

# Tracing Narrative Transitions: From Epic Traditions to Contemporary Fiction in the Works of Abraham Verghese

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the narrative evolution in the works of Abraham Verghese, tracing a significant shift from epic storytelling traditions to contemporary modes of narration. Rooted in the cultural memory of India and shaped by diasporic experience, Verghese's writings engage with the structural and thematic legacies of epic sagas while simultaneously reconfiguring them within modern literary frameworks. The study analyses how elements such as intergenerational storytelling, moral complexity, and expansive narrative scope—hallmarks of epic literature—are adapted into intimate, character-driven narratives that foreground issues of identity, migration, and belonging. Focusing on key texts such as *Cutting for Stone* and *The Covenant of Water*, the paper explores Verghese's use of medical humanities as a narrative lens, where the body becomes a site of history, trauma, and healing. His works bridge the temporal divide between past and present, intertwining personal histories with broader socio-cultural transformations. By employing a multidisciplinary approach that draws on postcolonial theory, narrative studies, and medical humanities, this study argues that Verghese constructs a hybrid narrative form that sustains the grandeur of epic traditions while embracing the psychological depth and realism of contemporary fiction. Ultimately, the paper positions Verghese as a vital voice in global literature whose works not only preserve cultural memory but also redefine narrative possibilities in an increasingly interconnected world.

**Keywords:** Abraham Verghese; narrative evolution; epic tradition; contemporary fiction; diaspora; medical humanities; postcolonial literature.

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Verghese's writings engage with suffering, betrayal, brotherhood, spirituality, and the fragility of human life. Unlike many contemporary writers who emphasize psychological alienation, Verghese brings the body, illness, and medical science into focus, weaving narratives of 'Medical Humanism'. Jhumpa Lahiri scrutinizes identity and alienation in the Indian diaspora, yet her emphasis remains psychological, whereas Verghese foregrounds the physical and medical dimensions of suffering. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* situates its narrative in Kerala, exploring caste and forbidden love. Verghese also draws on Kerala traditions but filters them through themes of illness and endurance.

The evolution of narrative forms from epic traditions to contemporary fiction reflects a profound transformation in literary history, marked by a shift from collective cultural expression to individual-centred storytelling. The works of Abraham Verghese exemplify this transition through their unique blending of epic narrative scope with the psychological depth of modern fiction. Rooted in the cultural memory of India and shaped by diasporic experience, Verghese's writing reinterprets the conventions of epic storytelling within a contemporary framework. His narratives echo the expansive structure, intergenerational continuity, and moral complexity traditionally associated with classical epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, yet they simultaneously depart from mythological frameworks by situating their stories within realistic and historically grounded contexts. This dual engagement with tradition and modernity allows Verghese to construct narratives that are both culturally resonant and stylistically innovative.

In contrast to the collective orientation of epic literature, which often foregrounds heroic figures and communal values, Verghese's fiction centres on individual experience and emotional interiority. His characters are defined not by heroic grandeur but by vulnerability, resilience, and the complexities of personal identity. Through works such as *Cutting for Stone* and *The Covenant of Water*, Verghese demonstrates how individual lives intersect with broader historical and cultural forces, thereby maintaining the epic concern with continuity and interconnectedness while adapting it to a modern sensibility. His narratives frequently traverse multiple generations, weaving together personal histories with larger socio-political contexts, and in doing so, they preserve the expansive temporal scope characteristic of epic

storytelling. However, this scope is reframed through intimate characterisation and psychological realism, reflecting the priorities of contemporary literature.

A central dimension of Verghese's work is the exploration of diaspora and cultural hybridity, which further distinguishes his narratives from traditional epic forms. As a writer whose life and career span India, Ethiopia, and the United States, Verghese brings a transnational perspective to his fiction, depicting characters who navigate the complexities of belonging across cultural boundaries. This diasporic sensibility aligns with postcolonial theoretical frameworks that emphasise hybridity, liminality, and the fluidity of identity. In Verghese's narratives, tradition is not presented as a static inheritance but as a dynamic and evolving force, reshaped by migration and historical change. His characters inhabit spaces of cultural negotiation, where past and present, homeland and diaspora, intersect in ways that challenge fixed notions of identity. This reconfiguration of cultural memory reflects a broader shift in contemporary literature towards recognising the multiplicity of voices and experiences that constitute the modern world.

Another distinctive aspect of Verghese's writing is his engagement with the field of Medical Humanities, which introduces a unique narrative dimension centred on the human body. As a practising physician, Verghese integrates medical knowledge and clinical experience into his storytelling, transforming the body into a site of narrative significance. In his works, illness, healing, and physical vulnerability are not merely thematic elements but central components of the narrative structure. This focus on the corporeal redefines the epic tradition, shifting attention from external heroic action to internal experiences of suffering and recovery. The hospital and the clinic become spaces where human stories unfold with intensity and immediacy, reflecting broader existential questions about life, mortality, and compassion. Through this lens, Verghese expands the scope of narrative inquiry, demonstrating how the medical humanities can enrich literary representation by foregrounding the lived experiences of the body.

