Modernism and Indian Citizenship: Mahasweta Devi Rewrites the Political Subject*

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Abstract
The rise of the aesthetic language of modernism in India was intimately related to the early anticolonial struggle and the birth of the nation. Referring to the transition towards the postcolonial state, in *Habitations of Modernity* (2002) Dipesh Chakrabarty draws a direct link between modernity, politicality and citizenship. Such triangulation, echoing Western political theory, is at the core of this article: reading Mahasweta Devi's creative writing against Chakrabarty's work, I question the possibility of seeing citizenship as the passage to modernity. Devi's short stories reveal how the acquisition of citizenship did not allow *adivasis* (indigenous people) to access the promise of 'development' that modernity signified during nationalism. Devi's acute realism denounces the liberal ideal of the citizen as a colonial construct and strips the postcolonial nation of its modern attribution.

Keywords: modernisation, India, citizenship, subaltern

During the last twenty years, several works of criticism on the Indian artistic vanguard have investigated the emergence of modernism in the subcontinent, asking when it took place and which characteristics it presented. Geeta Kapur (2000), Partha Mitter (2007), Rebecca Brown (2009) and Supriya Chaudhuri (2010) have provided valuable contributions to exploring modernism in literature, visual arts and cinema. Their works have prompted debates on canonising this trend, on its relations with Western formative influences and on the different linkages between modernism and modernity.

* The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) / ERC grant agreement n° 249379.

A conventional marker of the beginning of modernism in India can be considered the Bauhaus exhibition of 1922 organised at the Indian Society of Oriental Art in Calcutta under the aegis of Rabindranath Tagore (Mitter 2007: 17); it showcased, amongst others, works by Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee[1]. This event initiated discussions in India about the languages of Western and Soviet art and on the influence that they could have in the subcontinent.

Despite this genealogy, modernism in the subcontinent was far from being merely imitative of global trends. It was a complex artistic phenomenon shaped by the specificity of Indian politics: the Bauhaus exhibition overlapped with the rise of Gandhian nationalism and modernism came to be informed by the anticolonial movements that opposed British values, from individualism to urbanism. This article focuses on this intersection between political modernity, coinciding with the creation of the nation-state with new membership regulations, and its aesthetic representations in art and writing.

Tagore himself was inspired by Gandhi's project of non-cooperation when, in 1921 (only one year before the exhibition), he founded the university of Santiniketan in a rural area outside Calcutta. The aim was to boycott English education and its urban institutions, declaring the countryside as a privileged place for the diffusion of anti-imperialist ideas. His political stance is reflected in the thematic focus on lowly life in rural areas, and in the choice of his techniques. Tagore's minimalist art anticipates modernist trends (Mitter 2007: 29): his nationalism antagonised materialism and urban development, identified as Western, and his paintings expressed a longing for a mythical primitive simplicity.

The anticolonial critiques of the early 20th century often made use of modernist aesthetics. However, an analysis of a wider artistic

[1] For Chaudhuri the birth of modernism in Bengal can be traced to the 1940s: "modernism is self-consciously professed only in the 1940s, by a number of artists' groups: the Calcutta Group (formed in the shadow of the 1943 famine), the Progressive Painters' Association of Madras (1944), the Progressive Artists' Group of Bombay (1947), the Delhi Shilpi Chakra (1949), and the Triveni Kala Sangam (1951). Many of the artists were Marxists, and had links with the communist Indian People's Theatre Association and with 'progressive' writers" (Chaudhuri 2010: 948).

repertoire, including literature and architecture, reveals that the relation between colonialism and modernism is not simply complicit or antagonistic.

As I illustrate in the first sections of this article, the deployment of a modernist artistic language can be ambivalent towards discourses of nationalism and progress and towards the colonial heritage they retain. Very appropriately, Kapur warns us to be cautious in tracing a direct correspondence between modernism and the nationalist struggle:

> Modernism has no firm canonical position in India. It has a paradoxical value involving a continual double-take. Sometimes it serves to make indigenist issues and motifs progressive; sometimes it seems to subvert if not nationalism, then that on which it rests and purports to grow, that is, tradition. (Kapur 2000: 292)

The relation between the language of art and the context of its production cannot be reduced to binary terms where indigenism and progress simply occupy opposite sides; instead, the transition from colonialism to independence reveals a higher degree of complexity.

