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Research Article

Healing Narratives and Becoming Doctor: *A Medical Humanities Reading of Abraham Verghese's Cutting for Stone*

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Abstract

The medical humanities field has emerged as an essential interdisciplinary tool that bridges the gap between clinical practice and humanistic inquiry. By blending literature, philosophy, ethics, and cultural studies into medical discourse, it cultivates physicians who are not only medically competent but also attuned to the lived experiences of their patients. It is within this field that Abraham Verghese's *Cutting for Stone* stands as a seminal text, offering a nuanced exploration of doctor identity and medical professionalism.

Marion Stone's search for belonging and identity in a disenchanted world forms the crux of this paper. Doctor identity, in the context of medical humanities, is not a static professional category but an evolving narrative shaped by lived experience, suffering, and interpersonal engagement. Marion's trajectory from an abandoned child to a reflective surgeon demonstrates that the physician's identity is constructed through encounters with illness, mentorship, and self-reflection. As the novel suggests, becoming a doctor is inseparable from becoming a certain kind of person.

This article analyses *Cutting for Stone* as a narrative of professional becoming, emphasising how doctor identity is formed and shaped through relational, ethical, and narrative dimensions rather than practical training alone. The discussion also highlights how Verghese critiques the depersonalization of modern medicine while advancing a humanistic paradigm deeply embedded in empathy, narrative competence, and compassion.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the doctor as a professional and social entity has evolved dynamically over recent decades. Traditional biomedical paradigms stressed objectivity, detachment from patients, and technical expertise. However, such an approach often neglects the subjective, ethical, and humanistic dimensions of healthcare. A doctor's identity, in this context, is understood as a dynamic construct shaped by personal history, social background, narrative engagement, and cultural contexts. As Richard Cruess observes:

"Professional identity formation is a complex, developmental process through which individuals internalize the values and norms of the medical profession." — Cruess et al., 2010

In *Cutting for Stone*, Abraham Verghese radically challenges the idea of the detached physician by foregrounding the emotional and humanistic complexities of medical practice. Marion, the protagonist, is shaped as a doctor not primarily by technical expertise, but through moments of doubt, grief, and introspection. His identity as a physician is equally marked by his relationships with patients, family, and mentors.

1.1 Key Objectives of this Study

- To analyze how doctor identity is formed through relational and narrative dimensions in *Cutting for Stone*
- To examine the role of the "wounded healer" paradigm in shaping Marion Stone's professional selfhood
- To explore how mentorship, environment, and personal trauma contribute to physician formation
- To assess Verghese's critique of depersonalized medicine and his vision of a humanistic medical practice
- To connect the novel's themes with broader theoretical frameworks in medical humanities

2. The Wounded Healer: Trauma and the Origins of Medical Vocation

Marion's journey begins with foundational trauma: he and his conjoined twin brother Shiva are born following the death of their mother, a Carmelite nun. Their father, Thomas Stone, abandons them shortly thereafter. This sets the foundation for a pervasive sense of loss and fragmentation that profoundly influences Marion's identity. Though raised in a medical environment by two surgeons, his understanding of medicine is rooted in observation rather than formal education.

The abandonment by his father — himself a surgeon — creates a complex and ambivalent relationship with the medical profession. Medicine, for Marion, simultaneously represents connection and unresolved grief. This tension becomes the central driving force of his professional formation.

"My intent wasn't to save the world as much as to heal myself."
— Verghese, *Cutting for Stone*

This statement encapsulates the "wounded healer" paradigm, a central concept in medical humanities. Rather than positioning

physicians as detached experts, the novel reveals that many enter medicine carrying unresolved personal wounds. Marion's professional choices are shaped by abandonment, loss, and a longing for belonging.

Arthur Frank, in *The Wounded Storyteller*, argues that illness and suffering can generate narrative authority and empathy. Verghese similarly suggests that the physician's capacity to heal others emerges from an intimate acquaintance with suffering. The physician becomes a site where vulnerability and responsibility intersect.

2.1 Key Dimensions of the Wounded Healer in the Novel

- Marion's personal trauma (abandonment, loss of mother) directly motivates his medical vocation
- His desire to "heal himself" parallels his commitment to healing others
- Personal vulnerability becomes a source of empathy rather than professional weakness
- The novel challenges the myth of the emotionally detached, purely technical physician

3. The Hospital as a Formative Space: Missing Hospital as Heterotopia

In *Cutting for Stone*, the hospital is not merely a workplace but a formative environment where identity is actively shaped. *Missing Hospital* functions as what Michel Foucault might call a "heterotopia" — a space where life, death, and knowledge converge. The novel portrays medicine both as a sacred vocation and a social practice, where the act of healing extends beyond physical intervention.

For Marion, growing up inside a hospital blurs the boundaries between personal and professional identity. Medicine is not something he chooses later in life; it is something he inhabits from childhood. This immersion suggests that doctor identity is shaped not only through formal education but through environmental and relational exposure across time.

3.1 The Role of Mentorship in Identity Formation

Mentorship plays a crucial role in Marion's development. Figures like Ghosh and Hema model a form of medicine grounded in compassion and humility. Their influence demonstrates that doctor identity is transmitted through embodied practice and lived example, rather than abstract instruction alone.

- Ghosh models ethical medicine: humility, empathy, and lifelong learning
- Hema provides emotional grounding and maternal care, shaping Marion's relational competence
- Both mentors demonstrate that doctoring is a moral vocation, not merely a technical skill
- Their influence shows how identity is passed down through observation and relationship

4. Surgery as Moral Metaphor: The Ethics of the Scalpel

Marion's specialization in surgery is significant for understanding professional identity formation. Surgery, with its

emphasis on precision and decisive intervention, might appear to privilege technical mastery above all else. Yet, in *Cutting for Stone*, it becomes a powerful metaphor for moral and emotional work.

