The Wretched of the Nation

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The Wretched of the Nation

Sumathi Ramaswamy

Human struggle and suffering are everywhere in India.\(^1\)

Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced?\(^2\)

A cluster of works in recent years, including my own, have insisted – and demonstrated – that the modern conception of the nation, with its finely demarcated form, is inextricably obligated to the political map. In the words of the Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul, ‘A modern nation-state must be imaginable in mapped form... nationhood [is] literally formed by the demarcation of its body.’\(^3\) If it were not for the map, the nation’s territory – its ‘geo-body’ – would remain an abstraction, thereby leaving its citizen-subjects without a representational means to ‘see’ their country, to identify with it, and to become attached to it, all of which are necessary for the work of nationalism to proceed and succeed. To think the nation means to summon up its map form.

In the Indian subcontinent, as with so much else, the nation’s geo-body was a ‘gift’ of empire, a gift, that like others, was both desired and disavowed by its heirs and inheritors. However, from at least the early years of the twentieth century, the territory variously called ‘Hindoostan’, ‘British India’, or just ‘India’ in maps of the British Empire, and laid out as empty cartographic space within a lattice of latitudes and longitudes, was also variously feminised as ‘Mother India’ (Bharat Mata), and gloriously pictured in all manner of visual media ranging from oils and acrylics to chromolithographs and cinema, the work of men (and some women) – who I have called barefoot cartographers – who largely produced for the mass market rather than for high-end galleries, museums or collectors. In my monograph *The Goddess and the Nation*, I documented the rush to claim cartographic space delineated on imperial maps for the body of this new goddess of national territory who is made to supplement it in many different ways: occupying and engulfing the map; merging partially with it; seated or standing on it; and most destabilising of all, dispensing with it entirely and standing in instead for the geo-body of India.\(^4\) Ironically, in the visual productions of
Jesudas, *The Motherland*, 1997, SPP, chromolithograph, New Delhi, collection, JPS and Patricia Uberoi, Delhi
such barefoot cartographers, the map of India, the proud creation of a secular colonising state and its sciences, is in fact a necessary guarantor of Mother India’s persona as hallowed deity of national territory. In this process, and equally ironically, the scientific map is anthropomorphised, its empty secular space taken over by the sensuous, female, and very Hindu presence of Bharat Mata, who is more often than not imagined as benign and benevolent, in need of help from her children, especially her sons, to protect and cherish her, break her shackles, and restore her back to power and dignity in a free India. The presence of the beloved mother, I have argued, turns the impersonal and abstract map of the nation into a homeland and a motherland to die for.

Yet does the national yearning for cartographic form always take the route of adulation and deification with homage paid to national territory by associating it invariably with the beautiful and the bountiful? This is the question I explore in this article by focusing on a remarkable suite of ten watercolours completed between 1999 and 2000 titled ‘Tearscape’: the heteronymic enigma of the title is not the least of the challenges posed by this complex series to scholars of both cartography and nationalism, not to mention contemporary art. The work of the Mumbai-based artist of middle-class Gujarati origin Atul Dodiya (b 1959), the series was first shown in Mumbai in January 2001 and in Berlin in May that year, in elite spaces quite distant from the circuits of consumption in which the colourful prints of Mother India circulate. In the understated words of the artist himself from a later interview, the series offered ‘a kind of bleak portrait of Mother India’. In stark and direct contrast to the nation as a glorious mother/goddess, Dodiya consciously and conscientiously paints her very anti-thesis, the skeletal body of a haggard and hideous naked crone taking up residence in India’s geo-body which itself in the process comes to be variously disaggregated, de-formed, and denuded. The beautiful and bountiful is evacuated completely to make way for the appalling and the abysmal. She is left unnamed, her anonymity ominously suggesting that she might well be Every Woman, the subaltern female citizen of the nation. Allegoric though she may be, and with a high level of abstraction even, she is hard to look at without flinching, in contrast to the Mother India of mass-produced prints who invites identification, even desire.