Verghese's narrative techniques further illustrate his synthesis of epic and contemporary forms. His use of omniscient narration, detailed descriptive passages, and interwoven storylines recalls the structural complexity of epic literature, while his emphasis on character development and emotional nuance aligns with modern narrative practices. Temporal shifts and non-linear storytelling enable him to create layered narratives that mirror the workings of memory, allowing past and present to coexist within the same narrative space. This interplay of temporalities reinforces the idea of continuity that is central to epic storytelling, even as it accommodates the fragmented and subjective nature of contemporary experience. His prose style, characterised by its lyrical quality and clarity, enhances the immersive nature of his narratives, inviting readers to engage deeply with both the emotional and cultural dimensions of the story.

In reimagining the epic for a contemporary audience, Verghese demonstrates that the epic is not a static or obsolete form but a dynamic narrative mode capable of adaptation and renewal. His works retain the thematic depth and expansive vision of traditional epics while incorporating the introspective focus and realism of modern fiction. This hybrid narrative form reflects the complexities of a globalised world in which identities are fluid, histories are interconnected, and storytelling continues to evolve. By bridging the gap between past and present, Verghese not only preserves the legacy of epic traditions but also extends their relevance into the contemporary literary landscape. His writing underscores the enduring power of narrative to capture the richness of human experience, suggesting that the transition from epic sagas to contemporary narratives is not a rupture but a transformation that opens new possibilities for literary expression.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie portrays trauma, war, and displacement in Nigeria, aligning with Verghese in addressing suffering but differing in historical and cultural context. Salman Rushdie delves into postcolonial identity and magical realism, while Verghese reshapes the epic by grounding it in medicine and lived corporeal struggles. Through these comparisons, Verghese emerges as a writer who transforms medical practice and human suffering into art, situating his works at the nexus of world literature and global trauma narratives.

Verghese's debut novel *Cutting for Stone* epitomizes his literary vision. As a sweeping family saga, it follows twin brothers Marion and Shiva born in Ethiopia against the backdrop of political upheaval. The novel explores themes of independence, sexuality, migration, and belonging, while intricately binding personal trauma with political and medical realities. At its core, the novel is about the practice of medicine: all the central characters are doctors or medical workers, and the very title derives from the Hippocratic Oath—"I will not cut for stone, even for patients in whom the disease is manifest" (181). The narrative expands trauma beyond the individual to encompass political trauma, exile, and the metaphysical dimensions of healing. By fusing epic storytelling with clinical detail, Verghese redefines the boundaries of contemporary fiction.

After fourteen years, Verghese published *The Covenant of Water*, an expansive multi-generational narrative set in Kerala from 1900 to 1977. The novel spans more than seven decades, chronicling the lives of the Parambil family cursed by a rare condition that causes at least one member of every generation to die by drowning. Water, as both metaphor and destiny, becomes the central motif, binding together themes of inheritance, suffering, and resilience. The published novel unfolds as a sweeping family saga that follows three generations of a South Indian family affected by a rare medical disorder, like his previous novel. This one also explores themes such as grief, loss, endurance, and healing.

He blends medical knowledge with literary storytelling. As same as his previous work, he skillfully portrays the disease, surgical procedures, and recovery process, all are closely interwoven with the emotional experiences of the characters. And it illustrating the trauma and its influences in the life of characters and how it shaped the legacy and so on. The novel unfolds as a broad multi-generational narrative that reflects the transformations of the country during the twentieth century. Against the background of colonial rule, independence, and social reform, the story explores the themes of love, faith, and personal suffering.

The works of Verghese always connected through physical strain and traumatic aspect. Cathy Caruth explained in her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing intersect that the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the language of literature meet .(9)

Unlike traditional epics that glorify warriors, Verghese's heroes are doctors, mothers, social reformers, and ordinary individuals whose sacrifices elevate them into figures of epic nobility. The novel interlaces family sagas with ecological trauma, colonialism, and India's historical transitions from colonial rule to independence. In its breadth and attention to human fragility, *The Covenant of Water* functions as a modern epic—where battles are not fought in war fields but against disease, destiny, and mortality.

Both *Cutting for Stone* and *The Covenant of Water* embody Verghese's vision of medical humanism. Illness and healing are not treated merely as clinical events but as metaphors for fractured identities, cultural memory, and spiritual endurance. By situating medical practice within epic narrative forms, Verghese expands the scope of literature itself, bridging science and art, tradition and modernity, exile and belonging. His geographical details—whether Ethiopia's landscapes or Kerala's backwaters—become part of a lyrical imagination that reflects memory, culture, and history.

Abraham Verghese stands as a distinctive contemporary writer whose works reimagine the epic for a globalized world. By weaving medicine into literature, he not only narrates suffering but transforms it into a metaphor for healing. His diasporic experiences and medical background empower him to cross cultural boundaries and create narratives that resonate universally. Alongside contemporaries like Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Salman Rushdie, Verghese contributes to World Literature, yet his Medical Humanism and epic storytelling set him apart.