The act of “cutting for stone” itself symbolizes the removal of what harms individuals — whether physical or psychological. The scalpel becomes an instrument for confronting grief, guilt, and estrangement. This metaphor highlights that the surgeon’s identity is not defined solely by technical skill, but by ethical discernment.

4.1 Ethical Dimensions of Surgical Practice in the Novel

- Every incision carries moral weight beyond its clinical purpose
- The surgeon must decide not only how to operate, but whether to operate at all
- Surgery becomes a metaphor for confronting one’s deepest personal wounds
- Technical excellence and ethical sensitivity are presented as inseparable in good medical practice

5. Relational Identity: Family, Twins, and the Ethics of Interdependence

Doctor identity in *Cutting for Stone* is profoundly relational and interactive. Marion’s development cannot be understood apart from his relationship with his twin Shiva, his mentors, and his absent father. The fractured family structure mirrors the fragmented self. Healing, in this context, involves not only treating patients but also repairing broken relationships.

The novel suggests that the physician’s ability to care for others is deeply intertwined with their capacity for intimacy and forgiveness. Shiva’s contrasting approach to medicine — more instinctive and less formal — serves as a foil to Marion’s reflective style.

5.1 Marion and Shiva: Two Models of Doctor Identity

- Marion: disciplined, reflective, narrative-driven — identity shaped by formal engagement and self-examination
- Shiva: intuitive, embodied, instinctive — identity shaped by innate empathy and natural connection
- Together, they represent a spectrum of medical selfhood that the novel refuses to collapse into a single ideal
- Their relationship highlights how identity is co-constructed through close interpersonal bonds

6. Narrative and Identity: Storytelling as Professional Formation

A key dimension of doctor identity formation in the novel is the centrality of narrative. Structured as a retrospective account, the novel has Marion narrating his own life story. This retrospective narration illustrates how identity is constructed through the act of storytelling.

"You live it forward, but understand it backwards." —
Verghese, *Cutting for Stone*

This insight captures the essence of narrative medicine: meaning emerges through reflection and interpretation. By recounting his life, Marion transforms disparate experiences — trauma, success, failure — into a coherent narrative, thereby shaping his identity. Narrative also fosters empathy, as understanding one’s own story enhances the ability to understand others.

Medical humanities scholars argue that narrative is essential for ethical practice because it situates medical decisions within a broader human context. As Arthur Frank powerfully states:

"The ill person’s body is a source of stories, and those stories demand to be told." — Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*

6.1 Functions of Narrative in Medical Identity Formation

- Narrative integrates fragmented experiences — trauma, loss, success — into a coherent self
- Retrospective storytelling allows for moral and emotional reflection on past decisions
- Narrative competence enables physicians to understand and honor patient experience
- Marion’s identity as a doctor is inseparable from his identity as a storyteller
- The act of narration is itself a form of healing

7. Compassion, Ethics, and the Measure of a Physician

Compassion emerges as the central and defining component of doctor identity in *Cutting for Stone*. Ghosh, Marion’s primary mentor, represents a holistic model of doctorhood. He emphasizes empathy, humility, and lifelong learning, serving as a moral anchor throughout Marion’s development. Ghosh’s approach aligns closely with medical humanities principles of ethical care.

"God will judge us... by what we did to relieve the suffering."
— Verghese, *Cutting for Stone*

This ethical framework aligns with the principles of care ethics, which prioritize relational responsibility and empathy over procedural compliance. Doctor identity, in this view, is ultimately defined by a sustained commitment to the well-being of others. At the same time, the novel honestly acknowledges the challenges of sustaining compassion amid systemic pressures and personal fatigue.

7.1 Core Ethical Values Articulated in the Novel

- Compassion: the capacity to feel and respond to another’s suffering
- Humility: recognizing the limits of one’s knowledge and power
- Empathy: entering imaginatively into the patient’s experience
- Relational responsibility: understanding care as inherently interpersonal
- Lifelong learning: treating medical knowledge as incomplete and ever-evolving

8. Conclusion: Doctor Identity as Ongoing Becoming

Cutting for Stone ultimately portrays doctor identity as an ongoing process of becoming, rather than a fixed professional state. Marion's journey illustrates that becoming a doctor involves continuous self-reflection, ethical negotiation, and relational engagement. The novel's central insight — that medicine is as much about healing the self as healing others — resonates deeply with the foundational principles of medical humanities.

By foregrounding the emotional, narrative, and ethical dimensions of medical practice, Verghese challenges reductive notions of professionalism. Doctor identity, as depicted in the novel, is a dynamic interplay of vulnerability and responsibility, skill and compassion, individuality and relationality. It is shaped not only by what doctors do, but by who they become in the process.

In an era where medicine is rapidly transformed by technological specialization, Cutting for Stone serves as a compelling reminder of the enduring significance of the human dimension within medical practice. Through its rich storytelling and nuanced characterization, the novel makes a vital contribution to medical humanities, offering lasting insights into the complexity of doctor identity and the phenomenon of professional formation.

8.1 Summary of Key Arguments

- Doctor identity is a dynamic narrative construct, not a fixed technical category
- Personal trauma and vulnerability are central to — not opposed to — professional formation
- The hospital environment, mentorship, and relational bonds shape identity as much as formal training
- Surgery functions as both literal practice and moral metaphor in the novel
- Narrative competence and storytelling are foundational to ethical medical practice
- Compassion, empathy, and humility are the ultimate measures of a physician's identity
- Verghese advocates for a humanistic medicine grounded in relational and narrative engagement

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