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Research article

Material Entanglements: The Urban Ecopoetics of Tishani Doshi's Madras

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Abstract

This research article examines how Tishani Doshi's poetry reimagines Chennai (formerly Madras), a major South Indian coastal metropolis and capital of Tamil Nadu, as a dynamic, porous ecosystem rather than a static urban backdrop. Drawing on material ecocriticism and the concept of entanglement, the article analyzes how Doshi's work challenges traditional boundaries between human and non-human, built and natural environments in urban settings. Unlike earlier Indian urban poets who approached cities primarily as psychological landscapes with nature serving as background or idealized escape, Doshi portrays Chennai's coastal dynamics, monsoon patterns, and summer heat as active agents that materially transform human bodies and experiences. Through close readings of select poems in *Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods* (2017) and *A God at the Door* (2021), the paper demonstrates how Doshi reveals forms of distributed agency beyond human intention. Her representation of "mud-caked, mud-brown" bodies and skin, "offered" to gulmohar trees, exemplifies Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, where human bodies physically incorporate their environments. Doshi's "uninnocent" portrayal of multispecies relationships—from dogs to snakes to mice—further disrupts human exceptionalism while acknowledging the complex entanglements of urban coexistence. By attending to the material exchanges between bodies, infrastructure, and ecological forces specific to Chennai's vulnerable coastline, Doshi develops an urban ecopoetics that deepens our understanding of human-environment relationships in the increasingly precarious cities of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Tishani Doshi, urban ecopoetics, material ecocriticism, entanglement, Madras.

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Introduction

Throughout literary history, poets have developed profound relationships with specific cities. Romantic poets like William Blake and William Wordsworth often portrayed cities as manifestations of industrial society's moral corruption. Blake's "dark Satanic Mills" (Blake,1794) and "mind-forg'd manacles" (Blake,1804/2021) serve as powerful metaphors that depict how industrialization not only degraded physical environments but also imprisoned the human consciousness. The same poets also found transcendent beauty within city spaces sometimes, creating an ambivalence in their attitudes to urbanization. For instance, Wordsworth's sonnet "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" marvels at the sublime urban vista where "Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie / Open unto the fields, and to the sky" (Wordsworth, 1802/2023). His admiration places the built landscape alongside natural elements in a brief moment of harmony on a beautiful city morning.

Modernist poetry later emerged in response to major historical changes, including the trauma of World War I, rapid urbanization, and the impact of new technologies on urban life. Thus, Eliot's (1922) "Unreal City" in the "Wasteland" becomes a fragmented terrain reflecting the fractured consciousness of modernity itself. Modernists laid the crucial groundwork where cities came to be represented as complex systems generating new forms of consciousness. The particular experiences of the city, like fragmented perception, collective anonymity, quickened pace of urban life, and alienation, led to the invention of new poetic techniques that could authentically capture these new forms of urban consciousness.

The development of urban poetics in Indian literature offers a vital context for understanding Tishani Doshi's work. In post-independence India, poets approached cities with distinctive sensibilities shaped by colonial histories and rapid modernization. For the poets of this period, when urbanization was emerging in the consciousness of people as an opposition to calm rural life, the focus was more on the city as a psychological landscape rather than as an ecological one. Poets like Nissim Ezekiel, who set many of his poems in Mumbai, were more concerned with the social and personal lives that people lived in the city. Here, natural elements only formed a background to people's problems. In the poem "Urban," he writes: "At dawn he never sees the sky/ which, silently, are born again" (Ezekiel, 1960). The emphasis here is on how cities create a profound alienation from natural processes. Here, natural elements and urban experiences are distinct, reinforcing a binary opposition between nature and city. Nature also often functioned as an idealized escape or alternative to urban constraints, rather than as an entangled reality within the city itself. This is evident when the persona wishes he were a bird to escape the demands of harsh urban life in the poem "The Railway Clerk" by Ezekiel (1953). This contrasts with some new trends in contemporary urban eco poetry where nature is not an escape but an inescapable material presence in urban life.

Arun Kolatkar, like Ezekiel, explored the complexities of urban life in Mumbai. While much of his poetry focuses on social themes and cultural diversity, a poem like "Pi-dog" (1976) stands out for its attention to more-than-human concerns. Here, Kolatkar decenters the human perspective by adopting a stray dog's consciousness. But Kolatkar's dog must "surrender the city / to its so-called masters" (1976, para. 65) when morning comes. It suggests a temporal and spatial separation between human and non-human domains that doesn't fully reflect the reality of urban multi-species coexistence. This creates an either/or scenario rather than acknowledging the constant negotiations and overlapping territories that characterize actual urban ecologies. Doshi's approach differs significantly in that she portrays a more continuous entanglement between species. This limited ecocritical focus should not be understood as a failure of Kolatkar's poetic vision but as how it reflects the historical evolution of ecological awareness. He wrote at a time when urban ecology was not a strong scientific discipline and much before the systems-thinking approaches of today. But analyzing these different treatments of cities in poems shows the evolution of urban ecopoetics from a primarily social observation to material ecological awareness. It reflects broader developments in environmental consciousness.

