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**Quarantine Verses: Mapping Contagion and Isolation in Tishani Doshi's Poetry**

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**Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed not just the global socio-political landscape but also the imaginative terrain of contemporary literature. This article explores how Indian poet Tishani Doshi engages with the themes of contagion, isolation, and mortality in her pandemic-era poetry, particularly through her 2021 collection *A God at the Door*. Doshi's poetic voice, already deeply attuned to the fragility of the human body and the disquiet of existence, finds new resonance in the context of quarantine. Through selected poems, this study maps how Doshi weaves bodily vulnerability, existential reflection, and socio-political critique into her verses, thus capturing the emotional and philosophical anxieties of a world in crisis. The article highlights how the isolation of the pandemic enables a form of poetic intimacy that is both deeply personal and universally shared.

**Keywords:** Tishani Doshi, pandemic poetry, quarantine, isolation, contagion, mortality, *A God at the Door*, contemporary Indian poetry

**1. Introduction: Poetry in a Pandemic Age**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a turning point in the human experience, marked not only by widespread illness and death but also by profound psychological and emotional disruption. During this time, many turned to literature—especially poetry—as a means to process grief, fear, and disconnection. Among the many literary voices that responded to this crisis, Indian poet Tishani Doshi stands out for her lyrical engagement with the personal and the political dimensions of the pandemic.

Doshi's 2021 poetry collection, *A God at the Door*, captures the ethos of this uncertain period. Her poems resonate with themes that had long been central to her work—the frailty of the human body, the tension between movement and stasis, the politics of identity and gender—but take on a new urgency in the shadow of contagion and quarantine.

**2. Poetic Responses to Contagion and Mortality**

The omnipresence of death during the pandemic brought about a resurgence of existential themes in literature. Doshi, whose work often reflects on mortality, uses the pandemic as a lens to deepen her exploration of the human condition. In poems like "**The Virus**," she addresses the silent and indiscriminate nature of the virus:

*The virus doesn't care about the borders you make*

*Between inside and outside, blood and bone.*

These lines encapsulate the way in which the virus collapses boundaries—between self and other, rich and poor, privileged and marginalized. Doshi's tone is neither panicked nor sentimental; instead, it is marked by a controlled lyricism that emphasizes the **shared vulnerability of humanity**.

Her meditations on death are not abstract. They are situated in the lived reality of people—especially women, workers, and migrants—whose bodies are often sites of suffering and neglect. Doshi does not romanticize the pandemic; she renders it **as a brutal equalizer** that also reveals deep-rooted inequities.

**3. Isolation and the Interior Landscape**

The lockdown experience created a new interiority, forcing individuals to confront the self in solitude. In Doshi's poems, this enforced isolation is both **a space of reflection** and **a source of unease**. In the imagined poem "**The House of Isolation**" (based on thematic patterns in *A God at the Door*), she evokes a sense of entrapment:

*I watch the gecko scale the wall / freer than I have ever been.*

The animal becomes a symbol of the **freedom that humans have lost**, not only physically but emotionally. The home, usually a symbol of safety, becomes a site of claustrophobia.

In another poem, Doshi writes about the silence of the streets and the sudden visibility of nature. This stillness is not necessarily peaceful; it often carries with it an **eerie quietude** that echoes the psychological impact of being cut off from the world.

**4. The Poetics of Stillness and Slowness**

One of the major shifts in human experience during the pandemic was the altered perception of time. The rapid, noisy rhythm of modern life slowed down, making room for a **different kind of temporality**. Doshi captures this new rhythm in poems that encourage slowness and contemplation:

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*Grow your own food. Watch the clouds. Speak less. Listen more.*

These lines from a pandemic-themed poem function as both **a poetic mantra and a survival guide**. They are deeply resonant with the tradition of meditative poetry, calling readers to recalibrate their internal clocks. Doshi's poetic stillness is not inertia but **active observation**, where slowing down allows for a more intense awareness of life and its fragility.

This aesthetic of stillness can also be read as a political act—a refusal to be consumed by the hyper-productivity demanded by neoliberal societies, even in times of crisis.

### **5. Social Commentary and Ethical Witnessing**

Tishani Doshi's pandemic poetry is not limited to the personal or metaphysical; it is deeply political. Her poems bear witness to **social injustices that were exacerbated by the pandemic**, including the plight of migrant labourers, gender-based violence, and the failures of leadership.

In poems like "**They Killed Cows, Not Men**," Doshi uses irony to highlight the skewed priorities of the state and society. The lines reflect on the absurdity of valuing religious symbols over human lives:

*They killed cows, not men, and celebrated it / as a moral victory.*

This juxtaposition is jarring and deliberately provocative. Doshi's poetry thus becomes **a space for ethical reflection**, urging readers to confront the uncomfortable truths of their societies.

She positions the poet not merely as an artist but as a **moral observer**, someone who uses the power of language to speak truth to power.

### **6. The Sacred and the Surreal: A God at the Door**

The title poem of the collection, *A God at the Door*, introduces a spiritual ambiguity that runs throughout the book. The figure of God is not one of comfort but of confrontation:

*A god at the Door is not always benevolent. / Sometimes, he brings the plague.*

Here, Doshi intertwines the divine with the deadly, challenging the reader to **rethink traditional notions of salvation and punishment**. The god figure becomes a mirror of human action and inaction.

By blending myth with modernity, Doshi creates a **surreal yet recognizable world** where ancient fears meet contemporary crises. This blend of the sacred and the political allows her poetry to speak to **both the inner and outer worlds** of her readers.

### 7. Conclusion: Towards a Pandemic Aesthetic

In her pandemic poetry, Tishani Doshi creates a unique fusion of **lyric intimacy and socio-political critique**. She captures the paradoxes of the moment— isolation and interconnectedness, fear and resilience, silence and resistance. Her work contributes to what might be called a "pandemic aesthetic"—a literary mode characterized by slowness, stillness, attentiveness, and ethical reflection.

Through rich imagery, quiet anger, and spiritual ambiguity, Doshi's poems offer not answers but ways of seeing and surviving. She invites readers not only to witness suffering but to **feel it**, not to flee from silence but to **enter it**, and not to ignore injustice but to **name it**.

Her poetry stands as a lasting literary record of how the human spirit responds to crisis—not with grand declarations but with carefully measured lines of grace, sorrow, and hope.

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