What is dared in transforming thus the map of the nation from a repository of pastoral plenitude into the dystopian address of the (female) abject? As the monstrous devastates the map form of the nation, and ‘India’ is recast as an inhospitable home/land for its most downtrodden and wretched, especially the labouring female, a different narrative of nationalism is disclosed, hollowing out patriotic mantras such as ‘sare jahaan se achcha Hindustan hamara’, ‘of all the places on Earth, India is the best’. And yet these new ‘bleak portraits’ of the nation remain largely objects of elite consumption, mostly limited to viewers of modernist and contemporary art in India and abroad. Although like Dodiya himself, artists from non-elite social backgrounds are increasingly part of the mix of the gallery art world and curated exhibitions, these watercolours arguably remain outside the reach of the labouring-class citizen who is over-represented within their frames. How then do we understand the ethical mission of such works? In whose name do they speak and for whom?
Atul Dodiya, *Man with Chakki*, 1998, enamel paint, varnish with gold powder and mirrors on laminate, 182.88 × 121.92 cm, image: courtesy the artist
Bare Lives in the Unbearable Geo-Body of the Nation

To date, the most sustained engagement with this complex and dense series has been offered by Mumbai-based critics and curators Nancy Adajania and Ranjit Hoskote, the latter providing a systematic and acute analysis of each of the ten paintings. Adajania reads the series as signalling the ‘disenchantment’ with the nation that has clearly set in after the heady days of freedom from British rule and independence. In these works, she argues, Dodiya performs a ‘post-mortem of the human figure which... has been slowly drugged and broken down by the Indian nation-state’, and offers a contrast to his then-recently completed series ‘An Artist of Non-Violence’ (January 1999) in which he resurrected the image of Mahatma Gandhi to ‘enchant’ a new generation of (modernist) viewers.9 For his part, summarising the series as giving ‘compelling embodiment’ to the nation as ‘a tragic anti-icon, a manic dancer, a skeletal demon, and a lost mother’, Hoskote suggests that Dodiya produced a ‘meditation on the postcolonial state, which was at the same time a meditation on the uncertain fate of the citizen, as well as the artist-as-citizen’.10 Through such works, Hoskote also sees Dodiya as ‘renewing political art, rescuing it from the exhausted clichés of social and socialist realism’.11 Not least, Hoskote locates the affective charge of these works in the Sanskritic aesthetic categories of bibhatsa (disgusting, outrageous), and bhayanaka (fearsome, violent), offering an Indic counterpoint to the Eurocentric concept of the abject to which I will return later.12

Building on such readings, I focus in this article on the insertion of the map of India into these watercolours to analyse the work it does, even as I consider why the artist might have felt compelled to resort to it and render it abject by associating it with wretched bodies.

This is not the first time that the map of India features in Dodiya’s works, nor the last. In December 1992 – a critical turning point in India’s recent political history with the challenge posed to its much-vaunted culture of pluralism by the destruction of a centuries-old mosque by Hindu nationalist ‘foot soldiers’ – Dodiya painted a powerful little-seen work captioned Lives and Works in Bombay (1992).13 This is probably the first time the map of India entered his paintings, and it does so powerfully: bathed in the saffron, white and yellow colours of the national flag, it is the ground, literally, on which the artist sits, brush in hand, poised over paper and paint, next to the cartographic dot that is his city, Bombay, where he ‘lives and works’. Offshore, a large sperm whale rears its menacing head ominously, poised perhaps to undo the work of the artist and of the nation he both embodies and paints. Although its looming presence suggests that something is (already) amiss, the map of India is still painted in a wholesome manner, the site for life and work.

