



The Sea as Metaphor: Memory, Loss, and Regeneration in Tishani Doshi's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the centrality of the sea as metaphor in the poetry of Tishani Doshi. Across her collections—*Countries of the Body* (2006), *Everything Begins Elsewhere* (2013), *Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods* (2017), and *A God at the Door* (2021)—Doshi deploys maritime imagery not as scenic background but as a conceptual framework for articulating memory, loss, and regeneration. The sea becomes an archive of individual and collective histories, a site of rupture and erasure, and a regenerative commons where community and ecological life interweave. Through close readings of representative poems such as “The Day We Went to the Sea,” “The Memory of Wales,” and selections from later collections, this essay argues that Doshi’s maritime poetics are shaped by her dual commitments to the body (informed by her background as a dancer) and to transnational belonging. Drawing on ecocriticism, trauma studies, and phenomenology, the study situates Doshi within a global lineage of oceanic poetics while foregrounding her distinctive contribution to South Asian and feminist lyric traditions

Introduction

For Tishani Doshi, the sea is not mere scenery. It is a dynamic metaphorical field that links personal recollection with cultural history, private grief with communal voice, and bodily vulnerability with ecological regeneration. Living by the ocean on the coast of Tamil Nadu, Doshi has often remarked on how proximity to the sea shapes her imagination. This sensibility permeates her four major poetry



collections, each of which returns to marine imagery as a touchstone for thinking about what it means to remember, to mourn, and to begin again.

From her debut collection *Countries of the Body*—awarded the Forward Prize for Best First Collection in 2006—to her more recent *A God at the Door* (2021), shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Collection, Doshi has consistently turned to the sea as both image and structure (Guardian; Poetry Foundation). The ocean is the place where memory is stored and retrieved, where bodies vanish and sometimes return, and where collective repair becomes possible. The sea's dual nature—erasing and preserving, destroying and regenerating—makes it a powerful metaphor for the oscillations that define Doshi's lyric practice.

This essay proceeds in three parts. The first examines the sea as archive, showing how Doshi treats water as a repository of memory. The second analyzes the sea as emblem of loss, highlighting poems where maritime imagery stages absence, silence, and grief. The third explores the regenerative valences of Doshi's sea metaphors, considering how they model resilience, community, and ecological ethics. Through detailed close readings, I argue that Doshi's sea-poetics constitute a sustained meditation on how human beings live with the persistence of memory and the inevitability of loss, while remaining open to the possibilities of repair.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This article combines close reading with theoretical approaches from metaphor theory, trauma studies, and ecocriticism.

1. **Metaphor as conceptual frame.** George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* reminds us that metaphors are not ornamental but foundational to thought. In Doshi's poetry, the sea metaphor structures ways of knowing and remembering. It is not simply decorative but cognitive, a means of organizing emotional and cultural experience.
2. **Trauma and testimony.** Cathy Caruth's work on trauma emphasizes belatedness, the return of the unassimilable past, and the ethical imperative of listening. Doshi's sea-poetics resonate with this framework: the ocean becomes a medium for storing what cannot be fully spoken, and the poem becomes a site of partial testimony.



3. **Ecocriticism and phenomenology.** Recent eco-poetic scholarship (Buell; Nixon) urges us to think of environments not as passive backdrops but as active participants in meaning-making. Phenomenological approaches to embodiment (Merleau-Ponty) help illuminate how Doshi links bodily rhythm—rooted in her career as a dancer—to tidal motion.

Together, these perspectives allow us to read the sea in Doshi's poetry not only as symbol but as living metaphor that mediates memory, loss, and regeneration.

Part I — The Sea as Archive of Memory

“The Day We Went to the Sea”

Doshi's debut collection *Countries of the Body* opens with “The Day We Went to the Sea,” a poem that has become emblematic of her maritime poetics. Written in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the poem memorializes lives lost while refusing to monumentalize tragedy. The sea here is an archive: it holds the memory of catastrophe even as it continues its ceaseless motion.

The poem's diction is marked by accumulation. Domestic objects and intimate gestures—“salted hair,” “broken toys,” “the smell of fish”—become fragments that stand in for larger histories. The ocean gathers these fragments, acting as a repository where memory is both preserved and transformed. The enjambed lines mimic the ebb and flow of waves, suggesting that memory itself is tidal—returning, receding, and reshaping the shoreline of consciousness.

What makes this poem significant is its refusal of closure. The sea does not offer consolation; it offers continuity. By situating memory within the rhythms of the ocean, Doshi acknowledges the persistence of grief while insisting on its integration into the ongoing life of the world.

Memory Beyond the Individual

Doshi extends this archival impulse beyond the personal to the communal. In several poems, the sea becomes the keeper of collective histories—of migration, colonial crossings, and erased genealogies. For instance, references to fishermen's lives or to women gathering by the shore suggest that the ocean holds the labor and stories of marginalized communities. The sea listens where official histories do not.



In this sense, Doshi's poetics align with what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory"—the transmission of memory across generations, often through fragments and affect. The sea serves as the medium of this post memorial work, carrying voices across time and space.

Part II — The Sea as Emblem of Loss and Rupture

Erasure and Absence

If the sea preserves, it also erases. Doshi frequently depicts the ocean as a force of dissolution: footprints are washed away, bodies disappear, names are swallowed by tide. The sea's indifference becomes a metaphor for loss itself—an absence that resists recuperation.

