

# Body, Text, Materiality: Reading the Gendered Subaltern

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## **Summary**

Feminist concerns about the political consequences of a focus on the material body as an interpretable text continue to be of importance in postcolonial studies. In this paper I argue that the work of postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak<sup>1</sup> offers examples of a mode of reading that uses what Judith Butler calls the “sexed specificity of the female body” to mark the limits of existing discourses of analysis and of resistance, but without finally grounding that reading in a concept of materiality which escapes the discursive. Without implying that there is anything illusory, or “merely” discursive, about women’s pain and the materiality of the body, Spivak’s readings of the suffering women of Mahasweta Devi’s stories enable a powerful understanding of the construction of that materiality. The paper gives an account of two of Spivak’s readings of Devi stories, and links them to her deployment, in a third essay, of motherhood as a metaphor both for a politics of responsibility, accessible to the subaltern woman, and for the ethical relationship between the subaltern woman and the metropolitan feminist.

## **Opsomming**

Feministiese gemoeidheid met die politieke gevolge van ’n ingesteldheid op die stoflike liggaam as ’n interpreteerbare teks, is steeds van belang in postkoloniale studies. In hierdie referaat betoog ek dat die werk van die postkoloniale teoretikus, Gayatri Spivak,<sup>1</sup> voorbeelde bied van ’n leeswyse wat gebruik maak van wat Judith Butler noem die “geslagspesifisiteit van die liggaam van die vrou” om die beperkinge van bestaande diskoerse van analise en van weerstand aan te wys, maar sonder om daardie vertolking finaal te vestig in ’n konsep van stoflikheid wat die diskursiewe ontkom. Sonder om te impliseer dat daar enigiets denkbeeldigs, of “slegs” diskursiefs, oor vroue se pyn en die stoflikheid van die liggaam bestaan, verskaf Spivak se lees van die lydende vrou in Mahasweta Devi se verhale ’n sterk begrip van die samestelling van daardie stoflikheid. Die referaat gee ’n verslag van twee van Spivak se vertolkings van verhale deur Devi, en verbind hulle met haar ontplooiing van moederskap as ’n metafoor van beide, ’n politiek van verantwoordelikheid – toeganklik vir die ondergeskikte vrou – en die etiese verhouding tussen die ondergeskikte vrou en die metropolitaanse vrou, soos in ’n derde essay verwoord.

In the opening chapter of *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler encapsulates feminist resistance to poststructuralism in three frequently asked questions: “If everything is discourse, what happens to the body? If everything is text, what about violence and bodily injury? Does anything *matter* in or for poststructuralism?” (1993: 28). Butler is concerned to counter the assumptions which underlie such questions – the assumption, in particular, that “constructedness and materiality [are] necessarily oppositional notions” (p. 28). She does this in philosophical terms, via a reading of Irigaray, arguing that the material has traditionally been figured as feminine, and that the feminine is inescapably inside patriarchal discourse in the sense that it is its constitutive outside. In an earlier essay, she provides a characteristically incisive account of the effects of this association of the feminine and the material: she argues that masculinity

seeks to safeguard its own disembodied status through identifying women generally with the bodily sphere. Masculine disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities. If women *are* their bodies (to be distinguished from “existing” their bodies, which implies living their bodies as projects or bearers of created meanings), if women are only their bodies, if their consciousness and freedom are only so many disguised permutations of bodily need and necessity, then women have, in effect, exclusively monopolized the bodily sphere of life. By defining women as “Other”, men are able through the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies, to make themselves other than their bodies – a symbol potentially of human decay and transience, of limitation generally – and to make their bodies other than themselves.

(Butler 1987: 133)

To insist on the irreducibility of the sexed female body, then, is to risk playing straight into the hands of this masculine bid for the ultimate power: that of transcendence of the material and hence of mortality itself. At the same time, the physical abuse or exploitation of the female body – clitoridectomy, rape, prostitution, forced sterilisation, excessive childbearing – is a matter of the utmost political urgency. International feminism needs to find a way of talking about the body which neither reduces materiality to the discursive nor sees the material as outside of discourse.

I believe that the work of postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak offers examples of a poststructuralist and feminist reading which uses the “sexed specificity of the female body” (Butler 1993: 28) to mark the limits of existing discourses of analysis and of resistance, but without finally grounding her reading in a concept of materiality which escapes the discursive. Without implying that there is anything illusory, or “merely” discursive, about women’s pain and the materiality of the body, her readings of the suffering

women of Mahasweta Devi's stories enable a powerful understanding of the construction of that materiality. Of course "reading" here does not mean only the reading of written texts, but also of social and psychosexual ones, as well as of the text which is the potentially interpretable materiality of the body.

My first example will be Spivak's extensive commentary on Mahasweta's story "Stanadayini" ("Breast Giver"), a commentary which uses the figure of Jashoda to mark the limits of a number of interpretive and explanatory discourses, but without, I believe, implying that the subaltern body, because it cannot be fully comprehended within our existing discourses, is therefore outside of discourse or unconstructed. This is a Lyotardian gesture towards the unrepresentable, not an attempt to separate constructedness and materiality.

Jashoda is a wetnurse, a "professional mother" (Spivak 1988a: 222) whose husband, a Brahmin but poor – caste and class are completely discontinuous in this society – is accidentally crippled by the son of the wealthy Haldar family. Jashoda becomes wetnurse for the Haldars, her body conceptualised – by herself and others – in terms of a tradition of absolute female and maternal self-abnegation:

Jashoda is fully an Indian woman, whose unreasonable, unreasoning, and unintelligent devotion to her husband and love for her children, whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women from Sati-Savitri-Sita through Nirupa Roy and Chand Osmani.