A few years later at a time of growing economic and political crises across the nation, the map of India makes another appearance in Dodiya’s work in the powerful – and provocative – Man with Chakki (1998), the harbinger for the ‘Tearscape’ series in its placement of a naked labourer in the national geo-body (with the outline of neighbouring Bangladesh carefully delineated) onto which he defecates. It is

13 Thanks to Beth Citron who reminded me that this caption might well be playing with the captioning protocols adopted by curatorial practice.
‘a stylised but savage portrait of an individual stripped down to forced labour and bodily instinct’, in Ranjit Hoskote’s reading, and I agree. In a later interview, the artist recalled ‘the courage’ he had found by this time ‘to show a defecating man’. Especially demanding courage was the act of painting the man defecating on the map of India, the hallowed ground of nationalist politics and the sacred abode of Bharat Mata in patriotic visual culture, but also the cartographically-delineated homeland of the citizen-viewer who finds himself/herself reflected in the abhala mirrors that stud the map and that returns their gaze. As Hoskote rightly observes, ‘Dodiya’s is an angry painting, and it implicates its viewers in its anger.’ The painting also marks a departure from Lives and Works in Bombay in that India has been deemed an inhospitable homeland for the man with the chakki. Correspondingly, for a sensitive artist like Dodiya identifying with the plight of the labouring body, how then can it continue to serve as home, a place to live and work?

By 1998 when Man with Chakki was exhibited in Calcutta and New Delhi, gallery artists in India seem to have finally realised the aesthetic power and reach of the map form of the nation that their more plebeian counterparts painting for the mass-market had seized upon long before. For the first fifty years or so after Indian independence, most modernists and contemporary artists – with notable exceptions like Maqbool Fida Husain (1915–2011) – largely ignored the map of India. This was to change by the 1990s, as it began to increasingly appear in fascinating and provocative ways in artists’ canvases and installations, as I have begun to document elsewhere. Even while Dodiya’s ‘Tearscape’ series joins the company of such ‘map-minded’ works, it is remarkable for its dramatic association of the abject body of the labouring subaltern with the geo-body of the nation. He is truly pioneering in this regard, placing not just the defecating man with the chakki but other wretched figures in the company of the map of the nation: a man stripped down to his flesh with a skull in his belly and a breast wound in Skull in the Belly (1999); a bawling grotesque infant in Tearscape (1999); a foetus and a garland of skulls in Lullaby (2000); a naked man with his arms cut off and his buttocks exposed in Householder (2000), and in six other ‘scapes’ – Woman with Chakki, Houseboat, Gatha, Shipwreck, Iceberg and Petals – the stripped skeletal body of a hag of a female, her breasts sagging and her genitalia exposed. This is a parade of bare lives and immiserated bodies, a gallery of ‘the victims of the nation-state’ (allegorical though they may be, as befitted his turn away from photo-realism).

Indeed, an important explanation for the series is Dodiya’s anguished response to the escalation of intolerance, bigotry and violence around him, especially under the pressure of majoritarian Hindu nationalism, particularly following December 1992, that may well have also precipitated Lives and Works in Bombay. In a recent assessment, Dodiya has been placed among a ‘third generation’ of Indian artists who came of age in the 1980s and who have been named the ‘new mediators’:

The upsurge of communal and regional loyalties had begun to undermine national loyalty founded on secularism and equal rights. At the same time, a rise of capitalist enterprise threatened to bring in its wake new inequalities of wealth and privilege. Artists shaping their practices in

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14 Hoskote, ‘Tearscape’, op cit
15 Ranjit Hoskote and Nancy Adajania, Atul Dodiya: The Dialogues Series, Popular Prakashan/Foundation B&G, Mumbai, 2011, p 84
16 Hoskote, ‘Experiences Parallel to Beauty’, op cit, p 300
18 The phrase ‘victims of the nation state’ is from Hoskote, ‘Tearscape’, op cit.
these years tended toward political engagement, producing works that projected a position and endeavored to engage the viewer.¹⁹

The artist himself in his interviews points to the tribulations suffered by the labouring poor and the ethnically marginal as having inspired his ‘bleak’ turn, the possibility of basic survival further endangered as India took a neo-liberal turn away from its socialist past of the 1990s. These possibilities cannot be discounted, especially when we consider how places like Kashmir, Gujarat, the India-Pakistan border, the North East – the flashpoints of recent Indian statist and communal violence – are foregrounded in the watercolours of the ‘Tearscape’ series, sometimes coloured an ominous black, at other times a spectral white.

