The Deliverer

SUMMARY

The poem begins in a convent in the Indian state of Kerala. The speaker's mother is talking to a nun who is telling her that the children who live at the convent have ended up there because they are disabled, dark-skinned, and/or female.

She explains these children were abandoned. They'd been left naked and alone in piles of trash on the street, shoved in garbage bags, or left right in front of the convent itself.

One child was pulled out of the ground by a dog snuffling for something to eat; the animal thought the top of the child's head sticking out of the dirt was a piece of wood or bone that it could gnaw on.

The speaker's mother chooses this child to take with her.

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The second part of the poem takes place at an airport in Wisconsin, in the United States.

The couple who will adopt the child stands at the arrivals gate. As Americans, they are well-versed in the formalities of the situation and understand what is expected of them.

Because they haven't met the baby yet, they don't yet know that she has a thing for pulling the hair off people's hands. They also don't know about her history and the fact that her mother attempted to bury her.

Even so, they're crying. The speaker's mother later tells the speaker that they were all crying, herself included, as she handed the baby over and felt the absence of her weight in her arms.

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As the baby grows up, she watches videos of this exchange in which she's handed from one woman to another. She imagines her own obscure origins.

She pictures the day she was born, in a decrepit, rudimentary shelter outside of town.

This is where mothers go to give birth, during which they see another body slide out of their own.

They determine whether the baby has male or female genitals; if female, they discard the baby along with the other female babies.

Then they walk with heavy steps home, where they will be expected to have sex with their husbands again.

THEMES

GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND INFANTICIDE

"The Deliverer" illustrates the devastating effects of gender discrimination in India, showing how the devaluation of female life often begins at birth and leads to immense suffering, violation, and even infanticide. The speaker's mother visits a convent in Kerala (a state in southwest India), where the sisters take in children whom society considers disposable: those who are "crippled or dark or girls." The poem then zooms in on one child in particular: a little girl buried in the dirt, her head "barely poking above the ground," snuffed out by a dog searching for something to "gnaw on." This deeply disturbing image is symbolic of the fact that girls don't stand a chance in a world that denies them economic freedom, access to education, and bodily autonomy; their fates are sealed before they're even born.

The speaker's mother takes this baby to the United States to be adopted, but the poem doesn't present this as a straightforward happy ending. Instead, the narrative shifts back to India in its final stanzas, offering readers a glimpse into the lives of the mothers who abandon these children in the first place. They are not monsters, these lines reveal, but rather victims of a brutal, unjust, deeply misogynist system.

The speaker describes one mother trekking out to "some desolate hut" far from her village in order "to squeeze out life." This birth is not an occasion for celebration or joy, but rather one marked by isolation, pain, and disgust; the baby "slither[s] out from" the woman's body as though it were a snake, a horrifying image that hints that this woman did not have much of a say in getting pregnant. She certainly doesn't yet seem to feel any affection for this baby, at least, which is likely a coping mechanism given what she must do next. The mother checks to see if the baby has a penis or not, a chillingly clinical examination with life or death results: the boys get taken home while the girls get tossed onto "the heap of others"—a pile of dead or dying baby girls.

This, the poem implies, is what happens in an intensely patriarchal society that denies women their full humanity. Unable to work, educate themselves, or make their own reproductive decisions, women can't prioritize their children's lives. That the poem ends with these women "Trudg[ing] home to lie down for their men again" hammers home their lack of autonomy; their bodies are used as receptacles of men's desire, regardless of the consequences. More unwanted babies will be conceived, and if they're girls, they, in turn, won't be able (or

allowed) to contribute economically to their families. For families already drowning in poverty, girls are seen as an added burden. These destitute mothers know that if they keep their unwanted girls alive, the girls' fates will be as bad as or worse than their own. In this respect, the mothers might feel they are doing these babies a kindness by allowing them to die—really the only kindness they have at their disposal. At least their daughters won't grow up to face the horror of starvation, rape, and/or bearing children they, too, have to abandon.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-11
- Lines 22-32

POVERTY, MOTHERHOOD, AND ADOPTION

"The Deliverer" illustrates the at-times murky reality of cross-cultural adoption by juxtaposing the most "desolate" sector of Indian society and a relatively affluent sector of American society. The former is more populous, less affluent, and (in the era described) more regressive in its treatment of women. Intense poverty and oppression lead some Indian women to abandon their babies, while relative wealth and freedom allow some Americans to accept those babies with open arms. The poem suggests that more affluent and liberalized societies *afford* mothers the opportunity to treat all kids as worthy of unqualified love. Conversely, in impoverished societies that allow women no reproductive freedom and are especially brutal toward female, dark-skinned, and disabled children, mothers may find that giving up such children is the best they can do for them.

