



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Reading Water as a Space in Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water*

Sangeetha K Mohan

Research Scholar

PG Department of English and Research Centre
St. Xavier's College for Women (Autonomous), Aluva

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water* through the lens of blue humanities, focusing on the spatial differentiation between Kerala's inland backwater environments and the coastal urban seascape of Kochi. The central argument posits that the contrast between familiar backwater environments and the threatening yet fascinating open sea exemplifies blue humanities' exploration of how different aquatic spaces shape human relationships with water—from intimate, domesticated waterways to the sublime and riveting open ocean. This paper reveals a critical gap in current blue humanities scholarship, which has predominantly focused on oceanic studies while neglecting the cultural significance of rivers, backwaters, and other inland water systems, particularly in postcolonial contexts, by focusing on a journey that transforms from the known domesticity of river travel to the anxiety-inducing vastness of harbor waters.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, Hydrosapes, known to unknown

This paper attempts to provide the different levels of understanding the role of water in literature through Abraham Verghese's novel *The Covenant of Water*. Water has become an integral part in different genres spanning across the world through the introduction of 'Blue Humanities'. Apart from setting the background of reading, water is in the main focus, considered as a character, which raises the standard of approach towards reading. More than being read casually, water gives immense symbolic and metaphorical detailing through close reading. They mark the beginning of a journey of survival and optimism towards a fruitful passage of happiness and self-exploration, which could also be the vice versa of fatigue and despair.

As Serpil Opperman in the core work *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene* writes, "our perceptions and ideas of water bodies are culturally shaped" (1). This statement brings light upon the idea that waterways are connected to each individual in different ways as the perspective towards water bodies change. Opperman argues that the world's water is not just an ecological issue but a human-made crisis that could be solved only through a definite change in human culture (1). The geographical structure not only lays a backdrop for the novel but also plays an important role in the lives of characters. Veronica Strang, in the work *The Meaning of Water*, discusses "a picture of a highly complex relationship with water, in which physical, sensory, and cognitive experiences articulate with cultural meanings and values" (5). The concept of water in this novel takes the shape of a river and the sea, which need to be analyzed to interpret the relation to the sociocultural human background.

Set in Travancore, South India, the novel follows three generations of the Parambil family as they grapple with "The Condition"—a hereditary affliction later identified as neurofibromatosis type 2 (NF2) that causes deafness and a fatal dread of water. The matriarch, Big Ammachi, arrives as a child bride and dedicates her life to fighting the disease after losing her son to drowning. Her resilience eventually leads to

the creation of a local hospital. While her son Philipose struggles with the disease's limitations and personal trauma, it is her granddaughter, Mariamma, who finally bridges the gap between myth and medicine. By becoming a neurosurgeon, Mariamma transforms a "generational curse" into a treatable diagnosis, fulfilling her grandmother's legacy of love amidst the complexities of colonial-era India and caste injustice.

The descriptive narrative of a flowing river enriches the novel and the reader, whose mind and soul get refreshed by the very content of water. The nativeness and purity held by the water can be traced to the scenarios of water in paddy fields being compared to silver. Alongside, the matriarch of the novel, Big Ammachi, then a twelve-year-old girl who is getting married the next day, bids farewell to nature: "Goodbye, lagoon. Goodbye, creek" (Varghese 4). This captures a journey from intimacy with nature to farewell. The innocent connection to nature establishes the tone of the novel, where the child's homeland is filled with fertile fields and tamed water sources. Later, the journey towards church is through 'unfamiliar canals' to 'a lake' where the shore is invisible. The excitement of the young bride while travelling in the boat, the hustle and rush to pick lotus, and the enthusiasm to know how the ocean would look. The essence of fascination larger water bodies like oceans and seas contain is depicted. "She realizes that she's going so far away it won't be easy for her to visit home again" (7). These lines reflect her emotional state of leaving her childhood home for marriage. The sense of loss and emotional weight can also be understood through a hydrocritical viewpoint where the known waters are far beyond her sight and thoughts, and she fears being lost without the sense of water. It has become an integral part that the inexorable power of water encapsulates the entire emotional framework of realization and farewell.

