

Unveiling Trauma through Language: A Close Reading of Abraham Verghese's

The Covenant of Water

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Abstract

Trauma, a lasting psychological wound, is a powerful theme explored in literature. It reflects the harsh realities of human experience. Trauma studies, gaining prominence after major historical events, delve into the long-term effects of deeply disturbing experiences. This article "Unveiling Trauma through Language : A Close Reading of Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water*" examines how language is used to convey trauma in Abraham Verghese's novel *The Covenant of Water*, using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory as a framework. An exploration of Verghese's narrative techniques and writing style and how it reflects the deep-seated impact of trauma on his characters is studied in this article. It aims to elucidate how the novelist's use of language reveals the complexities of trauma, offering readers a window into the emotional and psychological landscape of the novel's characters. Through the deliberate choices of naming, characterisation, and symbolic elements, Verghese employs language to depict how trauma disrupts and fragments the self.

Key words : Trauma, Language,

Literature serves as a powerful reflection of the human experience, particularly exploring the theme of trauma. Trauma, the deep emotional and psychological scars left by distressing events, has been a central focus in literature throughout history. Scholars have studied how traumatic experiences disrupt the psyche and challenge the limits of language, often resulting in fragmented narratives and symbolic representations. From ancient epics to contemporary narratives, literature has long been a vehicle for

exploring trauma, not only portraying the immediate impact of such experiences but also delving into their enduring effects on individuals and communities. By the 1960s, the term began to encompass psychological damage caused by overwhelming events, reflecting an expanded understanding of trauma beyond mere physical injury. In the 1990s, scholars like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey H. Hartman furthered the field by exploring how trauma disrupts the psyche and challenges the limits of language. Cathy Caruth's seminal works, such as *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), laid the foundation for trauma theory in literature. This theory posits that traumatic experiences are often beyond the capacity of conventional language to fully encapsulate, leading to fragmented narratives and symbolic representations that attempt to convey the depth of such experiences.

Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water* offers a compelling exploration of trauma through its richly textured narrative. Published fourteen years after his acclaimed debut *Cutting for Stone* and selected by Oprah's Book Club, it is a sweeping saga that spans three generations of a South Indian family afflicted by a rare medical condition. The novel's central motif, "The Condition," symbolises the trauma experienced by the characters, serving as a lens through which the narrative examines themes of loss, grief, and resilience. Verghese, a physician and novelist, integrates his medical expertise with his storytelling to create a narrative that vividly portrays both the physical and psychological dimensions of trauma. His detailed depiction of illness, surgery, and recovery is intertwined with the emotional journeys of his characters, highlighting how trauma permeates their lives and shapes their legacies.

The novel is a sweeping, multi-generational epic set in India from 1900 to 1977. It explores themes of family, love, loss, and faith against the backdrop of a rapidly

changing India, referencing colonialism, independence, and social reforms. The story begins with a young girl who is forced into an arranged marriage with an older man. She is uprooted from her home and brought to her husband's family estate, Parambil, Kerala. There, she discovers a tragic family history of drownings that casts a shadow over their lives. The narrative unfolds through the perspectives of the young bride, Big Ammachi, and Digby Kilgore, a Scottish man who joins the Indian Medical Service. Their lives intersect in unexpected ways, shaping their destinies. Big Ammachi faces personal tragedies, including the loss of her stepson and the diagnosis of her daughter's developmental disabilities. Despite these hardships, she finds joy in her family.

Dr. Digby Kilgore, a surgeon seeking success in India, experiences personal setbacks and a tragic fire that forces him to abandon his career. He finds solace in farming and eventually becomes involved in the lives of the Parambil residents. Through his interactions with them, he discovers a new talent for drawing and helps a young boy perform a life-saving tracheotomy. As the story progresses, relationships between characters deepen and tragedies continue to unfold. A young couple, Philipose and Elsie, face the loss of their child and personal struggles. Their lives are further complicated by revelations about their family history and the mysterious "Condition" that plagues the Parambil estate. Ultimately, the novel explores themes of love, loss, resilience, and the enduring bonds of family.