In parts of India, families reject children who are "crippled or dark or girls" because they feel they will be too great a financial burden. The poem describes mothers actively abandoning these children in ways that seem unimaginably cruel to those accustomed to romanticized depictions of maternal love, but the women who discard their children don't do so out of intentional cruelty; they simply don't have the resources or freedom of choice necessary to make better decisions for their children. In a humane and stable society, such children would be treated no differently from their peers. But because these babies were born into a culture where there is little opportunity, they are cast out in anticipation of the fact that society will not want them. Where money and resources are scarce, the poem implies, life is often treated as cheap.

Meanwhile, the American parents who adopt the girl from the convent are said to "know about ceremony / And tradition, about doing things right." The Americans seem to think of themselves as morally superior for being able to treat this child "right," yet the main reason they can adopt her is that they're wealthier than the women who give birth to babies like her. The poem implies that the Americans are not *intrinsically* more appreciative of human life. Rather, their relative affluence *allows* them to see and treat life differently. They have the resources to ensure that this child won't face the same hardship as she would in India; when she grows up, she won't be expected to "lie down for [...] men" as her mother was, so she'll have a chance at a better life.

Still, she "grows up on video tapes," suggesting lingering curiosity about her origins, and she revisits "twilight corners"—murky, obscure memories or dreams of the place she came from but did not get the chance to know. And while the couple comes across as sincere in their desire for this child and filled with good intentions, the poem also subtly hints at the ways in which the wealth and prosperity of nations such as the U.S. are dependent on the oppression and suffering of nations such as India. That is, this family would not be experiencing the joy of adoption without the terrible conditions that led to the baby's biological mother rejecting her. In a way, babies are one of the many resources that rich countries extract from places like India, which are still reeling from the impact of Western colonization.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-11
- Lines 12-21
- Lines 22-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

OUR LADY OF ...
... dark or girls.

"The Deliverer" is a 32-line free verse poem broken up into three distinct sections. The first section begins with a heading announcing where the poem is set: a "convent" (a place where a community of nuns lives) in "Kerala," a state in India. By announcing the location up top, the poet conveys the importance of this setting: this isn't some imagined dystopia, but a *real* place in the *real* world.

The speaker then begins the poem itself by describing a conversation between her mother and a nun, who is explaining how the children living at the convent came into her care. This nun took the children in because "they were crippled or dark or girls." (Though the speaker narrates the poem in the present tense, she isn't necessarily there with her mother; more likely, she is imagining a scene from her mother's past.)

This blunt, matter-of-fact explanation makes it clear from the start that in India, being born with a disability, having dark skin, or simply being female puts children at a terrible disadvantage.

The polysyndeton of this phrase—"crippled or dark or girls"—presents all these traits as equally undesirable; being a girl is no better than being born with a disability, which is no better than simply having dark skin. In an ideal society, none of these scenarios would result in a parent rejecting their own child. But in an impoverished, deeply patriarchal society, such children are often rejected as soon as they are born because they would become a financial burden to their parents.

Thick, back-of-the-throat /c/ alliteration and consonance add intensity to these lines:

> How she came to collect children
> Because they were crippled or dark or girls

The growling /r/ and /g/ sounds adds to the effect. The lines are sharp rather than soft and comforting.

LINES 5-11

Found naked in ...
... mother will bring.

The children who come to live at the convent have been abandoned by their parents. The imagery of these lines is deeply disturbing, and it illustrates just how worthless these babies are considered. They are thrown out with the trash, left to wander "naked in the streets" or "Covered in garbage." The image of innocent children being "stuffed in bags" is particularly violent and difficult to stomach. The ones who get left at the front door of the convent are comparatively lucky; the mothers of these babies took a risk to leave them there, since it is illegal for them to abandon their children.

Asyndeton makes this list feel at once disturbingly casual and like it could go on and on—as though there's no end to the ways in which children are mistreated in this society:

> Found naked in the streets,
> Covered in garbage, stuffed in bags,
> Abandoned at their doorstep.