(Spivak 1988a: 226)

But this body is also understood in materialist terms as the means of production: "At night when Kangalicharan started to give her a feel she said: 'Look. I'm going to pull our weight with these. Take good care how you use them'" (Spivak 1988a: 228). In order to do her work as wetnurse (which requires an endless flow of milk) Jashoda, already a mother of three, bears seventeen more children and suckles thirty of the Haldar offspring. Her feckless husband becomes a hanger-on at the temple of Shiva, dedicated in particular to "the Lionseated goddess ... the Mother-goddess of Shakti-power" (p. 223), deifying motherhood while his own wife lives motherhood as exploitation but experiences it as fulfilment. Eventually Jashoda's abused breasts develop cancer, and she dies an appalling death.

Spivak looks at this story through the lenses provided by four different possible theoretical approaches: the author's own reading of the story, buttressed by the presumed authority of the authorial voice; a Marxist-feminist reading, a reading from within Western liberal feminism and a reading informed by the poststructuralist tenets of late twentieth-century French feminist theory. In each case the chosen discourse proves inadequate to capture fully what Spivak has elsewhere called the "ethical singularity"

(1995: xxiv)<sup>2</sup> of the gendered subaltern in all the specificity of her constructed materiality. Understanding this becomes, among other things, a guard against the easy appropriation of “third world literature”, a realisation that Western theory can *both* read this literature in potentially illuminating ways and simultaneously be read by it: there is no clear hierarchy in this dialogical relationship.

If the figure of Jashoda cannot be contained by any of these discourses, does this imply that her “sexed specificity” is somehow outside of, prior to, dis-course? I would argue that neither Spivak nor Mahasweta Devi allows for such a reading. It is significant, in the light of the issues Butler identifies, that Jashoda is at first unable to “read” the signs of her body’s disintegration. When the eldest daughter-in-law of the Haldar household notices something alarming about Jashoda’s body, the following dialogue takes place:

“Brahmin sister! Why does the top of your left tit look so red? God! Flaming red!”

“Who knows? It’s like a stone pushing inside. Very hard, like a rock.”

“What is it?”

“Who knows? I suckled so many, perhaps that’s why?”

(Spivak 1988a: 234)

In a later gloss on both this story and the Bhuvaneswari episode in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak comments that “it is parts of the sexed body – menstruation, lactation – that are invested with meaning and yet are not heard and not read” (Spivak 1995: xxvii). Similarly, in a discussion of Harriet Fraad’s analysis of anorexia, she points out that “what she is really talking about is the body as a kind of textualised agency that the anorectic is not able to read correctly” and goes on to emphasise “the idea that we are constituted as subjective agents by reading the body’s signals right” (Spivak 1994: xv). In the case of Jashoda, recognising the body as text does not lead us away from the acknowledgement of “violence and bodily injury”; instead it allows one to see how that textuality and its misreading are the very condition of possibility for physical suffering and exploitation. Far from being the self-knowing subaltern subject, Jashoda is unable to read what one might assume to be the most self-intimating of texts, that of her own body. And this is because she is attempting to read it by way of a discourse of mothering which simply disallows the possibility that nurturing may be synonymous with the abuse of the body or that her breasts may signify death rather than the giving of life. Affective coding<sup>3</sup> within a particular discourse of Indian motherhood has written her body for her in such a way that other forms of bodily “writing”, other material signifiers, become illegible or indecipherable. Rather than being in opposition to textuality, or outside of it, Jashoda’s body is lived as a sort of palimpsest, in which one text overlays, obscures or

disallows another. (Before she dies, however, Jashoda does have a moment of insight into the way in which affective coding creates a false relationship between motherhood as chosen identity and the exploitation of the maternal body: “If you suckle you’re a mother, all lies” (Spivak 1988a: 236)).

If Jashoda is, for the most part, unable to decode the constituting discourses of her own embodiedness, does this imply that a Western observer, outside of the specific ideologies which shape Jashoda’s self-understanding, will be able to provide an ideology-free and hence full and undistorted reading of the text of the gendered subaltern body? Spivak has stated unequivocally that “[third world women’s] access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be *corrected* by our superior theory and enlightened compassion” (1981: 156), and this is one of the essays in which she explores the limits as well as the explanatory power of “superior theory”.

Her opening move is to dispose fairly briskly of Devi’s own interpretation of her story: Devi reads her story as a “parable of India after decolonisation”; Spivak in turn interprets this reading, with its reduction of Jashoda to a metonym for the nation, as itself a parable of the effacement of the subaltern by the narrative of nationalism. In her view, Devi is forced to deny the ethical specificity of her own subaltern character, because “if the story of the rise of nationalist resistance to imperialism is to be disclosed coherently, it is the role of the indigenous subaltern that must be strategically excluded” (Spivak 1988a: 245). For Spivak, far from embodying the postcolonial nation, as Devi would have her do, the figure of Jashoda marks its limits. This is an insight which will be more fully developed in Spivak’s reading of Devi’s later story, “Douloti the Bountiful”.