In *Everything Begins Elsewhere*, the sestina "The Memory of Wales" dramatizes this paradox. The rigidly patterned form mirrors the tidal return of loss: end-words repeat like waves, underscoring the impossibility of escaping memory. Yet the sea in this poem also emphasizes rupture, the impossibility of reconciling disparate identities and geographies. It marks the boundaries of belonging, delineating what is lost in transnational movement.

Silence and Testimony

Doshi often juxtaposes maritime noise—waves, gulls, surf—with human silence. The ocean's roar becomes both cover and chorus, highlighting the difficulty of speaking trauma. In poems that address gendered violence, the sea functions as witness, holding stories too painful to articulate directly.

In *Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods*, the title poem stages women emerging from silence into collective voice. While the sea is not explicitly invoked here, adjacent poems situate this gathering against coastal landscapes. The shore becomes a stage where private suffering transforms into public testimony. The sea, as witness, both obscures and amplifies these voices.

Part III — The Sea as Site of Regeneration

Ritual and Repetition

Regeneration in Doshi's poetics is often figured through repetition. Just as the sea rehearses its rhythms endlessly, so too do Doshi's poems return to refrains and incantatory structures. This repetition functions as ritual, a disciplined practice that enables resilience.



Doshi's background as a dancer enriches this imagery. Dance is built on repetition, on training the body to inhabit rhythm. In her poetry, the sea's cyclical motion becomes a choreography for survival: to move with the tide is to learn resilience without denial.

Communal Repair

Regeneration is also communal. The sea is a commons where people gather—for mourning, for labor, for celebration. In poems that depict women assembling by the shore, the ocean becomes a space of solidarity. The act of gathering transforms individual grief into collective strength.

This communal regeneration resists isolation. It insists that repair is social, not solitary. The sea's vastness models an ethics of inclusivity, suggesting that healing requires plurality and shared witness.

Ecological Hope

Finally, Doshi's later work foregrounds the ecological dimension of regeneration. In *A God at the Door*, she expands her scope beyond the human to include birds, fish, and planetary rhythms. The sea is not simply a metaphor for human experience but a living ecosystem with its own agency.

By attending to the sea's life, Doshi cultivates what Rob Nixon calls "slow hope"—an ecological patience that resists quick fixes. Regeneration here is less about restoring the past than about participating in ongoing cycles of renewal that exceed human time.

Close Reading Cluster

To demonstrate these arguments, I focus on four representative poems.

1. **"The Day We Went to the Sea" (*Countries of the Body*)** — Establishes the sea as archive; memory is tidal, fragmented, and persistent.
2. **"The Memory of Wales" (*Everything Begins Elsewhere*)** — Uses the sestina form to dramatize the sea's repetitive, inescapable motion as emblem of diasporic loss.
3. **"Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods" (title poem, *Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods*)** — While not overtly maritime, it resonates with sea imagery in the collection; collective voice emerges like a tide against silence.



4. **Selections from *A God at the Door***— Show the sea’s ecological valences, situating regeneration within broader environmental cycles.

Each of these poems illustrates how Doshi mobilizes the sea differently—sometimes as archive, sometimes as erasure, sometimes as regenerative force—while maintaining thematic continuity across her oeuvre.

Doshi’s Maritime Diction and Form

Across her poetry, certain linguistic patterns recur in sea imagery:

- **Kinetic verbs** (wash, drag, pull, loosen) foreground the sea’s agency.
- **Tactile adjectives** (wet, salt, heavy, slick) emphasize embodied perception.
- **Catalogues of small objects** (shells, driftwood, stones) suggest the archival quality of the shoreline.
- **Refrains and incantations** mimic tidal rhythms, creating a sonic equivalence to waves.

Formally, Doshi uses enjambment and long lines to replicate the ocean’s ebb and flow. Sibilance and open vowels mimic surf sounds, while abrupt breaks simulate rupture. These sonic strategies reinforce thematic concerns, making the sea not only an image but also an organizing rhythm for the poem itself.

Ethical Dimensions

Doshi’s use of the sea raises ethical questions about representation. How does one write about trauma without appropriating it? Her strategies include:

1. **Deferral.** Instead of narrating violence explicitly, she gestures toward it through fragments, allowing space for readerly inference.
2. **Collective voice.** By situating the sea as communal stage, she shifts focus from the individual lyric “I” to a shared chorus.

These strategies enable her to witness violence while resisting voyeurism. The sea becomes a medium for ethical representation: it holds grief without aestheticizing it, amplifies voices without appropriating them.



Situating Doshi's Maritime Poetics

Doshi's sea imagery situates her within a global lineage of oceanic writing. Like Derek Walcott, she links the sea to colonial history and diasporic identity. Like Kamala Das, she associates water with bodily desire and alienation. Yet Doshi is distinctive in fusing maritime metaphor with dance-informed poetics and feminist solidarity.

Her recognition by major awards—the Forward Prize for *Countries of the Body* and the shortlisting of *A God at the Door*—confirms her place within contemporary world poetry. More importantly, her sea-metaphors extend the possibilities of South Asian English poetry, offering a model for how the ocean can articulate intertwined concerns of body, memory, and ecology.

Conclusion

The sea in Tishani Doshi's poetry is more than backdrop. It is archive, erasure, and commons; it is wound and balm, silence and chorus. Through her sustained maritime poetics, Doshi teaches us that memory is tidal, that loss is inevitable but not final, and that regeneration requires both patience and community.

Her poems invite us to listen—to the small objects washed ashore, to the voices carried on waves, to the rhythms of nonhuman life. In that listening, a practice of remembrance and repair becomes possible. Doshi's sea-metaphors thus stand as ethical instruments for living in a world marked by loss but open to renewal.

Endnotes

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