Asyndeton creates the sense that these are just a few of the scenarios that come to mind, the ones that stuck with the mother as she retells this story to her daughter, the speaker. There are undoubtedly countless more; these abandonments are disturbingly common.

In its next stanza, the poem zooms in on one particular child who'd apparently been buried in the dirt. A dog, sniffing around for something to eat, thought that the top of the baby's head was a bit of "bone or wood" and dug the child up. The pounding /d/ alliteration of "dug up by a dog" adds to the brutality of this image of a stray animal pulling an infant out of the ground. The fact that the dog itself was hungry, looking for "something to chew," adds to the sense of overwhelming poverty.

The poem's language continues to be disarmingly casual and straightforward. For example, listen to the asyndeton in line 10:

> Was bone or wood, something to chew.

This is a *human child*, not a chew toy, and the nonchalance of the language here is deliberately unnerving. The use of such language while discussing horror helps to convey how much life has been devalued in this world.

The first section then ends with the speaker saying that the child that was buried "is the one" her mother will take with her, though it yet doesn't specify where.

Horrific as the images in these stanzas are, the poem takes care not to condemn the mothers of these children. Instead, these images reflect the terrible reality of an impoverished society where women have little reproductive freedom or autonomy, lack access to education and employment, and are forced to give birth to children they don't want or can't afford to raise. In such a world, these women are as much victims as they are perpetrators of violence. Indeed, many likely believe they're doing the merciful thing by letting their children die, if there is no support for these children in the world they're born into. And if they have other mouths to feed, they might make the decision to abandon those children whom society has deemed less worthy (the "crippled," dark-skinned, or girls) in order to give the rest of their family a better chance of surviving. Faced with desperate conditions, people resort to desperate measures.

LINES 12-15

MILWAUKEE AIRPORT, USA ...
... doing things right.

The second part of the poem begins with a heading informing the reader that it takes place at an airport in Milwaukee, a city in the state of Wisconsin. From the first line, where the speaker says "The parents wait at the gates," it becomes clear that the speaker's mother has brought the baby from the convent in India to an adoptive family in the United States. Readers can assume that this is why she was visiting the convent in the first place.

The American family eagerly anticipates the child's arrival. The speaker says that because "They are Americans," they "know about ceremony / And tradition, about doing things right." This statement is a bit ambiguous. On the one hand, it implies that the Americans aren't going to abandon this baby the way her Indian mother did. They are prepared to be good parents.

But the statement also feels ironic, subtly implying that the Americans are ignorant of the fact that their preparedness, their ability to do things "right," isn't something that's *inherent* to their nature. Instead, it's a direct result of their country's comparative affluence. They are able to do things right because their society doesn't treat women as second-class citizens with no power of their own. This baby will have a better life with

them than she would have had with her own family, but the reasons for this are cultural, economic, and systemic rather than individual. If they feel a sense of superiority about being able to do "things rights," it's unearned.

Note, too, the use of more asyndeton in lines 14-15:

> They are American so they know about ceremony
> And tradition, about doing things right.

The lack of coordinating conjunction between "about ceremony / And tradition" and "about doing things right" seems to imply that, for the Americans, these things are interchangeable. They seem to think that to be good parents, they have to do what's expected of them—what was modeled by their own parents, no doubt. There's a precedent for parenthood; they know what to do because someone did it for them.

LINES 16-21

They haven't seen ...
... her empty arms.

The speaker says that the Americans haven't "seen or touched" their adoptive daughter yet. They don't know the first thing about her. They're unaware of her "fetish for plucking hair off hands," for example, imagery that might suggest some sort of neurosis that has resulted from her early trauma (alternatively, this is just a quirk). Nor do they know about her bleak origins, the fact that "her mother tried to bury her." (Remember, this is the same baby dug up by a dog.") The fact that they are "crying" anyway suggests that they don't need to know these things to already feel affection for this vulnerable little girl. These parents have undoubtedly been dreaming about bringing a child into their home for some time. The poem hints that they will be good parents, or at least that they will love this child deeply.

Of course, the poem also implies that this ability to be good parents is a result of their *circumstances*. In order to raise children successfully, parents need resources and support. Once again, the poem suggests that poor women in India don't reject their children because they are inherently cruel, and affluent women in America don't adopt because they are inherently good. They are each just responding to two very different realities.