Singular though Dodiya was among gallery artists in 1999–2000 in the manner in which he placed the geo-body of India in the company of the wretched of the nation, precedents exist – paradoxically – from the other end of the visual cultural spectrum, in the world of bazaar prints and barefoot cartography. Indeed, as I have documented elsewhere, the very founding moments of the cult of Mother India was grounded in a ‘bleak’ vision not unlike Dodiya’s. This is not altogether surprising given the colonial origins of the imagination of the new goddess, but something that has been largely occluded in the noisy clamour of ‘Bharat Mata ki jai’ (Victory to Mother India), and the subsequent saturation of the visual sphere with the glitzy productions of barefoot cartographers. Thus, around 1878, in the very decade in which the figure of Mother India made her appearance as such, the Calcutta Art Studio printed a lithograph titled Bharat Bhiksha, which has been variously translated as ‘India Begging’, or ‘the Begging of India’. In the print, the allegorical figure of India as a haggard, even grotesque female (clad possibly in widow’s garb) is paired with a youthful and beatific Britannia, trident in hand. The object of transaction between them is a large (naked) male child sitting between them but with his back to India and gazing up at Britannia, as both ‘mothers’ seek to hold him. In a contemporary Bengali allegory from 1873 called Dasamahavidya, ‘ten aspects of the goddess’, India strikingly resembles the old crone of Bharat Bhiksha:

*Bharat Mata* is now Dhumabati – the widow. In her state of widowhood, she lacks food to nourish her body and clothes to cover herself. Her hair is rough from the lack of oil and unkempt. She has lost her teeth and suffering has made her gaze intense and piercing.

As historian Indira Chowdhury has suggested in her fine analysis of other songs and plays of these decades in Bengal written by the *bhadralok* elite of the region, Mother India appears not as an all-powerful goddess but as a dispossessed and destitute woman, robbed of her lustre, and reduced to begging. Consider a verse from 1873, composed by Dwijendranath of the influential Tagore family:

Oh Bharat your countenance is like the fading moon,  
By day or night your tears flow incessantly;  
Accustomed as I am to your glowing beauty,  
How can I look upon this pale image?
A similar verse opened a play titled *Bharat Mata* by Kiran Chandra Bandopadhyay, first performed in 1873, in which the mother/goddess laments to her ‘sons’,

The plundering robbers have taken away all my ornaments. I have no oil for my hair and how much longer will I have to wear these dull and tattered rags?

Not least, such a wretched figure is smuggled into the most important, indeed foundational, narrative that established the cult of Mother India, the Bengali polymath Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s novel *Anandmath* first serialised in 1881–1882. In a critical scene in which the protagonist Mahendra is ushered into the underground temple where he first encounters the enshrined images of the mother/nation, he is presented with a vision of ‘the Mother of the present, the Mother who has ‘become’, who

is covered by darkness, of a black colour. She has been robbed of everything, that is why she is nude. Today, the whole country is a graveyard, that is why our Mother has a garland of bones, dead skulls. She is trampling her own welfare under her feet.

