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Oceanic Literature and the Blue Humanities: Narratives of the Sea in Literature and Culture

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Abstract

Oceanic literature has become an important area of practice in literary and cultural studies, especially in the interdisciplinary context of the Blue Humanities. It examines the role of oceans, seas and maritime spaces in constructing the histories of migration, empire, environment and identity. Oceanic literature prefigures water as a physical and metaphorical agent that unites cultures, economies, and ecologies, unlike land-centred traditions of history and literature. This paper follows the history of the relevance of oceanic literature as a discipline, exploring its convergence with postcolonial studies, ecocriticism, diaspora studies and memory. It pays particular attention to the way in which oceanic storeys undermine national borders, emphasising ecological disasters and discourses that redefine global interconnection.

Keywords: Oceanic Literature, Blue Humanities, Postcolonialism, Diaspora, Empire, Ecology, Metaphor

Introduction

Land-based texts have historically dominated literary traditions, emphasising territorial empires, agrarian societies and continental identities. Oceans and seas, however, with more than three-quarters of the world covered by them, have had equally important influences on the history, culture and imagination of humanity. The field of oceanic literature, increasingly studied under the rubric of the Blue Humanities, shifts attention to maritime worlds, examining how literature represents oceans as spaces of exchange, violence, mobility, and ecological life. From Homer's *Odyssey* to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and from Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* to M. G. Vassanji's Indian Ocean fiction, the sea becomes a dynamic setting for rethinking colonialism, capitalism, diaspora, and the Anthropocene.

As Steve Mentz notes, "the ocean is not a void but a turbulent medium, full of signs, stories, and histories" (*Shipwreck Modernity* 7). His formulation reminds us that the sea is not a passive backdrop but an active presence in cultural and literary history. Similarly, Elizabeth DeLoughrey insists that the ocean cannot be reduced to metaphor alone but must be understood as both material and symbolic, shaping "maritime modernity and planetary consciousness" (*Routes and Roots* 4).

This paper situates oceanic literature within the interdisciplinary framework of the Blue Humanities. It begins by examining the intellectual origins and literary influences of the Blue Humanities, from classical mythology to Romanticism, modernism, and postcolonial literatures. It then traces major themes in oceanic literature: the sea as a space of empire and capitalism, as an archive of diaspora and memory, as an ecological frontier in the Anthropocene, and as a metaphor of poetic imagination.

Oceanic Literature and the Blue Humanities

Beginning of the Blue Humanities

The Blue Humanities emerged in the early twenty-first century as an extension of ecocriticism and cultural studies, with scholars like Steve Mentz, Margaret Cohen, and Elizabeth DeLoughrey advocating for the sea as a central object of study. While the Green Humanities has emphasised terrestrial environments, the Blue Humanities extends this critical gaze to the watery spaces that cover most of the planet.

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Mentz argues that “the Blue Humanities insists on the ocean as central to our cultural imagination, a site where history, ecology, and literature intersect” (*Ocean 2*).

Sea and Literary Influence

The sea has always shaped literary imagination. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus’s perilous journey across the Mediterranean dramatises the sea as a site of danger, exile, and transformation. In biblical texts, the crossing of the Red Sea represents divine power and liberation. Ancient myths depict oceans as thresholds between life and death, chaos and creation. These early texts established the sea as a powerful literary and cultural influence, shaping narratives of human struggle and transcendence.

Features of the Blue Humanities

Several defining features characterise the Blue Humanities:

1. **Interdisciplinarity:** The fusion of literary criticism with the history, oceanography and environmental studies.
2. **Transnationalism:** Emphasising the sea links different cultures and pasts across national borders.
3. **Postcolonial criticism:** The discovery of how sea routes created the empire, slavery, and indenture.
4. **Ecocriticism:** Prefiguring the ecological systems of the ocean and their susceptibility in the Anthropocene.
5. **Metaphoric Lushness:** Insistence on seawater as meaning something profound and fluid, and uncertain.

Mythology and Ancient Texts

Poseidon is the ruler of the seas as described in Greek mythology, with both the power to create and to destroy. The adventures of maritime exploration are romanticised in Jason and the Golden Fleece as he embarks on a journey to find the Golden Fleece. Likewise, the Hebrew Bible portrays the sea as a supernatural power that is a threat and at the same time a freeing power. These myths portray the duality of the sea as both chaos and renewal, establishing narrative patterns that were later employed in further literature.

Romanticism: Romantic poets revived the sea as an emblem of the sublime. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Coleridge dramatises the sea as a place of moral and spiritual testing where a divine force punishes human pride. Byron glorified the sea as unlimited liberation, a primal power which cannot be organised. The sea in Romanticism turns into a reflection of human imagination and combines horror and transcendence.

