

What the Water Carries: A Hydrofeminist Reading of Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water*

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Abstract

This paper explores the resonances between contemporary hydrofeminist theory and Abraham Verghese's novel, The Covenant of Water (2023) and examines how both articulate human existence as fundamentally aqueous and interconnected. This literary analysis reveals how Verghese's narrative embodies hydrofeminist principles through its treatment of drowning, the hereditary 'The Condition.' Applying Astrida Neimanis's concept of "bodies of water" and the notion of "deictics falter," along with Stacy Alaimo's theory of transcorporeality and the Kerala backwaters, this paper argues that the novel's genealogical construct is a liquid cartography, where family lineage flows like water through generations, disrupting fixed boundaries between self and other, past and present, and human and aquatic environments. The exploration reveals several interconnected observations in relation to the connection between hydrofeminist theory and Verghese's novel. By reading The Covenant of Water through hydrofeminist frameworks, this paper proves how literary fiction can materialize theoretical concepts of bodily porosity, environmental entanglement, and the ethics of aqueous interconnection.

Keywords: Environmental Humanities, Hydrofeminism, Transcorporeality, Bodies of Water, Deictics Falter

Introduction

The Kerala backwaters do not proclaim themselves. They seep. They penetrate through the soil before the river arrives, through the air before the monsoon breaks, and through the walls of houses that have learned, over generations, to assent a degree of wetness as a permanent condition of habitation. The Kerala backwaters have played a major role in the socio-cultural and economic development of the region. The time period from 1900 to the 1950s in Kerala marks a growth in spice trade, land reforms, decline of caste hierarchy, and introduction of Western biomedicine alongside indigenous remedies. Kerala's backwaters made trade and commerce possible, while the coastline served as a catalyst for cultural and religious exchanges. Vasco da Gama's historic voyage from Portugal to initiate a sea route to India for spice trade was successfully established. Although it would be anachronistic to associate Vasco da Gama's arrival in 1498 through Kipling's later notion of the "White Man's Burden" (Kipling), his intention of religious conversion formed an important aspect of European colonial expansion.

But even before fourteen hundred years of his arrival, even before Saint Peter arrived in Rome, Saint Thomas had traveled by sea and landed on the Malabar Coast in 52 AD. The Saint Thomas Christians are portrayed in the novel through the cultural descriptions, religious practices, and references to the famous Parumala Church, where Saint Mar Gregorious is entombed. As a religious minority in Kerala, with its members forming part of the global diaspora, this ethno-religious community in Kerala retains a deep historical and emotional connection with land, water, and inherited property.

To live within the Kerala landscape is to realize that the self is not a sealed and autonomous entity that Western thought has often imagined it to be. Here, the skin is less a wall than a shoreline, a place of continuous exchange between what the body holds and what the world presses into it. As K. R. S. Iyengar observes in “Unfinished Continent,” “Every atom of action, thought, life-force— / somehow comprehends all, all” (35). This vision of radical interconnectedness resonates with the hydrofeminist understanding of the body as porous and relational rather than autonomous and self-contained. Water unsettles the boundary between inside and outside. The communities living beside Kerala’s tidal inlets and monsoon-fed rivers have always known, in their lives, their farming practices, and their seasonal grief, that what is more difficult to articulate is that human existence is fundamentally aqueous, and to exist as a body in this world is to persist in a permanent, intimate, and ultimately irreversible conversation with the water that constitutes it. In this way, the distinction between the human and the natural world begins to dissolve.