Next, Spivak moves on to an examination of what an orthodox Marxist-feminist reading can do to illuminate Jashoda’s story. She sums up the “representative generalisation” which might guide such a reading in the following terms: “It is the provision by men of means of subsistence to women during the child-bearing period, and not the sex division of labour itself, that forms the material basis for women’s subordination in class society” (Vogel quoted by Spivak 1988a: 247). The point, presumably, is that what feminism brings to Marxist analysis is an awareness of the exploitation of *reproduction*, since the latter does not produce surplus value and hence provides the basis for a gendered relation of dependency. Spivak points out that Jashoda’s situation reverses this logic: through reproduction she supports her husband who, by giving her children, becomes her “means of production”. But her control over both her body and her husband as means of production is vitiated by her affective coding as the infinitely exploitable maternal nurturer and wife. The ways in which her body is inscribed in culture completely undermine the theoretically liberatory potential implied by either the reversal of the relations of production defined in the Marxist-feminist

quotation or the undermining of the notion that reproductive labour by definition does not produce surplus value. Professional mothering is a culturally specific practice which exceeds the limits of a mode of thought which aspires to universal explanatory power. Spivak makes it clear that her point is not that this exception invalidates or devalues Marxist analysis but that the gendered subaltern cannot be easily recuperated into *any* universalising discourse. What the story reveals is that reversing the sexual division of labour is not necessarily emancipatory or in the interests of justice: rather, the process of reproduction, even when it *is* productive of surplus value, is susceptible to culturally determined idealisation which translates directly into exploitation. Jashoda, “living [her] body as a project, or bearer of created meanings” (Butler 1987: 133), rereads the founding assumptions of Marxist feminism in surprising ways.

Liberal feminism proves equally unable to account adequately for Jashoda, and Spivak’s illustration of this provides her with an opportunity to criticise what she calls “homogenizing and reactive critical descriptions of Third World literatures” (Spivak: 1988a: 253). Such descriptions involve a lack of attention to class- and caste-specificity in postcoloniality, the creation of a homogenising category – “Third World Women” – and a tendency to position all such women in relation to Western feminist concerns with individual emancipation. Assuming Jashoda as an individualist feminist heroine effaces “indigenous class formation under imperialism and its connection to the movement towards women’s social emancipation” (p. 254). As Spivak points out in a much later comment, the figure of Jashoda “is at a distance from the gradual emancipation of the bourgeois female” (1993: 49). In fact, it is the exploitation of Jashoda’s body that enables the comprador-class women of the Haldar household to “move into a species of reproductive emancipation seemingly outside of patriarchal control” (p. 255). Her suffering is the very condition of possibility of their freedom: an insight which liberal feminism, naming as “third-world woman” the elite women of postcolonial nations and diasporas, helps to obscure.

Finally, Spivak reads “Stanadayini” in relation to French feminist theory – specifically, in relation to Lacanian notions of *jouissance*. Here she is subjecting to critique one of her own most useful theoretical insights – the idea, developed in “French Feminism in an International Frame” (1981), that clitoral “excess” can be theorised as the possibility of an entirely different social, material and symbolic order.<sup>4</sup> As so often, her rereading does not invalidate her earlier conclusion, but adds a warning, an awareness of the limits and dangers of an enabling position. Here, almost as a black joke, Spivak reminds us that the excess of pleasure that escapes the reproductive circle is not the only excess the sexed female body can produce: the inscription of Jashoda’s body within the text of professional foster-mothering

produces another kind of excess altogether – that of the metastasising cancer-cells.

Finally, though indirectly, Spivak uses Jashoda's story to signal the limitations of Western psychoanalytic theory as a universal narrative. She does this primarily by invoking the notion of what she calls elsewhere "alternative psychobiographies" – the reminder that "[t]here are many accesses to the mother-child scene" (Spivak 1988a: 264). While a psychoanalytic emphasis on the divided subject is helpful in understanding Jashoda's body as what Spivak calls "the *place* of knowledge rather than the instrument of knowing" (p. 260), the precise terms in which Jashoda lives her body as "bearer of created meanings" cannot be understood through reference to an Oedipal narrative, but rather through the narrative of sanctioned suicide which Spivak examines in her most famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?". This narrative can itself only be understood in the context of a polytheism characterised by the ideological use of goddesses and mythic, heroic women as icons of motherhood. Such icons function to "dissimulate women's oppression" (p. 264) by confusing the gaze from above – the construction of the nurturing subaltern mother as object for exploitation – with the gaze from below – worshipful respect for the divine mother. In this context the final lines of the story become complicated to the point of undecidability: Devi writes: "Jashoda was God manifest, others do and did whatever she thought. Jashoda's death was also the death of God. When a mortal masquerades as God here below she is forsaken by all and she must always die alone" (Spivak 1988a: 240). Earlier she has claimed that "[o]ne must become Jashoda if one suckles the world" (p. 240). Here "Jashoda" stands both for the protagonist of the story and for the mythic mother of Krishna: the ideological confusion between exploitation and worship is clear. But Jashoda's misrecognition of her own exploitation as privilege cannot be simply and patronisingly dismissed as lack of self-knowledge: within the complex dynamics of a regulative narrative of sanctioned suicide, self-sacrifice, even self-destruction, must be recognised simultaneously as the failure of agency inscribed by gender ideology and as "choice". The equation of Jashoda's death with the death of God cannot have either a positive or a negative charge: within this regulative psychobiography choice understood as internalised constraint (Spivak 1993: 231) is still choice, and the denial of self which is suicide is also an assertion of self. Jashoda's "failure" to read the text of her own body is thus only a comparative failure. She cannot recognise her own victimage within the terms of most of the discourses which are available to Western theorists attempting to understand the material and ideological production of gender and gendered affect. And her exclusion from these sources of "self-knowledge" is a genuine problem. But the denial of the validity of her "reading" of her body as bearer of meaning within the terms

of her culturally specific psychobiography is problematic too, since the remedy which offers itself is what Spivak calls “counter-coercion through the orthodoxy of reason” (Spivak 1993: 231). The ending of the story thus marks the site of an aporia, or double-bind, where what is at issue is the “enabling violence” of the rewriting of the sexed subaltern body as bearer of created meanings. Devi’s prose encompasses this aporia in the undecidability of the final sentences of the story, which can equally be read as a satiric exposure of the ironic connection between mother-worship and the material exploitation of mothering or as a sympathetic acknowledgment of the validity of Jashoda’s limited deployment of selfhood and agency within a narrative of sanctioned self-destruction, the paradoxical narrative of suicide, self-obliteration, as “arising out of *tatvajnana* or the knowledge of the “it”-ness of the subject” (Spivak 1988a: 262). The difficult task of respecting the subaltern’s access to the created meanings of her body as text while simultaneously critiquing the ideological construction of those meanings gives rise to the fundamental ambiguity of the story’s ending.

