



A study of trauma and inversion in Tishani Doshi's "After a shooting in a maternity clinic in Kabul"

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Abstract

This research paper explores Tishani Doshi's poem, "After a Shooting in a Maternity Clinic in Kabul," focusing on the theme of women's mental health and investigating how conflict and violence cause significant psychological harm. This poem was published in her fourth anthology *A God at the Door*, published by Copper Canyon Press and Bloodaxe Books. It was shortlisted for the Forward Poetry Prize 2021. The article argues that the poem's main theme revolves around the loss of safety, where a haven "the maternity clinic" transforms into a site of tragedy, resulting in continuous anxiety and collective trauma among women. In addition, it also analyses how war aggravates the maternal trauma having an impact across generations in the form of anguish that arises out of fear of violence. The study reveals that the overlap of the patriarchal violence and violence out of warfare, shapes and surges the psychological oppression and it is escalated into more life-threatening and prolonging situations. This research addresses the trauma of loss, wherein the lack of proper closure and the absence of dignified mourning practices lead to an increase in the enduring grief and hopelessness. The article interprets the poem's striking symbolism which is the transformation of the orchard from a sign of fertility to one of violence as a representation of the deep psychological harm that disrupts women's perception of reality. This analysis offers a close reading and textual analysis of the poem, asserting that while war is a collective cultural injury for all people of the state, women have to face its most intrinsic and lasting psychological effects because they are doubly marginalised, struggling because of their identities as mothers, daughters, and sisters. They are not seen not as humans but a weapon in the war which deepens their grief and trauma.

Keywords: Anxiety, loss, trauma, war, symbolism

Introduction

Tishani Doshi is a poet who explores the relationship between the individual and the world around. Her poetry explores themes which are very complex and sensitive, especially the issues of identity crisis, sense of belonging, and the idea of home for a person. She handles such themes with both aggression and playfulness. Female body is the cornerstone of investigation in her works, via which she investigates the issues of gender, violence, sexuality and power. *Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods* is Joshi's most famous anthology that addresses women's agony in wartime. She seeks to question this gender specific violence and reclaiming the female body by talking out loud about the struggles one has to face.

Her poetic style is marked by fluidity and an amazing range of free verse. She uses variety of images and metaphors and one can see shift from serious tone to humour in a single poem of hers. This transition is smooth and not forceful. She draws on various traditions to embellish her writing. She asserts on the power on of an idea to take a form and shape on a page such that it can inspire and heal others. Apart from personal, her poetry also engages with themes of political and social interest. She writes on the environmental degradation, oppression and marginalization as well as greater propagandas. Poetry, for Doshi, is an alternative space where one can react and respond to the contemporary events with which they agree or disagree. Her works speak for the belief that creative writing can bring contradictory subjects face to face with each other, offer hope and teach resilience in the face of devastation and ruthlessness.

Tishani Doshi's poem "After a Shooting in a Maternity Clinic in Kabul," narrates an attack on a place where new

life comes into being and this shatters the illusion of peace that politicians want to create, in a city where war is going on. The poem begins by acknowledging the horrors of war, contrasting it by image of an orchard and that the city should be forgiven for its innocence- "forgiven for believing. is still an orchard". It is not a fertile land and blooming space of growth now due to the ongoing violence. It gives the people a deep sense of betrayal, grief and loss. She differentiates this scene from the expected devastation by war such as "bomb dropping from sky" or "a child picking up [a] toy that explodes." These details show that the attack is not only on the city but the human experience and its sanctity.

The clinic where a baby is born and new life breathes out is converted into a place of death. The clinic is described as a "place of safety" where one could prepare, for "this most ordinary thing, a birth." The attack on this place transforms it into a mortuary and steals life away before it can be given. The poem has many such juxtapositions to awaken the consciousness of its readers. The contrast between the "orchard" and the "piles of rubble" is a recurring motif which symbolizes the constant strife between hope and despair. This poem treats the conflict as a personal event rather than seeing it in a detached way. She skilfully describes about the clinic- "what it means not to make it past the first checkpoint of your mother's gates." This line hits the readers because she is using military language to define a biological process, underlining the fact that war torn cities are inflicted by violence in every facet of life no matter how evident or latent.

The "orchard" has now changed into the one that "has detonated its crimson fruits, its pomegranates and poppies

and tart mulberries / to wash these floors red." The beautiful colours of nature have got stained with blood and the place of new life has turned into a "graveyard." The concluding lines of the poem "what does it mean to be born / in a graveyard, to enter / the world, saying, / oh thief, oh life" compel the readers to reflect on the state of war and its repercussions. This kind of ending does not promise hope and a dystopian world if people do not mend their ways. Tishani Doshi's "*After a Shooting in a Maternity Clinic in Kabul*" portrays war not only limited to battlefields but in a maternity clinic which is a place associated with life, safety and generation of new life. The massacre taking place here has mothers and their newborns as victims. Doshi renders this horrid act by intertwining themes of trauma and inversion.

