IJRAR.ORG E-ISSN: 2348-1269, P-ISSN: 2349-5138

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND ANALYTICAL REVIEWS (IJRAR) | IJRAR.ORG

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Streams that Echoed from Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water* through a Hydro-critical Perspective

"All water is connected"

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***Abstract*:** The proposed study aims to investigate Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water* using an intertextual analysis, through a hydro-critical lens drawing upon the theoretical framework established by Laura Winkiel and Astrida Neimanis. The novel explores the engagement with hydrological consciousness and the ways that literature can influence our understanding of the natural world through usage of water as a medium. Views humans as one with nature, arguing that water is a metaphor from a "fluid" feminist prospect. Use of imagery and symbolism of water bodies in local environment, needs more critical focus hence, Verghese views a significant shift, how streams of river become an active agent within narrative instead of just being a symbolic or picturesque backdrop. The narrative aligns with the idea of the "dance of the water" shaping human lives through both soothing and destructive forces in a postcolonial setting.

Using a hydro-critical lens to examine the impact of Kerala's changing landscape on the characters, including themes of deforestation, modernization, trade and the relationship with water. Water is often a bridge to, or container of culture exchange and trading, in coastal literature. This study employs a qualitative research methodology, using textual analysis to examine Verghese's depiction of adaptability and fluidity, its understanding of individual identity through flow of life.

Keywords: **Hydro-criticism, Hydro-feminism, Coastal Literature, Identity, Genealogy.**

Introduction:

In *Hydrohumanities: Water Discourse and Environmental Futures* (2021), she encouraged anthropogenic climate change crisis, water sustainability, drought, flood, and other extreme water-related events that is threatening the very survival of human beings in this planet. Trying to bridge ocean-centered scholarship, research focused on rivers, works around three different themes: the agency of water, fluid identities and cultural currencies, in it. *In Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (2017), Astrida Neimanis claims, "We are all bodies of water" (Neimanis, 85). Her concept of hydro-feminism, emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman bodies through water challenging individualistic understandings of identity by highlighting how water flows through and connects all beings, entangling with each other and the planet.

The novel opens with two evocative epigraphs of Rabindranath Tagore, *"Not hammer strokes, but dance of the water, sings the pebbles into perfection,"* - symbolizing the transformative influence of water, extending to the characters' experiences, suggesting that their lives are shaped by the gradual impact of water as a silent witness to all. The "dance of the water" reflects the characters' journeys and their undergoing 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) - introducing water as a symbol of life, purification, and lost paradise where the characters' yearning for their lost family members, their oneness with water reflect their deeper emotional and psychological aspects. The story is set in the backwaters of Kerala where water is all around. The streams, rivers (like the Pamba River, Marine drive, Malabar coast, Arabian sea), and backwaters are a constant eye witness to medical progress evolving around them. The title suggests a bond both beautiful and inescapable deep connection to water, which acts as a fate, both destructive (the curse), and life (livelihood of Parambil). The story is set in the backwaters of Kerala where water is all around. The streams, rivers (like the Pamba River, Marine drive, Malabar coast, Arabian sea), and backwaters of Kerala are portrayed as a dangerous character defining meaning of life and reason for deaths of the locals, which highlights the unpredictability of a world driven by ecological forces. Spanning from 1900 to 1977 on the Malabar Coast of Kerala, India, the narrative follows three generations in a land surrounded by water, unravelling the enigmatic legacy of water that intertwines through the Tambaram lineage.

Verghese's sentences flow like the streams of river in Kerala, sometimes meandering, sometimes rushing in a rhythmic way using recurring motifs of water and vivid descriptions that bring the setting and character to life. Water is a recurring motif, symbolising life and loss around water as an eye witness to "the condition" and being a silent participated to the Tambaram family, to medical progress evolving around them. In this novel, water serves as both a literal setting of floods, channels, dams and drowning, and metaphorically "covenant" linking characters across and beyond generations. Symbolising purity and cleansing nature of water juxtaposing the superstitious belief and restrictions on getting involved with water. The analysis traces the shift in Mariama's response from superstition to rigorous intellectual scientific journey towards medical discovery demystifying inherited disaster.

