

READING “PTERODACTYL”

Thangam Ravindranathan’s excellent recent piece on how literature relates to climate change celebrates Marguerite Duras’ 1950 novel *The Sea Wall* and the brilliant diasporic writers Amitav Ghosh and Shumona Sinha from India, writing in English and French; but does not mention Mahasweta Devi’s “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha.”¹ I am writing this essay to fill that gap. And more.

The unreal fable of the pterodactyl in Mahasweta Devi’s “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha” is framed in the love story of a wanderlusting investigative journalist, Puran Sahay and Saraswati, patient, intelligent, educated middle-class schoolteacher with whom he has had a long and interesting relationship.² He leaves his unresolved situation with her to investigate an unusual story, with her uncertain response: “I can’t give my word” (98). And, at the end of the novella, Puran climbs up onto a truck presumably to return to that uncertainty. Such middle-class “equal” gender relationships are the deep background of the story. Note Saraswati’s “surprising” anger at Kamal’s criticism of the “evolved” tribal (118-9). Other examples would be Harisharan and his public sector wife (111), Surajpratap and Sheila (112-3). I believe the representation of this gendering is to show the absolute incommunicability between the story of liberated middle class gendering and the women of a place such as Pirtha, a remote valley in hilly Chhattisgarh. “Dimag’s wife,” dazed by the sale of her sister, shown as full of speech and tight love, is the exception that breaks the unreality, toward the end of the story:

Yesterday the Sarpanch arrived and distributed bundles of posters, "End separatism, keep communal harmony intact, and renounce the path of violence." Dimag's wife was saying, This paper is not good, too thin. She is now pregnant, and forever holds the hand of a three-year-old girl, as if someone will snatch the child away. She talks as well.

- O Shankar! When will we all die together?

- Shankar! Why did relief come this time?

- Shankar! Why did it rain?

They are not entitled to rain, they are not entitled to relief, the ancestors' soul has come and gone casting its shadow, therefore unremitting death was their only lot (153).

The reader can know s/he is in Chhattisgarh because Mahasweta cunningly mentions Abujhmar in the middle of the text: “In Abujhmar there is a huge depression in the rock like a well, or like a monster’s bowl. The sunlight never reaches its belly fully. The Adivasis live in the land of that primordial dusk” (109). She does not focus on what we know best about Chhattisgarh, the “Maoist” struggles inspired by middle-class leaders, but rather what Simon Gikandi has described as “the ordinary.”³ Frame and fable together stage the absolute separation of middle-class activist life and Adivasis in remote enclaves that still exist in India and certainly in Abujhmar. Let us remember as we enter the text “Puran has come to Pirtha with the worry that Saraswati might leave some day” (98).

From small-town middle class family life we enter the world of the lower reaches of the state civil service in a remote rural area where shreds of top-down idealism still survive. We see this as they encounter the still feudal functionaries of local self-government – the Sarpanch and

¹ Thangam Ravindranathan, “The Rise of the Sea and the Novel” (*differences* 30.iii, Dec 2019), p. 1-33. I hope in her future work she will spend some of her considerable energy on discussing teaching reading.

² Mahasweta Devi, “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha,” in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, tr. *Imaginary Maps* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 95-196. Further references in text.

³ Simon Gikandi, “Introduction,” in Sophonia Mofokeng, *In My Heart*, tr. Nhlanhla Maake (Calcutta: Seagull [1962], forthcoming). For the best-known description of the Chhattisgarh “Maoists,” see Arundhati Roy, *Walking With the Comrades* (New York: Penguin [2010], 2011).

his cohorts. But this too is a frame. An indication of what will be held within this is given in two passages. The first:

The survey map of Pirtha Block is like some extinct animal of Gondwanaland. The beast has fallen on its face. The new era of the history of the world began when, at the end of the Mesozoic era, India broke off from the main mass of Gondwanaland. It is as if some prehistoric creature had fallen on its face then. Such are the survey lines of Pirtha Block (99).