‘The whole country is a graveyard’: fast-forward to the 1920s and 1930s at the height of anti-colonial protests against British rule, and when ‘the peasant question’ became central to nationalist mobilisations. An illustration on the front page of the Hindi weekly magazine *Abhyudaya*, published in the north Indian city of Allahabad in 1931, shows the emaciated (and dead or dying) body of a peasant – the ‘Everyman’ – crucified on the cross of *lagaan* (taxation) occupying the outline map of India, blood from his wounds dripping on to the nation’s geo-body. His hands still pathetically hold on to a small sickle in one and a sheaf of grain in the other while birds representing smallpox, drought, deluge, poverty and influenza peck away at him; his grieving pathetic family huddles at the base of the cross. The emaciated skeletal peasant body also occupies the geo-body of India in Devnarayan Varma’s stark illustration, ‘Bharatki Loot’, ‘The Plunder of India’, printed possibly in 1931 as part of a series of patriotic illustrations. Framed by statements in English (and translated into Hindi) that draw attention to the systematic plunder and exploitation of India under colonial rule, the illustration has John Bull occupying ‘England’, and reaching out to grab the paltry food on the carto-graphed peasant’s plate, while the poor man recoils in fear, his wife and children at his side. Despite the mother’s salutation *vande mataram*, ‘I bow to the mother’, inscribed at the head of the print, the bare, mapped terrain of ‘Bharatvarsh’ (India) that the peasant occupies indicts the pastoral pleni-tude that dominated the pictorial work of most contemporary barefoot cartographers. The barely-clothed peasant’s skeletal frame also offers a striking counterpoint to the sumptuously-adorned Bharat Mata whose home is the map of India. Again, in an illustration published around the same time in a Tamil magazine at the other end of the subcontinent, the skeletal body of the peasant bearing the enormous burdens of taxes
Tearing Up the Map, Tearing Up Over the Map

As Indian artist and citizen, Dodiya is heir to this tradition that he seems to partly mimic in the ‘Tearscape’ series, even while at the formal level of the figure he harks back to the stark inspiration of Somnath Hore (to whom also the works are dedicated). Despite these allegiances and debts, I propose that Dodiya’s is a more daring venture since it suggests that it is not alien rule but ‘self-rule’ that has devastated the nation’s poor. It is also more daring because it is undertaken in a postcolonial environment where the map of India can only be tampered with at great risk to life and livelihood. This is a map that was born from the conflagration of the Partition of British India in August 1947, hastily put in place by the work of two Boundary Commissions headed by the British lawyer-cum-civil servant Sir Cyril Radcliffe over the course of a couple months, and defended with much ardour (and bloodshed) by the nation-states that were thus cartographically created. One of the empire’s proudest ‘gifts’ was thus hastily taken aparta st h et e r r i t o r yi t s e l fw a sp a r t i -
sitioned, and the map of the subcontinent redrawn. Since its birth as an independent new country, India has waged ‘cartographic wars’ – politics by other means – especially against neighbouring Pakistan but also against China. The Survey of India (whose roots also reach deep back into the colonial period) prints maps of India that are in effect a lie, given that the borders depicted do not conform to the actual lines of control and de facto sovereignty on the ground. And yet international maps showing otherwise – the real state of affairs – are stamped with the obligatory comment before they are allowed to circulate, “The external boundaries of India as depicted on this map are neither correct nor authentic.” Although the map of India is not statutorily covered by the Emblems and Names (Prevention of Improper Use) Act of 1950 or the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act of 1971, which regulate the symbolic economy of the republic (including the proper – or improper – use of the image of Gandhi, the flag and the national anthem), it is protected by the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1961 (section 2) which declared, fairly unequivocally,
Atul Dodiya, *Skull in the Belly*, 1999, from the series ‘Tearscape’, watercolour, acrylic and marble dust on paper, $178 \times 115$ cm, image: courtesy the artist
Whoever publishes a map of India, which is not in conformity with the maps of India as published by the Survey of India, shall be punishable with imprisonment which may be extend to six months, or with fine, or with both.24

As recently as May 2016, the sanctity of the nation’s territorial integrity has been reaffirmed in the Geo-Spatial Information Regulation Bill, which among other things, has this to state about ‘the wrong depiction of map of India, etc’:

No person shall depict, disseminate, publish or distribute any wrong or false topographic information of India including international boundaries through internet platforms or online services or in any electronic or physical form.