The speaker goes on to say that her own mother is also "crying" as she hands the baby girl over to her new parents. Diacope (the repetition of the word "crying") emphasizes both the emotional intensity of the moment as well as the vastly different sources of emotion at play. Again, it's clear that everyone involved cares about this baby and wants what's best for her. Yet the Americans are crying out of happiness and joy for the future, while the speaker's mother is, perhaps, crying from loss and the understanding of what this baby has been through—and what difficulties lie ahead for her because of that.

The poem implies that although the American parents may come to love this child deeply, they will never truly be able to understand her past or the conditions that brought her to them.

By now, it's clear that the poem's title is a play on words. To *deliver* something is to transport it and hand it over to its intended recipient. In one sense, then, the "Deliverer" of the poem's title is the speaker's mother, who is bringing the baby girl from the Indian convent to her adoptive family in America. However, giving birth is also referred to as *delivering* a baby. Thus, the baby's mother is another "Deliverer," albeit one made invisible by her geographic and economic distance from the people who adopt her baby.

LINES 22-27

This girl grows ...
... Outside village boundaries

The poem's third and final section fast-forwards into the future, when the baby girl from the convent "grows up." She'll watch "video tapes" of her adoption, the speaker says, and see "how she's passed from woman to woman." This line, with its repetition of "woman," suggests a certain kinship between the girl's adoptive mother and the speaker's own mother (a stand-in for the child's biological mother). They are connected by their gender; they share in the nurturing role that women have traditionally taken on across the world. Yet it also suggests a stark *divide* between them: the little girl is being handed over from one world to another. The American mother gains a daughter; India loses one.

This girl, as she ages, feels a pull toward her own origins. Having been so young when she was brought over, she has no conscious memories of her time in India. Still, the poem implies that some memory of her origins lives on inside her body, in "twilight corners." Twilight refers to the time of day after the sun is no longer visible in the sky, but its light still lingers. It's an in-between time; a hazy, ambiguous, hour. The image of "twilight corners" suggests that such trauma as the girl has endured doesn't just disappear; it affects her in unseen ways.

The poem then travels back in time to "the day of her birth" in India. The speaker says that "it" (the girl's birth) happens in some desolate hut / Outside village boundaries." The location conveys the poverty that the girl's mother faced and implies that didn't want to be discovered. If she planned on keeping the baby, she wouldn't have trekked out to some forsaken, broken-down structure "Outside village boundaries" where nobody could find her.

LINES 28-32

Where mothers go ...
... their men again.

In its final lines, the poem broadens its scope. Now, it's describing all the women who, like this girl's mother, found

some abandoned hut in which "to squeeze out life." This visceral phrase conveys that for these women, giving birth isn't beautiful or romantic. It's a painful, lonely experience; they're simply getting something unavoidable over with. The speaker adds that the babies "slither" from their bodies like snakes, disturbing imagery that suggests the revulsion these women feel. This revulsion might stem from the circumstances under which these babies were conceived (without autonomy, these women may have conceived against their will).

On the other hand, perhaps these women simply can't afford to think of the babies they're giving birth to as human yet, knowing that they might be forced to abandon them. Indeed, after they give birth, the mothers "Feel for penis or no penis." Diacope (the repetition of "penis") highlights the cold, clinical way in which the women assess the babies' worth. Those with male genitals will be carried home and, presumably, welcomed into the family. The ones with female genitals will be "Tossed" into a "heap" of other baby girls, left to die. This is patriarchy and poverty at its most devastating.

While it would be easy to blame these mothers for rejecting their own children, the last line of the poem emphasizes how little power these women have over their lives. They "trudge" (or walk slowly and heavily) "home to lie down for their men again." In this patriarchal society, women are passive figures, receptacles for men's desires. They aren't running home out of love and desire for their husbands; they're returning because they have no other options. Without access to education, jobs, and reproductive freedom, there is little these women can do to change their circumstances, let alone that of their vulnerable, infant daughters.

Note the use of asyndeton throughout these final lines. The piling up of clauses without coordinating conjunctions makes the ending feel like a landslide—as if none of the things the women are doing are truly the result of choice, but are rather an inevitable result of forces outside of their control. The poem implies that as long as women are treated as disposable, these heartbreaking acts of infanticide and abandonment will continue.