Modernism and Postmodernism: Modernist texts often portray the sea as ambiguous and alienating. In Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, rivers and seas are conduits of imperial exploitation. Eliot’s “*The Waste Land*” employs maritime imagery to evoke cultural decay and renewal. Postmodern literature, by contrast, emphasises the ocean’s fluidity and fragmentation. Margaret Cohen notes that the “novel at sea becomes a laboratory for modernity’s transformations” (*The Novel and the Sea 8*).

Postcolonial Dimensions: Postcolonial writers re-centre the sea as witness to slavery, indenture, and displacement. Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* depicts the Indian Ocean as a site of

forced migration and colonial capitalism. Vassanji’s *The Gunny Sack* engages with the Indian Ocean world to narrate East African Indian diasporic identity. Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* theorises the ocean as central to diasporic modernity, where identities are forged in circulation rather than national boundaries and rootedness.

Environmental Dimensions

In the Anthropocene, the Blue Humanities increasingly foregrounds the ecological crisis facing oceans. Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” captures the incremental devastation of marine ecosystems through pollution, acidification, and rising sea levels. Pacific Island writers like Epeli Hau’ofa emphasise both resilience and vulnerability in the face of climate change (*We Are the Ocean 34*). Literature thus bridges cultural memory with urgent environmental advocacy.

The Sea as Space of Empire and Capitalism

The oceans played a central role in the formation of modern empires and the development of global capitalism. Marcus Rediker describes the ship as “a machine of modernity,” simultaneously a factory, prison, and war machine (*The Slave Ship 10*). Oceans facilitated the slave trade, opium trade, and indenture labour system, binding together continents through exploitation.

Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* dramatises this history through the voyages of indentured labourers on the *Ibis*. The *kala pani* crossing represents rupture and transformation, situating the sea as both trauma and possibility. Similarly, Atlantic slavery literature foregrounds the Middle Passage as a site of violence and memory. Morrison’s *Beloved* recalls “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” of the slave ships (Morrison 199). Walcott’s poetry invokes the sea as “history,” filled with the ghosts of the enslaved (Walcott 364).

Thus, the sea emerges as both stage and actor in empire and capitalism, facilitating exploitation while also becoming a site of resistance and narrative recovery.

Ocean as Archive of Memory and Diaspora

The ocean functions as a fluid archive of diasporic memory. Glissant calls the sea “a womb and a grave,” embodying both loss and genesis (*Poetics of Relation 6*). Vassanji’s *The Gunny Sack* embodies this metaphor: the sack of memories parallels the Indian Ocean as a fragmented yet vital repository of diasporic identity.

Caribbean literature similarly portrays the sea as both a source of trauma and a catalyst for renewal. Walcott’s “*The Sea Is History*” evokes the Atlantic as both graveyard and birthplace of creolised culture. Gilroy’s theory of the *Black Atlantic* underscores the transoceanic circulation of identities that cannot be contained within national borders (Gilroy 15).

Through these narratives, the sea is not mere geography but a living archive of exile, hybridity, and cultural reinvention.

Ecological Dimensions: The Sea in the Anthropocene

In the twenty-first century, oceanic literature increasingly grapples with climate change. Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* highlights the fragile ecology of the Sundarbans, where rising seas and cyclones reshape both human and nonhuman life. Nixon’s concept of “slow violence” illuminates how

environmental degradation often unfolds invisibly yet devastates communities over time (*Slow Violence* 3). Pacific Island literature dramatises the existential threat faced by nations like Kiribati and Tuvalu, where rising seas imperil entire cultures. Hau'ofa emphasises both resilience and the need for global solidarity (*We Are the Ocean* 34). Oceanic literature thus foregrounds the urgency of ecological responsibility, making visible crises often overlooked in dominant discourse.

The Sea as Metaphor and Poetic Imagination

Beyond material history and ecology, oceans function as potent metaphors. Melville's Ishmael calls the sea "the image of the ungraspable phantom of life" (*Moby-Dick* 23), situating it as an existential mystery. Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* uses the ocean as a stage for spiritual and moral reckoning. Walcott's Caribbean poetics reimagine the sea as both scar and source of cultural renewal, embodying the paradox of colonial trauma and creative rebirth.

The metaphorical richness of the sea lies in its ambiguity; its shifting tides, infinite horizons, and hidden depths lend themselves to philosophical, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist readings. The ocean thus exceeds geography to become a medium of imagination itself.

Conclusion

Oceanic literature foregrounds the sea as more than a backdrop; it is an active agent shaping history, memory, ecology, and imagination. By tracing maritime narratives, we uncover alternative histories of empire, diaspora, and environment that destabilise land-centred perspectives. The ocean emerges as an archive, a metaphor, and an ecological frontier, offering new frameworks for understanding global interconnectedness.

As rising seas reshape coastlines and climate change threatens marine ecosystems, oceanic literature becomes urgent. It asks us to rethink our relationship with water, history, and ecology. By re-centring the ocean, literature reimagines not only the past but also the possibilities for survival in a planetary, oceanic future.

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