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Inherited Suffering and Family Memory: A Trauma-Theoretical Reading of Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water*

Ms. Mahalakshmi A
Assistant Professor, Department of Science and Humanities,Karpagam Academy of Higher Education, Coimbatore.

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Abstract:

This article addresses the theme of inherited suffering and memory from the family in *The Covenant of Water* by Abraham Verghese using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. The novel is a quest through the lives of several generations of a family in Kerala, tracing connections between individual trauma, family history, sickness, loss, and history. The study explores the impact of traumatic experiences on the individual's sense of self and relationships with family, especially when there is no explanation or communication of the trauma and resulting suffering. The article is based on Caruth's perception of trauma as a trauma that can resurface through memory and repetition, and examines how the characters cope with the psychological and emotional impact of trauma from one generation to the next. The article investigates the novel in the light of the idea that family memory can serve as a kind of narrative form of understanding suffering and dealing with the unprocessed past. In turn, the study is an attempt at trauma-informed literary criticism, which examines the connection between intergenerational traumas, narrative reconstruction, and familial identity as found in contemporary novels.

Keywords: Family Memory, Inherited Suffering, Collective Memory, Narrative Reconstruction

Introduction:

The connection between personal suffering and family relationship, memory and collective history is a theme that is explored in literature often. Loss/illness, separation and grief can affect people long before and after the events themselves. In families, the impact of hurt can be passed on down the years in memories, stories, unspoken words, inherited beliefs, and emotional ties. These experiences form the understanding of identity and past generation's lives. Literary works that explore family histories therefore offer good opportunities to explore the connection between suffering of oneself and intergenerational memory. Trauma theory is a critical lens that is useful for understanding the memory, representation and reinterpretation of painful experiences over time.

In *The Covenant of Water* (2023), Dr. Abraham Verghese tells a cross-generational story of a family, in Kerala, whose lives are beset with illness, loss, mysterious deaths and the constant dread of drowning. It spans a period of time from 1900 to 1977, and tells the story of several generations whose lives are connected by a mysterious affliction from the family. All of the generations eventually perish by drowning, so water plays a vital role in daily life and a constant threat to the well-being of all. In this pattern, Verghese explores the links between personal experiences and family narratives and the ways in which future generations are shaped by the results of past events. Medical knowledge, cultural beliefs, relationships and explanations are also examined in the novel.

Big Ammachi is the central matriarch of the novel, and plays an important role in the story because her experiences link the various generations of the novel's family. Growing up, she has no choice but to deal with separation, loss, marriage, and the role of sustaining family connections. As the story unfolds, her story is intertwined with the larger history of the family. Her life illustrates a way that the experience of suffering can be felt personally, but also come to have meaning in a shared family story. This link between collective memories and personal memories is further developed in the experiences of other characters. But later generations don't necessarily have to suffer the same experiences as the previous generations do, they suffer the consequences through family stories, shared fears, and the ongoing presence of unexplained suffering.

To distinguish between physical status and the transmission of pain in the novel, there needs to be a separation between the physical and the emotional. Physical patterns of drowning deaths can be established in the family, while memory, family stories and cultural interpretations reinforce the fear and uncertainty surrounding the drownings. These processes are correlated, but not synonymous. The novel thus offers a chance to explore the formation of inherited condition and how that condition becomes part of a cultural identity, as well as how individuals cope with the emotional impact of inherited knowledge. Understanding the relationships among what a family knows, fears and what remains unexplained becomes focal to the understanding of the story.

The main theoretical approach used for this study is Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* Caruth discusses the challenges of understanding and representing trauma. Her work reflects the interplay between experience/ memory / repetition / narrative, focusing on the meaning of an event that might be painful at one time, but more fully appreciated later. Rather, its significance might come into being later in memory, repeatedly in experience, and in efforts to tell and retell the past. It is a relevant perspective to *The Covenant of Water,* as the experiences the family face are repeated throughout the story, and their meaning gradually evolves as characters learn more and rethink previous beliefs.

Caruth's previous edited volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* further develops trauma studies through the gathering of discussions on traumatic experience, historical understanding and representation. These works serve as a basis for exploring literary narratives that convey experiences that are hard to describe and explain. Trauma theory can be applied to the study of the novel Verghese wrote to examine the connection between the repetition of loss and a lack of understanding, especially when there is a lack of understanding as to the meaning of previous loss in the context of the family. The theory also sheds light on the way in which new readers will rethink events that seem unrelated in the narrative.

Caruth's approach has to do with is the connection between knowing and not knowing. Suffering in a family story does not automatically result in an immediate and total explanation of the causes of the suffering. Family members could have an awareness of certain events that have happened over and over again, but not know the cause of these events. This is the space between experience and comprehension which becomes a crucial part of the novel's structure. Each generation of the family knows of the recurring drowning fatalities but the family knowledge of the affliction grows over time as information accumulates and is reinterpreted. Hence, trauma theory offers a window to explore the legacy of trauma even when it isn't fully understood.