SYMBOLS

GARBAGE

The poem describes abandoned babies being thrown out with and/or buried beneath piles of garbage. The sister at the convent informs the speaker's mother that she's even found babies "stuffed in bags." This disturbing imagery symbolizes how little this culture values these babies; dark-skinned children, children with disabilities, and girls are deemed essentially worthless, just more trash to be thrown away. The image of mothers deciding to "Toss" their female babies onto "the heap of others" echoes this idea, again reflecting that, in a society that doesn't value women, female babies get treated as disposable.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Covered in garbage, stuffed in bags,"
- **Line 31:** "Toss the baby to the heap of others,"

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The poem's devastating imagery portrays the bleak reality of life in an extremely poor, patriarchal society. Early on, for example, the speaker describes abandoned children "Covered in garbage" and "stuffed in bags." This disturbing imagery illustrates how worthless these children are considered: they're treated like pieces of trash. In one of the poem's most horrific scenes, the speaker describes a little girl who "was dug up by a dog." The dog, catching sight of the child's "head barely poking above the ground," thought the child "Was bone or wood, something to chew." The mention of "bone" casts a deathly shadow over the scene, symbolizing the fact that many children in this world are doomed from the moment of their birth.

The imagery in the poem's final section considers things from the point of view of the mothers who abandon these children, revealing that they, too, have no real control over their lives. The speaker describes how these women give birth in broken down "hut[s]" outside of town, where they "squeeze out life, / Watch body slither from body." There's nothing remotely romantic or exciting about such scenes; birth instead seems traumatic, isolating, and painful. The word "slither" is particularly disturbing; normally one would think of *snakes* slithering, not children. This suggests how disconnected these mothers are from their babies. Perhaps they had no say in getting pregnant and birth feels like another violation. Or, maybe, they are trying to protect themselves. Having no means of keeping these children alive, they dissociate from an event that, in more fortunate circumstances, would be celebrated.

They then "Feel for penis or no penis," and if there is no penis, they "Toss the baby to the heap of others." This imagery is cold and clinical. These women simply can't afford to love their female babies, the poem implies. They throw them out without acknowledging their humanity, then "Trudge home to lie down for their men again." The word "trudge" means to walk slowly and heavily, with great difficulty, so it's clear that these women aren't running off to their men out of love or pleasure. They are prisoners of their society's rules about gender, no more valuable than the babies they left to die.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-10:** "Found naked in the streets, / Covered in garbage, stuffed in bags, / Abandoned at their doorstep. / One of them was dug up by a dog, / Thinking the head barely poking above the ground / Was bone or wood, something to chew."
- **Lines 28-32:** "Where mothers go to squeeze out life, / Watch body slither out from body, / Feel for penis or no penis, / Toss the baby to the heap of others, / Trudge home to lie down for their men again"

DIACOPE

Repetition appears throughout "The Deliverer," and it has a few different important effects on the poem. At times, repetition simply creates emphasis. Take the diacope of lines 14-15:

> They are American so they know about ceremony
> And tradition, about doing things right.

The repetitive language highlights the Americans' sense of propriety. They want to make sure that they are doing things by the book.

Elsewhere, diacope creates a sense of simultaneous connection and division. In lines 19-20, for example, the repetition of the word "crying" conveys just how much crying is going on and it links the American mother with the speaker's mother:

> But they are crying.
> We couldn't stop crying, my mother said,

The repetition of the word "crying" at first suggests that these women from vastly different cultures are both deeply affected by the fact that this baby is being given a second chance at life. And yet, the repetition of "crying" also hints at the *divide* between them: the speaker's mother is *also* crying because of "the strangeness of her empty arms." She wants what is best for this child, but she also grieves having to relinquish the baby and, in doing so, cut her off from her homeland.

The diacope of "she's passed from woman to woman" works similarly. On one level, it connects these women and highlights the nurturing role that women often play in societies across the globe. At the same time, it highlights the reality that these women must grapple with very different circumstances; one must give up the baby, while the other is able to receive it.

Listen to the diacope of line 29:

> Watch body slither out from body,

Again, the repetition of "body" *connects* the woman to her child; the child comes directly from this woman. It evokes the astounding miracle that is birth, in which one human being releases another into the world. And yet, the language here also sounds strangely *dehumanizing*. It's not "mother" and "child" but the cold, anonymous "body" and "body." Neither being has any real power or autonomy in this world.