There is a perfectly reasonable discussion of “development” needs in terms of that map:

Look at this map. Near the foot of the animal there is a church but no missionaries. We are forty kilometers to the south of this church. And a canal would have gone from the animal's tail to its head by the Madhopura Irrigation Scheme. The scheme is in the register. That canal would have joined the Pirtha River as well. And look here. - I'm looking.

- The tribals are in the animal's jaws. Near the throat water gushes down into Pirtha at great speed in the rainy season. If there were small dams three miles down the river, and then another mile down, the tribal area of Pirtha would be green (100).

The second:

A boy painted this on the stone wall of his room. The picture was taken by Surajpratap, but no, this photo is not for a newspaper, not for publicity. - He did not print a photo. - No, we took away the negative. He cannot print this, he doesn't have a copy. What is it? Bird? Webbed wings like a bat and a body like a giant iguana. And four legs? A toothless gaping horrible mouth. But this is ... Don't say it. I won't hear it.

The prehistoric Mesozoic animal from a time and space that intervene in the opening of the journey into the true fable. There are two unrealities in the telling of the journey, the fable.

This is fiction. When I brought literary considerations into the work of the Subaltern Studies collective at Professor Ranajit Guha's invitation, there was a fierce disciplinary opposition from most of the other members of the collective, who were historians. And, when I wrote my critical essays on various pieces by Mahasweta, a reviewer in *India Today* dismissed them as “sermonizing.” I will therefore add here a few corrective words before I comment on the unrealities in the fable at the center of “Pterodactyl.”

It was my great good fortune to be close to Mahasweta Devi for many decades. Whatever our differences, it was clear to me that, even more than in her personal life, in her writings, right from the start, she was in pursuit of the possibility of the ethical. Therefore, any capable reader would track that in her writing – and that is not sermonizing. As for fiction not having any home in that historians' house, I would ask my historian friends – not all, the best of them already know this – that if history is perceived as well researched verified facts, ranged together appropriately, in order to provide ingredients for an interpretive narrative – then fiction, understood not merely as the opposite of truth – is the imaginative activism that allows the emergence of the historical object of investigation with a subject-character of its own. Then, a further understanding, which is a little bit harder: that the reader of fiction learns from the singular and the unverifiable. And sometimes, the details that are not necessarily and clearly correct in fact will make the reader ask: why has the writer staged the text in this way? Why indeed, sensing this perhaps, Mahasweta writes in a final note, as author rather than narrator within the text:

[In this piece no name-such as Madhya Pradesh or Nagesia --been used literally. Madhya Pradesh is here India, Nagesia village the entire tribal society. I have deliberately conflated the ways, rules, and customs of different Austric tribes and groups, and the idea of the ancestral soul is also my own. I have merely tried to express my estimation, born of experience, of Indian tribal society, through the myth of the pterodactyl. - Mahasweta Devi. (196)]

Let us rather ask, as readers rather than author, why the text has staged an absolutely deprived community of child-bearing women, with their children dying of malnutrition, and one male, Shankar, the only literate person in the community, almost silent throughout the text until he breaks into the philosophical discourse which refuses the interference of so-called "development:"

What is Shankar Nagesia saying? A warning bell goes off in Puran's mind. He must understand Shankar's words, otherwise no justice can be done to himself or Saraswati in the Saraswati affair. . . . Shankar speaks. As if he is singing a saga. . . . Shankar comes up close and says, "Can you move far away? Very far? Very, very far?" Shankar sways, he faints. (119, 120).

He supposedly "sa[ys] a lot" (129), directing his fellow-tribals. But that goes unreported.

