



## Narrating Trauma through Silence: An Analysis of *The Covenant of Water*

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### Abstract

*The Covenant of Water* is a deeply transformative story that foregrounds the themes of human resilience and redemption. The narrative is replete with silences that transform the story to one that explores the concept of intergenerational trauma. The idea of human endurance is closely tied to the narrative arc and the novel lauds the human capacity to transform and transcend trauma. The story of a family becomes a microcosm of the saga of a community and it bears testimony to how trauma is overcome through a collective sense of responsibility. In this great saga of life, silence becomes a powerful medium to create and transmit significations. The present paper tries to analyse how the signifiers of silence communicate the multi-generational codes of trauma.

**Keywords:** Narrative silences, focalizers, intergenerational trauma, kernels, fragmentation.

### Introduction

Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water* (2023) is a sprawling narrative that discusses how intergenerational trauma is narrated through narrative gaps and silences. The story of a family and its closely guarded secrets are narrated from the perspectives of several family members, spanning generations. As the narrative weaves itself through the perspectives of several characters, the story of a family, that closely mirrors the story of a community, slowly emerges. The rich tapestry of the family saga is made more poignant by the narrative gaps and silences that Verghese deftly uses to foreground the intensity of the trauma

that haunts them all. The present paper tries to analyse how narrative gaps, silences and delayed revelations become seminal strategies in the unravelling of trauma. These narrative strategies that emphasise the ramifications of intergenerational trauma are perhaps more effective in translating the lived experiences than explicit narration.

*The Covenant of Water* employs third-person omniscient narration and Big Ammachi and her descendants take turns to narrate the story of their lives. As the narrative shifts from one character to another, the focalization changes and the reader is drawn into the intricate details of their family life. Verghese's

insightful analysis of his characters' eccentricities imbues his narrative with an intensity that is made more emphatic by the narrative silences. He often employs variable internal focalization so as to probe into the psyche of his characters, thereby delineating a polyvalent narrative that emphasises the diverse subjectivities of the participants concerned. Even as the story is narrated in minute detail, there are "silences" that make the reader more aware of what is deliberately left unsaid than the details that build up towards a startling revelation.

The novel revolves around a dark secret of the Parambil family, one that is referred to only as "the Condition" (CW 73). As the different characters narrate their stories, the secret is alluded to, but never revealed and this strategy keeps the reader invested till the end of the narrative. While it is Big Ammachi, who speaks about the secret at first and even goes so far as to name it, it is unravelled by her granddaughter, Mariamma, who decides to learn more about her family's affliction. The mysterious affliction becomes a kernel event in the narrative. Kernel events are those that "are logically essential to the narrative action and cannot be eliminated without destroying its causal-chronological coherence" (Prince 48). The terms, kernels and satellites are introduced by Chatman. He defines kernels as "narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events. They are nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a movement into one or two (or more) possible paths" (53). Thus, the novel centres around the dreaded affliction that inevitably shapes the lives of the members of the Parambil family. The present paper tries to study the narrative gaps and silences that surround this kernel event and thereby reveal the extent of trauma.

### Theoretical Framework

The present paper draws on critical insights drawn from narratology and trauma theory to frame how silence can be read as an

enactment of intergenerational trauma. Though the novel has a third-person omniscient narrator, the story is narrated from the perspectives of the various characters who act as focalizers. Each section offers an insight into the minds of the various characters and as the same events are perceived from the perspectives of these internal character focalizers, a myriad and polyphonic narrative emerges. Closely connected to the concept of narration is the idea of focalization. Manfred Jahn posits a clear-cut distinction between the two when he says, "*Narration* is the telling of a story in a way that simultaneously respects the needs and enlists the co-operation of its audience; *focalization* is the submission of (potentially limitless) narrative information to a perspectival filter" (94). Focalization thus specifies the concept of perspective and can be categorised into the focalizer (the one who sees) and the focalized (the one who is seen). Gerard Genette and Mieke Bal are the leading theoreticians who have formulated the various aspects of focalization. Verghese employs multiple focalizers in order to accentuate how the silences in the narrative are shared by most of the focalizers who share the trauma that is central to the narrative.

The multiple focalizers of the narrative experience the same trauma and yet they find it difficult to voice the same. Their pain and desolation are conveyed through silence and this aligns closely with Cathy Caruth's ideas on the nature of trauma and how it prevents direct linguistic expressions. "Fragmentation or dissociation is viewed as the direct cause of trauma, a view that helps formulate the notion of transhistorical trauma, which suggests that trauma's essential or universal effects on consciousness and narrative recall afford the opportunity to connect individual and collective traumatic experiences" (Mambrol). Here, the trauma transcends generations and silence becomes the only way in which the trauma can be expressed. The silences and gaps in narration shape the reader's perception of the enormity of the trauma and one can argue that it is what is

not narrated that shapes the act of interpretation. The novel withholds explanations across generations and one can read the silence and narrative gaps as the formal enactment of inherited trauma.

### **Narrative Silences and the Idea of Trauma**

Big Ammachi, the first focalizer in the narrative, introduces the mysterious affliction that she terms as “the condition.” Through her eyes, the reader understands the strange fear of water that is prevalent in the Parambil family. The mystery deepens when it seems to affect mostly the male members of the family. Though Big Ammachi wants to know more about this family secret, “she’s not brave enough to probe” (CW 39). Her curiosity wilts in the face of stony silence. Even when nobody explicitly states that it is a secret, there is a certain dread that stops her from inquiring further. This wall of silence that is deliberate and yet natural conveys to the reader that the trauma that is hinted at cannot be expressed in words. “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 (Mattam 362-63).”