Finally, the diacope of line 30 conveys the cold, horrific unfairness of this society:

> Feel for penis or no penis,

The repetition of "penis" makes it clear how gender discrimination reduces this precious life. These innocent human beings are sorted according to something they have no control over. Note, too, that the poem does not say "penis or vagina": it's "penis" or its *absence*; female anatomy is not even worth mentioning.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-15:** "about ceremony / And tradition, about doing things right."
- **Lines 19-20:** "But they are crying. / We couldn't stop crying"
- **Lines 23-24:** "from woman / To woman"
- **Line 29:** "Watch body slither out from body,"
- **Line 30:** "Feel for penis or no penis,"

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton contributes to the poem's clipped rhythm and matter-of-fact tone, which in turn highlights how disturbingly normalized violence becomes in places where women have no economic or reproductive freedoms. In lines 5-7, for example, the speaker says that abandoned babies are

> Found naked in the streets,
> Covered in garbage, stuffed in bags,
> Abandoned at [the convent's] doorstep.

The lack of coordinating conjunction between clauses makes it feel as if the images are quickly piling up one on top of the other. It also makes this list feel inexhaustive; there are undoubtedly countless other horror stories that aren't being relayed in the short span of this conversation between the speaker's mother and the nuns.

There is also asyndeton in lines 14-15, as the speaker describes the girl's adoptive parents waiting at the airport:

> They are American so they know about ceremony
> And tradition, about doing things right.

The lack of an "and" between these two clauses creates some subtle ambiguity. "Know[ing] about ceremony / And tradition" isn't necessarily the same as "doing things right," but asyndeton

blurs the relationship between the two, perhaps implying that to the Americans, "doing things right" is simply a matter of observing certain formalities or following a prescribed set of rules.

In lines 22-24, asyndeton creates speed; the speaker says the child "grows up on video tapes, / Sees how she's passed from woman / To woman." The lack of coordinating conjunction between "tapes" and "Sees" makes it all the more clear that the child is watching tapes from her own childhood, from the day at the airport when she was handed over from the speaker's mom to her adoptive family.

Finally, the last five lines of the poem also contain asyndeton. The lack of conjunctions makes the lines sound terse and clipped despite the horror being described. For example, here are lines 30-32:

> Feel for penis or no penis,
> Toss the baby to the heap of others,
>
> Trudge home to lie down for their men again.

This terseness contributes to the emotional devastation of the poem because it's clear that to these women, this terrible business of leaving their children to die is normal. They've never known anything different, and there is no real hope of this cycle being interrupted any time soon.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-7:** "Found naked in the streets, / Covered in garbage, stuffed in bags, / Abandoned at their doorstep."
- **Lines 9-10:** "Thinking the head barely poking above the ground / Was bone or wood, something to chew."
- **Lines 14-15:** "They are American so they know about ceremony / And tradition, about doing things right."
- **Lines 22-24:** "This girl grows up on video tapes, / Sees how she's passed from woman / To woman."
- **Lines 28-32:** "Where mothers go to squeeze out life, / Watch body slither out from body, / Feel for penis or no penis, / Toss the baby to the heap of others, / Trudge home to lie down for their men again."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration (and occasional consonance) emphasizes words and images throughout the poem. In lines 3-6, for example, the sharp alliteration of "came to collect" and "crippled" adds a certain tonal harshness as the speaker describes something terrible: children being abandoned. Similarly, thudding /d/ alliteration highlights the horrific image of a buried child being "dug up by a dog."

The alliteration in the poem's third and final section is some of the most striking. The breathy, huffing /h/ sounds of line 26, for instance, suggest frustration and effort as these women go off to give birth alone:

> How it happens in some desolate hut

The sibilant alliteration in the next stanza makes the disturbing imagery even more visceral:

> Where mothers go to squeeze out life,
> Watch body slither out from body,

The lines themselves seem to hiss, like a slithering snake. By emphasizing the words "squeeze" and "slither," alliteration makes these births feel less like the triumphant arrival of new life and more like a revolting task that must be dealt with and then forgotten. This echoes the fact that these children are probably not planned for nor desired, and that their mothers likely have little to no choice about what to do with them once they're born.