From *Cutting for Stone* to *The Covenant of Water*, Verghese bridges the personal and the historical, the physical and the spiritual, the local and the global. His works testify to literature's enduring role as a vehicle for exploring trauma, healing, and identity—transforming human suffering into narratives of resilience and reconciliation that belong to the canon of world literature. In *Cutting for Stone*, Verghese crafts a rich, layered narrative that intertwines medicine, memory, and migration to depict how colonial legacies continue to shape the psyche of individuals and nations. The novel, set primarily in Ethiopia, unfolds through the eyes of Marion Stone, one of the twin sons of Sister Mary Joseph Praise, an Indian nun, and Thomas Stone, a British surgeon.

The setting itself—an Ethiopian Missing hospital founded during the colonial period—becomes a metaphorical space where colonial and postcolonial identities collide. Through characters like Thomas Stone and Sister Mary, Verghese traces the remnants of European missionary presence and its entanglement with local realities. The hospital, “a relic of the empire's lingering influence,” as Marion recalls, is both a site of healing and a reminder of subjugation (Verghese 56). This tension between benevolence and domination forms the novel's emotional and political core, illustrating how colonial structures persist in shaping the postcolonial consciousness.

The novel's characters function as embodiments of cultural memory and the lingering effects of colonial history. Marion and his twin brother Shiva, born of a forbidden union between a Western doctor and an Eastern nun, symbolize the hybrid offspring of empire—caught between worlds, languages, and loyalties. Their upbringing under the Ethiopian physician Ghosh introduces another layer of postcolonial negotiation, as Ghosh becomes a surrogate father who embraces indigenous knowledge alongside Western medicine. As Ghosh tells Marion, “The world turns on our small acts of mercy” (Verghese 218), reflecting a moral philosophy that contrasts sharply with the detachment of colonial medicine. Thomas Stone's flight from responsibility and his emotional alienation can be read as a metaphor for the colonial subject's moral abdication, a theme that critics like Priya Menon identify as “Verghese's indictment of imperial apathy and its enduring psychic scars” (Menon 104). Through these intersecting lives, the novel becomes an inquiry into how the legacy of empire disrupts familial, national, and personal identities.

The novel *Cutting for Stone* carries a lot of themes such as forgiveness, self-sacrifice, compassion, identity, abandonment, sex and many others. The author reveals the traumatic problems in the novel based on two aspects: physical trauma and psychological trauma. One of the main themes in *Cutting for Stone* is “strength and skill,” which drives the plot as well as the ambitious characters. The lesson it teaches us is that skill is important and valuable, but we should not forget to live while dedicating ourselves to our life's work. As much as we value strength and skill, we must also give equal importance to suffering. For the people in *Cutting for Stone*, life is filled with misery and suffering. The

author of the book is also the Professor for the Theory and Practice of Medicine at Stanford University School of Medicine in California and *Cutting for Stone* is considered his debut work.

Verghese explains the reason for his long novel by saying that his first novel took a long to come to fruition, probably because he did not prepare the whole novel when he began writing it. Because of this, he felt that he was different from other writers who had inspired him a lot. Therefore, he allowed his characters to develop, grow, and move forward naturally in the story. He is not able to stop them. He has continually written and made a wonderful piece called *Cutting for Stone*. Because of his unexpected writing, He has been cutting and reworking the plot so many times. He proudly shares that his book has been wonderful to see, it has been slow and steady, a case of tortoise nipping the hare. Thus the first novel has led to a great fame and success in his life.

Verghese's prose, rooted in the specificity of Ethiopian experience yet resonant across global contexts, redefines world literature as a dialogue of shared vulnerability and resilience. His surgeons and storytellers remind us that the human condition, though fractured by history, is bound by a collective desire to heal. Through the confluence of medicine, memory, and morality, Verghese reclaims colonial legacies not as burdens to be erased but as histories to be understood, sutured, and transformed into compassion.

*Cutting for Stone* transcends the boundaries of national and postcolonial literature to affirm a universal ethics of healing. Verghese's prose, rooted in the specificity of Ethiopian experience yet resonant across global contexts, redefines world literature as a dialogue of shared vulnerability and resilience. His surgeons and storytellers remind us that the human condition, though fractured by history, is bound by a collective desire to heal. Through the confluence of medicine, memory, and morality, Verghese reclaims colonial legacies not as burdens to be erased but as histories to be understood, sutured, and transformed into compassion. In doing so, *Cutting for Stone* affirms that the deepest form of healing—individual, cultural, and historical begins in the recognition of our shared humanity.

Abraham Verghese's *The Covenant of Water* presents a deep and thoughtful examination of trauma through its distinctive use of language and symbolism. The novel portrays trauma in a way that resonates with the theoretical ideas of Cathy Caruth, highlighting the intricate relationship between language, personal identity, and emotional memory. Verghese illustrates how traumatic experiences shape the lives of individuals and influence their understanding of themselves and the world around them. The novel also offers significant possibilities for further academic research, especially in areas such as ecocriticism and postcolonial studies. Its layered themes and narrative richness encourage continued scholarly exploration. Ultimately, Verghese's work not only reflects the lingering impact of trauma but also provides valuable insight into the complex nature of identity and human experience.

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