Trauma, as a literary concept, often challenges the boundaries of language and representation. Contemporary literary trauma theory suggests that trauma creates a "speechless fright that disrupts identity, resulting in a fragmented self" (Balaev 149). In Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water*, the portrayal of trauma through language and narrative techniques provides a deep insight into the characters' struggles. The novel opens with two evocative epigraphs that frame its thematic exploration.

Rabindranath Tagore's quote, "Not hammer strokes, but dance of the water, sings the pebbles into perfection," (126) symbolises the transformative influence of water. This metaphor extends to the characters' experiences, suggesting that their lives are shaped by the gradual impact of their traumas and relationships. The "dance of the water" also reflects the act of reading itself, as readers engage with the characters' journeys and undergo their own emotional transformation. The second epigraph from the book of Genesis in Bible, "And a river went out of Eden to water the garden," (*Holy Bible*, Genesis 2.10) introduces water as a symbol of life, purification, and lost paradise. The characters' yearning for a lost Eden, their lost family members and their struggles with water reflect their deeper emotional and psychological conflicts. The act of reading about their experiences mirrors a cathartic process, offering readers a chance to reflect on their own emotional landscapes.

Abraham Verghese's novel *The Covenant of Water* employs a range of narrative techniques and stylistic strategies to convey the profound trauma experienced by its characters, particularly through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. The novel's portrayal of trauma is complex, nuanced, and deeply integrated into its characters' lives, reflecting the belated and often ineffable nature of traumatic experiences. One of the primary methods Verghese uses is temporal narration, which aligns with Caruth's concept of belatedness. The novel's non-linear structure mirrors the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. By employing flashbacks and flash-forwards, Verghese allows readers to experience the characters' trauma in a fragmented, non-sequential manner. This narrative technique underscores the way trauma disrupts the normal flow of time, creating a sense of ongoing disruption and intrusiveness in the characters' lives. For instance, the recurring deaths by drowning and the mysterious "Condition" that haunts the Parambil family are presented through disjointed memories and events that unfold

out of chronological order. This structure reflects the difficulty characters face in making sense of their trauma and emphasises the persistent and intrusive nature of their suffering.

Verghese employs rich imagery and figurative language to deepen the reader's emotional engagement with the characters' experiences. Through vivid descriptions and metaphors, he captures the essence of the characters' psychological states and the pervasive impact of trauma. Imagery such as "the water in the paddy field shimmers like beaten silver" (Verghese 10) and "the scent of a bygone era" (76) not only sets the scene but also imbues the narrative with a sensory richness that reflects the characters' internal worlds. These descriptions create a tangible sense of place and mood, allowing readers to viscerally experience the characters' fears, losses, and emotional turmoil. Similarly, figurative language is used to convey the characters' trauma. The simile "their wet cheeks glued together." (10) poignantly captures the bond between mother and daughter on the eve of separation, while the metaphor "dusting of mold on a tree trunk" (79) reflects the husband's perception of his illiteracy. These metaphors and similes provide insight into the characters' emotional and psychological states, making their trauma more accessible and relatable.

The use of internal monologue is another crucial technique in Verghese's narrative. Through the characters' inner thoughts and reflections, Verghese explores their emotional struggles in depth. For example, Big Ammachi's thoughts after JoJo's death reveal her profound grief and crisis of faith. Her internal monologue, including her repetitive and fragmented thoughts, illustrates her struggle to come to terms with her loss and the impact of trauma on her sense of self. The third-person omniscient viewpoint allows readers to access the inner workings of multiple characters, creating a sense of unity and interconnectedness across generations. This narrative style not only

deepens character development but also enhances the reader's understanding of the pervasive nature of trauma and its effects on different individuals.