“Woman in Difference” (1993), Spivak’s analysis of Devi’s story “Douloti the Bountiful”, picks up some of the issues raised in her discussion of “Stanadayini” but inflects them with a more overt emphasis on the concerns that characterised much of her work in the 1990s: in particular the complex relationship between gender oppression and struggles for subject status and access to civil rights within the neocolonial state and in the context of the debt-bondage engendered by the workings of global capital. So, where the sexed specificity of Jashoda’s inscription as victim of oppression marks the limits of a range of Western theoretical discourses, Douloti’s does the same for the political discourses of individual rights, legislative justice, national unity, development and class-based liberation struggle – the constitutive discourses of subjecthood (in the political rather than psychoanalytic sense, though the distinction is never absolute) in the postcolonial state.

Douloti’s story echoes Jashoda’s in many respects. She is the beautiful teenaged daughter of Ganori “Crook” Nagesia, a *kamiya* or bonded labourer in the service of Munabar Chandela, the biggest landowner in the vicinity of Nagesia’s home village of Seora. When her father is crippled as a result of being forced to pull Chandela’s ox-cart, he is unable to continue working to pay off the loan that made him the latter’s bondslave. He and his wife are thus not inclined to ask questions when the apparently benevolent Paramananda offers to pay the debt in return for permission to “marry” Douloti. Having purchased her for the price of her father’s release from debt Paramananda forces her into prostitution as a “*kamiya*-whore” in his brothel in Madhpura. Not only does Douloti understand herself to have “taken the yoke of Crook’s bondslavery on her shoulders” (Devi 1995: 73) but she soon becomes hopelessly burdened by debt herself, since her exploiter “lends” her money



for her basic needs and then charges exorbitant interest on this forced loan. Her body is her only means of raising money for this perceived debt. After Paramananda's death his ruthless and venal son forces the *kamiya*-whores to increase the number of clients they service until their bodies are entirely devastated. Finally, too ill to work – and still in her early twenties – Douloti is ejected from the brothel and refused treatment at the local hospital. With a body “hollow with tuberculosis” (p. 90) and ravaged by venereal disease she walks as far as the school in Bira village and collapses in the courtyard. In the morning, the schoolmaster, coming out to raise the flag for the celebration of Independence Day finds her body sprawled across the map of India which the students had drawn in the courtyard – the scandal of bond-slavery and exploited womanhood covering the face of the postcolonial nation.

Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the himalayas, here lies *bonded labor* spread-eagled, *kamiya*-whore Douloti Nagesia's tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs.

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.

(Devi 1995: 93)

Spivak uses this grim story to do a number of things: to measure the distance between Douloti's narrative and the Western feminist narrative of the gradual emancipation of the bourgeois subject of rights, to critique unexamined notions of class-struggle and collective consciousness, and to suggest the need for new ways of understanding community and, above all, responsibility.

Spivak's commentary makes explicit the ways in which Devi uses the figure of Douloti to call into question the idea of collectivity, whether at the level of family, community or nation-state. This is not because either Spivak or Devi are opposed to the *use* of the idea of collectivity in the interests of resistance: Spivak points out that when Devi lists the multiplicitous and heterogeneous tribal communities there are instances where she “rather unexpectedly uses the Bengali word customarily used for ‘society’: *shomaj*” (Spivak 1993: 80) – a word which would be unremarkable if used to describe individual communities but which “undergoes a startling transcoding into a broad collectivity when used in the context of the far-flung *society* of bonded labor” (pp. 80-81). The word thus underwrites the desire for the bonded labourer's access to a potentially progressive collectivity. But the figure of Douloti fractures this collectivity and undermines the whole notion of a chain or hierarchy of collectivities beginning with the family and progressing unproblematically from family through community to nation. Spivak argues

that “[m]any readers still hold the implicit evolutionary assumption, sometimes in contradiction with their overt politics, that the true formation of collectivity travels from the family, through society, into the possibility of the ethicorational abstraction embodied in the nation-state” (Spivak 1993: 81). Douloti, in the specificity of her sexed, gendered and material femaleness, undermines this narrative of progression at all levels.

Spivak has remarked elsewhere that “[w]omen carry internalized the lesson of the exchangeability of the home, the base of identity” (1993: 252). This is nowhere more starkly evident than in the case of Douloti who is literally exchanged for her father’s debt, an exchange made possible by her internalising of gendered concepts of responsibility and self-sacrifice. It is this gender-specific sense of responsibility for her family – a responsibility not in itself ethically negative – that allows for her exploitation and marks her distance from the male victims of the bonded labour system. This difference is revealed in one of the poems scattered throughout the story:

These are all Paramananda’s kamiyas  
Douloti and Reoti and Somni ...  
The boss has turned them into land  
The boss ploughs and ploughs their land and raises the crop  
They are all Paramananda’s kamiyas.