After questioning the equation of modernity, modernisation and anticolonialism through writing and art, the last sections introduce a critique of citizenship as the heritage of colonial modernity. The granting of citizenship after independence appears in many theoretical works, including Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000; 2002), as the recognition of the politicality of the subaltern subject. Critically revisiting this position, Mahasweta Devi's literary modernism calls for evaluating both Indian citizenship and modernity in relation to their promises of democracy and egalitarianism. In the analysis of Devi's writing it becomes clear that my use of the notion of citizenship does not simply refer to the legal definition of a member of the state. The article incorporates citizens' practices of claiming rights and demanding justice that often remain subterranean and concealed.

1. Indian Modernisms: multidisciplinary perspectives

Although apparently in tune with Western criticisms of industrial capitalism, the primitivist aesthetics of Rabindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy and Amrita Sher-Gil had their roots in the history of

the subcontinent and in Gandhian nationalism. Mitter highlights that "the Western primitivists were chiefly concerned with the predicament of urban existence, whereas Indian artists used primitivism as an effective weapon against colonial culture" (Mitter 2007: 12). Anticolonial ideology endorsed the foreignness of rural India to British indoctrination and turned images of village life into iconic representations of the authentic nation. Idealized rural India became the essence of the nation and constituted a foundational myth for the nationalist discourse, thus linking modernism to early nationalism.

As in modernist visual art, analogous aesthetic innovations invested the field of literature. The diffusion of primitivism inspired a wave of realist Indian writers devoted to the mundane reality of village life, rather than to 'higher' epic themes. The new focus caused a larger recourse to the genre of novels and short stories, which were considered more appropriate for such simple and base content.

Modernist writers were influenced by the cultural agenda of the All-India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA), which voiced the aspiration of some intellectuals to direct nationalism towards socialist ideals in the early 1930s. The novelists Mulk Raj Anand and Premchand were among its members. The group was so successful in encouraging a change in aesthetics that, as Ahmed's study illustrates: "by the mid-1930s a particular brand of realism had come to hegemonise the thinking of the radical intelligentsia" (Ahmed 2009: 7). Chaudhuri (2010: 948) highlights the relation between communist progressive and modernist authors[2].

These stylistic innovations also led to the birth of the novel in Bengali. In his writing on nation and imagination, Dipesh Chakrabarty labels the Bengali novel as a "modern" object. Referring to a number of critical sources, he emphasises that political and social transformations of 19th century Bengal found an expression in the realist prose: "Srikumar Bandhyopadhyay's comprehensive and masterful survey of the history of the Bengali novel, *Bangla*

[2] In Hindi, although modernism developed an elitist trend with Ajneya's formalism, realism in fiction remained greatly influential. Chaudhuri maintains: "the most striking modernist fiction was produced in Urdu, by writers like Sa'adat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chugtai, and Qurratulain Haider" (Chaudhuri 2010: 957).

shahitye upanasher dhara – first serialised in a Bengali magazine around 1923/1924 – made much the same connection between the realism of prose fiction and the coming of a new, modern politics of democratic sensibility" (Chakrabarty 2000: 154). The novel is the genre where modernist and modern sensibilities overlap most.

Chakrabarty does not only maintain that the commitment to naturalism transformed literature into a means for interrogating contemporary politics; but also, citing Bandhyopadhyay, he suggests that the 'modernity' of the Bengali novel depends on its connection with the spread of democratic ideals. When the representations of popular struggles and of the poor's social oppression became the main subject of fiction, the broader national quest for democracy appeared as the main concern of literary modernism.

Chakrabarty then clarifies: "My use of the word 'modernism' follows that of Marshall Berman in designating the aesthetic means by which an urban and literate class subject to the invasive forces of modernisation seeks to create, however falteringly, a sense of being at home in the modern city" (Chakrabarty 2000: 156). The language of modernism, taken up by the elite, sustains the values opposing British colonisation that are embodied in rural Indian life. Nevertheless, it appears to stand in a dual relationship with colonial ideology: on the one hand, it sustains resistance against the British rule; on the other hand, it derives from the discourse of Enlightenment promoting ideals of equality and democracy, along with a teleological idea of progress. Modernism seems to be born at this conjuncture between the struggle for freedom and the invasion of the 'forces of modernisation'.