"...the field provides in-depth analyses of human relations with fluid sites from both material-discursive and sociocultural perspectives and offers analytical frameworks and critical pathways for studying these relations" (Opperman 1). Opperman clearly brings the idea that the sociocultural engagements with nature result in a metaphoric and symbolic understanding. Blue humanism is the field that shifts from the ecocentric view to the hydrocentric view through the introduction of terminologies like blue ecocriticism, hydro-criticism, blue ecocriticism and more to enlarge the strong presence of water in literature. The terracentric approach was sidelined by the emergence of hydrocentric narrative techniques, which can also be traced in other novels.

Similar metaphorical passages can be traced in *The Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, published in 1899, which is a major literature piece known for its characterization, landscape, and handful of events in the reader's mind. "The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway" (Conrad 3). The journey depicted in the novel can also be interpreted as a journey from known to unknown, likewise in *The Covenant of Water*. Nellie, the cruising yawl's journey through the Thames River in England to the Congo River is remarkably important, wherein in the novel the former is described as a symbol of glory, brightness, and beauty, while the latter is presented in darkness and mystery to contrast the idea of civilized and threatening. "Old river in its broad reach rested unruffled at the decline of day, after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks, spread out in the tranquil dignity of a waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth" (5) shows how the water is known and familiar, as it has witnessed the civilization across shores; the calm, civilized behavior of the river brings the river more than just a landscape. To contrast with the Thames River, which is a domestic and tamed waterway, the Congo River presents a boundless, unmappable, and uncontrollable space, which is the sea. "But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land" (11) depicts the danger and unexplored and deleterious threats lying ahead through the symbol of a snake. The time period between the aforementioned two novels—*The Heart of Darkness* and *The Covenant of Water*—is very long, but they could be analyzed through the lens of blue humanities to understand the pivotal role of water bodies.

The Covenant of Water has brought the idea "all water is connected" (Varghese 12), which is a universal statement that links different land and water together. The novel also beautifully draws the state of Kerala as "The land is shaped by water and its people united by a common language: Malayalam" (12), the poetic description of the sea meeting white beach, the rivers in the slopes of the Ghats, rivulets, canals, lakes, lagoons, maze of backwaters, and lotus ponds, which form a circle as all these water bodies, big or small, are interconnected. '...there absence defines a nightmare' clearly portrays the unlimited affection

Malayalis feel towards water. The sight of water brings refreshment to the mind of the community, which does not feel lost in the sight of water. 'When Malayalis say 'land,' they include water' is another statement that reflects a cultural and geographical understanding deeply rooted in the way of life in Kerala. The landscape is inseparable from its network of rivers, canals, lagoons, and backwaters, which are as integral to daily existence as the soil itself. "Mentz, too, draws attention to the interrelations of bodies, water, histories, and narratives: multiple forms of water shape human bodies and human histories. Different narratives become legible through our depictions of liquid salt and freshwater, gaseous vapor, and solid ice" (Opperman 3). The theorist states that water cannot be separated from the human body, as she carries the idea of Veronica Strang, a cultural anthropologist, that human cells are mostly intra-cellular which contains water, and the other third is extra-cellular fluids like blood plasma and transcellular fluids which surround the cells, carry nutrition and oxygen to remove metabolic wastes (3).

The presence of water has become an integral part throughout the novel, so its absence makes a big difference, as "She listens. Something is missing. The absence is disquieting. It comes to her: she cannot hear water. She's missing its murmuring, soothing voice, and so she manufactured it in her dream" (Varghese 17). The familiar surroundings has changed as the bride reaches Parambil, her husband's home, which is far away from the riverside. "She'd looked for the house when they landed at the jetty, but it wasn't there by the river, so surely it must be by the stream . . . but she saw nothing" (18). The psychological discomfort is spread through the lines as the emotional balance and sense of peace relating to the known waterway are lost. Water is an entity that is closely embedded to the subconscious mind of the protagonist, who feels safety, closeness, and warmth in the soothing sound of water. The constant query towards water as the questions "why up there? Why not by the stream? Or by the river that brings visitors, news, and all good things" (18) repeats the cultural significance of water, which varies from person to person.

