is precisely the sequential progression of events that leads to her abduction and trauma.

**Urban Space and Tribal Effacement**

If industrial exploitation is the means by which urban space disables the tribal subject’s sense of self, it also demonstrates the extent to which the rhetoric of urban space—unrestrained market capitalism—suffuses and contaminates all spaces. After Douloti becomes a kamiya, the story goes on to offer “an uncompromising and harrowing portrayal of systematized gendered exploitation” over the sixteen remaining years of Douloti’s life (Majumdar 158). As Majumdar notes:

> The brothel caters to its clientele with the free labor provided by women like Douloti, who are all bonded to Paramanand. Apart from rare instances when a rich client pays enough for maintaining exclusive rights to one woman, the women are made to serve numerous clients every day. The only payment that they receive in return is their poor quality of room and board. In a few years when the women prematurely age with overwork and venereal diseases, they are thrown out of the brothel, leaving them with the only option of becoming beggars. (158)

Douloti is exiled from the calendrical progress of history, and from the nation itself. However, this exile is not merely a straightforward critique of the violence of nationalism; the novella dramatizes the plight of the tribal subject at both thematic and formal levels. When the text comments directly on Douloti’s place in the larger system of bondslavery, it frequently detaches both from Douloti’s focalization and the unnamed third-person narrator. For example, Rampiyari’s mocking rejoinder to Douloti that “you too are a whore now” (59) is followed by an unattributed stanza of poetry in which the fate of kamiyas is naturalized and explicitly tied to the land. The stanza occurs twice, leaving the reader unclear as to who is speaking. Repeatedly, the text moves in and out of realist convention, slipping into the psychic space between narrator and speaking subject that, quite appropriately, is not part of the ostensible narrative. Thoughts, assertions, reflections on myth and fate, and bitter satire
of the dynamics of bondslavery all appear in the narrative margin, accentuated by Spivak's italics to indicate industrial words borrowed from English in her translation of the Bengali text. The dispersal of ethical commentary is another aspect of the kamiya, alienated from her surroundings in the context of Indian capitalism: in the market town, only the male purveyors of human goods can freely circulate, whereas the kamiya are imprisoned in partitioned rooms until age and disease lead to expulsion and then death.

Urban space is thus not the city as the site of subjective potential, but rather the violent containment, both within and outside cities, of an anonymous partitioned room, where raw material is concentrated and molded into the desired shape, then cast away once it is no longer useful. Douloti's experience is not unique to the unnamed market town in which she is captive (most likely Madhpura town itself, although the novella omits direct mention of the name). The violated body of the tribal kamiya is isolated in an unmarked room, within the maze of streets that evidence no cosmopolitan sense of possibility. Rather, the mobility and fluidity of the masculine subject—Paramananda, the slave trafficker, Latia, the contractor—enable a profound dislocation, the destruction of subjective integrity as well as a series of everyday traumatic violations for Douloti, who becomes the replacement for Somni, an older bondslave now too ill to "work" as frequently as Paramananda wants. Within this confined space, the subject disappears into the annihilating logic of market capitalism, to the exclusion of all sense of nationalist rhetoric or any distinction between forms of time. When Somni wanders around asking if famine will come soon, it is an indication of desperate poverty: if a famine occurs, she can send her children to the orphanage and out of bondslavery. But it is also a figuration of her withdrawal from "civilized" market relations into a state of being that acknowledges only the primacy of nature: the cycle of famine and plenty is eternal and has no place in nationalist discourse. Consequently, Somni is unable to identify with the construct of the Indian nation, a dislocation that gains a particular traumatic resonance in the anonymous semi-urban space of the market town. One day, she overhears that "someone called India" is fighting some China" (63), a reference to the India-China war of 1962. However, the concept of India as a nation is unintelligible to Somni and the other kamiya, condemned as they are to the cycle of bondslavery. India and China are reduced to individuals in physical combat, personifying only the relation bondslaves can fathom: face-to-face aggression between two people, an echo of the direct, interpersonal violence of the customer–kamiya relation. Here, relationality does not evoke the cosmopolitan narrative of self-discovery, with urban space as "the site of modern citizen-making" (Ali and Rieker 3), but rather the absorption of the subject into the hegemony of capitalist relation, producing a disposable body "whose existence in the city is underwritten by forms of degraded and destructive labour" (Rao 269).