In fact, Mahasweta knew well that, even in the direst circumstance, Adivasi women were rarely a silent group, although she (and under her auspices, I) had heard Lochu Sabar speak history (*itibash bolchhi*, he would say) like a saga. What we are looking at is a structuring of the text that may have an effect on the reader. We remember that the story began with a frame containing a singular man held within family-inclined women, and find here a structural parallel on a more deprived level. In other words, the absolute divide between middle class India and the tribals shows some commonality in gender-structure through this textual structuring; not available in the narrative or story-telling., For reproductive heteronormativity is bigger than all the problems of society.

The central unreality, the incursion of the pterodactyl among these Adivasis goes even further. For if reproductive heteronormativity (or RHN, as I have affectionately abbreviated this here and there) is the broadest link that holds human beings together, the earth holds the human. The pterodactyl is staged to teach us a couple of things. First of all, the difference in gaze between the implied reader and the protagonists. For us, an improbability. For them, the punishing spirit. But the author warns: "the idea of the ancestral soul is also my own."

The pterodactyl draws forth from Puran the difference between planetarity and our responsibility to the earth. But in order to be prepared to respond, to access the pterodactyl's message in his imagination, to "read" it in an act of imaginative activism, Puran has to be prepared. He has to be moved from the political to the literary. He is ready for he is already "romanticizing:" "This room is telling me, or I am grasping this as I've entered this room . . . this is sensed in the blood, it flows in the blood from generation. – Puran! Don't romanticize it"(134). And the first step is to show that he does not know.

As he sleeps in an emptied dwelling the rains finally come and end the drought. Puran walks to the forbidden shrine room. "Filling the floor a dark form sits. . . . The creature is breathing, its body is trembling. Puran backs off with measured steps" (141). A bit later, "Bikhia [the boy who drew the pterodactyl] looks at him in deep expectancy and Puran understands nothing" (144; translation modified). He weeps. Shankar tells him: "You have brought this rain, the people of Pirtha are now in your debt" (idem). And finally an explanation from his friend Harisharan: "People who have nothing need *miracles*. For now it's through you . . . now a story will be put together from voice to voice, the story will become song . . . and the song will enter the history that they hold in their oral tradition" (145).

There is a good deal of statistics in the text, sometimes in a non-characterological "objective" voice, sometimes in free indirect discourse inhabiting Puran's voice which always gives way to texture, "experience." There is also a good deal of representation of private sector and public sector aid work, shot through with political strategy, that is given with narrative irony.

Through all this, now a companion of Bikhia in taking care of the pterodactyl, Puran worries: "There is a tremendous problem facing him" (155).

Alone with the pterodactyl, Puran says toward it: "forgive me," as he reads up on the pterodactyl, classified under "Reptiles: in sea, in air" (154). Contrast this to the absence of affective focusing on the couple of pages on "the characteristics of the Indian Austric" (114-5)

broken by the appropriation of the tribal identity by the caste-Hindu Sarpanch, as the text suggests paratactically (with no transition between “[t]here are some caste-Hindus in Gabahi” and “Bhan Singh Shah the Sarpanch . . .”)

Bikhia, the subaltern (“social groups on the margins of history,” Gramsci) takes agency. He “establish[es a] pact of secrecy” with Puran and Puran starts to address the pterodactyl. The object of knowledge has become a subject from whom a response is sought:

What do its eyes want to inform Puran?

Corporeality constructed of the gray dusk or this liquid darkness is altogether still. Only an unfamiliar smell, sometimes sharp, sometimes mild. When Puran stands, or Bikhia stands, the smell turns mild and faint. Some in-built perception for self-protection from unknown beings?

There is no circulation eye-to-eye.

Only a dusky waiting, without end.