(Spivak 1993: 85)

Where the male bonded labourers work the land, producing resources for “the boss”, the women have become resources, transformed wholly into commodities. And this transformation is made possible by a complex and overdetermined process of the production of the “meaning” of the sexed female body within the context of the family, of the community and of the nation. Spivak suggests that the logic of debt-bondage in a sense reverses the hierarchy family/community/nation, producing a chain which begins with transnational global capital and moves via national industrial capital to local class-based debt-bondage to patriarchal family structures to woman as property to woman’s body as commodity for “absolute sexual and economic exploitation” (Spivak 1993: 82). Rather than the family being “the first step toward collectivity” (p. 81) it is the site of the last stage of a process of fragmentation beginning at the level of the fracturing of global community by colonial and capitalist relations of exploitation. The “meaning” of the sexed female body is thus written within the text of international capitalism. But it is also, as Spivak points out, “the last instance on the chain of affective responsibility” (1993: 82), and changes in relations of exploitation at the level of nation-building are not necessarily the solution to internalised gendering perceived as choice – like Jashoda’s, Douloti’s suffering is structured by gender-specific assumptions about responsibility and sacrifice and this puts

her at a considerable distance from struggles that seek simply to change the economic and political status quo.

The story thus raises a whole cluster of issues. In terms of ethics it suggests the need to rethink responsibility so that it becomes something other than feminine self-abnegation understood as choice. At the same time it offers a nuanced political account of the possibilities and limits of resistance in neo-colonial space. Neil Lazarus has pointed out that Spivak's reading of "Douloti the Bountiful" provides an effective counter to Benita Parry's claim that Spivak ignores and even suppresses accounts of "native resistance". He points out:

For Parry, apparently ... "native agency" betokens Indian resistance to British colonialism .... But the nationalist representation of (anti) colonialism cannot be uncritically affirmed. There is now an abundance of scholarship to suggest that in colonial India, as elsewhere in the colonial world, local struggles and everyday forms of peasant resistance were often entirely divorced from and unassimilable to the "vertical" political concerns of elite anticolonial nationalists.

(Lazarus 1994: 207)

Spivak is not attempting to deny the reality of indigenous resistance nor to underestimate the effectiveness of struggles for national liberation, but to ask the reader to recognise the heterogeneity, stratification and unevenness of that agency and to reveal how constituting the struggle for nationhood as homogenous, works, in Lazarus's words, "to render 'subaltern' a variety of forms of self-understanding, social practice and struggle in India – forms that do not articulate themselves in the language and syntax of national consciousness" (Lazarus 1994: 208). While agreeing with Lazarus's reading as a counter to Parry's charge of denying native agency, I would want to push his argument further and foreground what his account does not – the extent to which, in this story, true subaltern identity-in-difference is structured not by class but by gender.

Certainly, Spivak draws out of Devi's story the complexity of the varieties of "native agency" in resistance to colonial and neocolonial power and the different extent to which various groups have access to the discourses of national liberation. She focuses on a moment which reveals how far the *kamiyas* are from thinking of themselves as "Indian". Latiya is giving a speech intended to rouse in his listeners feelings of national pride and identification:

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

Where, I don't know.

You will never know, bastard motherfucker. China has come to spoil India's honour.

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

(Spivak 1993 : 87)

Behind the comedy is a very serious concern with the gulf between the ideal of national identity and the reality of exclusion. But class and caste alone are not sufficient to structure a relation of complete subalternity in relation to political resistance. The untouchable, Prasad Mohato, forms a militant splinter-party at some distance from "the now weakened legacy of Gandhian nationalism" (1993: 83), and is joined by Douloti's uncle, Bono Nagesia. Devi's gloss on this event is a simple sentence: "Douloti didn't know this news" (p. 83).

What Devi's story, in Spivak's hands, demonstrates is the absolutely relational and contingent nature of subalternity. The male tribal may be in a relation of subalternity to the discourse of religious multiculturalism, by virtue of the State's refusal to define animism as a religion (p. 80). The same individual may (or may not) have a degree of access to the discourses of resistance – may in this respect be not subaltern, but simply "the oppressed".<sup>5</sup> In this story the female body marks the outermost limits of any discourse of collective resistance, any talk of undifferentiated "native agency". In Asha Varadharajan's words, the "body of the gendered subaltern ... emerge[s] within or at the edges of master narratives as the sexual differential they seek to suppress ... the body of woman figures subalternity because it cannot be accommodated either within the modes-of-production narrative or within the relay race between imperialism and independence" (Varadharajan 1995: 107-111). This is not to argue for the irreducibility of bodily experience and bodily suffering but to show how that suffering is the product of woman's simultaneous encoding within and exclusion from the discourses of collectivity and resistance.

Devi's portrayal of Douloti, and Spivak's commentary on that portrayal provide an answer to the objection raised by South African theorist Annamaria Carusi that "locating otherness in the same space as the unrepresentable *leads* to the passivity of the other" (Carusi 1991: 4; my italics). One answer to this would of course be that to place something in the space of the unrepresentable is not to deny its reality or effectiveness, but to acknowledge the limits of one's own epistemology. But another would be to point out that passivity sometimes exists and its determinants need to be recognised. Douloti is almost entirely passive, but not because she, or the flesh-and-blood women she represents, have been theorised as such by postcolonial academics. As Spivak shows, Douloti's lack of the more obvious varieties of agency is structured by a combination of her exclusion from,