Trauma studies has emerged as a significant field of literary criticism as it allows one to examine how trauma is presented, the psychological trauma, memory, historical violence, and the challenges of narrative. Caruth's study of such traumatic experiences has especially shaped the conversation about the difficulty of them being easily explained. It is important to be careful in applying the theory of trauma, however. Not all psychological trauma is considered to be an experience of grief, sickness or family separation. Literary analysis should take into account the particular conditions of each event and differentiate between the physical, emotional, cultural and traumatic experiences the narrative represents.

There have been previous discussions on *The Covenant of Water* about intergenerational suffering, illness, medical knowledge, memory, and family history. The length of the novel's history and the common family disease justify these subjects for critical analysis. A 2026 study by R. Aarthy and I. J. Kavitha, "Narrating Generational Suffering: Body, Disease, and Memory in Abraham Verghese's The Covenant of Water, discusses the link between generational suffering, body, disease and memory. This scholarship points to the critical work which has already been done in the field of inherited suffering in the broader context. Thus, this present study does not say there has never been a study on intergenerational suffering in the novel before. Rather, it aims to create a more focused interpretation by means of the concepts of traumatic repetition, incomplete understanding, narrative silence, and reconstruction of family memory.

Silence is a key element to this inquiry. Recall and communication are not the sole determinants of family histories, but also things that are forgotten, unexplainable, or hard to talk about. When one does not know all the facts, family members can come up with different understandings of the identical experience. These contrasts may impact on relationships as well as leave a generation of uncertainty. Through the family's search for a cause of its recurring illness, Verghese's novel illustrates the fallacies of inherited explanations and the need to look at the past in new ways. By focusing on painful experiences and their subsequent interpretation, Caruth's theory can shed light on these types of narratives.

Storytelling is also a part of the reconstruction of family memory. The multi-generational approach in the novel makes personal experiences part of a historical continuum which can not be fully owned by any one person. The reader gradually establishes connections and links between events and the characters try to make sense of what has previously affected them in their lives. Storytelling is then a way to pass on family history and rethink the definitions of suffering. It does not have to take away the sadness or all the anguish, it's just an opportunity to reflect and reinterpret.

This article explores how inherited suffering and family memory are presented in *The Covenant of Water* with the use of Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma. It is about the frequent deaths of drowning, Big Ammachi's experience, how nothing was said about it in the family, the reinterpretation of events over time and how narrating connects generations. It suggests that the novel treats the act of remembrance as a continuous process, in which people face and (re)imagine the repercussions of past suffering. The study, which highlights traumatic repetition, lack of understanding and narrative reconstruction, provides a specific look at how memory, identity and the unresolved past play out in Verghese's fiction.

Silence, family secrets, loss and memory are interconnected in the shaping of successive generations in Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water*. The novel portrays a family with a history of deaths, emotional anguishes, questions unanswered, and water always looming. These experiences shape family members' self-understandings and family relationships. Verghese highlights, "A good story goes beyond what a forgiving God cares to do: it reconciles families and unburdens them of secrets whose bond is stronger than blood. But in their revealing, as in their keeping, secrets can tear a family apart" (15–16). In a way, Verghese has taken suffering off the island of the individual and revealed that the emotional impact of loss is not just felt by the individual but permeates family bonds and that it shapes the memories, beliefs, and choices of future generations. Silence matters because it hinders a full comprehension of painful experiences, and family secrets keep unanswered questions alive, impacting the current generation.

Big Ammachi comes in the middle of this loss/memory gambit. Personal duties, emotional issues and the experiences of the family she creates and nurtures influence her life. She sees suffering and is faced with uncertainty as she grows up and her memories become

part of the family's collective history. As a mother and matriarch, she must meet the challenges of various generations, even if she does not always fully know or understand them or be able to solve them. Her experiences show that memory is not just a memory of the past, but also a way that people make sense of what is happening in the present. Some losses she experiences and some responsibilities she takes on help her develop as a person, and affect the emotional climate of the family. But the fact that she is resilient does not mean that she is not suffering. Rather, it illustrates how people go on living with the pain of the past while performing their duties to others.

The novel does not mean that there is only the absence of conversation. May come out of grief, fear, uncertainty, social expectations and inability to talk about painful experiences. If family members can not go about their suffering openly, their experiences are not fully understood by others. This silence can shield people from the emotional shock of what has happened to them, but at the same time can also keep the family from coming to know the story as a whole. Secrets and unrecalled memories then can lead to a lack of correspondence between what has occurred, what people know, and what they are willing to share. The gaps are significant to the novel's discussion of inherited suffering, as later generations have to understand the past in a limited way, filled with family ideology and the results of earlier events.