The penalty for individuals doing so is ‘a fine ranging from Rupees 10 lac [about 15,000 USD] to Rupees One Hundred Crore [16 million USD], and or/imprisonment for a period of up to seven years’.25

And yet, in Dodiya’s ‘Tearscape’ series, the territorial integrity of the Indian geo-body is challenged repeatedly and through visual representation, the firm lines of imperial and national cartography frequently dissolving into spectral and wraith-like contours. In Woman with Chakki the unclothed female labourer – reduced to a grotesque skeletal figure with exposed genitalia – sits on the map of the nation, as she manically grinds away at a flourmill (chakki). In Skull in the Belly, the map of India floats detached from the globe of the world, curling up at its edges as if scorched: is the large naked man standing on one leg shielding himself from the violence visited upon his wounded body? In Tearscape which lends its title to the whole series, a howling child, only loosely anchored to the mother/land, is placed on the spot occupied by Kashmir – the crown jewel of Mother India, in the barefoot cartographer’s visual work – the hilt of a dagger sticking out of the symbolic vagina in the very heartland. A string of skulls garlands the map of the nation in Lullaby, from which the foetal citizen has been expelled, its umbilical cord ejecting it from the mapped motherland. In Shipwreck, a grinning grotesque bald female’s buttocks grace the Indian heartland, her breasts sagging, her genitalia exposed for all to see, a skeletal arm pointing to some distant space off the map: is she warding off her viewers away from the danger zone that is her putative homeland, or is she suggesting that she herself has been asked to leave? In Iceberg, the map of the nation is disaggregated piece by piece, and placed in the fisherwoman’s net, like ‘a mixed catch’, the most troubled spot, Kashmir, floating like a ‘decapitated head’, or like the tip of an iceberg on the verge of complete submergence.26 Not least, in Gatha – the only scape in the series with a non-English title – the nation’s geo-body is held in place by a human rib cage and vertebral column, the skeletal armature echoed also in the skeletal look of the scrawny nude female perched on the map of India, occluding ‘Kashmir’ in the process. The visual assault on the map of India across the series is relentless, uncompromising and brutal. Genitalia and buttocks are in contact with it, and other body parts – such as the umbilical cord – are strewn across. It is ripped


25 At the time of writing, the status of this Bill is still pending. For a copy of the draft Bill, see Save the Map Campaign (http://savethemap.in/#STM), accessed 20 October 2016.

26 Hoskote, ‘Tearscape’, op cit. Interestingly, the outline of Kashmir conforms to the official Survey of India borders rather than the actual situation on the ground.
Atul Dodiya, *Tearscape*, 1999, from the series ‘Tearscape’, watercolour, acrylic and marble dust on paper, 178 × 115 cm, image: courtesy the artist
Atul Dodiya, *Lullaby*, 2000, from the series ‘Tearscape’, watercolour, acrylic and marble dust on paper, 178 × 115 cm, image: courtesy the artist
Atul Dodiya, *Householder*, 2000, from the series ‘Tearscape’, watercolour, acrylic and marble dust on paper, 178 × 115 cm, image: courtesy the artist
Atul Dodiya, *Woman with Chakki*, 2000, from the series ‘Tearscape’, watercolour, acrylic and marble dust on paper, 178 × 115 cm, image: courtesy the artist
Atul Dodiya, *Houseboat*, 2000, from the series ‘Tearscape’, watercolour, acrylic and marble dust on paper, 178 × 115 cm, image: courtesy the artist
Atul Dodiya, *Gatba*, 2000, from the series ‘Tearscape’, watercolour, acrylic and marble dust on paper, 178 x 115 cm, image: courtesy the artist
Atul Dodiya, *Shipwreck*, 2000, from the series ‘Tearscape’, watercolour, acrylic and marble dust on paper, 178 × 115 cm, image: courtesy the artist
Atul Dodiya, *Iceberg*, 2000, from the series ‘Tearscape’, watercolour, acrylic and marble dust on paper, 178 x 115 cm, image: courtesy the artist
Atul Dodiya, *Petals*, 2000, from the series ‘Tearscape’, watercolour, acrylic and marble dust on paper, 178 × 115 cm, image: courtesy the artist
apart and stabbed open. When the map is not skeletal, it is spectral. It is
never shown whole and complete, not even in *Petals* (2000) which, in
Ranjit Hoskote’s reading, ‘celebrates the moment of redemption’.
Yes, there is a shower of (auspicious?) petals raining down upon both
the map and the grotesque grinning female perched upon it, her pendu-
lous breasts aimed like missiles at the nation’s geo-body: the latter
however is neither complete nor whole.