Theoretical Framework

The study undertakes a close textual analysis of Abraham Verghese’s *The Covenant of Water* within the discourse of Blue Humanities that deals with water’s significance in our culture, environment, and literature. Abraham Verghese is an Ethiopian-American physician, born to Malayali Malankara Christian parents from Kerala, India. He has written articles for medical journals and four books based on his life experiences and medical expertise. Verghese regards storytelling and medicine as inseparable, so a patient’s narrative is itself clinical evidence, not separate from diagnosis. *The Covenant of Water* is inspired by his mother’s life, a journey through the history, memories, and struggles of a Malayali family. Within this framework, hydrofeminism functions as the primary analytical lens, which looks at how water is connected to our bodies and the world around us. A key concept is “bodies of water,” coined by Astrida Neimanis, which helps us see how water shapes us and our relationships. Another important concept is transcorporeality, from Stacy Alaimo, which elaborates on how our bodies and the environment are braided. While other scholars like Steve Mentz, Melody Jue, Nancy Tuana, Serenella Lovino, and Serpil Oppermann have contributed to our understanding of blue humanities and material ecocriticism, our interpretation directs attention to Neimanis’s hydrofeminist perspective. The approach helps to explore the novel’s central concept of fluidity, thus gaining a deeper insight about the complex relationships between water, culture, and human bodies. Since the novel was published in 2023, there are limited scholarly engagements. This paper, therefore, brings hydrofeminist theory into dialogue with the lived aquatic landscapes of Kerala to examine the portrayal of water as a genealogical record and medical archive.

Abraham Verghese’s most influential book, *The Covenant of Water*, employs the fluid terrain of Kerala and the hereditary affliction known as ‘The Condition’ to challenge the Western metaphysical myth of the autonomous individual. Through the theoretical lenses of hydrofeminism and trans-corporeality, the novel reconceptualizes the human body as aquatic. By framing family lineage as connected by water rather than an impenetrable barrier, Verghese

suggests that memory, trauma, and identity are not contained within the self but are part of a continuous exchange with the environment and the past. The novel, through the story of three generations in a Kerala Christian family marked by a recurring familial condition, is organized around precisely this kind of negotiation. Its central affliction, known within the family as ‘The Condition,’ is an inherited pull toward water that claims one member in each generation. It is neither a curse in the supernatural sense nor a purely clinical disease. It is a family’s embodied memory of the landscape it has lived beside for over a century, surfacing over time. The novel suggests that the boundary between the human body and its environment is not a wall but a watershed, which is permeable, porous, and charged on both sides. The family remembers ‘The Condition’ long before medicine explains it. Through stories, observations, drownings, and the Water Tree, knowledge of the disorder is preserved across generations. When Mariamma finally identifies the neurological basis of the condition, scientific diagnosis does not replace familial memory; rather, it confirms and translates it into medical language. The body therefore functions as a living archive in which hereditary information is stored and transmitted across time.

Steve Mentz, in his seminal work, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*, captures the pervasive nature of the hydrocommons, noting that “the felt opposition between wet immersion and dry terrestrial living operates in tension with a broader sense in which water touches everything. It flows through our body’s cells, moistens our food and flesh, permeates the earth’s crust, and even, scientists have determined, sits frozen on interstellar comets” (xiv). As Lovina and Oppermann note in their work *Material Ecocriticism*, “Blue Humanities promotes discussions about water ecosystems and engages with immediate water issues through material ecocritical perspectives” (45).

Astrida Neimanis explains that her exploration of embodiment originates in the material concept of human beings as essentially aqueous. Because we are constantly absorbing water and returning it to the world through various biological functions, we are fundamentally inseparable from all other worldly entities—including nature, infrastructure, and our ancestors—across different time periods (3). The key theory texts for the study include particularly Astrida Neimanis’s 2017 published book, *Bodies of Water, Thinking with Water: An Aqueous Imaginary and an Epistemology of Unknownability*, and her 2012 essay titled “Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water,” alongside Stacy Alaimo’s widely recognized book published in 2010, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Nancy Tuana’s 2008 essay, ‘Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina,’ provided the foundational idea of ‘viscous porosity,’ which identifies bodies as fluid and dynamic sources rather than dormant. Melody Jue, in her 2020 published book *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater*, connects the aqueous themes of posthumanism to the physical experience of the deep, mentioning that “the transcorporeal understanding draws on feminist theories of posthumanism by Stacy Alaimo and Astrida Neimanis that consider bodies not as isolated containers but as porous to distributed material flows that connect to global elements” (19). She further notes that Alaimo’s concept of transcorporeality highlights the idea that human beings are “perpetually interconnected” (19) to the material flows and environmental forces that surround them.