All these poetic engagements have in common the city as the defining condition of modern existence. In the Anthropocene, urbanization has become a dominant global phenomenon. Cities are no longer isolated places as portrayed in earlier poetry. Urban centers and their residents are now connected to diverse global processes, revealing relationships that extend beyond the individual and their immediate surroundings. As Ursula K. Heise (2021) argues in "Urban Narratives and Climate Change," the growth of urban environments represents a widespread ecological transformation that defines the Anthropocene era. She identifies the urban environment as "the greatest unrecognized environmental challenge of the twenty-first century" (Heise, 2021, p. 22). This global recognition led to a significant shift from studying cities as simple transformations of local landscapes to understanding their global ecological impacts. Cities as complex networks where buildings, nature, and global exchanges all connect and influence each other have become a popular idea within urban ecopoetics. This sort of ecological awareness has led to the process of understanding and representing ways in which cities link local experiences to worldwide environmental issues like climate change, waste movement, and animal migration patterns. Urban poetic analysis has also moved beyond an analysis of urban psychology toward examining the material connections between humans and their environments. Doshi's poetry about Chennai exemplifies this shift, as she attends to the material realities of coastal urban life. From monsoon flooding and heat to the persistent return of discarded objects washed back onto city shores, she draws up a shared vulnerability that she shares with her city.

Tishani Doshi, born in 1975 in Madras (now Chennai) to a Gujarati father and a Welsh mother, brings her complex cultural heritage and global perspective to her poetry. Although her collections *Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods* (2017) and *A God At the*

Door (2021) feature poems set in various cities in India and across the world, "Madras"[1] consistently emerges as the central landscape of her ecological imagination. Currently living in a coastal village near Chennai, Doshi draws from the region's distinctive climate, coastal dynamics, and multispecies encounters in her creative work. Doshi continues to favor the name "Madras" for her home city, as it holds a personal and nostalgic significance for her. In an interview with Nicholas Wroe in *The Guardian*, Doshi says:

> I do sometimes use Chennai, but Madras was the place I was born in and now Chennai seems a different avatar of the city; more modern and technological. Madras is more romantic for me. Just one more example of hybridity, I suppose. (Wroe, 2019)

This paper examines how Doshi's poetry reimagines Madras as a dynamic, porous ecosystem. It is an attempt to understand how her exploration of material connections in urban spaces dissolves traditional boundaries between human and non-human, built and natural environments. For this, the paper draws on concepts related to material entanglement as elaborated in the works of theorists like Serpil Opperman, Serenella Iovino, Stacy Alaimo, and Jane Bennett. Doshi uses Chennai's specific ecological realities to challenge established views of how human life unfolds in isolation from natural elements in the city. To prove this, the paper focuses on poems that depict the city's vulnerable coastline, disruptive monsoons, and oppressive heat. By examining material exchanges between bodies, infrastructure, and ecological forces, she reveals forms of agency beyond human intention. Chennai emerges not as a space lacking nature, but as a complex ecological assemblage. Doshi's urban ecopoetics deepens our understanding of human-environment relationships in the increasingly precarious cities of the Anthropocene.

Material Turn in Urban Ecocriticism

The material-turn in ecocriticism gave an impetus to the study of urban environments in literature as it sought to pull out ideas of the environment from the merely symbolic spheres to a "material-semiotic" arena (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, p. 2). Iovino and Oppermann (2014) argue that the aim was to understand the complex interrelations between discourse and matter, moving beyond interpreting nature solely as a social or linguistic construct, and instead focusing on matter as active, agentic, and inherently meaningful. For instance, in Doshi's poem "What the Sea Brought In", the sea acts as an agentic force that refuses human attempts to discard and forget. The sea brings in brooms, brassieres, and empty bottles of booze, a forefinger, ghost children, poisoned dogs, among other things. The sea doesn't just symbolize memory. It physically returns objects. It moves matter from sea to shore. This action challenges the city's attempt to

[1] A note on terminology: Throughout this paper, both "Madras" and "Chennai" have been used to refer to the capital city of Tamil Nadu. The author maintains "Madras" when quoting directly from Doshi's poems and when referencing her specific perspective, following her own practice.

make waste vanish. The agency here doesn't lie in the mere physical return of objects, but in how Doshi portrays this return as an intentional, almost willful act that counters human intentions. While the actual sea operates according to physical laws, Doshi's poetic rendering gives it qualities of decision-making and purpose. This is where material ecocriticism becomes particularly interesting. It examines how literary texts attribute agency to natural processes, helping us recognize the active role non-human forces play in urban ecosystems, even when those forces are operating through physical rather than conscious means.