indeed lack of understanding of, any discourse of liberation whatsoever and her internalisation of gendered notions of responsibility. As a tribal she has no access to the Law within the neocolonial State engendered by the national liberation movement, and other supposedly progressive discourses, like that of development, not only exclude her but actively dispossess her.<sup>6</sup> As a woman she has no access to the alternative liberation movements which hold out some promise for her uncle and his peers. Her family's extreme poverty enmeshes her father in debt-bondage; her gendered understanding of responsibility ensures that she takes over that burden. Carusi's argument is symptomatic of a perfectly reasonable anxiety that academic theory not be seen to undermine or negate progressive political praxis by calling into question the agency of the oppressed – an anxiety understandably acute in South Africa at the time her article was written. The case of Douloti, though, is a clear illustration of Bruce Robbins's counter-argument: that, while it has become something of a truism that denial of native agency leads to political defeatism and paralysis, it is less frequently remarked that “as a critical procedure or paradigm, the formulaic recovery of inspirational agency may foster political quiescence” (Robbins 1993: 187) – if agency is always discernible, despite the mechanisms of silencing and the ideological distortion of self-knowledge, the latter are not, after all, of such immediate concern to the left-wing critic and need not be so urgently addressed by the activist. Robbins shrewdly points out that while the discovery of native agency may give an academic political credibility and professional kudos, there is still a need for the “more difficult though less pious procedure of *not* assuming agency to be everywhere present, but trying to explain why it is where it is and why it isn't where it isn't” (p. 187).

Spivak does not, in any case, simply discount Douloti as agent, despite her and Devi's ruthless exposure of why Douloti's agency “isn't where it isn't”. If Douloti's political agency has been effectively undermined, her ethical agency has not, and paradoxically Spivak acknowledges Douloti and the other *kamiya*-whores as agents in the arena where she has revealed their agency to be, in one sense, most compromised: that of responsibility. Not the self-destructive responsibility which leads Douloti to see herself as exchangeable for her father's debt, but responsibility reread through the experience of mothering as a different way of understanding the political. In much of her work, Spivak foregrounds maternity as a key trope which, depending how it is used, can define woman as “legal object as subject of reproduction” – transmitter, but not possessor, of the Name of the Father through her role in the reproduction of the patriarchal law of legitimacy and inheritance – or, alternatively, through a deployment of maternity as metaphor, can suggest other ways of conceiving the mother-child relationship, and by extension, the relationship between self and other.

In “Stanadayini”, motherhood understood as sacrifice becomes both the site of Jashoda’s exploitation, the macrotext within which she inevitably misreads the microtext of her own body and, paradoxically, the site of her ethical choice within a narrative of sanctioned suicide largely inaccessible to Western understanding (though the figuring of motherhood as sacrifice is not). But it is in her account of “Douloti the Bountiful” that Spivak first touches on an alternative way of reading motherhood which has far-reaching ethical and political implications, and which she will explore in depth in her essay “French Feminism Revisited”.

Faced with Douloti’s de facto exclusion from the discourse of constitutional rights, Spivak concludes that the solution is “not simply electoral education” (Spivak 1993: 88) and turns, rather, to look for an alternative discourse, one which will facilitate thinking the political in a way which does not exclude the subaltern woman – in fact one to which she may have greater intuitive access than does the elite woman. Discussing the mother-child relationship in the con-text of *kamiya* prostitution, Spivak invokes Simone de Beauvoir’s argument that

[i]n the continuum of gestation, birthing and child-rearing, the woman passes over and crosses over her inscription as an example of her species body to the task of producing an intending subject ... however much the woman may want a child, however much she may bestow an intentionality upon it, she cannot desire *this* child. Beauvoir suggests that the rearing of the child, once it is born, is a chosen commitment, not the essential fulfilment of a woman’s being.

(Spivak 1993: 89)

This passage pulls together a number of the concerns informing Spivak’s work during the 1990s. It feeds into a general concern with the way in which whatever “excess” the female body produces, that excess is coded as value in terms of the requirements of a specific sociosexual economy. Thus *jouissance*, the excess of nonuterine sexuality, is valued (or devalued) in terms of the needs of a uterine social order – one premised on reproduction as guarantor of property and inheritance. In “Stanadayini” the cancer which Jashoda’s body produces as excess stands metonymically for the unhealthy way in which her affective excess – of maternity, of self-sacrifice – is exploited. In “Douloti”, Spivak argues, “pregnancy as the result of copulation with clients allows the working out of the inscription of the female body in gestation to be economically rather than affectively coded .... Yet these women are absolutely committed, in the best sense of *engagement*, to the future of their children” (Spivak 1993: 89-90). In Spivak’s understanding, Devi allows the reader “an impossible step, before the coding of value” (p. 90), a moment which can unsettle all the existing ways in which motherhood is understood either within the patriarchal discourses of exploitation or the

liberal discourse of reproductive rights. What the Beauvoir passage offers, in this context, is something similar within Western feminism: a way of thinking maternity which does not code the child as property or motherhood either as self-fulfilment or as the passage of property, but understands the child as “excess” in the ethical sense of “that which exceeds the self”.

The importance, for Spivak, of this figuration of motherhood as responsibility to what exceeds the self and the self’s fulfilment becomes apparent when the same Beauvoir passage appears in “French Feminism Revisited”, and reading this essay in parallel with “Woman in Difference” both clarifies and supplements the latter’s themes. The essay is a “revisiting” in the sense that where an earlier essay, “French Feminism in an International Frame”, was concerned to alert the reader to the potential misuses of elite feminist theory in attempts to “know” the third-world woman, “French Feminism Revisited” finds in the writings of Beauvoir, Cixous and Irigaray matter which resonates both with specific feminist issues in decolonised nations and with the complex negotiation between, firstly, metropolitan and postcolonial feminists in an international relationship, and, secondly, elite feminist and subaltern woman within the postcolonial nation. Spivak suggests that rethinking motherhood and sexual difference itself in the terms provided by these elite, metropolitan theorists can both offer a counter to patriarchal accounts of female sexuality that define a “proper” femininity as reproductive, and help define and clarify the ethical relationship.