2. Modernisation, modernity and citizenship

It is difficult to establish a neat periodisation of Indian modernism because of the regional differences and its wide reach. Although scholarship on art and literature consecrated its correspondence with Gandhian nationalism, studies on film and architecture date modernism a couple of decades later and stress its overlapping with the Nerhuvian era (Brown 2009). Colonialism, its aftermath and the drive towards "the new", however, still remain its main subjects. New representations of Indian identity arise in dialogue with Western artistic vanguards: Italian neorealism influences

Satyajit Ray and, in architecture, Le Corbusier starts designing Indian cities.

In 1950 Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru commissioned Le Corbusier, who had established his reputation as a modernist city planner with his 'Plan for a contemporary city' (1922), to design Chandigarh, the provincial capital of Punjab. The city, he maintained, was to be the icon of the new, independent India, striking a balance between the international modernist syntax and the Indian idiom (Brown 2009: 109). To respect the local character, Le Corbusier's agreement with Nerhu excluded the construction of skyscrapers. The architect opted for a symmetrical grid plan leaving plenty of green spaces and dividing the city into sectors, each of which had both residential and commercial areas.

The fame of Chandigarh depends on its being the first 'planned' city in India, designed to be rich, prosperous and green. The rhetoric surrounding its conception reveals how the modern city came to be seen as a positive representation of the nation. Moreover, it is an example of the convergence of modernism and the rhetoric of modernisation.

Although modernism is the aesthetic language chosen in the transitional stage out of colonialism, its stress on technological modernisation unveils the endurance of colonial ideology during nationalism. Since an early phase, the British used the promise of modernisation and development through infrastructures as an alibi for colonising. With independence, the idea of development became the gateway to 'Western modernity'.

The example of architecture exposes what Brown calls "the paradox of the modern": "the paradox of constructing modernity in the face of both the universalising modern and the particularity of India" (Brown 2009: 3). Modernism too is caught in this paradox: although it aims at resisting the universalisation of British cultural values, it incorporates a model of development and an idea of modernity inspired by Western discourses of conquest.

As a consequence, modernity itself appears as a condition of cultural imperialism. As Das Gupta and Panikkar underline (1995), both modernity and modernisation in India cannot be disjointed from the operational logic of colonialism: tracing the relationship between the epistemology of 'the modern' and the process of industrialisation of the country means re-establishing

the centrality of British dominance in the history and culture of the subcontinent.

For Brown the modern is "a particular approach to the world embodied in an epistemology of progress, a faith in the universals, the primacy of the subject and a turning away from religion toward reason" (Brown 2009: 4). Secularism, individualism and the universal values of European Enlightenment remain at the core of modernity.

In the colonial discourse, modernity stands for the path towards a higher form of civilisation to which colonised subjects should aspire in order to free themselves from the ties of their 'primitive' culture. As Chakrabarty stresses in *Habitations of Modernity* (2002), the very creation of modernity as a category contains an impasse: defining what it is means to implicitly define what it is not and confine some people to the domain of pre-modernity and backwardness. Characteristics such as religiosity, equated to a lack of rationality, and traditionalism keep the colonised subjects out of the modern state.

Tracing a "small history" of the Subaltern Studies group, Chakrabarty emphasises their interest in deconstructing the equation between premodernity and the lack of politicality. The purpose of Ranajit Guha's investigation on peasants' insurgencies was exactly to demonstrate how, and under which circumstances, the often overlooked activity of the masses emerged as central for the political domain. Displaying the continuity between anticolonial struggles and independence, Chakrabarty states: "the formal granting of the rights of citizenship to the Indian peasant after the achievement of independence from the British simply recognised his already political nature" (2002: 19). He thus reiterates a direct link between citizenship, politicality and modernity. Citizenship acknowledges the political nature of the subject, who acquires modernity via belonging to the new, secular nation. The technological modernisation that started with colonialism and the transition from imperial rule to national citizenship form the main pre-conditions of modernity. This figure of the citizen as a member of the state is a particularly Western, if not liberal notion. Yet, another image of the citizen as a political subject who exercises the right to have rights could open the way to uncovering other imageries of the citizen that have barely been unearthed.