This agentic quality of matter is closely connected to how material ecocriticism understands meaning itself as emerging from material relationships rather than human interpretation alone. The concept of inherent meaning in material ecocriticism doesn't suggest that objects possess conscious meaning-making, but rather that material things have significance that exists prior to and independent of human interpretation. The objects discarded by the sea carry traces of their material journeys—how they were made, used, discarded, and transformed by water. These physical properties tell stories of their existence that don't require human assignment of meanings. But when "three dying fish" appear alongside "four dead grandparents" (Doshi, 2017, p. 11), their physical proximity reveals material connections between different kinds of mortality, generating new meanings by virtue of being in physical proximity. The sequence creates material connections between marine death, human death, and ceremonial remains, revealing how mortality transcends species boundaries in the coastal ecosystem. As Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman proposes in their book *Material Ecocritcism* (2014):

> Reading into the "thick of things," material ecocriticism aims to explore not only the agentic properties of material forms, whether living or not, whether organic, "natural" or not, but also how these properties act in combination with other material forms and their properties and with discourses, evolutionary paths, political decisions, pollution, and other stories (p. 7-8).

These "volatile knots" of human and non-human agents contribute to understanding the environment without placing humans at the centre (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014, p. 8). In Doshi's urban ecopoetics, Chennai emerges not as a backdrop for human drama but as a dynamic material assemblage where sea, waste, infrastructure, and bodies are entangled in continuous exchange. Her work shows how the material turn transforms our understanding of cities from human constructions to ecological processes where agency is distributed across human and non-human participants. This recognition of distributed agency leads us to a deeper understanding of how entanglement functions in urban ecosystems. In Doshi's poetry, human and non-human elements of Chennai don't simply interact, but they mutually shape and bring each other into being through their material entanglements.

Entanglement as Co-constitution

Entanglement challenges the idea that beings exist separately before they interact. Instead, humans, animals, plants, and environments actually create each other through ongoing relationships. What I wish to do in this reading is not to explore "the topics of subjectivity or the nature of human interiority or the question of what really distinguishes the human from the plant, animal or thing" (Bennet, 2010, p. 126). This paper aims to explore the already entangled lives in complex webs of material, social, and ecological relationships that both constitute and constrain. The concept of entanglement posits that entities (including humans, nonhumans, technologies, and environments) are not pre-formed but rather emerge through their interconnected and inseparable relationships. Thus, entanglement decenters human exceptionalism and exposes how both humans and nonhumans are caught in systems of extraction and exploitation, especially in the urban scheme of things. Recalling what Jane Bennett says in her book *The Vibrant Matter: A Political ecology of Things*, "Give up the futile attempt to disentangle the human from the nonhuman. Seek instead to engage more civilly, strategically, and subtly with the nonhumans in the assemblages in which you, too, participate" (2010, p. 122).

Building on Bennett's call to engage with nonhumans in our shared assemblages, Doshi's (2017) poem "Coastal Life" shows this entanglement through the Malacca snake. The persona compares human life to a "lifeless Malacca snake/ discarded from the fisherman's net/ buried in sand" (2017, p.87). This isn't just a metaphor but a recognition of shared material reality. The snake is caught in human fishing practices as "bycatch" - an unintended consequence. Humans are similarly caught in larger systems they can't fully control. This reveals how urban coastal areas function as places where humans and nonhumans shape each other's existence. The fisherman needs marine life for survival. The snake dies because of human fishing methods. The persona understands herself by recognizing this shared vulnerability. None of these beings exists before their relationships. They emerge through their connections. Doshi doesn't try to separate humans from nonhumans. Instead, she directly faces the uncomfortable truth that in Chennai's coastal environment, human and nonhuman lives are connected through practices that often make both disposable within extractive systems.

This entanglement that is evident in Doshi's poetry is also mired in the material realities of the urban coastal life of Chennai. In Doshi's poetry, nonhuman entities actively shape urban realities rather than serving as passive backgrounds or symbols. For instance, the sea in "What the Sea Brought In" (Doshi, 2017, 11) doesn't simply receive urban waste but actively dredges up the debris of human life and returns it to shore. The sea's currents, tides, and chemical processes transform, redistribute, and return discarded objects in ways humans cannot control.