Yet, even as he is tearing up and ripping apart the map of India – lit-
erally and metaphorically – the artist also appears to be *tearing up over*
the map, as the watercolour paints that he consciously adopted for this
suite of paintings – a very recent turn he made towards that medium –
enable tear-like smudges, smears, and blotches to punctuate gashes and
wounds, especially apparent in *Skull in the Belly*, *Tearscape*, *Shipwreck*
and *Petals*. The nation, which should be home to its citizens – gestured
to in almost every one of the ten paintings by a thatched house that the
artist meticulously places in or about the map – is clearly ‘unhomely’,
as the maternal turns monstrous, flesh and muscle atrophying into
skulls and bones. Is this why the artist has been compelled to produce
these *tear*-scapes, his homage not to the victors of India’s nationalism
but to its victims, inevitably those at the bottom? Is this how the
nation’s map – its geo-body – appears to the wretched of the nation,
the dregs and the detritus, the afflicted and the over-burdened, as they
struggle to eke out an existence?

**Dodiya’s Dare: Nation and Abjection**

In an important commentary on abject art, the art historian Hal Foster
reminds us,

> A special truth seems to reside in traumatic or abject states, in diseased or
damaged bodies. To be sure, the violated body is often the evidentiary
basis of important witnessings to truth, of necessary testimonials against
power.28

In this article, I draw on the everyday understanding of the term abject
– whose history goes back several centuries in the English language – to
refer to the degraded, the despised and the dejected. But I also use it in the
philosophical sense first proposed by the French sociologist Georges
Bataille in an essay he drafted in 1934 in the context of the rise of
fascism in Europe, where he confessed that while it was difficult to give
it a positive definition, the abject referred to all that is excluded or
excreted from the body and from mainstream society, *les misérables* in
his coinage. The latter are ‘the wretched population, exploited for pro-
duction and cut from life by a prohibition on contact’, represented
‘from the outside with disgust as the dregs of the people, populace and
gutter’.29 Although subsequently – and most influentially – the concept
took a psychoanalytic turn in the writings of the Bulgarian–French fem-
inist Julia Kristeva (which is not without value when considering
Dodiya’s abject(ed) female figures and their corporeal exertions and
secretions), I follow Imogen Tyler in her call to sustain our concern

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27 Ibid
Press, Pasadena, California, np
with ‘unbearable life on the margins of social invisibility’, and with abjection as a material social process rather than only as a psychic phenomenon.\textsuperscript{30} I also reference scholars such as Judith Butler who draw our attention to abjection as an active operation that produces ‘bodies that matter’, and those that do not,\textsuperscript{31} and critics such as Hal Foster who remind us that abjection is both the operation by which that ‘which disturbs or threatens the stability of the self’ is expelled, and\textsuperscript{32} the condition of those so abjected. In Rina Arya’s very helpful gloss,

The threat of abjection (of being abject) gives rise to the operation of expelling the abject and thus restoring stability, albeit for a limited time. The expelled part does not disappear – it is the perpetual remainder – and continues to threaten the boundaries of the self, meaning that its presence disrupts the stability of self and society, thus activating the need for the operation of abjection.\textsuperscript{33}