What news does it want to give? (157; translation modified)

And then Mahasweta offers the distinction between extinction by planetarity and anthropocentric extinction as imagined by Puran trying to “read” what the pterodactyl’s message might be. The first sentence is about planetarity. The rest about our responsibility for killing our earth. Please allow me a long quotation:

We are extinct by the inevitable natural geological evolution. You too are endangered. You too will become extinct in nuclear explosions, or in war, or in the aggressive advance of the strong obliterating the weak, which finally turns you naked, barbaric, primitive, are you going forward or back, think. Forests extinct, animal life obliterated outside of zoos and forest sanctuaries. What will you finally grow in the soil, having murdered nature in the application of man-imposed technology? "Deadly DDT greens,/charnel-house vegetables,/uprooted astonished onions, radioactive potatoes/explosive bean-pods, monstrous and misshapen/spastic gourds, eggplants with mobile tails/bloodthirsty octopus creepers, animal blood-filled/tomatoes?"

The national spirit of the ancient nations is crushed, like nature, like the sustaining earth, their sustaining ancient civilizations received no respect, recognition didn’t happen, they were only destroyed, they are being destroyed, is this what you are informing us?

The grey lidless eyes do not answer.

Have you come up from the past to warn, are you telling us that this man-made poverty and famine are crimes, this wide-spread thirst is a crime, it is a crime to take away the forest and make the forest-dwelling peoples naked and endangered? Are you telling us that it is a crime to strangle and destroy all voices of protest, and the arm of combat?

The eye utters no word.

How grey, what amazing eyes. It wants to say something, to give some news, Puran does not understand. No communication point. No word can be said or written.

Is there a message in the smell of its body? Why do its eyes look? In the inner shrine room (the worshipped and the worshippers are gone) of the family of a poor tribal (who is dead), oh ancient one sitting unmoving, what do you want us to know?

The grey eye does not answer.

You have come to me for shelter, and I don't know how to save you, is that why I'll see your death? I don't know, if I knew I could have saved you, you would have taken wing and left again, you would have searched and found water, food, shelter. I don't know, if I knew... In this shrine room of stone and earth in the

last years of the century an urgent piece of news that humanity needed to know came to us and the news could not be given because human beings did not know or understand its language.

The grey eye wants to give Puran some news (157-8; translation modified).

Critics such as Bruno Latour, Timothy Morton, Margaret Cohen, and Amitav Ghosh have suggested that the rise of the novel, conventionally connected to modernity, can be re-constellated today as connecting to the Anthropocene and the climate change that is bringing the world to its own destruction. “Jennifer Wenzel, Jesse Oak Taylor, Ursula Heise, ... Sadia Abbas [and others] have taken issue with [these writers],” writes Thangam Ravindranathan. She suggests that this criticism of the novel “at the same time imagine [s] the epilogue, the final twist, to a long story about (ultimately deceived) reading. This story’s end would read: Human literature turned out in the end to be ‘carbon emissions’ uncannily clever gesture of self protection.”⁴

It is in complicity with this deceived reading that I add my appeal for a more robust practice of reading, harnessing the humanities for the kind of imaginative activism, holding back from planetarity, that Mahasweta stages in “Pterodactyl.”

What I am proposing, through the practice of literary reading, is a training of our students’ habit of “normality,” continuing through further teaching and rearing, developing a worldwide collectivity, generation by generation, rearranging the groundlevel affect of greed, and parochiality at all ends. I want to be able to say, without accusations of sermonizing, that “Pterodactyl” can become a teaching text for such a practice of literary reading. I have tried to show how the text throws the reader structural and textural signals for reading, finally limited by planetarity. For the planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say “the planet, on the other hand.” And that is the figurative space of the pterodactyl.

The pterodactyl is brought alive from that space through the map (“The survey map of Pirtha Block is like some extinct animal of Gondwanaland” (see page 00). and is meticulously re-written back into the visual representation of the map in the end. This is an important step to understand – for the animation of the map into special texture is a topos, and mapmaking is the beginning of civilization, and the tectonic separation of Gondwanaland may be the inauguration of the remote possibility of the map of the still changeful world we live in (“[t]he new era in the history of the world began when, at the end of the Mesozoic era, India broke off from the main mass of Gondwanaland. It is as if some prehistoric creature had fallen on its face then” [99]), and it is that cusp situation that we are addressing here. I have suggested elsewhere that mapmaking is also the beginning of the anthropocene.⁵ Gramsci once suggested that the way to bring back social justice is to locate where history went wrong, and start our work at redress from there.⁶ One might say, that this use of the topos of opening up the map to texture in a completely new way is also part of what we must learn by reading this text as it signals to the reader, as follows: Bikhia and Puran, with a shared unspoken understanding, find a place to dispose the pterodactyl’s body with appropriate respect for tradition. They go down to the deepest level of the cave structure, to the shores of a deep natural well. Here is again the real,