Big Ammachi’s reticence crumbles when she is faced with the tragedy of JoJo’s death and she demands an answer from her husband, who reveals the existence of “the water tree” (CW 79). The water tree is a document that traces the lineage of the Parambil family and the secret malady that affects them. “She understands at once that it is a catalog of the malady that has shattered the Parambil family, but unlike Matthew’s gospel, this is a secret document, hidden in the rafters, to be viewed only by family members, and only when they absolutely must see it” (CW 75). The “secret document” is steeped in silence and can only be viewed in the most desperate of situations. Big Ammachi is racked with guilt that the “silence” cost her the life of her step son. And yet, she too is forced to guard the secret in silence. At this point in the

narrative, there is no scientific or rational clarification given for the mysterious deaths and the narrative silence is maintained across multiple chapters and generations.

The narrative gap regarding the explanation of the deaths forces the readers to a state of uncertainty that is mirrored in the lives of the characters. The knowledge that can relieve this narrative tension is structurally postponed towards the final section of the narrative, where Mariamma dons the role of the seeker. The moment of release is deferred till the end of the narrative and it intensifies the trauma that the characters undergo. When one critically evaluates the deaths in the narrative, it may be argued that the focus is primarily on the aftermath and the emotional trauma on the other members of the family, rather than on the moment of death. The narration of the deaths is elliptical and the emotional responses are often muted and rooted in silence (CW 71, 592). By refusing to resolve the narrative tensions and silences in the beginning of the narrative, the novel engenders the epistemology of trauma, where understanding arrives belatedly and never fully resolves fear.

### **The Silences within the Family: Shared Trauma of a Community**

The secret of the Parambil family is one that is transferred silently from one generation to the next. This idea of familial silence translates into forbidden knowledge that is managed and not shared. Though the children of each generation are warned about the perils of water, it is simultaneously a natural force that draws them in. “The condition” is never revealed to the children and they must be content with the vague assurances that they are given. It may be argued that the familial silence stimulates fear that is inherited as part of their legacy.

The irrational fear that the children feel is magnified in the hearts of the mothers who watch their children with barely concealed terror and anxiety. The novel portrays how the

mothers absorb their grief in silence so as to guard the family secrets. The maternal loss is endured in silence and rarely articulated. JoJo's birth mother, a spectral presence, is perhaps the most poignant symbol of such sorrow. Though her corporeal presence is never felt, she remains a silent shadow whose intense grief is felt by Big Ammachi as she too shares the same sorrow (CW 177-78). This maternal grief is articulated through the nuances of silence, buried beneath the secrets that the family holds. However, this silence is never one that is born out of repression, but one that functions as protection against further traumas. The mothers in the narrative deal with their sorrow in silent pragmatism. As Big Ammachi and the spectral presence grieve together, this strange familial silence becomes a mode of preserving their sanity.

When the narrative eventually offers release, it is only after irrevocable damage has been done. Mariamma's medical discovery provides the answer to all the questions that haunted the earlier generations. Nevertheless, this medical intervention is fuelled by the discovery of several families who held similar secrets (CW 614-20). The secret shared by the members of the Parambil family was one that linked several other families as well. Broker Aniyam reminds Mariamma of the secrets that their families shared. "*Every family has secrets, but not all secrets are meant to deceive.* What defines a family is not blood, . . . but the secrets they share" (CW 620). The silence and the suffering were inherited by many in the community as well, thereby making it their shared trauma. Mariamma's discovery of the medical condition is a release from their traumatic past to a future that holds the possibility of redemption.

Though the narrative silences are eventually resolved, the trauma that shadowed it will never be resolved as knowledge is placed before the descendants and not the original sufferers. The novel thus aligns readerly experience with traumatic temporality. The

gaps in the narrative are eventually filled but the delayed revelation ensures that the loss that the families endured can never be undone as irreversibility is central to the idea of trauma.

### Silence and Intergenerational Trauma

As Marimma unravels the silences that haunted her family's narrative history, she realises that people are not keen to address the issue even at a later stage (CW 614). She realises that the fear of water persists even when its original cause is not remembered. This fear that once haunted the ancestors lives on in the hearts of the descendants who become intergenerational inheritors of trauma. Throughout the narrative, one sees how trauma simultaneously survives as behaviour and memory. The silence is not fully resolved even at the end of the narrative; however, it bears a more redemptive arc as it is acknowledged. It is no longer the silence of the ancestors that was laced with irrational fear and despair. It is one that offers the possibility of closure.

The novel also employs spatial coordinates as an effective narrative strategy to position characters and their emotional landscape. Parambil is a place that offers the illusion of safety, even when it has witnessed the deaths of many. Philipose, Big Ammachi's son finds himself unmoored when he reaches Madras. He has to come back to Parambil to gather his sense of belonging (CW 330). Though Mariamma doesn't falter like her father in Madras, she too finds Parambil a soothing presence. This narrative strategy foregrounds how intergenerational bonds are also invariably linked to spatio-temporal coordinates. "This concept of connectedness, the sense of family that can extend to those unrelated by blood, is carried through nearly every chapter of this novel" (Preston).

### Conclusion

The novel suggests that inheritance is always partial, fragmented and unfinished. As the narrative comes to a close, the silences that guided its course are recognised. As indicators

of trauma, these narrative silences become a formal strategy and not absences that hint at erasure. The initial gaps in the narrative along with the silences become the medium to represent the idea of trauma. The sorrow that is inherent in this silence is indicative of narrative restraint and signifies the quiet transmission of trauma.

The silences in the narrative are not merely mimetic; they serve as indicators of loss and suffering. The present paper has tried to read *The Covenant of Water* as a narrative that highlights the seminal relationship between narrative silence and trauma. The inevitable silences and gaps in the narrative lend itself to the protean nature of human relationships and remind the readers of the idea of healing that is inherent in this potent form of narration.

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