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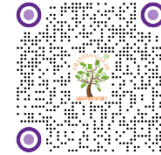
PROSTHETIC MEMORY AND THE MEDIATED CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDHOOD: ANALYSING TISHANI DOSHI'S SELECT POEMS FROM "COUNTRIES OF THE BODY"

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the two select poems of Tishani Doshi "The Day We Went to the Sea" and "Aj, Age 15," from her poetry collection *Countries of the Body* (2006). These poems utilise childhood not as a first hand organically lived experience but as sensory, affective and somatic impression acquired through mediated representation that is capable of reshaping the subjectivity of the ones who lived through it. Engaging with Alison Landsberg's theory of postmemory, by applying it beyond its primary cinematic and museal archive, this article shows how these lyric poems make use of the comparability of memory, that allows cross-experimental identification with coastal Indian childhood. The analysis engages Landsberg's ethical ambivalence about the politics of borrowed pasts as sites where prosthetic transfer is simultaneously enabled and complicated. Both poems taken for the study offer readers an opportunity to inhabit an intensely local coastal childhood while simultaneously marking that inhabitation as partial, second hand, and structurally belated. The article using Landsberg's prosthetic memory framework to the literary lyrics of Doshi provides an account of how contemporary poetry participates in the circulation of cultural memory. The article concludes that the poems of Doshi not only represent childhood but also manufactures a version of that is shareable and that which can be circulated as a collective cultural memory, all the while retaining the friction between its social and historical origins.

Keywords: Prosthetic Memory, Childhood, Lyric Poetry, Postcolonial Memory, Somatic Transfer, Ecofeminism, Indian English Poetry

INTRODUCTION

Doshi (2012), a poet, dancer, and novelist, was born in Chennai to a Welsh mother and a Gujarati father. She received the Forward Prize for Best First Collection in 2006 for *Countries of the Body*, a volume that centralises the South Indian coastline as its literary geography. In this collection of poetry, the coastline is not a neutral backdrop but a spatial nexus of domestic ritual, classed labour, and catastrophic events. This melting pot of cultural history generates a poetics of place that converges memory, lived experience, and its transmission. Doshi writes about a sea inflected childhood, staging familial intimacy against the backdrop of slums, shorelines, and catastrophe. The memories transmitted through her poems are not about a private past but shareable memory scenes, inviting

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readers to coexist in them. This shareable memory can be analysed using Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory. Alison Landsberg's *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (2004) states that the mode of memory acquisition in culture has changed from organic and biographically oriented recollection. According to [Landsberg \(2004\)](#) prosthetic memory is a type of public cultural memory that is formed when individuals interact with mediated representations of historical narratives.

Prosthetic memories are not naturally lived experiences inherited but arise through engagement with films and museum exhibits. Landsberg refers to these activities of watching a film or paying a visit to museum as "an act of prosthesis" (34). The representations through medium act as sites of experiences for the individuals to connect with their past. The individuals exposed to this mediated experience are also forced to look "through someone else's eyes and asked to remember those situations and events" [Landsberg \(2004\)](#). This article claims that Doshi's poems "The Day We Went to the Sea" and "Aj, Age 15" function as mediums of representations and manufacture sensory, specifically situated, coastal childhoods. The readers acquire the prosthetics of otherwise inaccessible memories of lived childhood in coastal premises. Memory is dynamic, as it depends on historical and cultural contexts, culminating in diverse interpretations through continuous negotiation. Memory is constantly in a negotiation with the past, and as a social process, it is involved in constructing various representations of the past in the present. This process is highly influenced by the context of social relationships and is in pursuit of specific goals (Hajek and Kansteiner).