Trauma Studies is a body of knowledge that takes into account the psychological, social and cultural effects of traumatic experiences. It is very crucial in understanding the trauma women have to go through because of being a female. This area of study also gives a framework to address the issues of gender-based violence, using women as tools and weapons during war, historical conflicts and double marginalization. The causes and effects of all these are discussed. Focusing on women's experiences, Trauma Studies can provide a voice to those who have been systematically and historically silenced by force. It discusses the impact of such silence on their mental, emotional and physical health. These frameworks allow the victims to talk about their sufferings using a logical base so that others cannot sway it away as something which is of lesser significance. It allows them to open the forum for public discourse and reflection, understand the psychological and physiological harm these events cause and the effect they have on a woman's identity and beliefs. Therefore Trauma Studies is important to recognize and address the ways in which women are impacted with pain and their coping methods also.

Trauma, with reference to this paper and the event of war is collective since the city is in ruins and women are the ones grieving about their men who lost their lives in the war. Women who are dependent and closely attached to the men of their house are deeply affected by this sudden demise although expected but this fact does not decrease their pain. Inversion is a technique often used by Doshi which is excellently employed in this poem also to show the maternity wards turning into graveyards and the imagery of orchard becoming detonated, which turns hope itself into a "booby trap" (line 13). This suggests that hope is just an illusion or like a lullaby that pushes man away from reality for a while in order to comfort him. Life is full of pain and struggles otherwise.

Collective Trauma and the Illusion of Normalcy

The beginning lines of the poem - "No one forgets there's a war going on, but there are moments you could be forgiven for believing the city is still an orchard, a place where you could make a thing grow" (lines 1-3) states that the presence of war is unforgettable but there is conscious denial of this situation in order to get temporary relief from agony. The paradox created is that of the persistence of life but with immense fragility in war zones. The fertile lands as that for orchards can be supposed to be very temporal and end in the blink of an eye. It is used to propagate the idea of normalcy but it is just a myth. Doshi writes "There is

always a pile of rubble from which some desperate person struggles to rise" (line 4). The probability of growth is immediately over-shadowed by destruction.

This tension increases as what Kai Erikson defines as collective trauma, which "works its way slowly into the awareness of those who suffer from it, until it becomes part of their very sense of self" (Erickson 94). For the citizens of Kabul the orchard is not a real orchard but a remembered or imagined one that is under constant threat of rubble. The illusion of life and normalcy cannot be distanced from the fact of presence of death.

Doshi reveals its all-encompassing nature when she describes it as - "while another person wraps a shawl around their shoulders and roasts marshmallows over a fire" (lines 5-6). Rasting Marshmallows is an act of leisure time that often happens in family gatherings. Here it is juxtaposed with war and the rubble it causes. The mingling of the mundane with disturbing impact of trauma shows the boundary between the course of normal life and the violent extremes they have to go through. It leaves the survivors in a state which is loosely strung to stability. The world no longer feels predictable but catastrophic. The mental boundaries of comfort and ease are also shattered, creating a liminal state where everything is in a flux. The act of roasting marshmallows is an indicator of how innocence, dreams, happiness of people is completely destroyed by war.

Inversion of Safety into Violence

The central inversion of the poem is in the visual imagery of the maternity ward-

"This is the house you were brought to after crossing a river, leaving the mountains and burnt fields behind. A place of safety where you could be alone with your own startling power... But here, prepare for this most ordinary thing, a birth" (lines 17-23).

The "house" is a symbol of refuge that shall protect one from violence and safeguard from all harm and "burnt fields". The maternity clinic is described as a place where there is "safety" and "startling power". This sense of a safe place is completely changed into a place of massacre and a death bed. Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) makes a point that traumatic events shatter the "sense of basic trust" by violating the assumption that certain spaces like home, family, hospitals are safe. Doshi also agrees to this thought while she declares that "*hope is a booby trap*" (line 13). The maternity ward and the clinic are a site of betrayal for the common man. War is an event which changes not only the physical surroundings but also how people think, receive and respond. War corrupts the mind turning anticipation into danger and hope into despair. It snatches the power of emotions and humans start losing their sensitivity.

Doshi also notes that massacre is not only the "This is not bomb dropping from sky, human shield, hostages in a stream, child picking up toy that explodes in her hands— although there's always that" (lines 9-12). It is also an emotional attack where the victims and their families are left heartbroken and grief stricken to such an extent that they can never go back to being the same person that they were before the war. The images of war that she lists are very disturbing but important for the readers to understand what does one feel being a part of events like this and living under constant threat. The expected does not happen and the

unexpected keeps happening. Thus, the very act of giving birth to life in maternity ward is inverted to the imagery of death snatching away children from their mother and mother from their children.