Trauma theory in the context of Cathy Caruth's analysis proves helpful in a consideration of the relationship between silence, memory and the unprocessed experience. Caruth discusses the possibility of immediate and later, or repeated, remembering of trauma, and how such experiences can seem incomprehensible in the moment but begin to take on significance later on in time through memory or repetition in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). As seen from this side, the past does not necessarily stay in the past in the sense that a moment passes when a thing happens. It can be as gradual as people get reminded, find new information, or rethink or reexperience familiar things. This idea of belated understanding can be explored in the Covenant of Water as the family continually experiences loss and remains unsure of the relationship between water and death. As the characters interpret previous events, new experiences and knowledge are added making the interpretations more complicated.

But the description of the suffering that happens multiple times in the novel should not be regarded as evidence that psychological trauma is passed down from generation to generation through biology. The legacy of the past can be comprehended, however, by family stories, acquired anxieties, emotional bonds, cultural ideas, and the unacknowledged or incompletely shared experience of suffering. Big Ammachi's statement, "I need to know about" she wrings her hands in exasperation "about the Condition" (73), reveals her desire to understand the unexplained suffering affecting her family.If there is a family history of death and water and they have not experienced all of these deaths, the association may influence their expectations and actions. Memory functions separately and as a group. The

family becomes the context in which other experiences are understood and silence and secrecy makes it hard to separate out what is known from what is assumed.

The relationship of loss and memory also illustrates the emotional nature of family relations. To remember the dead might help to keep the affection and feeling of belonging alive, but it might also bring back grief and fear. Likewise, sharing a secret can offer a chance for learning, but may also force members in the family to deal with certain harsh truths. Verghese thus conceives of memory as a fluid phenomenon, one that is constantly rethought. The family's knowledge of its past evolves when they recount, conceal, find or reframe their experience. These transformations imply that the healing process doesn't have to involve the erasure of painful memories, but rather starts as people begin to recognize suffering and reflect on the beliefs that they have adopted in understanding it.

In this way, the themes of silence, family secrets, loss, and memory are interwoven in *The Covenant of Water*. Verghese illustrates how long, after the events, unresolved loss can affect family identity through Big Ammachi's experiences, and how to that of successive generations. "And now that daughter is here, standing in the water that connects them all in time and space and always has" (Verghese 706) emphasises the connection between memory, family identity, and generational experience.The delayed recognition and repetition of painful experience is understood in the context of the author's trauma theory, and to the family centered story of the novel, the significance of communication, remembrance, and reinterpretation of inherited beliefs. Finally, the family's journey towards understanding is not just about recalling the past it is about challenging the gaps and presumptions in the family's memory.

Deaths that happen in the novel become part of the family's memory and legacy of fear of water. These experiences repeat, shaping the knowledge and understanding of suffering of future generations. Trauma theory, as outlined by Cathy Caruth, offers a framework of how traumatic experiences can impact the present, both through memory and repetition. The quest for medical information questions and potentially alters beliefs, and provides fresh perspectives on the family's repeated tragedy. While grief can never be taken away by science, scientific explanations may help the family to address fear and uncertainty. So, Verghese emphasizes the need for knowledge and critical thinking in the process of comprehending inherited suffering and reconstructing a family's narrative.

The novel follows the journey of how people cope with a hereditary trauma using knowledge, strength, and transformation of family dynamics. Big Ammachi's message is one of strength, and that she is still continuing to care for her family despite personal losses and emotional ups and downs. The younger generations begin to investigate in answer to their doubts of inherited beliefs and to ask questions regarding the repeated tragedy of the family. The trauma theory by Cathy Caruth can be used to help understand how traumatic events can be repeated and remembered in the present. But healing does not require forgetting, it is an

understanding of suffering and a new thought on its meaning. Hence, Verghese argues that knowledge, emotional support and critical reflection can make a person change their family identity, and transcend their inherited fear.

The Covenant of Water is about inherited suffering, family memory, loss and resilience by the writer, Abraham Verghese. Herman emphasises that "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites" for healing (1). This idea supports the analysis of how communication and the disclosure of family secrets may help characters confront unresolved suffering.The stories and the unspoken anxiety in each tragedy astutely brings into focus how the past affects the lives of subsequent generations. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory has an interesting history of how traumatic experiences and memories persist. The novel also emphasizes how medical knowledge questions our inherited beliefs, and fosters a greater understanding of family history. While the elimination of suffering is impossible, this does not mean that there are no possibilities for change, if suffering can be understood and known. In the end, Verghese argues that memory, knowledge, and familial relationships are all crucial in comprehending and react to inherited suffering.

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