Landsberg's prosthetic memories aid in creating a new form of subjectivity for individuals even though they are not a part of the community whose past is transmitted. As per this notion, an individual, in principle, can acquire a prosthetic memory of coastal Chennai through Doshi's poems, even if that person is living in any part of the world. The article by R. Babu, titled "Memory, Loss, and Regeneration in [Doshi \(2012\)](#), establishes memory as having the traits of a tide itself that returns, recedes, and reshapes like memory. An ecofeminist study on Doshi's female coastal figures by Kavita Sharma, encode the intersection of ecological and social precarity on the Indian shore. "The Day We Went to the Sea," a poem on coastal childhood, is the opening work in *Countries of the Body*. The poem juxtaposes an everyday seaside outing with the horror of the 2004 tsunami. The beach is transformed into a site of collision between everyday childhood and massive catastrophe. Through the vivid and moving images of flying thatch, runaway prisoners, and "houses [that] danced like danger"(30), the poem depicts how a secure and familiar coastal world is violently destroyed. The poem is centered around portraying how an unpredictable disaster redefines place and memory. While tsunami makes an archive of loss out of the sea; people persistently desire care and safety in the midst of ruin.

"The Day We Went to the Sea" constructs a prosthetic memory of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, a narrativized experience enabling readers who have never been on the cultural landscape of Marina Beach to create their own memory of the catastrophe. The poem frames its prosthetic effects through depiction of childhood coastal experiences of the ordinary and pleasurable, collectively connected to the historical event of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. It transforms mediated news into an event of affective intimacy and personal memory. The poem is the fabrication of South Indian childhood, sharing the memory of an environmental threat. Doshi uses the poetry as a means to develop an alternative experiential site for an abstract historical disaster. The scary tsunami is reconstructed as a privately felt loss of coastal childhood. From its first line, the poem shows how an everyday childhood outing is followed by a devastating catastrophe: "The day we went to the sea / mothers in Madras were mining / the Marina for missing children" (30). The phrase "we went to the sea" (30) is suggestive of a child or family collective, a familiar childhood framework, engaged in a very recognizable ordeal. The definite article and the simple past tense in the phrase "The day we went" are markers of autobiographical memory of a summer outing and sensory joys of coast and sea. The beach then turns to a space of turmoil as "mothers...[are] mining" the beach for "missing children" (30). This is an allusion to tsunami news imagery that many readers have known only through media. The poet has compressed the tsunami into a series of cinematic images, which in turns catalyses in formation of prosthetic memory: "Thatch flew in the sky, prisoners / ran free, houses danced like danger / in the wind" (30). These moving images of flying debris and animated houses enable the readers to recall the catastrophe as if personally witnessed. The poem does not describe the disaster but believes in the reader's prior mediated exposure to the news photographs and footage of the destructive tsunami. The poem uses existing memory structures of the reader to build an interface, resulting in the historical event that is no longer mediated information but felt with proximity. The poem turns the event into a childhood memory of a disaster that happened on "the day we went to the sea," making it an embodied coastal childhood experience. The closing phrase of the poem, "bring us to the wordless safety of our beds" (30), explicitly declares the prosthetics of the poem. It points to a child experiencing safety in the secure hands of an adult. This experience is foundational for childhood, is structured universally, and can bridge the differences in experiences among readers. The reader here is simultaneously a witness to catastrophe and a vector of childhood care.

"Aj, Age 15" is a poem that recollects the childhood chase down the edge of the sea. This moment converges into overwhelming joy and intimacy among siblings. The poem is set against a vivid backdrop of coastal landscapes. The speaker recollects her memories of running along with her brother "down to the edge of the sea" between "sheets and towels / spread like sky on the beach" and "slums shackled to the shore" (2). She briefly loses him but finds him laughing uncontrollably in a hut beside the waters. They sit in silence, "his rare chubby hand" in her hands, while "listening to the breath of living water." (2). The poem here transforms into a specific afternoon of well-spent childhood, enabling readers to inhabit the space of coastal childhood as if it were part of their own childhood. "Aj, Age 15" exemplifies prosthetic childhood as it demonstrates shareable experiences from childhood that others can

own as their own. The poem functions as a spatial interface for coastal childhood as it describes the textured setting of “sheets and towels / spread like sky” (2). The cloth strips on the beaches with “drying chilli and tamarind,” and “slums shackled to the shore – / a maze of thatch roofs and cowdung / caked walls” (2) offer a map of South Indian beaches. The labour, poverty, and domestic routines depicted in the lyrics offer the frame for children’s games. For the readers, especially those who are unfamiliar with childhood near the sea, this landscape can be more textual than biographical. The images in the poem make one share alleys, smell chillies and tamarind, and navigate the beach in search of a sibling.”