By implication, the trauma of industrialization has created a different "someone called India" in the person of the bondslave, for whom violence marks entry into a state that eradicates personhood through repeated, naturalized trauma:

"Douloti the Bountiful" reveals that women become an exploited material resource—raw material and labor folded into one—in the economic formation of the postcolonial nation as well as its graphically and ideologically embedded an image of a traumatized woman is to the postcolonial nation.
trauma is bereft of the “ironical intimacy” that, for Anderson, marks the modern novel’s relationship to national identity (28). Interiority disappears for good just as Douloti is expelled from the enclosure of the brothel, the formal solidification of the text’s thematic critique of the urban language of unrestrained market exploitation. Mahasweta juxtaposes references to the Indian Emergency of 1975–1976 (during which the government suspended civil rights on the pretext of defending the nation’s security) with Douloti’s abject state of withdrawal into her own bodily trauma: sick with venereal disease, unable to eat much or “take clients” (90). The diseased tribal body, now no longer useful within the circuit of exploitation that first molded it into a “suitable” shape, is summarily discarded; although the tribal farm-workers agitate for fair wages, “Douloti didn’t know this news” (90).

Instead of the seamless passage from interior novel time to exterior reader time, the novel skillfully disrupts all sense of progressive time, drawing the reader into an intimacy that is at once visceral, aestheticized, and traumatic. Brothel, bus, Tohir hospital—all locales blur together within the narrative, which pauses from unmarked conversations between those around Douloti only to offer chilling descriptions of more things being done to her: while she is unconscious at the hospital, the sweepers rob her of the little money she has, and the doctors and nurses discuss her condition in her presence, before revealing that they do not have the facilities to treat the tuberculosis and unspecified venereal diseases from which she suffers (91–2). Urban space is thus the site at which the body of the tribal is known and yet effaced.

In tracing the connection between industrial exploitation, urban space, and forms of time in “Douloti the Bountiful,” I want to reposition the story as more than simply the product of Mahasweta’s decades-long activism on behalf of the tribal community in India. Spivak, as one of Mahasweta’s major translators, is careful to note that she has made little or no attempt to soften the edges and transitions from Bengali to English. As a result, the prose style of “Douloti the Bountiful” risks being submerged to the story’s activist concerns in the genres of testimonial and protest fiction. My point is not to imply that testimonial has no aesthetic resonance or instability as a medium of representation, but to remind us that critical interpretations of texts centered on tribal or Dalit concerns tend to treat such literature as transparent expressions of identity, with aesthetics and form absent. Moreover, the challenging representation of Douloti’s experience of time is part of how Mahasweta’s story resists the attempt to erase tribal experience within the development rhetoric of contemporary Indian nationalism; such a representation, I have suggested, is as aesthetic as it is political. If postcolonial Indian nationalism elides the conceptual space to imagine the experience of tribal women in relation to the machinery of urban development, “Douloti the Bountiful” recuperates that space in its critique of the market logic of industrial capitalism, culminating in the dead body of Douloti spread across a map of India, “putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited all the blood in its desiccated lungs” (93). One could certainly express discomfort with the parallel between the violence done to the body of Douloti by her captors and rapists and the violence that the narrative foregrounds in its closing pages; Mahasweta may be at risk of instrumentalizing Douloti as the paradigmatic tribal body and providing no way forward for the tribal figure herself. But it is precisely this hegemonic erasure that the novella is so invested in challenging. If rural and semi-rural spaces can be contaminated by the rhetoric of urban development, this closing scene demonstrates the potential for an inverse effect: the resurgence of the rural body, the refusal of that body to be contained and effaced within urban logics. The novella, I suggest, rejects the non-selfhood that awaits the tribal woman, transferring Douloti’s body from the anonymous urban realm into the national narrative by returning her body to rural space—to the village in which she grew up. Douloti, the tribal kamiya for whom the image of the nation as family is neither natural nor naturalized, is unable to become the citizen-subject of postcolonial India. However, her death signifies the extent to which the uncontested corporeality of countless “Doulotis” is already in the process of creating a different version of India, in which the inequities of industrialized urban life can no longer be concealed. Ultimately, the novella establishes a connection between the disruption of the tribal subject’s experience of time, on the margins of postcolonial Indian nationalism, and the pervasive capitalist logic of urban space, the unrelenting penetration of market forces into all facets of tribal experience. In this penetration, bonded labor negotiates the subjection of the tribal using the language of industrial exploitation, creating an India that is unintelligible to Douloti, Somni, and the rest of the bondslaves, when they wonder who India is, and who this person is fighting. Their exclusion from the national narrative denies them conceptual access to the idea of a national collectivity, implicating cosmopolitan individual agency in the production of urban trauma.