This focus on material agency doesn't mean Doshi abandons reflection on human experience. Instead, she finds a special kind of comfort by engaging with nature's cycles in urban spaces. She does this not through idealized visions but through honest attention

to messy realities. In "What the Sea Brought In", after listing all the debris and loss, Doshi notes that even among this waste, "barnacles house empires, the feral creature of love blooms" (2017, p. 10). She recognizes how life persists and renews itself. This insight doesn't come from romanticizing nature as pure or separate from humans. It comes from seeing how life continues within damaged, interconnected systems.

Material Agency in Urban Ecosystems

Agency refers to the capacity to act, make choices, and exert influence in the world. Traditionally, agency has been attributed primarily to humans as they are deemed to be the only entities that can form intentions and take deliberate actions. However, in contemporary theoretical frameworks like new materialism and posthumanism, the concept of agency has been expanded. Thinkers like Jane Bennett (2017) describe forms of "distributive agency" where the capacity to produce effects isn't limited to humans but extends to nonhuman entities, materials, and systems. Bennett draws on Spinoza's concept of "affective bodies" and Deleuze and Guattari's "assemblage" to develop her theory of distributive agency (2017, p. 38-39). Affective bodies, simply put, refers to the idea that all bodies have the capacity to affect and be affected. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage examines how agency operates across networks rather than within individuals. It shifts our understanding of action from singular entities toward diverse collections of elements working together.

The idea of distributive agency also challenges human exceptionalism:

> No one really knows what human agency is, or what humans are doing when they are said to perform as agents. In the face of every analysis, human agency remains something of a mystery. If we do not know just how it is that human agency operates, how can we be so sure that the processes through which nonhumans make their mark are qualitatively different? (Bennett, 2017, p. 50)

Bennett points out that despite centuries of philosophical investigation, we still don't have a complete understanding of what human agency actually is or how it functions. When we say humans "act" or "make choices," the underlying mechanisms remain somewhat mysterious. Given this scenario, Bennett questions how we can be so confident in declaring that nonhuman forms of agency are fundamentally different from human agency. This quotation supports Bennett's broader argument for "vital materialism" by questioning the human/nonhuman hierarchy that traditional Western philosophy has established.

The idea of distributive agency has particular significance when understanding urbanization. While we often view cities as purely human constructions, under the control of human design and intention, the reality is far more complex. Though cities indeed begin as human-made transformations of landscapes, the consequences they generate for overall ecosystems are often invisible, unforeseeable, and ultimately beyond human agency alone.

Urban life in Chennai, as explored in Doshi's poetry, reveals how cities quickly become complex assemblages where agency is distributed across human and nonhuman participants. For instance, in Doshi's "Rain at Three" and "Monsoon Poem", agency emerges through dynamic relationships between multiple elements within Chennai's urban system. When Doshi writes that rain "splits the bed in half" (2017, p.9) and transforms roads and sewers into "wandering pursuers," (2017, 19-20) she's revealing a complex web of material interactions. The monsoon is not merely synmbolic, it physically acts upon the world. Humans are not the sole inhabitants of the city. In Doshi's poetry, the city is presented as an assemblage of physical infrastructure, natural elements, biological participants, human bodies and behaviors, cultural frameworks, and temporal patterns. These elements interact during the monsoon, all peculiar to the place. These elements create effects that no single component controls. The infrastructural elements don't simply serve human needs but respond to rain in their own ways - fridges leak, sheets remain damp, roads and sewers "wander and spill their babbling hearts" (Doshi, 2017, p. 19-20). Similarly, in "Rain at Three," we see how rain transforms the domestic assemblage, splitting beds and cracking windows, while also connecting to larger natural cycles. The city in Doshi's poems isn't a static human construction but a dynamic assemblage where agency is distributed across human and nonhuman participants, all responding to and shaping each other through the monsoon's material presence.

This perspective of the entangled agency should not dissolve the responsibility that humans hold over ecological devastation, but bring to the forefront two things. One, that not all humans are equally responsible for the environmental havoc that is caused, and two, that the repercussions of an action don't generally stay in human control because of how systems are connected in ways that go beyond our control. Hence, this reading of Doshi's poetry, in its attention to material interactions in the city, doesn't just describe Chennai's ecology, but reveals a more accurate way of understanding how cities actually function as dynamic sites of human-nonhuman becoming.