Narrative Synopsis

The novel in detail recounts three generations of the Parambil family in Travancore, South India. It establishes a storytelling structure where multiple plot lines are concerned with the intergenerational transmission of trauma, social sorting, and an inscrutable recurring torment termed ‘The Condition.’ This is medically understood in the text as a variant of neurofibromatosis type 2 (NF2), and the manifesting symptoms are deafness, dizziness, and a severe, often

fatal, aversion to water. The matriarch, Big Ammachi, enters the family as a twelve-year-old bride who dedicates her life to withstanding 'The Condition's' effects, struggling with immense personal grief, including the drowning of her son, JoJo. Mariamma, driven by her grandmother's resolve, becomes a neurosurgeon and diagnoses bilateral acoustic neuromas in her father, recasting the family's curse as science. The novel's titular covenants that shaped Mariamma's life unveil the intricate web of personal secrets and protective pacts.

Hydrofeminist Analysis of Dissolution of Borders

Astrida Neimanis writes, "Blood, bile, intracellular fluid; a small ocean swallowed, a wild wetland in our gut; rivulets forsaken making their way from our insides to out, from watery womb to watery world: we are bodies of water" (1). She says that water is the element that ties human beings into the world around them, where they and the water bodies are united. This nature-centric approach can be viewed in Verghese's novel as the lines "It is a child's fantasy world of rivulets and canals, a latticework of lakes and lagoons, a maze of backwaters and bottle-green lotus ponds, and a vast circulatory system because, as her father used to say, all water is connected" (Verghese 12) show that humans are not autonomous but rather connected to a larger flowing system. "She aches for him, a man who won't travel by water, who perhaps has never heard the sound of water parting before the prow, never felt the exhilaration of being carried by the current or the spray as the boatman's pole clears the water" (Verghese 51) depicts the contrast between the couples, where Big Ammachi is seen as a watery body, porous, and expansive, while the husband is marked as a terrestrial body devoid of water and stable. The concept of all water being connected has an alternate sensation where Big Ammachi realizes that her world is limitless and he stands at his limits. The traits of 'The Condition' can also be viewed here, as the husband finds aversion towards water, taking long walks instead of a boat ride to reach any destinations.

The novel throws light on this idea, "all water is connected," repeatedly throughout the novel, which describes the environment as a biological extension of the human body. The concept is the map of the world, where porosity is the membrane that allows that world to flow through the human subject, which ultimately deconstructs the idea of absoluteness. Nancy Tuana defines the interconnected nature of existence through her conceptual metaphor of 'viscous porosity,' explaining how the boundaries of the persona are constantly negotiated where the boundaries between our flesh and the flesh of the world we are of and in is porous (198).

Astrida Neimanis, in the work *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, argues to recognize humans as watery and interconnected bodies, which eventually challenges patriarchal, colonial, and anthropocentric traditions. Neimanis contends that watery embodiment destabilizes the Western self, recasting us as oceanic eddies rather than fixed entities. Water moves through and between bodies, before and beyond them, dissolving boundaries into relations of debt and complicity (85). The emergence of hydrofeminism remains a hurdle to Western metaphysical tradition, which views bodies as isolated and self-contained. Neimanis argues water is an entity that retains anthropomorphic secrets that would be easily forgotten. It also says that our immediate and isolated pasts will return in dribbles and floods (Verghese 87), which assists the record of the water tree as an archive of distant memory and confounding drownings of the family.