Verghese's manipulation of tone highlights the emotional disjunction caused by trauma. The contrast between joyful memories and traumatic events reflects the characters' internal conflicts and the impact of trauma on their emotional states. For example, the juxtaposition of happy memories with descriptions of traumatic events underscores the emotional fragmentation and instability experienced by the characters. The shift in tone often mirrors the characters' psychological transitions, such as Big Ammachi's move from grief to determination in the face of her family's struggles with "the Condition." These tonal shifts create a dynamic and engaging reading experience, reflecting the ongoing influence of trauma on the characters' lives. Big Ammachi is filled with grief after the death of her son JoJo. She is also filled with a sense of fear towards her husband's family. This contrasts with her later determination to protect her family and understand "the Condition." "She will be the one henceforth to repair and preserve this genealogy." (81) The silence surrounding "the Condition" creates tension and misunderstanding. This is also contrasted by the moment of revelation when the husband shows the "Water Tree" to his wife, Big Ammachi. These contrasting tones keep the reader engaged throughout the novel.

Lea Wernick Fridman states that "silence bears the marks of a historical trauma that "resists representation." (34) This view has its bearings on Caruth's argument in the book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, where she notes that silence confides in the "story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and language." (4) Silence is a powerful tool

in Verghese's portrayal of trauma. The novel often leaves unspoken thoughts and feelings hanging in the air, reflecting the characters' difficulty in processing and articulating their traumatic experiences. This technique aligns with Caruth's idea of trauma as an ineffable and unspeakable wound. "Because, as was always his way, he expresses his love for her the only way he knows how: through his silence." (211) The husband remains silent, even regarding his love. This silence of the character is used by the author to convey the depths of trauma. For instance, Big Ammachi's reluctance to explicitly discuss JoJo's death and the family's history of water-related tragedies illustrates the profound emotional pain associated with these events. The use of euphemisms and indirect references highlights the difficulty of confronting and articulating trauma, while also emphasising the pervasive and lingering nature of the trauma. Verghese's background as a physician lends authenticity to the medical themes explored in the novel. His use of medical terminology and his depiction of medical practices are grounded in his own experiences, adding a layer of credibility to the narrative. This authenticity enriches the portrayal of trauma, particularly in the context of "the Condition" and its impact on the characters' lives.

The Covenant of Water masterfully employs a range of narrative techniques to convey the complexities of trauma. Through its non-linear structure, vivid imagery, internal monologue, tonal shifts, and use of silence, the novel reflects Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, highlighting the belated and often ineffable nature of traumatic experiences. Verghese's skillful integration of these techniques allows readers to deeply engage with the characters' emotional and psychological struggles, offering a profound exploration of trauma and its enduring effects.

Verghese's novel intricately weaves trauma into its narrative fabric through various aspects of language and symbolic methods. Verghese's use of vivid imagery,

metaphor, and silence aligns with Caruth's theory that trauma defies direct representation and instead manifests through indirect, figurative language and behavioural patterns. A notable technique is the deliberate omission of names for key characters. The nameless husband of Big Ammachi, for instance, serves as a universal archetype, allowing readers to project their experiences onto him. His lack of a name foreshadows his emptiness and numbness, reflecting his fragmented identity—a common symptom of trauma. The unnamed husband of Big Ammachi, embody the fragmentation of identity caused by trauma. This anonymity allows readers to project their own experiences onto him. The lack of a name not only foreshadows his inner void but also serves as a powerful literary device to explore how trauma impacts his psychological state. His aversion to water and stoic nature illustrates Caruth's concept of trauma as a "speechless fright" that disrupts one's self-narrative and emotional expression. Verghese's symbolic language effectively communicates the unspoken anguish of characters, reinforcing how trauma shapes language and identity. By withholding a name, the author manipulates language to focus on the character's trauma, creating a sense of distance and mystery. This technique emphasises the character's struggle to understand and integrate his traumatic experiences, as readers gain no direct insight into his perspective. The character appears only in relation to his wife and other figures, reinforcing his fragmented identity and illustrating the profound effects of his trauma.

The novel depicts the husband's preference for solitude and his stoic demeanour as manifestations of his trauma as it cannot be conveyed through language. He positions himself outside the domestic sphere, underscoring his sense of alienation. "Trauma theory often divides itself into two basic trends: the focus on trauma as the "shattering" of a previously whole self and the focus on the survival function of trauma as allowing

one to get through an overwhelming experience by numbing oneself to it.” survivors (Caruth 131) This solitude aligns with trauma theory, which identifies withdrawal as a coping mechanism for. The husband’s aversion to water and his stoic nature further highlights his struggle with generational trauma. His fear of water, coupled with his retreat into isolation, exemplifies the survival function of trauma—numbing oneself to overwhelming experiences. The elements of numbness, stoicism, and solitude are all methods through which the novelist convey unrepresentable trauma.