The paper focuses on two key elements of Chennai's urban ecology as portrayed in Doshi's poetry: the coastal dynamics that define the city's relationship with the sea, and the seasonal patterns, particularly monsoons and summer heat, that shape urban life. Through these material realities, Doshi reveals forms of agency that extend beyond human intentionality. Rather than portraying nature as the backdrop, she shows how nonhuman elements actively participate in creating urban realities.

Urban and Coastal Ecologies in Doshi's Poetry

Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, stands as one of India's most dynamic urban landscapes. Situated along the Bay of Bengal, Chennai's identity is deeply intertwined with its coastline, shaping its climate, livelihoods, and culture. Chennai's development has been significantly shaped by its coastal location, including its history as a colonial trading port, the establishment of Fort St. George, its maritime commerce, fishing communities, and

more recent challenges like coastal erosion and vulnerability to cyclones. Tishani Doshi, her husband, and her dogs reside in a secluded home in a coastal village about an hour and a half from Chennai, so it is only natural that the sea is a recurring presence in her work. But her attachment to the sea goes further back to her childhood. In an interview with Feroz Rather, Doshi responds to the question of her attachment to Madras thus:

> Home is where my people and dogs are. My parents. My brother. My sister. My husband. My friends. But it's also the Bay of Bengal. If there's a physical anchor, then it's this ocean that I grew up with. Life giving, raucous, moody, beautiful. As a child growing up in Madras, we lived far from the sea. We'd sometimes go on a Sunday to spend the day at the beach. All my ideas of happiness are tied to those memories (Rather, 2018).

"What the Sea Brought In", "Fear Management", and *"Coastal Life"* are three poems in the collection *Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods* where the sea coast features prominently. The sea coast becomes a larger canvas where urban ecological entanglements unfold. In "What the Sea Brought In", Tishani Doshi (2017) portrays the sea as a chaotic force that dredges up the debris of human life, memory, and loss. The sea here is not just a body of water but a living archive of the city's debris, trauma, and forgotten histories. The poem catalogs what the waves return, which is a strange inventory of discarded, lost, and broken things.

Brooms, brassieres, empty bottles
of booze. The tip of my brother's
missing forefinger. Bulbs, toothpaste caps,
instruments for grooming. Chestnuts,
carcass of coconut, crows, crabs. (Doshi, 2017, p. 11)

Here, the sea functions as an active agent that poses a challenge to careless urban disposal systems. The return of all the waste that is discarded or "lost" to the sea is returned because of the physical mechanism by which the sea works. The cyclical movements of matter between urban and marine systems are more than just a moral lesson for humankind. It is a physical demonstration of ecological connectivity. The sea, here, is a force that disrupts the city's illusion of waste disappearance. While urban systems are designed to make waste disappear, the sea refutes this logic by returning discarded items to shore. Urban dwellers are forced to confront their destructive and unsustainable consumption patterns through this material loop created by the sea.

A contradiction arises when, towards the end of the poem, after cataloguing this potpourri of objects that the sea brings in, she refers to them as "lost" objects rather than discarded or dumped: "If everything we've lost were to return/with the sea..." (Doshi, 2017, p. 9). The word 'lost' refers to both the physical displacement of objects and the moral/ethical disconnection from the material impacts of our unsustainable consumption. The appearance of "Two ghost children foraging their way/home" and "a pack of poor poisoned dogs" among the catalog of debris collapses distinctions between discarded

objects and discarded lives (Doshi, 2017, p. 9). It suggests parallels between how cities treat marginalized beings and material excess. Also, the discarded materials do not lose meaning but forge new meanings when juxtaposed with each other, as the sea brings them in. The dead dogs might have one meaning, but the meaning is modified when they are placed alongside the ghost children and funeral dust. It dredges up urban hierarchies of value.

The poem ends on a hopeful note of renewal, which also emerges from several material entanglements. Seeing barnacles colonize debris shows the persistence of life even in polluted environments. This transformation of waste into a thriving habitat signals how ecological processes continue despite human disruption. The persona gains hope from the fact that even within highly disrupted systems, "feral creatures of love" are able to persist beyond disruptions caused by humans, and convert decay and waste to new life (Doshi, 2017, p. 10).