The Water Tree as a Genealogical and Medical Archive

The ten-generation water tree is not just a list of names but stands as a living memory, which shows the crossing of genetic constitution and observable characteristics of 'The Condition,' crafting a valuable store of long-forgotten medical history. The water tree is demonstrated in

the novel as “[. . .] an outsized map or chart made up of papers glued on their long sides, but the rice-paste glue, so delicious to silverfish, is largely eaten away. He spreads it out over both their laps. The writing is faded” (Verghese 74). There are leaves and branches attached to the water tree with information from the past. The leaves stock names, dates, and notes of ancestors from the past seven generations. Big Ammachi recollects her father explaining that “Matthew gives us the genealogy of Jesus beginning with Abraham. Fourteen generations to David, then fourteen from David to the Babylonian Captivity and another fourteen from the exile to the birth of Jesus” (Verghese 74).

Big Ammachi realizes that the document is a catalog of the malady, which also documents slave trades, murders, and an apostate priest. This secret document takes Big Ammachi to “unfamiliar backwaters” (Verghese 75), where the history is analyzed through a hydrological perspective. The asymmetrical paper also has a note, “Boys suffer more often than girls. Watch for exuberant children, fearless except for water. By the time they are taken to the river, all you mothers will know” (Verghese 75). The drowning of JoJo acts as an eye-opening experience that brought Big Ammachi to ‘The Condition’ and the old secret medical archive. By bringing this document to an Indigenous lens, it helps the future to communicate with the past. The water tree shows a cross with branches over water, which stands as a record for the drownings in the lake, stream, agricultural pit, and Pamba River. To record JoJo’s death, Big Ammachi draws three wavy lines representing water and places above them a cross “reminiscent of the Saint Thomas Cross” (Verghese 78). The image functions as more than a genealogical marker of drowning. According to Pathikulangara, the distinctive flowering tips of the Saint Thomas Cross symbolize new life and resurrection, with the buds signifying the restoration of life through Christ’s resurrection (264). Read in this context, the Water Tree becomes both an aqueous archive and a sacred genealogy. While the wavy lines preserve the family’s history of drowning, the branching cross simultaneously gestures toward continuity, renewal, and survival. The symbol therefore transforms familial memory into a visual theology in which death and regeneration coexist.

Ancestral history flows like water, blurring past, present, and inherited memory. “Water connects the human scale to other scales of life, both unfathomable and imperceptible. We are all bodies of water in the constitutional, the genealogical, and the geographical sense” (Neimanis 87). The ‘Water Tree’ is composed as a liquid cartography, visualizing a genealogy where span and domain are not consecutive but cyclical, echoing Neimanis’s observation of everlasting interconnectedness. The family’s history is never a closed book but needs constant analysis of the aqueous flow of inheritance and trauma that overflows across generations. Baby Ninan, son of Philipose and Elsie, also developed ‘The condition,’ which is the tragic hereditary legacy of his grandfather and father. Big Ammachi realizes this after observing his physiological reaction to water poured over his head. The water disorients him, which also causes his eyes to bob and hammer sideways repeatedly. (Verghese 386). This aqueous fate of men in the family was then demonstrated with the help of the water tree.

“Deictics Falter”: Dissolving self and other

Astrida Neimanis brings up the concept of “Deictics Falter” (85) in “Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water,” alluding to the collapse or instability of words such as “here/there,” “this/that,” and “I/you.” The recurring motif of drowning functions as the ultimate landmark in this cartography, representing the “viscous porosity” (91) where the human body fails to preserve its boundaries against the devastating agency of the aquatic milieu. In a way, it details how humans are bodies that act as a threshold of past and present, which can even lead to loss of boundaries. “She stands there, feeling the soil between her toes as Elsie must have. She stares at the rippling brown surface of the river, whose every mood she knows, from