The portrayal of the sea through the eyes of Digby, who has joined the Indian Medical Service, gives another perspective of mystery and vastness. "The black waves turn a fluorescent green and blue, as if a fire rages deep in the ocean. He's the only witness to an utterly beautiful yet mysterious spectacle" (93). The journey on the ship as it reaches the southern tip of India from Glasgow fascinates Digby. The term 'black waves' instantly provides a metaphor of unknown depths of ocean or of darkness as contrasted to the river as a 'murmuring, soothing voice' by Big Ammachi. This contrast is remarkably significant as this forms the basis of understanding water from different perspectives.

The description of Cochin begins with the journey of Big Ammachi, her mother, Babymol, and Ranjan from Parambil to Cochin in an afternoon to meet Dr. Rune Orqvist. They traveled through the river, canals, backwaters, and Vembanad Lake in a bigger boat and reached Cochin. "Big Ammachi and Baby Mol head out to get their first glimpse of the ocean" (Varghese 187). This event of exploration could be linked to when Big Ammachi as a bride wondered on how the ocean would be: would it be soothing, still, and smooth. "It laps noisily at the shore, sounding just like Caesar drinking from his bucket but with a thousand times the intensity; it dwarfs Vembanad Lake" (187). The most important remark given to an ocean being compared to the known/domesticated waterways is water in a bucket and a lake. It is through this comparison that the matriarch is able to know the depth of the sea. They understand the sublime power of water and how the familiar waterways are forming a bridge to comprehend the incomprehensible ocean. Sounds of the known are related to the unknown, where the concept is "all water is connected" (12). The sight of a ship also fascinates them, and they wonder how it works, which indicates the mysterious, unfathomable, and sublime nature of the sea, which is beyond human understanding. "Lord, forgive me, but sometimes I think you are the God of my little Parambil alone. I forget how vast this world is that you created and that you watch over" (187). The comfortable limitation of backwaters is countered by the exploration of vast oceans, which marks the stage of identification, which paves the way from intimate to cosmic or knowable to unknowable, and water marks a carrier of change in perspective of the character. Therefore, blue humanities proves how different aquatic spaces shape not just human behavior but human consciousness, spirituality, and relationships with the infinite. The character's spiritual journey from God of little Parambil to "how vast this world is" (187) parallels the physical journey from the backwaters to the ocean.

The dividing line between familiar backwater environments and the threatening yet fascinating open sea shows how different aquatic spaces reshape human relationships with water and consciousness.

Domestic waterways like rivers, lakes, canals, and coastal zones offer intimate, comprehensible environments where human authority operates effectively. These spaces are named, mapped, and integrated into daily life, providing predictable settings for commerce, ritual, and community. Transposed, the open ocean presents the vast, uncontrollable, and cognitively overwhelming. Its magnitude challenges existing knowledge systems and worldviews. The backwater's domesticity enables rootedness and cultural continuity, while the ocean's sublimity provokes wonder, terror, and transformative encounters with the infinite.

References

1. Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. e-book, created by José Menéndez, 1902, https://www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Conrad/Heart_Darkness.pdf.
2. Oppermann, Serpil. *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene*. Cambridge University Press, 2023.
3. Ray, Subhadeep. *River Fiction in India: Intersectional Flows of Narratives, Geographies and Histories*. Routledge, 2025.
4. Strang, Victoria. *The Meaning of Water*. Berg Publishers, 2004.
5. Verghese, Abraham. *The Covenant of Water*. Grove Press, 2023.