3. Writing the nation and the political subject: Mahasweta Devi's critique of modernity

Against the universalist epistemology of 'the modern', which marked colonised subjects as backward, modernism is an aesthetic space where more nuanced perspectives arise. Kapur links modernism to an exploration of subjectivity in a moment of turbulence: it "refers to the project of figuring subjectivity as a locus of potential consciousness" (Kapur 2000: 300), where the subject acts politically in unpredictable ways. Modernist art challenges the pristine image of the modern self inherited by Cartesian thought and filtered by the Enlightenment. By doing so, it also challenges the legal and cultural discourse of the nation that is rooted in that tradition. The ideal of the Indian citizen identifies the modern subject as conscious, rational and law-abiding.

But the issue of citizenship in modern India is not unproblematic and the question of what position a subject occupies cannot be exhausted with a simple answer. Considering citizenship as a mere legal status is reductive, since it may conceal the heterogeneity of contexts, practices and positions determining the (im)possibility of claiming rights. Can widows, poor people and tribal groups, who face discrimination and do not benefit from the basic rights of education and welfare, be considered as citizens?

With the passage from colonialism to the postcolonial state, this preoccupation opened up a field to be investigated. As highlighted above, in the 1930s the writers of the PWA made peasants, lower caste and village people the main characters of their works. Literature addressed issues of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection. It also echoed a broader quest for democracy and for the democratic ideals of social justice and equity.

After independence, this tradition inspired new explorations of the limits of the nation and its definition of the citizen. Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi, born in Dhaka (1926) and educated at Santiniketan, took on this task. Listing modernist Bengali writers from the 1930s onward, Chaudhuri remarks: "women poets and novelists such as Mahasweta Devi evolved radically oppositional modernisms rooted in subaltern experience" (Chaudhuri 2010: 956). Although Devi's literary activity started only after independence,

the form and the content of her works are in tune with modernist themes. Her critique of modernity unveils the injustice hidden behind the flag of progress.

Her criticism is finely illustrated in "Douloti" and "Operation? – Bashai Tudu", two stories that create a series of short-circuits between the foundational values of independent India and its cruel aspect. To question who is to be called a citizen today, the stories stress the persistence of pre-colonial systems of inequality and colonial legal discourses at the heart of the national enterprise[3]. "Douloti" denounces castism for supporting the system of bonded labour still surviving despite the constitutional ban[4]. Bashai Tudu is the Naxalite rebel at the centre of an eponymous story that unmasks the brutal use of force by police and government officers against tribals and poor villagers in West Bengal.

Devi focuses on lower castes and adivasis' social marginality to shed light on the inability of the state to live up to its modern, egalitarian principles. Indignation and anger for the injustice the government perpetrates incite her journalistic and literary activities:

> Forty-one years after Independence I see my countrymen without food, water and land, and reeling under debts and bonded labour. An anger, luminous and burning like the sun, directed against a system that cannot free my people from these inhuman constraints is the only source of inspiration for all my writing". (Devi 1990: xx)

Portraying the postcolonial state as a system reproducing endemic poverty and inhuman conditions of living, the stories reflect on the paradoxical experience of modernity for the citizens who remain marginal to the formation of the new nation.

Devi's writing helps discuss different approaches to Indian modernity. A close look at modernism and modernisation has

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[3] I here refer to Devi's commitment to fight against the prejudice affecting the tribes that were notified as criminals under the British Criminal Tribes Act (1871). This colonial law created a colonial stigma that persists today.

[4] Bonded labour consists of a system of inherited debts: employers give high-interest loans to workers whose entire families work at low wages to pay off the debt. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have the highest figures of unorganised and indebted labour in India.

suggested two definitions of modernity: first, modernity can be considered as the introduction of a colonial epistemology promoting a singular model of the individual at the basis of the state and its laws; second, it stands for the institutional proclamation of Indian independence. However, for Devi the way in which these possibilities merge into each other exposes the continuous oppression of the poor despite the promise of modernity. Stressing the continuity in people's oppression, she maintains that the granting of citizenship to tribals and marginalized subjects did not change their condition of deprivation.