Within this framework appealing to the senses, the poem constructs childhood as a play of loss, discovery, and shared happiness that can be internalised as a personal memory. The speaker’s words that “And then I lost him, / searched loudly for him, called his name. / Said, Come out or else – / all the usual tricks” (2) enrapture the short-lived panic followed by exuberance. The momentary fear of losing a beloved culminates into laughter as the siblings find each other. “A woman cleaning rice on her knees / in a blouse done up with safety pins,” points “with a single weary finger” (2) to the hut where the brother hides. This woman, with her kneeling body and safety pinned blouse engaged in work, puts forth the economic vulnerability of the children’s environment. From the prosthetic memory perspective, the “single weary finger” of the woman is also a micro gesture that readers can share as an action of adult knowledge that persistently reorients the child’s space. The scene of discovery in the hut is emotionally embodied. “He was inside, laughing so hard, / shaking his head back and forth, / I thought the joy would come tearing out from him” (2). The description of laughter as a source of delight in excess and tough to be contained, points at an affective surplus that readers can easily connect through memories of their own bodies even though they haven’t shared the coastal context. Doshi’s representation of laughter and joy as surplus and uncontainable brings in a corporeal echo in the reader.

The poem ends in stillness, the sea, and focusing on the coexistence of the sibling bond: “Afterwards, we sat in something like silence – / his rare chubby hand in mine, / listening to the breath of living water.”(2). The phrase “something like silence” indicates that the quiet is not empty but filled with a nonverbal connection and the environmental sound of the sea’s “breath” as waves animate. The poem invites the reader to adopt a coastal Indian adolescence as part of their own imaginative past, recalling a moment spent with a sibling at the beach. In “Aj, Age 15,” the line “something like silence” (2) is not merely an affective nuance but marks that what is on offer is a mediated approximation of an experience rather than unmediated access to the experience itself. The adjective “rare” in “his rare chubby hand in mine” (2) does not only transmit the sense of the childhood touch but also bridges the gap between the reader’s borrowed access to that moment of the speaker’s biographical ownership. The poem offers the reader a hand to be held while never pausing to remind them that the hand was never theirs, staging prosthetic memory as ethically responsible.

CONCLUSION

Both poems taken for the study offer readers an opportunity to inhabit an intensely local coastal childhood while simultaneously marking that inhabitation as partial, second hand, and structurally belated. The article using Landsberg’s prosthetic memory framework to the literary lyrics of Doshi provides an account of how contemporary poetry participates in the circulation of cultural memory. Doshi’s coastal poems not only represent a South Indian childhood lived by a biographical subject; they generate sensuous, portable childhood experiences that can connect with geographically and historically dispersed readers, with precision and ethical reflexivity that mark the best literary art. “Aj, Age 15” and “The Day We Went to the Sea”, show how shorelines, siblings, mothers, and monsoon seas can be accessed by the readers, as if already remembered. At the same time, through qualifiers and temporal doubling, the irreducible distance between having lived and learning is emphasised. The ethical framework of prosthetic memory demands honest analysis of experiences that feeds genuine cross-cultural empathy. In the case of Doshi’s poems, the insistence is on the social texture of the landscapes they represent. The prosthesis in the poems carries the weight of its origins, as the childhood it represents can only be understood through the social conditions that frame it. To receive a prosthetic childhood is also to act responsibly for it by obliging to the social and historical world it came from.

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