While not necessarily wanting to hastily pigeon-hole Dodiya’s watercolours as an Indian version of ‘abject art’,\textsuperscript{34} I propose that the ‘Tearscape’ series daringly shows us how the very process of bourgeois nation formation is not unlike abjection in this double sense. On the one hand, the series uncompromisingly – and with great courage – forefronts those lowly bodies that have been disenfranchised through the operations of so-called nation building and state formation, and yet without whose quotidian labours it is impossible for the national body politic to survive. Hence Dodiya’s recourse to the map form – the graphic representation of the national geo-body – to underscore the violence visited upon the bodies of the dispossessed underbelly of the nation which cannot be readily accommodated in Mother India’s pastoral home/land. On the other hand, the violence committed comes with its catastrophic cost, namely, the rupturing of the geo-body itself, hence ‘Tearscape’, here the word ‘tear’ in the heteronym meaning a ‘rip’, or a ‘cut’. The amputated limbs, the exposed orifices and the skeletal remains of the nation’s wretched find a visual echo in the map of the nation in disarray. In the culminating image of Petals, the grinning wretched female even finds herself ‘mirrored’ back in and by the map of the nation. She is India, alas. Hence also ‘Tearscape’, here the title summoning up the act of crying.\textsuperscript{35}

Dodiya does not ignore the abject male, but not surprisingly, given the over-worked feminisation of India as Mother India, the principal protagonist of the ‘Tearscape’ series is the wretched female. Dodiya himself apparently turned to archetypal females such as Sabari and Karaikkal Ammaiay drawn from the Indic mythic past for the unnamed crone who is carto-graphed by her placement within the map of India.\textsuperscript{36} But she also brings to mind another more recent abject and carto-graphed female who is the protagonist of the poignant story from the 1980s, ‘Douloti the Bountiful’, by one of contemporary India’s most engaged activist-writers, Mahasweta Devi. As the story has it, Douloti is the daughter of a bonded labourer who is forced to turn to prostitution to pay off family debts. Towards the end, her body wracked with (venereal) disease and failing to secure adequate medical treatment, Douloti lies down to die on the bare earth. Her body is discovered the next morning, laid out on an outline map of India drawn in chalk on the

32 Foster, ‘Obscene, Abject, Traumatic’, op cit, p 114
33 Arya, Abjection and Representation, op cit, p 4
35 In a recent interview with the author, Dodiya confirmed that he had titled the series with tears in this sense, rather than in the sense of ripping apart that I have also discussed. He also recounted the circumstances under which the ‘tears’ and ‘blotches’ appeared on these scapes as he painted them, and inspired him to name the series as such, artist interview with author, November 2016.
36 ‘In Tearscape for the first time, I… invented a new figuration for the female body’ (Dodiya, quoted in...
bare earth by Mohan (a local schoolmaster) to celebrate India’s Independence Day. Mahasweta concludes her story thus:

Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labor spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Doulotia Nagesia’s tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today, on the fifteenth of August, Doulotia 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? Doulotis is all over India.

Gayatri Spivak, who translated this story into English from Bengali, notes that Mahasweta’s conclusion demonstrates the reinscription of ‘the official map of the nation by the zoograph of the un-accommodated female body restored to the economy of nature’.37 I suggest that Mahasweta Devi’s story and Dodiya’s ‘Tearscape’ series both mock a century of patriotic visual culture in which the exceptional female form of the mother/goddess has been deployed to supplement the cartographic configuration of the nation and re-present it to its devoted patriots as a mother/land worth dying for. Diseased and skeletal bodies such as Doulotia and Dodiya’s anonymous abject female compel us to reflect on the inadequacies of the bountiful form of Mother India, as indeed does the incapacity of the Indian national project to accommodate its most vulnerable citizens. At the very least, they have displaced the glorious Mother India from her righteous abode, at worst, they in fact may be Mother India herself, her home turned into a graveyard, her maternity gone awry, her abject children spread all over India.

Is this what the artist is tearing up over as he tears up the map of India?

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37 I draw this section from my discussion in Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation*, op cit, pp 283–284.

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