Research Questions:

- How does international trading through water during colonial period benefited both the countries?
- What was the myth related to water curse in Tambaram family?
- Could water pave the way of life for people in Kerala?
- In what ways does industrial progress become a reason for depletion of water?
- When does the role of water establish meaning in one's life?

Research Objectives:

- To observe the trading benefits of both India and Foreign countries through waterways.
- To analyse the myth related to water curse prevailing in Tambaram family.
- To ponder on the life of people in Kerala surrounded by water.
- To identify the depletion of water due to industrial progression in coastal India.
- To summarize water's role in every aspect of life of people in Kerala.

Potent of water:

Kerala being at the southern tip of India on the West Coast significantly, had a long history of a spice trade back and forth between Arabia and this area of India where spices were grown. Sailors from middle east caught the south westerlies in lateen sails to land on the "spice coast" to buy pepper, clove, cinnamon. When spices reached the prices of jewels in Europe, the Arabs sailors who brought them from India kept their sources a secret for centuries. The ship coming from Glasgow rounds the southern tip of India up the Coromandel coast and witnessed phosphorus plankton fluorescent green and blue view in the sea. Showing the richness of oceans before its depletion in the later part of the story. During colonial period, giant bars of ice were transported by American ships to Marine Beach and stored- to provide Britishers relief from the scorching heat. Stories of discovery of oil in Gulf in fifties, where many men went to trade through river roots in their boats illegally. And when gotten caught, they'd be thrown offshore and had to swim to the beach for saving their lives.

Curse of water:

Big Ammachi's husband didn't like travelling by boat. According to her, rain never held anyone back in her father's house but confined her husband in a way that baffled her. Raindrops felt like stones to him. She was astonished by his meanness towards water, strange way of bathing, and the drowning curse mentioned in their water tree. She aches for her husband who will never travel through water hell never know the sensation of driving headfirst into the river, the roar of entry followed by deep silence. He stood at the limits of his. Compulsions and anxieties, created a constant sense of dread, legacy of fear, anxieties and vulnerability around water for every generation. Big Ammachi loved Jojo like her son. She bathed and feed him scrupulously, even though Jojo threw tantrums while bathing. This is because the Tambaram's family has a feud with water. Her husband, Big Appachen, a fearless man of few words who hated getting wet, Jojo his son too had an irrational dislike of water who drowns in a ditch in their village. His death by drowning reminded the family about The Water Tree. He revealed a long-held family secret with the names of family of other members with water related deaths. Confronted their histories and channelized their fears toward their future. This affliction, causing at least one member die inexplicably in water in every generation of the family becomes a powerful allegory for the long-term generational and inescapable nature of genealogy. It suggests that Tambaram family were victims of their surrounding ecosystem in Parambil water. The condition that plagues the family was a genetic disorder, but its connection to water live-giving and deadly is a literary efficacy.

Big Ammachi witnesses her family expand and shrink through births and tragic. Her son, Philipose's fascination with water persistently asking to learn swimming despite his mother's fears. Eagerly embraced swimming lessons from his friend Joppan. Progress eludes him once Joppen leaves, Ammachi shares the family's dark secret of 'water curse" and makes Philipose vow to avoid it. Narrative crescents when one day, on his way to school, he encountered with a boatman when the Pulath bridge was washed out in storm whose child was sick. With the boatman pleading him to save the child, he was helpless because of the promise he made to his mother, the river is in flood and his boat is ramshackled but instinctively took the child from the boatman, jumped into the boat, and pulled the boatman along, instructed him to steer. Driven by an innate courage he drives the obstruction and sets out to reach a hospital overcoming the flood water in saving boatman's child, hints at his potential to break the family's curse. The victory of cheating death by just touching the flood water and saving the boatman's child shows how battling through one's fear can erase the fear of family curse. His brave act symbolizes hope for liberation both personal and national amidst a world dominating by postcolonial challenges. As fate would have it, his train met with an accident, stranding him to a desolate area. Where he heard a child drowning in a nearby pond, unable to hold back, Philipose jumped into the water to rescue the child. Tragically, he got stuck in the mud and lost his life.