Finally, /t/ alliteration in the final lines of the poem ("Toss" and "Trudge") links the child's fate with the mother's own lack of agency. So long as the mother has no real control over her body and must "lie down for" her husband "again," more babies will be "tossed" away like trash.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "came," "collect"
- **Line 4:** "crippled"
- **Line 8:** "dug," "dog"
- **Line 17:** "hair," "hands"
- **Line 22:** "girl," "grows"
- **Line 26:** "How," "happens," "hut"
- **Line 28:** "squeeze"
- **Line 29:** "slither"
- **Line 31:** "Toss"
- **Line 32:** "Trudge"

JUXTAPOSITION

The poem juxtaposes two extremes of motherhood in order to show how child abandonment and infanticide stem from severe poverty and misogyny. The poem begins in Kerala, India, where nuns take in children who have been abandoned for being "crippled or dark or girls." They find these children "naked in the streets, covered in garbage, stuffed in bags"—basically, treated like trash. The poem zooms in on one little girl whose mother tried to bury her.

The poem then switches to a very different setting: an airport in Milwaukee. While the baby's biological mother left her for dead, the baby's adoptive parents eagerly await the child's arrival. They stand together "at the gates," already "crying" in anticipation of getting to know their new daughter. The fact

that they "know about ceremony" and "doing things right" implies that they will treat this baby well; they won't abandon her the way her birth mother did.

The juxtaposition between these scenarios emphasizes that abandonment isn't as simple as a mother just not wanting her child. Instead, the poem shows that this girl's mother was a victim of poverty and her culture's extreme prejudice toward women. Indeed, the poem's final section contrasts her own introduction to motherhood with that of the mother in the airport:

- The American mother is overwhelmed with emotion, there with her partner, and prepared.
- The girl's biological mother, meanwhile, gives birth alone, in a "desolate hut." The experience sounds disturbing and violating rather than joyful: the baby "slither[s]" out, and the mother coldly checks to see whether it has a penis or not before tossing it onto a pile of other dead or dying baby girls and then trudging home to "lie down for [her man] again."
- Becoming a mother, this juxtaposition illustrates, is not a happy occasion when you don't have much of a choice about it.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10
- Lines 12-18
- Lines 25-32

VOCABULARY

Convent (Line 1) - A community of nuns.

Kerala (Line 1) - A coastal state in southwestern India.

Milwaukee (Line 12) - A city in Wisconsin.

Ceremony (Line 14) - Formalities performed at an important occasion.

Fetish (Line 17) - An obsessive interest in something.

Twilight corners (Line 24) - *Twilight* is the brief period of time between sunset and dark when the sun is no longer visible but its light is. As such, the word *twilight* is also used to mean something half-lit, obscure, ambiguous, or declining. In the context of the poem, it refers to the girl's knowledge of her origins: because she doesn't remember her infancy, she can't see any of it clearly, but because she has these "videos" (and perhaps some sort of record of what happened), she is able to imagine it.

Desolate (Line 26) - Abandoned, bleak, and/or in ruins. The girl imagines being born in a very poor, rundown area.

Trudge (Line 32) - Walk slowly and wearily. The word implies that the women are downtrodden and unexcited about returning home.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Deliverer" is a 32-line free verse poem broken up into three sections. The first section takes place at the "Lady of the Light Convent" in Kerala, a coastal state in India, where a baby girl is found buried in the dirt. The second section takes place at the "Milwaukee Airport" in Wisconsin, where this girl is adopted by American parents. The third section travels back in time to describe the horrific conditions surrounding the girl's birth, and abandonment, in India. The fact that the poem begins and ends in India suggests that while this one particular girl may have been saved, the broader cycle of misogyny and abandonment has not been broken.

METER

"The Deliverer" is written in free verse, so it doesn't use a set meter. The poem's language sounds real and raw rather than artfully crafted, which is fitting for a poem about a devastating subject.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "The Deliverer" doesn't use a rhyme scheme. The lack of rhyme keeps the poem sounding more conversational and direct, as though the speaker is simply telling this story to a friend.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is the daughter of the woman who "deliver[s]" an abandoned baby girl from India to her adoptive parents in America. Because the poem is based on the experiences of Doshi's own mother, the speaker can be interpreted as Doshi herself.

Despite narrating the poem in the present tense, the speaker isn't actually at the convent in Kerala or the airport in Milwaukee; her mother tells her about these events later on. The speaker also isn't present in the poem's devastating final scenes, which describe women going off to some "desolate hut" to give birth, abandoning their female babies, and then trudging back "home to lie down for their men again." Instead, she is imagining what the reality of birth looks like for very poor women in an intensely patriarchal society.