a lifetime of giving herself to its embrace” (Verghese 462) depicts the poignant aftermath of Elsie’s disappearance, as Big Ammachi visits the exact spot by the river where Elsie’s clothes were found by Shamuël, the helper. Big Ammachi is not just observing the site, but she is physically inhabiting the space Elsie occupied moments before her presumed death. This scene functions as a bridge that blurs the fixed boundaries between self and other, where women in the Parambil family across generations share an aqueous intimacy unlike the men who view water as a deadly medium. Through the lens of “Deictics Falter,” we can read through the lines as the living mother-in-law and the missing daughter-in-law share sensory experiences of soil and watercourse. Another instance is the naming of the newborn Mariamma that draws upon the Syrian Christian practice of transmitting ancestral names across generations. Yet Verghese transforms this cultural custom into a moment where the past, the present, and the future converge. When Big Ammachi hears “Mariamma” “a name... that hasn’t been uttered since she came here as a twelve-year-old bride...” (Verghese 458-9), the present moment becomes one with her own remembered past. The name simultaneously belongs to the newborn and to the grandmother, creating a genealogical continuity that transcends individual identity. In hydrofeminist terms, identity appears less as a bounded self than as a flow of memory and inheritance moving across generations. Towards the end of the novel, after the revealing of secret parentage, Mariamma connects with her mother, Elsie. “Without thinking, without having to think, Mariamma feels herself drawn forward. She puts both her palms on the glass pane, pressing and overlapping her mother’s hands, so that at that moment, all is one, and nothing separates their two worlds” (715). The deictic faltering moment of erasing the lines between mother/daughter or healthy/sick bodies is dissolved into the concept of a shared biological and genealogical archive.

Transcorporeality and Narrative Closure

Stacy Alaimo’s concept of transcorporeality, described in her book *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and Material Self*, posits that the substance of the body is itself always already part of the environment (20). “Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (Alaimo 2). This intersection of ideas incorporated within these theory texts justifies the factor of fluidity and porosity of genealogy in the novel. There is no clear separation of time in the novel as everyone travels through the same water and returns back to this unity. This mutual, reciprocal binding of human to water, of water to human, is precisely the relational ontology that hydrofeminism articulates. “She stands at this junction of land and water, her heart racing, breathless, and yet only now can she breathe. On the water’s green, rippled surface, she sees her undulating, fragmented reflection” (Verghese 705) explores bodily porosity with Alaimo’s concept where humans are not separate from the environment. And the shattered reflection of Mariamma in the water comes to the argument that it is not a fixed or sovereign entity but shifts with the liquid medium.

“It is indifferent, this water that links all canals, water that is in the river ahead and in the backwaters and the seas and oceans—one body of water” (705). Mariamma discovers Elsie survived and Digby is her father; water neutrally binds these hidden, protective truths. In the closing scene, Mariamma stands in water that has bound her family across generations, where past, present, and future collapse into one continuous moment. This is, for Verghese, “the covenant of water”; he understands that everyone is linked through their actions and omissions so that no one truly stands alone. Listening to the river’s ceaseless murmur, Mariamma recognizes her individual life as a shared illusion and accepts that all she can do is go on

affect us all, since the planetary hydrocommons flows through everybody (64). Mariamma understands that her individual life is maya, which is a shared illusion, undivided and integrated. This fundamental clarity relates to Neimanis's concept of connection and thereby evokes a sense of intimacy despite geographical hindrances.

Conclusion

This study has traced three interlocking functions that water performs across *The Covenant of Water*. First, the water functions as an archive where the water tree preserves records of drownings and intergenerational traumas and holds an official document encoding family history in the fluid environment. Second, it serves as a genealogical medium that traces 'The Condition' not just as a metaphor, but as inheritance. Third, it becomes a form of medical memory by understanding 'The Condition' as a clinical discovery rather than a curse.

The Covenant of Water suggests that bodies, histories, cultures, and environments remain inseparable within the networks of aquatic relations. The human body is never simply a biological unit but a site where ancestral memory, environmental force, and medical history converge and flow through one another. This understanding challenges the disciplinary habit of treating bodies, ecosystems, and histories as separate objects of study and asks instead that they be read as co-constitutive, each one legible only through its relationship to the others. Water allows reading characters, events, and plot as a single material entity connected to a wider spectrum. The liquid cartography discussed in the novel is unique to Kerala's backwaters or is part of a global pattern in literature shaped by monsoon, water bodies, and the deep.

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