In the poem "Fear Management" (Doshi, 2017, pp. 14-15), the beach predominantly features as a space where a woman's vulnerability entangles with that of the non-human. The beach is a contested territory both environmentally and socially. On the one hand, there is the violence meted out to the environment through overconsumption and over-extraction, and on the other is the violence the female persona has to face by virtue of being in a public urban space. The fishermen with their "ceaseless, cooing threats" (Doshi, 2017, p. 14) embody a predatory male presence that immediately evokes fear in the mind of the persona. Their threatening sounds directed at the woman mirror how they would treat "a small, brainless creature" before "smashing it underfoot," directly linking the vulnerability of women's bodies to non-human vulnerability (Doshi, 2017, p. 14). Simultaneously, the environmental violence is evident in the "ocean's regurgitations—/orphaned slippers,/ styrofoam, fossil of crab" (Doshi, 2017, p. 14). The fishermen at the beach at dawn, hauling their nets, create a direct physical connection between their threatening presence toward the woman and their extractive relationship with the sea.

It is noteworthy that it is the absence of her dogs that makes her feel more vulnerable to the threats. Their absence creates the conditions for fear. Kinship with various creatures of urban life evolves further in the poem "Coastal Life" (Doshi, 2017, pp. 87-88). Doshi's urban ecopoetics explores different modes of human-animal relationships along Chennai's coast. The persona is struck by the realization that human life is very similar to the discarded Malacca snake. The poignant comparison of human life to a "lifeless" Malacca snake, "discarded from the fisherman's net, buried in sand" is a dehumanizing metaphor that portrays the human being as an expendable entity like the snake, which is tossed aside, forgotten, and slowly decomposing (Doshi, 2017, p. 87). The snake is caught unintentionally in the fisherman's net and holds no apparent value to humans, though it has ecological significance. Its death and decay are tragic because it simply happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The metaphor of bycatch expresses how easily individuals are overlooked, their stories unacknowledged, and end up being collateral

damage in someone else's pursuit. This metaphor reminds us that violence and loss aren't always dramatic but are woven into the mundane routines of urban life. By identifying with a discarded, lifeless creature, the speaker flips the usual human-nature hierarchy. The persona does not place herself above or apart from the ecosystem but is revealed to be deeply entangled with the city's cycles of waste, death, and neglect.

Entanglements extend across multiple species. The "million ephemera wings, clogging/the balcony drains" physically connect insect bodies to human infrastructure (Doshi, 2017, p.87). So does the resident mouse that shares living space and food meant for humans, and the roots of the bougainvillea that choke the water pipes in the poem. The relationship with animals is not romanticized. The persona acknowledges laying "poisoned biscuits" for the mouse. The relatedness that she explores here is "uninnocent", to use Radhika Govindarajan's term (2018). The relation to animals in Doshi's poem is not just about companionship but also about 'indifference, disgust and hostility' (Govindarajan, 2018, p.5). Together, these different animal relationships reveal how coastal urban life in Chennai creates various forms of multispecies entanglement where some are chosen, some are imposed by circumstance, but all of them shape human experience of urban environments.

Seasons of the City: Monsoon and Heat

The bookseller in Alexander Frater's *Chasing the Monsoon* (1990) on being asked whether a book on Madras Presidency contains details of the weather proudly proclaims: "Certainly the weather. We Indians are obsessed by the subject and so were the British. Madras, remember, had Asia's first observatory, built in 1792" (p. 100). This interaction marks the importance that weather played in Madras's growth as a colonial powerhouse and as a modern city today. The heat and the rains of Chennai occupy a central position in the imaginative literature and culture of the place.

"Summer in Madras" explores a family's psychological and emotional landscape during the intense summer heat of Madras. Each family member copes differently with what appears to be not just physical heat but emotional or psychological strain. The oppressive summer heat serves as both a literal reality and a metaphor for internal struggles. The summer heat of Madras functions as a primary non-human agent with overwhelming force that is not merely a backdrop but an active presence, causing everyone to be "dying" (Doshi, 2017, p.5). The heat drives the mother to seek refuge in "an air-conditioned room". The father responds to the heat more directly, stalking verandas. The surreal image of "offering pieces of his skin to the rows of lurid gulmohars" evokes both the literal effects of sunburn peeling skin and a metaphorical sacrifice to nature. The heat has made him restless and is literally taking pieces of him. The heat appears to intensify the psychological distress of the husband, which the brother remains "lackadaisical" (Doshi, 2017, p.5). The heat ultimately functions as a transformative pressure that reveals each character's unique psychological makeup and coping mechanisms.

The heat of the summer is not just an environmental condition in the poem that serves as a background to the family's lives. They are agents of emotional breakdown, psychic tension, and bodily vulnerability. It is interesting to note how the gulmohar tree in the yard, a common sight in Chennai and one that blooms in summer, stands in contrast to the suffering humans. It flourishes in the heat while the human withers. This highlights the differential impacts of the environment on human and plant life.