Douloti’s corpse dramatizes and exposes the end result of the “processed” tribal body, the detritus of industrialized urban development, which assumes that “the rights of the urban poor ... are a kind of wealth that can be spent in the process of creating the market for space” and within which “[t]he wasted lives of the poor, their expendability and debasement, constitutes this foundational logic of the future” (Rao 275). In contrast to the idealized Mother India figure, Douloti is not fertile but dying, reproducing not offspring but disease, a radical challenge to the sanitized history taught in the primary school where her body is discovered: the market logic that processed and destroyed Douloti now has “no room ... for planting the standard of the Independence flag” (93). The empty homogenous time of modern nationhood encounters a direct challenge in Douloti’s corpse, which emerges as “something eternal, something omnitemporal, something already consummated in the realm of fragmentary earthly event” (Auerbach qtd. in Anderson 24). Paradoxically, this clash between empty and eternal time gestures to the future: Douloti, the rural kamiya destroyed by urban exploitation, gains meaning by dying in a village, not in a city, becoming the paradigmatic example of “an ecology of new spatial forms that have created new layers of obsolescence, decay, vacancy, and a sense of temporariness underneath the skin of the existing built fabric” (Rao 271). Douloti’s body, “all over” the nation, reveals her
own corporeality and irreducibility of experience, replacing cosmopolitan mobility with the traumatized body of the tribal bondservant, the product of urban logic that has become, in the end, “someone called India.”

Notes

1. Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, for example, positions the city as the nostalgic site for a multicultural plurality that is both masculinist and culturally elitist. Bharati Mukherjee’s Miss New India dramatizes the domestication of violence within the family unit, but offers Anjali the implausible mobility of a rich white benefactor, Peter Campion, who allows her to escape the intolerable arranged marriage to her rapist within the urban landscape of Bangalore: the world of call centers, potential, and “(the novel uses the term repeatedly)” “flight and angles” (39).

2. In both Midnight’s Children and Miss New India, urban experience is critiqued but ultimately recuperated by the national narrative: Saleem Saleem laments the downfall of the plurality of Bombay, exiled to the picket factory from which he narrates India’s emergence as a nation, while Anjali finds herself working as a debt collector, marveling at the endless web of possibilities that constitute “the wonders of the world” in which she somehow managed to survive (Mukherjee 325).

3. Even writers who use the concept of the family to challenge the nation—Amitav Ghosh, for example, asserts that “writing about families is one way of not writing about the nation (or other restrictively imagined collectivities)” (Ghosh and Chakrabarty 147)—accord this configuration power by virtue of focus. Furthermore, one could argue that a novel such as The Shadow Lines privileges a form of cosmopolitan urban experience that depends on the gendered silencing of the female subject within the family. Ghosh outlines a subjectivity predicated on the self’s ability to imagine different worlds outside the family without having to engage in physical travel; as the cosmopolitan world-traveller, Tridib moves freely through various spaces, cultures, and times, retaining his sense of self because “the place does not merely exist” and “has to be invented in one’s imagination” (21). By contrast, his cousin Ila is little more than a pathetically deficient figure whose attempts to negotiate an independent self are never more obviously futile than when the narrator declares to her: “You cannot live free of me […] If I were to die tomorrow you would not be free of me. You cannot be free of me because I am within you just as you are within me” (89). Ila’s place, then, remains within the family, but this place gestures to a broader problem: it is difficult to speak of the “private” sphere of the family as an autonomous haven for individuality, because it has never actually been a free space for women.

4. As Jatin Gajarvala observes: “Dalit literature is largely understood as the unmediated expression of Dalit identity, now legible in modern narrative and poetic forms. Aesthetic and formal considerations of such texts, therefore, have been subordinated to these political aims, if not eradicated entirely.” (3).

Works Cited