Devi stages this modern paradox by revealing that the concept of independence still remains unintelligible for part of the Indian population. "Operation? – Bashai Tudu" deals with this peculiar foreignness of tribals and villagers to the language of the nation and points out:

> ten per cent of the agricultural labourers said they did not know India was independent. They thought that the Englishmen had been given a new name, the Indian government. One hundred per cent of them said that they had never heard of minimum wages for the agricultural labourers. (Devi 1990: 63).

This foreignness of tribals to modernity arises from the impossibility to understand what is meant by independence, since it has no relation with the people's demands for fundamental rights. In 1968 the gap between the state and the poor was still too wide.

Set at the end of the 1970s, "Operation? – Bashai Tudu" revolves around the mysterious figure of Bashai, an adivasi revolutionary who fights for the rights of agricultural labourers. Outside any formal institution or party (including the Communist one), he leads protest actions for minimum wages, the freedom of bonded labourers and for water from the canals. Bashai escapes the police by staging his own death numerous times. When he is 'resurrected' to fight against a new abuse, his figure gains a halo of mystery.

Bashai supports the ideology of the Naxalite revolutionary movement, but his critique is equally directed against the government and other forms of local power. He rejects the upper and middle class leaders of the Communist Party, whose actions rarely aim to

help agricultural labourers. Bashai's dissent, expressed through dismissing party affiliations, transforms him into a 'continent' of its own. Making the rebel an epitome of exclusion from mainstream politics, Devi states: "No bridge could ever be built over the ranging sea of incomprehension that rolled between Bashai and the Party. Bashai was now a strange continent. But a continent that one could not attack, *explore* or *colonize*" (Devi 1990: 29).

Devi refers to colonisation to indicate a deep-rooted and ongoing history of tribal exploitation. Bashai decides to break free from institutional politics because he is aware that without the promotion of education for poor villagers and adivasis, oppression and abuse will not end. Bashai is aware of the centrality of rural workers for the Indian economy and is forced to register their transformation into a mass of forgotten citizens. He states:

> Ours is an agricultural country, isn't it? In this whole music that runs and grows through the sowing, the planting, the weeding, the harvesting and the paddy carried to someone else's granary at the end, the lead singer was the agricultural labourer, who got bypassed by every organization. (Devi 1990: 32)

The song created from the sounds of working the land dissolves into the modern and rising national anthem. As a result, the traditional singers become de-politicised and their exploitation becomes part of the newly established system of managing resources. Bashai Tudu summarises the chain of exploitation citing a protest song:

> 'Gandhi Raja said, you're all harijans,
> And there're three of us here
> To steal all that you have'
>
> Yes Kali-babu, there were the three of them. Bhuinya the zamindar, Sau the moneylender, and Barari the jotedar. I don't recollect a single day that I hadn't had a drubbing from all the three devils. (Devi 1990: 23)

In the independent nation, the state is the prime owner of the land and stands on top of a feudal hierarchy allowing proprietors, moneylenders and bureaucrats to perpetrate abuses.

Devi points out that this current situation of mass exploitation in rural and adivasi areas is a persisting heritage of the system of land

management that was crystallised by the British. As early as 1824 the English Crown began a process of privatisation of resources and, with a series of laws (including the Land Acquisition Act), acquired all the lands that were vital resources for grazing and firewood for nomadic tribes (Singh 1986) and ruled out their customary rights[5]. In his ground-breaking analysis, Singh summarises the situation with a lapidary statement: "the forest dwellers of India became poor in the first place because the British destroyed their claims to customary occupancy rights and took away their resources, and because the Indian state has continued to do so" (Singh 1986: 46). The assimilation of the British system and laws in the modern nation did not grant any freedom to marginalised citizens and it established a state of paradoxical alienation of the ordinary people from the Indian system.

Like "Operation? – Bashai Tudu", "Douloti The Bountiful" exposes the distance between the material subjugation of lower caste and indigenous people and the democratic principles of nationalism. It revolves around a bonded labourer living in the village of Seora in Palamu, in modern Jharkhand.