Later in the story when Mariama fulfils her grandmother, Big Ammachi's plea she becomes a doctor and discovers the condition for which male members of her family were dying since more than ten generations was Vestibular Schwannomatosis, which could be cured through risky neurosurgery. After autopsy, the tumor found in both the ear indicated that this condition was genetic.

Way of water:

Banks of lagoon, skims the water, out from canals, onto the carpet of lotus and lilies, flowers opened like well-wishers to the new bride, Big Ammachi. Land shaped by water where sea meets beach alongside green canopied slope of Western ghats, rivers and canals, a lattice works of lakes and lagoons, a mace of backwaters and green lotus ponds "all water is connected". The novel is a celebration of the backwaters where when Malayalis say "land" they include water. Witnessing women bathing in the shallow waters was like an air filled of festivities. Knowing about 42 rivers running down from mountains, 120 miles of waterways was a credit in Southern India. "Its roots are deep and so ancient that it feels like a law of nature, like rivers going to the sea." – Verghese, speaking about the caste system prevalent and humiliation faced by them are normalized by society as if they were inevitable as natural occurrences rather than choices, like waterways there, which were connected and eventually flowed together. Craftsmen lived by the banks, Potters rely on river banks for alluvial clay, Brickmaker fills boat with river mud, boat being Boatman's only livelihood. Torrential rains along with swollen streams threatened huts of craftsmen. But the legendary floods of 1924 caused destruction in Travancore but never troubled Parambil. When the monsoon stops, two weeks after, newspaper read hundreds have drowned, thousands are displaced and cholera and dysentery being rampant.

Digby witnessed a stagnant pond of water whose surface mirrors the sky, the scent of ocean mingled with perfume, Temples concealed by the sea as soon as he reaches Madras. With fishmonger's arrival brought the scent of river, on skiffs, canoes, barrages and ferries, Malayalis and their goods flew over Travancore, Cochin, Malabar with swiftness the land locked could not imagine. In the absence of decent bus transport, roads and railways, water was the highway. Water was a comfort for people residing in Parambil and for people like Joppan steering the jetty was like a cakewalk. Verghese takes us on a walk to the seaside in Madras, making us relish the salt in its air. The salt air carries scents of dried fishes. Mariama felt the absence of waves and restoration of water that she needed in her life at Mahabalipuram during her Medical school days. She keeps imagining waves, from a far away land from beach during her medical school days. When she returned to her home back in Parambil, she sees canals dredging all the way to its confluence with water. Surface of water seemed to her like kaleidoscope of green leaves floating faster than she recalls her childhood.

Evolution of water:

Churches were built on the island surrounded by water around from where roars of river were audible and even rumbles underfoot due to flash floods were felt. Big Ammachi sees the future, with the demolition of shelters near the river bushes, widening of canals for giving way to bigger barrages to come by for business expansion. A marine engineer, Briston in 1920 built an island back then from where today ships have a deepwater harbor built for business. The backwaters which were a livelihood of Kerala, got exposed to saltwater ocean creating immeasurable damage to the Benthic, Nektonic, Planktonic Communities beneath the ocean. Degradation of the rock oyster, *Crassostrea*- a vital food chain that goes from fish larvae to adult fish to young children with growing brains. It amuses Philipose to sit on the land that once was water in his childhood. He connects it to- building of dams, denuding teak trees and digging for ore. The unvoiced villagers became a victim to such unintended consequences of such big projects and once damage was done what their perception was hardly considered.