The sun comes in at one side through the crevice above. Puran shines his flashlight where Bikhia points. Drums beat from the smooth stone, one hears the clamor of the dance. With great care and over time, who has engraved dancing men and women, drum,

⁴ Ravindranathan (op cit), p. 8-9, 11.

⁵ “Halting the Map Maker,” Inaugural Lecture, 50th Annual Convention, International Association of Art Critics, Paris, November 13, 2017; reprinted with revisions in “From Forest to Furrow,” in Olivia Fairweather ed., *Root Sequence Mother Tongue: Asad Raza*, (London: Koenig Books, 2019) pp. 32-43.

⁶ Writing at speed, I cannot take the time to locate the Gramsci passage. For the moment, let me cite a discussion somewhat different from my own: Milan Babic, “Let’s talk about the interregnum: Gramsci and the crisis of the liberal world order,” *International Affairs* 96.iii (May 2020), p. 767–86 <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiiz254>

flute, the khoksar to keep the beat? Peacock, elephant, deer, bird, snake, naked child, tree, Khajra tree, bow and arrow, spear. . . . Who carved these pictures, filling the cave wall for how long? Do these pictures date from the time when Bikhia's people were free, and the animal kingdom was their dominion, beasts of prey? When the forest was mother and nurse? (175)

Real, as in a news item:

12000-years-old ancient cave paintings in Hazaribagh face destruction; Government inaction continues. . . .

Ranchi, 21 October [2005]: . . . Here one finds the 'Isco Cave' – famous for its treasure of ancient rock paintings. And not only at Isco, but we also find cave paintings in the Keraderi hills. Ancient cave paintings are also found in the Kebdur Cave in Barkagaon. But the most significant among them is found in Thethangi village, in Tandwa block. Thethangi is about twenty kilometers to the south-west of the town of Tandwa. It is in the caves of this village that one finds the rock painting of a dinosaur.

According to antiquarians, this dinosaur figure was carved into the rock some 10,000 years before the Christian era. Historians are also investigating as to how the dinosaur, thought to have become extinct during the Ice Age 65 million years ago, re-appeared in a cave painting dating from 10,000 BC. But, due to a complete absence of any effort at preservation such a priceless specimen of prehistoric cave painting decays away. And the dinosaur figure is not the only one –several geometrical figures are found in these caves of Thethangi. On the one hand, historians say that these geometrical figures bear testimony to the mathematical genius of the ancient peoples of the region. To the local villagers on the other hand, these geometrical figures are nothing but images of malevolent gods. And, in order to placate their wrath they continue to apply generous dabs of sacred vermilion, all the while defacing the valuable paintings. The villagers are adamant, and refuse to pay any heed to the requests from the visiting researchers to give up this practice. The state government of Jharkhand has of course done nothing to protect and preserve any of these cave paintings in either Isco or Thethangi.⁷

The reader remembers that on his first sleep in the area, Puran had dreamed that Saraswati must become part of the cave paintings with him. There are enough hints in the text that she is there in her own mind, to be recognized as a companion. With that dream he is ready to get on the truck and move into Pirtha.

In his sleep the men and women of the cave paintings dance. In his sleep a shadow flies floating. No, this incident is not of the type where I come, I see, I take some notes for writing a report, I record some voices on tape. How about staying on a bit? I must write to Saraswati if I can. Thirty-two is not old. Yet in his dream the men and women of the cave paintings keep dancing and Puran asks Saraswati, Will you dance? It's at this point that someone shoves him awake. - Get up, get up, the truck's here (106).