The plot unveils exploitation in its clear brutality. The daughter of "crook Nagesia", who became crippled after being forced by his master to carry an ox yoke on his shoulders, Douloti's fate is to repay her father's debt. Sold to become the wife of a brothel owner disguised as a Brahamin, she is forced into prostitution and dies of venereal disease at the age of 27, on the 15th August 1975, which is Independence Day. Her body tortured by the illness collapses on the map of India drawn in chalk in the courtyard of a village school:

> Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour 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

[5] The confiscation of land initiated by the British coincided with the introduction of enclosures and legislation on private property. The legislation recognised property as the cardinal principle regulating land use, betraying the traditional customary rights of indigenous cultures. The transformative impact of this action affected the adivasi economy, which relied on common lands for open pasture and shared agriculture. For a discussion on these themes see Pathak (2002) and Guha and Gadgil (1993).

has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan [the schoolmaster] for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India. (Devi 1995: 93)

In this tragic ending, the harshness of the story is conveyed by its bare, even stifled, literary language.

Devi rebels against the elitism of literature by adopting a simple and direct style, sometimes even using the variety of Bengali spoken by adivasis. To write the national abject subjects into official history, Devi provokes an interruption in the cohesive language of national identity. Multiple points of view are conveyed in a range of vernacular languages. Her realist aesthetics fragments the authority of the narrator in favour of a plurality of voices that are not represented in the political realm.

In a dialogue between the washerwoman Rajbi and the Gandhian prophet Sadhuji, we are confronted with the stubborn rejection of the concept of the country as Mother India. When Sadhuji explains that the nation is like a mother taking equal care of all her children, Rajbi responds confused:

"Oh Sadhuji, my place is Seora village. What do you call a country? I know *tahasil*, I know station, I don't know country, India is not the country."
"Hey you are all independent India's free people, do you understand?"
"No, Sadhuji". (Devi 1995: 41)

For Rajbi, as for Bashai, "country" and "independence" are empty signifiers, only filled with the experience of gender, social and material inequality. As Collu affirms, the story "establishes a parallel between the exploitation of adivasi men who become bonded-labourers […] and the sexual exploitation of adivasi women who are used and abused because they are poor – they own nothing: not the means of their livelihood, nor their own bodies" (1999: 49).

Moreover, Douloti restates the colonial responsibility in preserving and legitimising the injustice of bonded labour. The British confiscation of lands pushed the tribals out of their territories. Unable to rely on the land to sustain their livelihood, they started to sell their work as cheap manual labourers. But soon, the foreignness of cash economy and their lack of education transformed them into

easy preys of landowners and moneylenders. With the foreign rule of the Rajput the peasants became slaves:

> Who reckons how long the Crook Nagesias have been their servant-kamiya-seokia [bonded labourers]? It's a matter of hundreds of years. When did the Rajput brahman from outside come to this land of jungle and mountain? When did all the land slide into their hands? Then cheap labour became necessary. That was the beginning of making slaves on hire purchase. (Devi 1995: 21)

This form of slavery still exists. The legal framework against bonded labour consists of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act (1976) and is supported by the Minimum Wages Act (1948)[6]; yet this practice continues unabated due to failure in the enforcement of law. What rights can people like Douloti, or Rajbi, tribals and bonded labourers claim, when the law in place to protect them remains unimplemented? Devi's answer is bitterly harsh:

> The Indian constitution respected every citizen's fundamental right to become whatever he could by dint of his guts. The poor therefore had the right to become poorer still. A peasant today had the right to be a landless agricultural labourer tomorrow. There was no governmental agency or strong organisation to stand by these men who made a living by cultivating other people's land. (Devi 1990: 87)

Affirming that the only right left to the poor is the one to become poorer, the author severely questions independence and the meaning of the institution of citizenship: since it does not grant access to equal rights, citizenship is not a gateway to modernity as prefigured by the Enlightenment discourse. Devi's use of the experience of the poor interrupts Chakrabarty's equation between modernity, citizenship and politicality. Not only do modernity and citizenship depart from each other but the very characters of Devi's stories, as I explain in more detail later, defy the idea of the political subject that such concepts presuppose.