Undying water:

Imagery such as "the water in the paddy field shimmers like beaten silver" (p.10) sets 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. Water initially in the novel is clear and slow like the days in new bride's life. This concept of connectedness, that can be extend to those unrelated to blood, is carried through nearly every chapter of this novel. This represents a "watery perspective" where characters are linked by shared experiences and environmental fate, rather than just bloodline. Here water is used as a mirror to fluidity and transitions in the Big Ammachi's life, who must adapt to new homes and families. Even the space between his husband's sentence is compared to a wide river while he spoke about his late wife. She named Philipose for the soothing syllable that sounds like flowing water and prays he'll be carried by the current to the shore. She when bathed from the water of her well, she felt an obligation to the water, soil and its connection to life. Nothing restores and renew her more than when she plunges into the river. Being baptized from the water, same water cleansed the sins with transgressions, paves a way from birth to end of life.

Locals anticipated monsoon downpour much as their Christmas when body and soul are cleansed. "You cannot walk across a lake just because you change its name to land (p.223)" Denying of traumatic history or hiding the fact or conversion of *Pulayar*s (lower caste), would not heal it or change the reality of what it is and had happened earlier. Reality cannot be cannot be altered by avoiding it. A lake will always remain water, regardless of what one calls it. Water symbolizes nourishment and life, through the *Pulayars* and craftsmen residing by the banks but it also represents danger of death through the tragic drownings and natural calamities like flood and landslides in Kerala. This duality illustrates how role of water bears the weight of way of life, fear and grief.

Mariama compares her medical school with a raging river because of all the obstacles in it. She relishes being in water and realises how the water contact could break the barrier within her. Water symbolizes connectedness and the flow of life, linking Mariama with her mother waves connect the living and the dead, the fate of life that connects past present and future in a single unbreakable chain. When she returned back to Parambil, she realized that neither the canal nor she were the same anymore. "The covenant of water: that they're all linked inescapably by their acts of commission and omission, and no one stands alone… repeating its message that *all is one*. What she thought was her life is all *maya*, an illusion but one shared illusion" (p. 706) and there is no going back. With the realization that time and water move unavoidably faster than one can imagine, according to her water that washes blisters, blood, tears, sins can never wash the stigma of leprosy.

Dr. Rune's eyes were compared to that of ocean's color because it gave a ray of hope and kindness. Just as wave or surf which manifests to be ocean but can never be, likewise manifestation of universal consciousness and separateness of illusion differs. Universe being a limitless oceanlike, beyond all understanding. Set during postcolonial era, water becomes a symbol of change, with old superstitions being washed away by rising tide of modernity through emergence of medicine and scientific research. In the end, we analyze, all the water is connected and only land and people are discontinuous both in positive and negative aspects of life. Themes of inevitable changes brought upon characters by fate and time are symbolized by the flow of water. Water becomes a source of life as well as a force of destruction, with a delicate balance of faith, trauma, around nature.

Conclusion:

Focusing on the setting of Kerala defined by its systemic impacts of global change through trade, mirroring the long-term life-giving hydrological crisis. Verghese uses Kerala with its rivers, canals and backwaters are a character in itself, to ground the narrative. The narrative underscores the resilience of human spirits and interconnectedness of lives much like rivers that symbolise continuity and change in essence. His novel attributes to the enduring bonds of family pursuits of identity and transformative power of love and hope amidst life's uncertainties.

Through the lenses of hydro-criticism and hydro-feminism, this narrative shows water as a symbolic entity that gives life-giving potential to the character's personality development, framed in Anthropocene viewpoint is something to be considered. By a theory of environmental framework, this work expands the scope of study of water fully engaging with humans' perspective as a defining axis of hydrology. The very qualities that make water dynamic and revolutionary are its fluidity and versatility in all aspects of life. Concept of hydro-feminism urges us to recognize that, humans perceive different water body in different ways.

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