The occasion for the essay arises from a reading of a text by Algerian feminist activist Marie-Aimée Hélié-Lucas. Characteristically, Spivak does not summarise this text for her readers, or quote extensively from it, but she appears to be focusing on two aspects: Hélié-Lucas’s account of the way in which Algerian women are controlled through their inscription into a reproductive order and her comments on the need – only recently acknowledged by herself – for communication and co-operation between postcolonial and metropolitan feminists. In relation to the first of these aspects, Hélié-Lucas talks about the extent to which Algerian women are defined in relation to childbearing and to which feminist efforts in that country centre around reproductive issues – a husband’s right to “repudiate” his wife for being infertile, the attempted control of women’s bodies either through refusal of access to contraception or forced sterilisation, the close association of religious with sexual morality, the definition of children as the “property” of the state (Hélié-Lucas 1983: 7). Spivak acknowledges that these issues are not necessarily those which would be considered most urgent by grassroots Algerian women activists, but feels that this is an area in which French feminism can speak to the postcolonial woman activist not only of her own definition as sexually “proper”, and sexual conduit for property, but also both of the relationship between the metropolitan feminist and the elite

postcolonial feminist (a relationship with an other all too easily appropriated as a self) *and* of that between the elite feminist and the subaltern woman (a self or “subject in the narrow sense” all too easily othered). Spivak warns against “too easy ethical exchange” (1993:154) between feminists situated in very different political and cultural contexts, but she also suggests that the elite postcolonial feminist needs both to acknowledge her own inescapable relationship with the metropolitan feminist and to “negotiate with the structure of enabling violence that produced her” (p. 145). This is the other side of the elite feminist’s imperative to recognise the very different selfhood, the ethical singularity, of the subaltern woman.

However unwilling she may be to acknowledge this, part of the historical burden of that “emancipated” postcolonial is to be in a situation of *tu-toi*-ing with the radical feminist in the metropolis. If she wants to turn away from this, to learn to “give woman *to the other woman*” in her own nation state is certainly a way, for it is by no means certain that, by virtue of organizational and social work alone – doing good from above, itself infinitely better than doing nothing – she is in touch with the Algerian gendered subaltern in that inaccessible I-thou.

(Spivak 1993: 157)

What Spivak draws out of the three French texts that she “places before” the Algerian text is, then, twofold – she finds in these works both a way of thinking childbearing and female sexuality that undermines, rather than reinforces, appropriation,<sup>7</sup> and a series of resonant metaphors for a truly ethical, nonviolent, nonappropriative relationship between self and other, a relationship which attempts to negotiate the Scylla and Charybdis of a violent and self-consolidating othering and an equally violent refusal to respect and recognise difference, to acknowledge one’s absolute lack of access to the “mental theatre” and sovereignty in the narrow sense of the other, yet somehow, impossibly, respect that other’s selfhood.

Returning to the Beauvoir passage, Spivak argues that Beauvoir’s account of the female body in gestation and of the mother-child relationship is essentially another account of what she calls the ontico-ontological difference, where the ontic is understood as “that which is lived so intimately that it is inaccessible to ontology” (1992b: 15). The relationship between pregnant mother and child cannot be brought within the realm of ontology, since the child cannot be known as itself, as *this* child, this particular being. Yet the mother must take responsibility for the well-being of what she cannot know. This concept can be read in two ways in the context of both this essay and “Woman in Difference”. On the one hand it can be read metaphorically as figuring the relationship between self and other. Spivak comments that Beauvoir “writes the mother as the situation that cannot situate itself but must take responsibility – the risk of a relationship in view of the impossibility of



relating” (Spivak 1993: 149). This seems to me a moving formulation of the counterintuitive leap which the metropolitan or the elite postcolonial feminist must make as she seeks to forge a relationship with the subaltern woman whose selfhood is inaccessible to her but whose good she must nonetheless seek. Of course, such a metaphor must be used with care so that the identification of the subaltern woman with the child or child-like is not literalised. But this understanding has immediate and practical political consequences too: equally moving is the footnote in which Spivak draws on her own experience to illustrate the way in which this attitude carries over into a relationship between mother and grown child to enable a liberating moment when the mother transcends tradition in the interests of a child seen as exceeding rather than extending the self. In Beauvoir’s words “[t]he child brings joy only to the woman capable of disinterestedly desiring without reflexion [*retour sur soi*] the happiness of another who seeks to exceed [*dépasser*] her own existence” (Beauvoir 1952: 149). Spivak writes:

I must here record that my own birth-mother, Sivani Chakravorty, liberated me from an arranged marriage in 1957 (at her own peril, how much I could not then know), understanding responsibility beyond cultural norms, “giving the mother to the other woman” that I would be, using almost the same words, which I reproduce here in translation: “I cannot imagine your future good because it exceeds me”.

(Spivak 1993: 310)

Spivak goes on to draw out the implication of Beauvoir’s picture of the mother in ways that are directly relevant to the debates Hélié-Lucas is engaged in. Beauvoir, she argues, presents the figure of the mother as prepropriative. In other words, because the relationship between mother and unborn child belongs to the realm of the ontic rather than the ontological it exceeds or eludes the coding of social and cultural laws, norms and values. And, she goes on,

[t]he reproductive rights debate can only begin after the body has been written into the normative and privative discourse of a law predicated on agency. The prepropriative description of gestation and the figure of the Mother as a site of passage *for* the Mother *from* species life to the project of species being (rigorously to be distinguished from the patriarchal view of the person of the mother as a passageway for the child) is irreducible to that discourse.