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[6] It is also supported by other legislation like the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970; the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979.

Let me follow this disruption of the normative idea of the subject. Apart from considering independence as the threshold of modernity, I have suggested that modernity may be defined, as Kapur does, in relation to the colonial introduction of Western categories of the individual that inform hegemonic theories of citizenship. The liberal modern citizen is understood as a self-determined, secular and rational individual, and a private owner. None of these attributes, however, can be applied to indigenous people and poor villagers. There is a friction between the model of the national subject and the subjects of Devi's stories.

First, adivasis did not use enclosures, nor did they have a concept of private property. In India, the British instituted individual property rights where there were communal and occupancy rights, and in many areas these still remain the main methods of land management. Devi's discussion of Bashai Tudu and Douloti's stories points to the injustice and exploitation caused by the present enforcement of colonial laws.

Second, their stories question the notion of self-determination through staging how economic and social forces inevitably hold people down. Douloti, for example, is not in control of her fate; she is doomed to live and die as a slave. Her death, however, is not apolitical: her tortured body performs an ultimate act of resistance covering with blood a map of the allegedly free and modern India.

Finally, the conversation between Devi's work and the Subaltern Studies group results in the assimilation of religiosity into political actions. Ranajit Guha's studies on the peasants' revolts exposed the role of religious elements in organising resistance against the authorities (see Guha 1988). Referring to a Naxalite as the epitome of a peasant rebel, Devi echoes Guha's work and defies the equation between religiosity and absence of rationality or politicality. She highlights the incongruence between the ideal, autonomous individual and millions of subjects whose exercise of political subjectivity exceeds the dominant model of the citizen. Her stories show that approaching Indian modernity as an accomplished project consecrated by Independence, or as the triumph of the foundational categories of citizenship equally reveals the paradox of state inclusion without participation.

4. Devi's other modernism

Devi's writing stems out of the socialist trend that emerged during nationalism; but her modernism, as Chaudhuri notes, is both radical and oppositional. Her perspective cannot be reduced to the view of the urban elite on rural India: her works are generated by the shared subaltern experience of indigenous, lower caste and village people.

I have shown that Devi endorses the modernist motif of primitivism at the level of form and content, while reconfiguring its political potential. The simplicity of her prose is intermingled with the use of the variety of Bengali spoken by the tribal groups featured in the stories. Folk tales and oral accounts collected in the rural villages are regularly incorporated into the fabric of her fiction.

The choice of this technique, though, is not merely formal. The writer identifies those who inspire her literature as co-authors, including storytellers and unofficial informants; by doing so, she contests the notion of the singular writer as a spinoff of the Cartesian rational, conscious and self-determined subject. Her idea that cultural production entails the formation of a collective subject questions the individualism at the core of the epistemology of the modern condition.

The seeds of such a critique can be found in Chakrabarty's analyses of Bengali fiction. In *Habitations of Modernity* and in "The birth of the subject" in *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty investigates Kalyani Datta's essay on the condition of widowhood in Bengal (Chakrabarty 2000: 106), starting with some fictional accounts that brought this social problem to the fore. Through Datta's text and her interviews with the widows, Chakrabarty draws attention to the limits of modern rationality. Against the liberal value of individualism, these narratives show a sense of solidarity that shifts the attention away from the singularity of the spokesperson. In relation to the possibilities of subverting the authority of the writer, Chakrabarty affirms:

> The subject of Bengali modernity who demonstrates a will to witness and document oppression is thus inherently a multiple subject, whose history produces significant points of resistance and intractability when approached

with a secular analysis that has its origins in the self-understanding of the subject of European modernity. (Chakrabarty 2000: 147)

He states that the writing subject documenting oppression is involved in a movement of transformation: the author is generated out of the making of a multiple subject which resists forms of understanding that are normatively rooted in the axioms of modern epistemology.

While Chakrabarty's focus on citizenship as a way to access modernity seems to reiterate a discourse that is drenched in colonial ideology, his reference to literature provides a more challenging alternative. Through literature, Chakrabarty stresses the limits of using hegemonic European categories to understand postcolonial processes of subject formation; he also questions the assumptions on which Western social sciences base the notion of citizenship and binds modernity to its specific colonial history.

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