Trauma as Temporal Rupture

There are lines in the poem which strikingly infuse the idea of biological processes of birth to a kind of militarized language where there are checkpoints “Not to make it past the first checkpoint of your mother’s gates” (line 28). The newborn baby’s inability to go beyond this check post or gate shows not only death but also the interruption of temporality. Cathy Caruth in the book *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) argued that “trauma resists assimilation into narrative because it disrupts time: the event is experienced belatedly, as haunting. The unborn child embodies this rupture: a life erased before it begins, a story silenced before articulation.” (Caruth 108) The metaphor of a “checkpoint” suggests that even the passage from womb to world has been corrupted by war and not remained untouched by the impact of the wrath of the nations and lust of power.

This temporal rupture is exemplified in the following lines—“Even if you could bring a man to recover your sister’s corpse and the newborn, where do you go from here?” (lines 34–35). This act of recovery is only hypothetical and reveals the futile nature because recovery cannot be done of the corpses and the future that has never existed cannot be recovered. Trauma here is not only about death but the collapse of an entire world where the continuity of family, generation and culture all fall back. Doshi reinforces this idea by turning attention away from the external world: “*Never mind all the wild places outside—the mud-brick villages, the valleys and harvests and glasses of green tea*” (lines 29–31). The ordinariness of life and the normal patterns of life are now irrelevant. The massacre obliterates not only individual lives but the very imagination of communal continuity.

Double Marginalisation of Women

The poet draws attention to the double marginalization faced by women which makes it even worse. There are patriarchal restrictions even on the maternal spaces which should be free from interference. She writes: “Not Why were you out? And why wasn’t your face covered? And who told you to climb into that rickshaw?” (lines 21–23). These kinds of rhetorical questions expose the everyday trauma and moral policing that Afghan women had to go through regarding their movement and own bodies. The irony is that even though women conform to these regulations they are not safe. They are taught how to live their lives in the private also. Childbirth is the period of extreme care and comfort but they are not left alone and free from terror there also.

Thus, women are subject to the war doubly. Firstly, as citizens of the nation and henceforth collective violence and then as women whose identities are specifically targeted. They are seen as objects in war to rape, humiliate and target the ego of their male family members. The bodies of females are the sites of symbolic warfare. Caruth’s concept that trauma is beyond identity and memory comes here. The shooting and massacre in the maternity ward is not just a physical assault but also an assault on reproduction and continuity of life which is a biological affair and course of

nature. It is utterly inhumane to target such a place showing that war knows no boundaries and turns attackers emotionless. Doshi writes about this inversion: “to ask what it means not to make it past the first checkpoint of your mother’s gates” (line 28). Mother who has the traditional role of a protector becomes the site of death intensifying women’s agony and trauma, making them both the witness as well as the casualty of cultural annihilation.

Witness and Memory

The concluding stanzas widen the focus from Kabul to the whole of the world: “See—it is raining outside and men weep for their wives, and perhaps the entire world is an orchard that has detonated its crimson fruits, its pomegranates and poppies and tart mulberries to wash these floors red” (lines 37–41). This shows the pain behind losing family at war. The war is between nations but the common man suffers in terms of life and property both. The entire world shrinks down to be an orchard which has donated all its vibrance and the fruits are seen bleeding across the floor. This imagery shows the collapse of life into death and shattering of nourishment into destruction.

The poem ends with a devastating inversion: “what does it mean to be born in a graveyard, to enter the world, saying, oh thief, oh life” (lines 43–44). This is a rhetorical question where birth or point of renewal of life is called a theft because its essence has been stolen or corrupted by violence that comes with it to the world. As Caruth puts it, trauma is defined by its resistance to comprehension which produces questions rather than answers. Doshi embodies this resistance by ending the poem with an unanswered question. The poem becomes a testimony refusing to be forgotten by anyone who reads it. Dominick LaCapra’s concept of empathic unsettlement (*Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 2001) is applicable here. The poem unsettles the reader ethically forcing to bear witness without providing solution to grief or any kind of resolution to war and this trauma. There is uncertainty and open endedness, leaving the readers amidst uncomfortable space in which there is no reconciliation of life and death, hope and despair.

Conclusion

Through the lens of trauma and inversion Tishani Doshi’s poem presents war as a condition that destructs not only lives but also future, dreams, memories and cultural or familial continuity. The orchard becomes a rubble and the maternity ward becomes a graveyard where hope isn’t able to provide comfort or peace anymore. Trauma theory highlights how the poem investigates both the collective wound of a city’s natives and the gendered suffering of women who are doubly marginalised as citizens and as females. Doshi exposes how war corrupts life at its origins by drawing attention towards the massacre in the maternity clinic at the time of women giving birth. It is seen as an insidious act and leaves the readers terrified. The poem refuses to give any kind of hope or consolation even towards the end. It demands remembrance rather than resolution. Doshi transforms the poem into a living testimony of the ruthlessness of men that often goes unacknowledged. In this way, the poem functions as an indictment of the war’s capacity to see living life as illegal rather than an elegy for the dead or resentment against the attackers only.

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