(Spivak 1993: 152)

This both has implications for the reproductive rights debate and alerts us to the need to rethink the relationship between rights and responsibility. As Spivak points out, if the child is seen as part of the species life of the mother, that might seem to support the pro-choice position, while the fact that the child and the child's being are "philosophically inaccessible" (p. 152) to the mother – that the mother cannot know what the child would "want" – might equally well be used to support the "pro-life" position. This makes the issue of reproductive rights the site of a genuine ethical aporia, which does not mean that a stand cannot be taken, but that that stand cannot be seen as grounded.<sup>8</sup> This in turn is a safeguard against "the rational abstractions of democracy" (p. 152) being naturalised in such a way that they facilitate the workings of law rather than of justice – a distinction that Spivak invokes at the end of this section of the essay. Richard Kearney defines the difference as follows:

Law, in contrast to justice, can be accounted for in terms of a good rule applied to a particular case .... Justice, on the other hand, is incalculable by definition for it entails moments in which the decision between just and unjust cannot be insured by a rule. Justice involves singularity. It concerns the "other as other" in a unique situation, irreducible to principles of duty, rights or objective law.  
(Kearney 1993: 36)

It has taken me a long time to circle back to "Woman in Difference" but it is this justice/law distinction that, I believe, illuminates the full significance of Spivak's use of Beauvoir in that essay. Douloti and the other *kamiya*-whores have no access to the processes through which they could achieve the status of subject of rights. Without in any way minimising the importance of the struggle for democratic and constitutional rights Spivak warns against seeing the "rational abstractions of democracy" (1993: 152) as the only route to justice since to do this will, once again, not only exclude the subaltern but occlude that process of exclusion. In emphasising responsibility rather than rights Spivak forces us to attend to the limits of conventional politics and to try to think another sort of politics altogether – one which might be intuitively accessible to the women in this story in a way which it may not be to the elite activist in pursuit of rights in the context of the nation state. Two points emerge. Firstly, that it is both possible and necessary to learn from those who are outside the circuits of what we understand as knowledge. To diagnose the political exclusion of the subaltern woman is not to negate her ethical agency, but rather to point to the need to learn from her alternative ways of understanding justice and responsibility which must supplement any ongoing – and of course necessary – struggle for access to constitutional rights. This is a move away from ideas of agency posited on the grounds of identity and thus vulnerable to appropriation by various forms of essentialism or fundamentalism, and towards an emphasis on the relationship between agency and responsibility. In an interview given in 1993, Spivak makes this explicit when she says:

Now, I don't think that agency necessarily follows from identity claims ... the idea of agency comes from accountable reason, that one acts with responsibility, that one has to assume the possibility of intention, one has to assume even the freedom of subjectivity in order to be responsible. That's where agency is located.

(Spivak quoted in Landry & Maclean 1926: 294)

And the second lesson that I find in this reading of Beauvoir in the context of these two essays is, to return to Butler's questions at the beginning of my essay, that a focus on the body as decipherable text does not lead inwards to the privatising and apolitical, or to the ineffable, but outwards to the potential overcoming of oppressive cultural norms.

## Notes

1. I have provided details of the first publication of all the essays by Spivak mentioned in this article. This is in order to give readers a sense of the chronology of Spivak's work. However, wherever an essay is available in one of the anthologies – *In Other Worlds* (1988) or *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993), that is the version I have used.
2. Spivak talks about “establish[ing] ethical singularity *with* the subaltern” (1995: xxiv; my italics) which implies a relationship of responsibility, an individual ethical response to a unique subject. But the phrase “ethical singularity” also seems to me useful in describing the impossibility of capturing the figure of the subaltern within any generalising discourse.
3. This is Spivak's frequently used short-hand phrase for the way in which culture- and gender-specific values are internalised and cathected as emotional reflexes, “natural” affective responses.
4. In “French Feminism in an International Frame” Spivak reads clitoridectomy as a metonym for the effacement of clitoral (nonreproductive) sexuality which is in turn the condition for a whole mode of cultural organisation – what she calls “uterine social organisation” (1981: 151) that confirms and perpetuates woman's role as “instruments for the production and passage of property” (1983: 184).
5. In an interview with Leon de Kok, Spivak makes plain her irritation with people who  
[think] the subaltern is just a classy word for the oppressed ... everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern.  
(Spivak 1992c: 45-46)
6. Mahasweta Devi, in the interview that prefaces *Imaginary Maps*, says of the tribals:

They do not understand mainstream machination, so although there are safeguarding laws against land-grabbing, tribal land is being sold illegally every day, and usurped by mainstream society all over India, especially in West Bengal. In North Bengal, extensive lands are being converted into tea gardens, fruit orchards .... All the big dam projects are made to fit the new rich Kulaks. For that the tribals are evicted from their home-land, with no compensation.

(Devi 1995: x-xi)

7. “ Propriation” is a term taken from Derrida and glossed by Spivak as “making a being proper to itself” (1993: 126). I take it to refer to the positioning of any individual within a specific symbolic order through insisting on that person’s “proper” identity, and on identity itself as given, as presence, self-proximity. Spivak notes that the term as she uses it is more general than, but not unconnected to, its more “restricted” meanings in the work of Nietzsche: “appropriation, expropriation, taking possession, gift and barter, mastering, servitude” (ibid: 127).
8. It is important to note here that for Spivak, following Derrida, the aporia does not mark the moment of ethical or political paralysis, but the moment at which *real* choice must take place – “the undecidable in the face of which decisions must be risked” (1993: 93).

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