SETTING

"The Deliver" begins at the Our Lady of the Light Convent in

Kerala, a state in southwestern India. The specificity of this setting grounds the poem firmly in reality. This isn't an anonymous, exaggerated tale that's too horrible to be true, but rather a real story from a real place involving real people.

The nuns at this convent take in children who have been abandoned by their families for various reasons, including having dark skin, having a disability, or simply being female. The poem's imagery in its opening section paints a vivid picture of the way extreme poverty and misogyny can lead to the devaluation of human life: this is a place where unwanted babies—those whom society deems undesirable and a burden to their struggling families—are left in piles of garbage or buried in the dirt.

The second part of the poem takes place in a very different setting: an airport in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a state in the American Midwest. Here, a set of adoptive parents wait to meet the baby girl the speaker's mother has brought from the convent. The juxtaposition between these two places is intentionally jarring. One is a shiny airport with happy, excited parents; the other is a hellish place where babies are tossed out like trash. This contrast, the poem makes clear, is the result of vast socioeconomic divides, not essential differences in character. The American parents in the poem have money and support that the Indian mothers who abandon their children simply do not have. What's more, the poem hints that the girl's adoptive parents will never fully understand the world she came from; they "Don't know [...] how her mother tried to bury her."

The third part of the poem then returns to India, as the now older girl imagines the circumstances she was born into. She pictures women giving birth "in some desolate hut / Outside of village boundaries." This illustrates the immense poverty these women face while also hinting that they leave town with the express purpose of abandoning their baby girls (it is technically illegal, so they must do so away from onlookers). The disturbing descriptions of "squeez[ing] out life" and watching "body slither out from body" further convey that giving birth is not a happy, celebratory occasion for these women, who in all likelihood had little say in getting pregnant in the first place. The image of tossing a baby girl onto a "heap of others" is meant to be chilling. It emphasizes that abandonment is not an isolated issue nor the result of one terrible woman's terrible choice; rather, it is the result of a misogynistic society that doesn't offer women many choices at all.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Tishani Doshi is a poet, journalist, and dancer. Doshi was born in India but moved to the United States to study at Queen's College in North Carolina; she later studied writing at Johns Hopkins University before working in London and, eventually, returning to India. Her world travels are reflected in the global scope of her poetry, which often explores issues of immigration, economic hardship, alienation, and systemic violence.

"The Deliverer" was published in Doshi's debut poetry collection, *Countries of the Body*, in 2006. The book won the Forward Prize, and the poem later appeared in a 2016 anthology of Forward-winning works titled *Poems of the Decade*. As the title implies, *Countries of the Body* explores the relationship between memory and the body. Doshi has written that "The Deliverer" in particular asks whether there is a "knowledge in the body that allows" the girl to "know that she was abandoned, half buried in the ground, left for dead, will she be able to imagine her beginnings?"

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Deliverer" was inspired by a true story. Doshi says her mother "did take a baby to America" and that the heart of the poem is that

> The male child is still preferred over the girl child in India. Female foeticide and infanticide are still widely prevalent, so much so that it is illegal in India for a clinic or doctor to tell parents about the sex of their baby during the pregnancy. Many Indian women don't have access to birth control and therefore have little control over their reproductive rights, which takes us to the final image of the poem [...]

It is illegal for Indian women to abandon their babies, which is why so many of them resort to "bury[ing]" them or going far outside of town to give birth rather than leaving them somewhere they might be found.

India has made some strides toward reproductive rights for women in recent years; in 2022, the Supreme Court ruled that women of any marital status can receive abortions up until the 24th week of pregnancy (previously only married women or rape victims had this freedom). Still, with only 25% of Indian women participating in the workforce and with little access to education and land ownership, many women—especially in rural areas—have no way of exercising their right to abortion or any way of providing for children on their own.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Trash Bin Babies: India's Female Infanticide Crisis — Read about India's problems with female infanticide and one of many creative solutions that has recently helped save lives. (https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/05/trash-bin-babies-indias-female-infanticide-

crisis/257672/)

- The Poet's Life and Work — Learn more about Doshi in this biography from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/tishani-doshi)
- Tishani Doshi's Website — Links to books, reviews, and introductions to specific poems by Doshi herself. (https://tishanidoshi.weebly.com)
- Indian Women Poets — Check out some examples of Indian feminist poetry. (https://feminisminindia.com/2017/11/03/excerpts-indian-women-poets/)

HOW TO CITE

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