In the novel, trauma is intricately depicted through various symbols and subtle narrative techniques, particularly highlighting Sigmund Freud’s concept of “repetition compulsion,” where traumatic events overwhelm the mind’s defences, leading individuals to relive the trauma in a bid to process it, often trapping them in a cycle of unresolved pain. The "plavu tree" becomes a central symbol in this exploration. It represents the internal struggles of the characters, particularly Philipose, who has a subconscious connection between the tree and his aversion to water. The tree offers a semblance of control and security over water, which is linked to Philipose’s fear and the family’s trauma, even if indirectly. The tree’s presence and its eventual disappearance underscore the family’s inability to confront and integrate their traumatic experiences, revealing how trauma can persist in subtle forms.

The novel also delves into how characters avoid confronting their trauma directly. For example, Philipose’s aversion to water is subtly shown through his behaviours and the unusual location of their home away from water sources. Big Ammachi’s observations about her husband’s fear of rain and his avoidance of water further hint at deep-seated trauma. Her own gradual detachment from water after marriage reflects her integration into the Parambil family's trauma, aligning with Cathy Caruth’s idea that extreme trauma can alter one’s sense of self, creating a "traumatised

self." (137) The "plavu tree" in the novel emerges as a complex symbol of trauma and compulsion. It represents the Parambil family's struggle with their fear of water and their attempt to exert control over it. The tree's presence offers a sense of security against the trauma associated with water. Its eventual disappearance symbolises the loss of this subconscious shield and intensifies the family's vulnerability. This symbolism reflects the repetitive compulsion described by Freud, where trauma leads individuals to relive and struggle with their past experiences (Caruth 31).

The novel also explores how trauma is passed down through generations. The character of Big Ammachi undergoes a shift in identity upon marrying into the Parambil family. The delay in revealing her name, Mariamma, until the birth of Elsie's daughter signifies her gradual integration into the family's trauma. This aligns with Caruth's assertion that extreme trauma can create a "second self," radically altering an individual's sense of identity (137). The author, Abraham Verghese, uses these symbols and narrative choices to reveal trauma indirectly. Characters' compulsions and anxieties about water, as well as the delayed revelation of Big Ammachi's original name, serve to illustrate how trauma shapes and manifests in their lives. Through these literary techniques, Verghese effectively communicates the characters' unspoken pain, aligning with theoretical insights into trauma and its impact on identity.

Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water* masterfully uses language to convey the complexities of trauma. Through the strategic use of naming, symbolic elements like the "plavu tree," and the depiction of solitude and stoicism, Verghese illustrates the profound impact of trauma on identity. The novel's portrayal of trauma, aligned with contemporary trauma theory, reveals how language and narrative techniques can effectively communicate the unspoken pain of its characters. Verghese's work demonstrates the power of literature to explore and articulate the intricate

dynamics of trauma and identity. The article highlights several avenues for further research, underscoring the novel's potential for continued scholarly exploration. An ecocritical lens could examine the impact of Kerala's changing landscape on the characters, including themes of deforestation, modernisation, and the complex relationship with water. The novel's historical context in postcolonial India presents opportunities to explore gender and power dynamics, including the evolution of women's roles and societal norms. A postcolonial perspective could also investigate cultural identity, colonial legacies, and indigenous healing methods.

Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water* offers a profound exploration of trauma through its innovative use of language and symbolism. The novel's depiction of trauma, aligned with Cathy Caruth's theoretical insights, reveals the complex interplay between language, identity, and emotional experience. The potential for future research extends across diverse fields, from ecocriticism to postcolonial studies, reflecting the novel's rich thematic depth and its capacity to inspire ongoing scholarly inquiry. Verghese's narrative not only captures the haunting presence of trauma but also opens new avenues for understanding the intricate dynamics of identity and human experience.

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