

The Aesthetics of Human Body: A Reading of Selected Poems of Tishani Doshi

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Abstract: The poetry of Tishani Doshi seems to speak upon a lot of themes. The specific paper in consideration discusses the use of human body as a metaphor in the selected poems of Doshi. The paper focuses on the intriguing ways upon which the poet has interwoven the bodily aspects into the otherwise mundane themes of survival, consummation, resistance, civilization and death.

Keywords: human body, metaphor, civilization, survival, resistance, death.

“The human body is an instrument for the production of art in the life of the human soul.”

Alfred North Whitehead

Tishani Doshi's poetry is different in its theme, structure and treatment. Doshi is of Welsh-Gujarati origin and henceforth her works have undertones of immigrant angst and urge to find her roots. However, her poems are noticeable for a variety of themes that Doshi highlights. The poems taken into consideration in the paper actually project human body as a metaphor and use its functional features to delineate the intended idea.

Over the few decades studies on human body has gained a lot of popularity. “.....the study of social mobility, of racism, the formation of the ‘underclass’, social inequalities in health and schooling and globalization, are all concerned implicitly with the movement, location, care and education of bodies. In different ways, all these areas of study are interested in how and why the social opportunities and life expectancies of people are shaped by the classification and treatment of their bodies as belonging to a particular ‘race’, sex, class or nationality (Shilling, 18).

The poem “What the Body Knows” published in her first poetry collection titled “Countries of the Body” (2006) speaks about the survival of an individual in the world. The journey to move away from oblivion to embrace light is embodied in the poem. The poet uses human body as a metaphor to delineate the survival instinct in an individual. The poem begins with the phrase “the body “ instead of using any names or pronouns as body stands for all human beings. The burden of failure, loss and stress in a fast moving world gets reflected:

“The body dances in a darkened room

Turning itself inside out

So that skin can face the light in

fractures

Slip like shadow through skeleton

Walls

Begin to cry- really- to scream

About the tarnished weight of dreams”. (1-8)

The poem refers to body as being in a dark room in search of light. It is the very same body that searches its origin, looks out for new dreams and gets tangled within the trap of memories. The human desire to explore new paths and avenues of knowledge is explicit in the line, “Flying from this dream to the next” (17). The body looks for its roots or more specifically its origin:

“Searches for remain of bark,

Hints of what it used to be.

Perhaps an ocean framed in bone,

A pair of birds in early white,” (13-16)

Undoubtedly, the most beautiful lines in the poem are:

“This has been a drift after all.

The body returns to its original place,

Moves from one to the other – creeps

Tries to flee itself, lone trunk, “ (9-12)

The lines portray the very essence of human life – the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Interestingly, Doshi often talks about the religious beliefs of afterlife and rebirth in her poems as it is evident in another poem, “The Art of Losing” (Everything Begins Elsewhere, 23).

“Ode to the Walking Woman” (Everything Begins Elsewhere, 14) has historical nuances attached to it. The poem brings in the factual elements of the Indus Valley civilization. Being one of the oldest known civilizations of the world Indus Valley civilization has made a mark for itself in the world. The poem has references to the cities of Harappa and Mohenjodaro where the remnants of the civilization has been discovered initially. The expressions like “bronzed rib”, “ Mohenjodaro’s brassy girls”, “ turbaned Harappan mothers”, “ terracotta legs” and “dancing underneath “ are all direct references to Indus Valley lifestyle. The people of the Indus are experts in pottery and use bronze, as iron was discovered only later. The baked earthen statue of a dancing girl made out of bronze discovered at the site of Indus Valley garnered a lot of praise. The poem can be treated as an ode to the entire human race not to get weary or tired. Henceforth, the poem begins as “Sit –you must be tired of walking” (1-3).

The references to the goddesses like Inana, Istar of Mesopotamia and Cybele of Anatolia reinforce the belief that these early civilizations had trade relations with Indus. The poem speaks of human civilization in relation to human body, more precisely female body. Indus is considered to be matriarchal as the society is believed to have worshipped mother goddess associated with fertility. Inana, Istar, Cybele, Artemis are associated with fertility and vegetation. Thus, woman becomes the centre of human civilization:

“Mohenjodaro’ brassy girls

with bangled wrists
and cinnabar lips;
turbaned Harappan mothers
standing wide
on terracotta legs;" (31-36)

The cry of the goddesses symbolizes their pain and agony as they are worried about the humankind. The present plight of corruption and unrest in the human world might have pushed them into grave pits of unpleasant thoughts.