While the heat in "Summer in Madras" creates isolation and decay, the rain in "Rain at Three" (Doshi, 2017) causes disruption and renewal: "This is how desire works:/splintering first, then joining" (Doshi, 2017, p. 8). "Summer in Madras" and "Rain at Three" together represent Chennai's natural seasonal progression from the scorching summer to the relief of monsoon rains. This cyclical understanding of seasons helps with contextualizing the larger material rhythms that are inherent to the region.

Chennai doesn't feature in Frater's book *Chasing the Monsoon* (1990) because he follows the bigger monsoon winds - the summer monsoon. Chennai receives the winter monsoons, which run roughly from October to Christmas and are described as "a fairly minor affair compared to the summer one" (Frater, 1990, p.100). Even as most of the country gears up to receive rains from the southwest monsoon between June and October, Chennai receives its rain only from the northeast monsoon rains, from October to December. This creates a unique seasonal rhythm and relationship with rain that sets Chennai apart from other Indian cities.

In Doshi's poems, the physical body stands at the center. She writes about real, material bodies that exist in the world. These bodies are earthly and connected to the natural environment. Doshi uses the body to explore issues of gender and power. Her poems not only show how bodies can experience violence, but also how bodies can resist and subvert expectations. Her famous poem "The Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods" demonstrates this clearly.

In her Madras poems, the human body is intermeshed with the more-than-human worlds. In the poem "Rain at Three" (Doshi, 2017, p. 8), we see that the bodies aren't really separate from the environment outside, but mix with it in very physical ways. When the poem describes people sleeping with "pumiced, wooden bodies—mud-caked, mud-brown" (p. 8), it creates a visual image of bodies that have been marked and altered by environmental encounter. In the specific context of Chennai, this mud imagery also connects to the regional materiality of the clay soil, the heat, and the relationship with monsoon seasons that characterize the region. By being a part of the natural cycle of "splintering" and "joining," this materiality provides humans with connection, not contamination. As Stacy Alaimo (2010) says in her *Bodily Natures*, "…conceptions of the human self are profoundly altered by the recognition that "the environment"" is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves (p. 4). Transcorporeality emphasizes porosity of the body that entangles it to the world through

the movement of substances like mud, air, sweat, heat, and rain. it shows how physical and ecological systems shape one another.

In the poem “Summer in Madras” (Doshi, 2017), the act of the father "offering pieces of his skin" (p.7) likely points to the heat and physical suffering of summer in Madras. It suggests not only suffering due to heat but also an unwilled merging with the environment. His skin is being burned or parched, possibly even peeling, and becomes an example of a transcorporeal metaphor for how the heat is consuming him. Similarly, in the line "We sleep with pumiced, wooden / bodies—mud-caked, mud-brown" (2017, p.8) from “Rain at Three”, the bodies are heavy, rough, and tired, physically marked by mud and metaphorically shaped by the emotional and environmental weight of their lives. The line conveys a deep connection to land, labor, and exhaustion, merging the human with the earth in a raw, almost elemental way.

Talking about monsoon also coincides with the failure of monsoon to bring rains, subsequently causing droughts. In the poem “Everyone has a Wilting Point” from the collection *A God at the Door* (Doshi, 2021), the poet especially looks at what happened when Chennai city was in the grips of a debilitating drought. It grapples with drought, environmental crisis, political failure, and the deep human longing for renewal. The poem is built around the image of the drought and how women, political leaders, and spiritual advisors are dealing with the problem. The rivers she says are terribly polluted (full of shit, just like the leaders who preach help) and the wells are dry. While the leaders turn to temples and priests to make a miracle rain, you have the contrasting images of women in the street carrying pots, waiting for ‘water tanker god to arrive’ (Doshi, 2021, p. 47 - 48). The poet mocks the political leaders by pointing out how the problem is not an immediate one of solving just this one drought. What is really needed is an emotional and spiritual replenishment that would help us get in touch with human vulnerability and endure it with love and desire. It is only through a realization of human wilting point that we would understand how human, ecological, and emotional droughts are intertwined.

The wilting point refers to the stage at which a plant can no longer extract water from the soil. At this point, the plant begins to wilt because there’s not enough moisture to sustain its structure and functions. Without intervention, like rain or watering, it cannot recover. In the context of Doshi’s poem, a wilting point becomes a metaphor for human vulnerability and emotional exhaustion. It’s the moment when a person, community, or society begins to collapse under pressure, whether it be from drought, neglect, emotional strain, political failure, or ecological collapse. Doshi expands this idea from the body of a plant to the human body and psyche, suggesting that everyone has a limit, a point where they begin to sag or fade. It also invites tenderness as the poem asks us to “rest against our wilting points” to acknowledge fragility, rather than resist it, and to respond with compassion and renewal (Doshi, 2021, p.48).