"Measurement began our night," W. B Yeats wrote in "Under Ben Bulben," his valedictory poem. And the well is measured. A stone's throw, and the sound of the drop comes back in a few moments. Deep.

Now look at the description of the death. The prehistoric animal is restored to the map: The body seemed slowly to sink down. a body crumbling on its four feet, the head on the floor, in front of their eyes the body suddenly begins to tremble steadily. It trembles and trembles, and suddenly the wings open, and they go back in repose, this pain is intolerable to the eye. Bikhia goes on saying something in a soundless mumble, moving his lips. He sways, he mumbles, sways forward and back. About an hour later Puran says. "Gone" (180).

The actual internment is not described.

⁷ Email source Avishek Ganguly, translation from Hindi is also his.

Now it is as it was, when all of the top-down workers saw it and discussed "development" in terms of the animal, as I have pointed out above (see page 00). The planetary is restored (as it can be done in didactic literary space, but of course not in our practical everyday) to the worldly.

The word "planetarity," was first used by me in "Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet," in 1997.⁸ My use of "planetarity" does not refer to an applicable methodology. It is rather the limit to our efforts to save our world. It is different from a sense of being the custodians of our very own planet, although, as this paper emphasizes, I am fully committed to such a sense of accountability, present in Mahasweta's text in the description of monstrous vegetation.

Planetarity is not susceptible to the subject's grasp. Since the human ideal may be to be intended toward the other, we provide for ourselves transcendental figurations ("translations?") of what we think is the origin of this animating gift: Mother, Nation, God, Nature. These are names (nicknames, putative synonyms) of alterity, some more radical than others. If we think planet-thought in this mode, the thinking opens up to embrace an inexhaustible taxonomy of such names including but not identical with the whole range of human universals: aboriginal animism as well as the spectral white mythology of post-rational science. If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us, it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away -- and thus to think of it is already to transgress, for, in spite of our forays into what we metaphorize, differently, as outer and inner space, what is above and beyond our own reach is not continuous with us as it is not, indeed, specifically discontinuous. We must persistently educate ourselves into the peculiar mindset of accepting the untranslatable, even as we are programmed to transgress that mindset by "translating" it into the mode of "acceptance." This task is what Puran Sahay, Mahasweta's protagonist, is shown not to understand,

Do not think this acceptance is giving up. Think rather that nothing works if you do not know the limit of your powers. It is to "supplement" top-down philanthropy with the impossible task of harnessing the humanities robustly into education.

In Mahasweta's narrative, Puran's lack of understanding is given to us transformed as another improbability, if not impossibility: Puran the caste-Hindu activist, following Shankar the subaltern activist's behest; and not writing a report for his paper. If I may say it with utmost respect and indeed affectionate devotion: Mahasweta could not do this in life. But the imagination took her further.

Yet the report is written in the text. And the rhetoric is of a letter not sent, except in fiction, to every reader as s/he animates the text in the existential temporality of reading.⁹ What can come of such readings? I have offered you one example. The literary offers no guarantees. Perhaps at least an acknowledgement that the first right of those we want to "help" is the right to refuse? A further acknowledgement that nothing can change without a total epistemological transformation of the state? A call for the humanities beyond the disciplines? An acknowledgment of our limits which makes practice stronger? You will add to these possibilities, I hope.

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⁸ Spivak, *Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet/Imperative zur Neuerfindung des Planeten*, ed. Willi Goetschel, Passagen: Vienna, 1999; reprinted as "L'imperativo di re-immaginare il pianeta," in *aut aut* 312 (Nov-Dec '02), pp. 72-87.

⁹ As I have presented in my discussion of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," in *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* in my discussion of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in "Acting Bits/Identity Talk" in *An Aesthetic Education in an Age of Globalization*.