"egg- breasted Artemis-

Inana, Istar, Cybele, clutching their

bounteous hearts.

in the unrepentant dark,

Crying: 'Daughter,

Where has the granaries

And great baths disappeared?"(37-43)

".....the development of civilized bodies involves a progressive socialization of the body. As used here, the socialization of bodies involves two main features. First, from being closely associated with the rhythms and dictates of nature, natural functions are socially managed and organized.....Second as the body becomes subject to ever expanding taboos, it is transformed into a location for and an expression of codes of behaviour" (Shilling, 136). It is made clear that the power of leading the human civilization has to be passed on to the "daughters ". It calls forth the next generation to take ahead the

civilization and build on what has been created by the ancestors. The power of regeneration of female body is referred to:

“Won’t you resurrect yourself,

make love to the sky,

reclaim the world.” (44-46)

Being an ardent feminist, Doshi’s “The River of Girls” (Everything Begins Elsewhere, 13) speaks about women’s resistance against injustice. The poem can be read as a song of celebrating womanhood that can break away any form of hurdles. The opening line, “i.m India’s missing girls” is remarkable as it sets the tone of the poem. The plurality of the line portrays the harsh reality of Indian girls who fall prey to the cruel world. The implication might be towards those girls who might have been forgotten by their own families, society and denied the right to attain justice. The agonizing condition of hundreds of mothers who have lost their daughters to the devilish society is outlined in the lines:

“.....this mother

laying down the bloody offerings

of birth”. (10-12)

Doshi uses female body as a means of resistance in the poem. The discussions about female body has always been a taboo in the Indian society. Doshi makes references to vagina and breasts in her poem and thereby tries to project female body as a medium of resistance. The reference to vagina and breasts would help to normalize the talks on female body and sexuality. In a sense, Doshi asks women to make her body a weapon, that is to say, the very same body which has been subjected to torture and shame for centuries would become the site of confrontation and battle.

“This coin – thin vagina

.....

their golden breasts held high

like weapons to the sky” (7...21-22)

Women have often been reduced to be a sexualized object intended to satiate the lust. As Laura Mulvey observes in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1973), an object for voyeuristic and fetishistic pleasure. Doshi has projected woman as a fierce being as opposed to the universal image of submissive, naive and self – effacing woman.

“when they were born with tigers

breathing between their thighs;

when they set out for battle

with all three eyes on fire” (17-20)

“Ode to Drowning” (*Everything Begins Elsewhere*, 2) is written as a passionate song about the act of love – making, “a song to be sung at the latest hour of night” (8-10). The longing for the lover and the angst of the beloved form the theme of the poem. Interestingly, rain forms a prime image in the poem. Doshi equates the act of intercourse with the rain drops falling on the earth’s surface. Just as how the earth eagerly waits for rain, the beloved too waits for her lover anxiously. The human body becomes a metaphor for consummation:

“It’s that old idea

of drowning

in another to find the self”. (63-65)

Further in the poem:

“When the hymen

of the earth

is torn into”. (87-89)

There has been a paradigm shift in the confrontation of death as a communal phenomenon to a more personal loss. “These processes of individualization and privatization in the organization of death have important implications for the strength of boundaries between the bodies of the living and the dead” (Shilling, 164). Doshi too tries to normalize “death “ as a phenomenon, an unavoidable one in her poem, *The Art of Losing* (*Everything Begins Elsewhere*, 23). Doshi’s casual way of referring to death as a mundane affair gives a new dimension to the meaning of death itself. The most striking trait of the poem is the fact that it talks about how death always surrounds one all through one’s life starting from one’s childhood. The beginning line “It begins with the death of the childhood pet” (1-2) reinforces this idea.

Death, though a physiological phenomenon has a lot of religious beliefs intertwined. The concept of heaven and hell, reincarnation and rebirth are still prevalent. In a sense, the people left behind wailing and sobbing for the dead feel disheartened as they will never be able to see their loved ones again. Thus, it is believed that the soul leaves one human body to take upon another.

“ People around you grow old
and die, and its explained
as a kind of going away-
to God, or rot, or to return
as an ant”.(30-34)

The callous tone of the lines actually sheds light on the need to be more accepting and being someone who would understand the fact that death is inevitable for the mortal beings. The line “you’ll be called aside” (65) reinstates the idea.

But one day your parents
will sneak into the garden
to stand under the stars,

and fade, like the lawn,

into a mossy kind of grey.

And you must let them.(56-61)

The poem touches the readers in a different way for someone who has lost a very dear one, it simply asks to be more ‘accommodating’ to the fact of losing the person. Doshi discusses losing somebody very close as an art where success comes only to those who could stand strong. Of all the poems discussed so far, “The Art of Losing” is special in the sense that it talks about the inevitability of death in human life and also stresses on the need to accept it. Death is not something outside of life, it is always around the people. The poem is unique as it does not brood on the images of decay and destruction.

Works Cited

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