Doshi uses urban elements not just as background, but as integral parts of the ecological and emotional crisis she’s portraying. The images of leaders folding their hands to the sky

for the rains to come or getting down on their knees to pray at the temples are a direct commentary on the urban-political theatre in response to environmental collapse. Women waiting in the streets with empty pots for water tankers to arrive is a familiar urban scene in an Indian city like Chennai, where water shortages force residents to queue up for municipal water tankers. The empty reservoirs and the polluted rivers underscore urban pollution, the collapse of water systems, sewage, mismanagement, and the failure of basic sanitation. It brings the ecological crisis into the literal filth of urban living, rejecting romantic notions of rivers or nature. The idea of the wilting point is also a metaphorical symbol of the psychological toll of urban life wherein the emotional capacity of urban residents has been stretched thin by urban systems that are failing, and have taken humans far away from their connections to nature's cycles. The monsoon in the city is a paradoxical force that is desired in drought, yet feared in excess. It is also romanticized in poetry, but sometimes unforgiving in reality.

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to conduct a material reading of Tishani Doshi's Madras poetry. Doshi's poetry lends itself to this reading because of a significant evolution within urban ecopoetics from predominantly social and psychological representations of human problems in cities to an acute ecological awareness that recognizes complex entanglements between human and non-human elements. In Doshi's work, Madras emerges as a dynamic ecological assemblage, where seasons, the sea coast, biodiversity, political and social issues, and everyday life intersect, with agency distributed across its diverse participants.

A significant step in the evolution of urban ecopoetics is the development of systems thinking, where poems do not isolate human experience but tease out its particularities in relation to larger ecological systems that work hand-in-hand. Systems thinking in ecology is a framework that looks at how different parts of an ecosystem are interconnected and interdependent. It highlights that no part works alone and that each one affects the others and shapes how the whole system functions. This evolution represents a profound shift from earlier poetic approaches that maintained clear boundaries between nature and city, human and non-human. Doshi's poetry exemplifies this systems perspective by portraying Chennai not as a collection of isolated elements but as an interconnected ecological network. Through her attentiveness to Chennai's specific material conditions such as its vulnerable coastline, disruptive monsoons, and oppressive heat, Doshi dismantles conventional binaries between nature and city, human and non-human. Her poetry reveals how the urban environment functions not as a static human construction but as a vibrant ecosystem where sea currents return discarded objects, rains transform domestic spaces, and heat reshapes human psychology and bodily experience.

Central to Doshi's urban ecopoetics is her representation of transcorporeality. The "mud-caked, mud-brown" bodies and "muscled Tamil Nadu nights" in "Rain at Three" (Doshi, 2017, p. 8) and the skin offered to "lurid gulmohars" in "Summer in Madras" (2017, p.7) demonstrate how human bodies are connected to environmental transformations. She uses embodied imagery that is visceral and materially grounded, making abstract concepts like transcorporeality tangible through bodily response.

Equally significant is Doshi's portrayal of distributed agency across Chennai's urban ecosystem. The sea that returns discarded items, the rain that "splits the bed in half," and the heat that causes family members to respond in distinctive ways all demonstrate how non-human elements actively shape urban realities rather than serving as passive backgrounds. This recognition of diverse forms of agency decenters human exceptionalism without dissolving human responsibility for ecological devastation.

Doshi's "uninnocent" portrayal of multispecies relationships from the vulnerability shared with the Malacca snake to the ambivalent connections with mice and insects offers a more truthful account of urban coexistence. It goes beyond mere romanticized visions of human-animal harmony. Yet even amidst this damaged urban ecosystem, she finds possibility for renewal, noting how "barnacles house empires" and "the feral creature of love/ grows from greystones…" (Doshi, 2017, p.12).

As cities increasingly define human experience in the Anthropocene, Doshi's urban ecopoetics provides an interesting perspective of how cities function as sites of human-nonhuman becoming. Her poetry reveals some of the material entanglements that evolve out of the ecologies peculiar to the city of Chennai. It provides a rich imagery of embeddedness within urban systems, while also exploring the daily lives of its human and non-human inhabitants. While the select poems try to derive lessons of hope and renewal from nature, it does not rely on pristine and "green spaces" for their lessons. The poems, instead, observe the urban world in all its messiness and chaos in order to tease out from it lessons of mutuality and co-existence in order to develop an urban eco-consciousness.

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