

READING AND TRACING BLUE EPISTEMOLOGIES: OCEANIC FLOWS IN WORLD LITERATURE

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Blue humanities, an interdisciplinary area within literary and cultural studies, considers the planet's composition—71% water, 29% land—and turns the usual perspective around. The ocean's untamed nature, its constant motion, and the complex connections linking people to everything beyond—these become the focus. When stories immerse themselves in ocean settings, they leave behind the solid certainty of land-based tales and dive into the ever-changing, layered bonds that only the sea can create. The sea has been a significant theme in literature and art throughout history, but it has only recently gained attention in academic discussions. There is a noticeable shift in focus from terrestrial to marine environments, and from what is visible on the surface to the mysteries beneath. In the nineteenth century, artists like MW Turner and Winslow Homer showcased the seascape in its fullest expression. Eighteenth-century seascapes primarily focused on sailing mechanics, but they later transformed into a canvas for exploring concepts of modernity. Ocean studies introduce a fresh epistemological perspective, offering new ways to contemplate the surface, depths, and extraterrestrial aspects of planetary resources and relationships. This is an interdisciplinary field that involves transnational and hemispheric perspectives in literary, cultural, and historical research. It is a varied domain that includes environmental studies, marine biology, Atlantic history, Pacific studies, ecology, scientific research, and more. This broad area of study examines the ocean as a framework to rethink established ideas, concepts, and approaches.

The Earth we inhabit, often referred to as the 'Blue Planet', is named so because oceans cover seventy percent of its surface. The oceans are not only fully populated but also contribute over half of the world's oxygen and play a crucial role in regulating our climate.

Since the early nineteenth century, the oceans have emerged as a central theme in various forms of literature, including plays, travel essays, poetry, songs, and films, depicting the ocean as foreign, vast, expansive, empty,

purifying, and indestructible. In contemporary times, the ocean serves as a setting for the creation and dissolution of social relationships and identities, alternative political movements, legal developments, economic activities, militarization, and cultural annotations. This deep blue sea holds significance across all aspects of human existence, encompassing aesthetic, historical, religious, political, and social expressions. In earlier literature, the sea played a vital role in the works of Daniel Defoe, particularly in 'Robinson Crusoe'. It reached a higher level of metaphysical depth with 'Moby Dick' and continued through the aquatic narratives of Jules Verne.

Rachel Carson's 'The Sea Around Us,' released in 1951, represents humanity's mental and imaginative engagement with the ocean. John Steinbeck's 'The Log from the Sea of Cortez,' co-written with naturalist Ed Ricketts, marks one of the earliest examples of this genre through its scientific exploration of the sea. In 2009, literary scholar Steve Mentz introduced the term 'blue cultural studies' or 'Blue Humanities,' offering a platform for the collaborative efforts of a growing number of scholars who have redirected their focus from land to ocean.

Throughout history, from Homer's 'Odyssey' to Adam Nicholson's 'Life Between the Tides: In Search of Rock Pools and Other Adventures Along the Shore,' the ocean has continually inspired poets, writers, and artists. In an era facing extreme weather, melting polar ice caps, marine pollution, and the loss of biodiversity, there are countless artistic and activist efforts focused on water. However, there remains a significant gap in thorough cultural and literary analysis concerning the relationship with water, particularly in light of the climate crisis and our self-centred approach to nature. The outlook for the 'Blue

Humanities' appears optimistic, fueled by a rising curiosity about ocean studies and its various expressions in arts, literature, painting, music, and more. Movies, literature, and photography that focus on the ocean present marine life as a medium for daring exploration and

an ideal subject for aesthetic admiration. The emerging field of maritime humanities engages with a range of contemporary discussions, such as globalization, post-colonialism, environmentalism, eco-criticism, and the evolution of science and technology. As a result, the sea, which has historically been viewed as a metaphor for existence or quietly ignored, reveals new opportunities for the study of early modern literature.

The sea is represented as both a source of wealth and a source of death, which exemplifies two early modern nautical symbolism trends: the sea is both a commercial route and a vision of God's judgment. Raban and Auden overlook the split worldly and spiritual sense of water in early modern society. The literary sea would evolve by the time Melville and Conrad described it, but as early modern European sailors circumnavigated the globe, the sea became vital to Western culture's sense of self and position in the world. The water is in a completely different location than the land, both physically and culturally.

Although our bodies are around two-thirds water, water is a hostile element that threatens human life. Many ancient scriptures describe the sea's underlying inhospitality to human existence, particularly in traditions that associate the sea with primordial chaos.

Visions of paradise that influenced early modern literature, such as Hesiod's *Works and Days* and the *Book of Revelation*, predict a utopian future in which 'there will be no more sea.' However, as the fisherman in *Pericles* knows, the ocean is also a place of plenty and recuperation.

The poem's picture of oceanic alterity is more complex than the monster-filled vacant spots on medieval maps. *Lycidas* makes a rigorous distinction between freshwater beneficia to people, and saltwater harmful. Freshwater, such as the Muses 'sacred spring' (Milton 15), the pastoral 'fountain' (Milton 24) by which the poet once sat with *Lycidas*, and even the 'fresh dew of the night' (Milton 29) in which the two young poets laboured, makes the earth safe for classicized English lyric. This environment, characterized by characters such as the river god Camus (Milton 103–7), the legend of Arethusa and Alpheus, and the Virgilian river Mincius (Milton 86), portrays a utopian world of welcoming water that fades when Edward King drowns in the remorseless deep'. The

conflict between Arethusa and the river god Alpheus implies that even fresh water contains violence, but the fantasy of union between the river and the fountain that Arethusa becomes which early modern mythographers read as an allegory of the union between truth and justice, or imperfection and virtue implies that fresh water can produce a livable, interpretable world through conflict.

This collection of photographs depicts a complicated but ultimately sustainable aquatic environment. The poem contrasts Poseidon's salty dominion with the land-based pastoral presided over by Phoebus (Milton 76–84), with many allusions to Virgil and Theocritus and the help-meets of fresh water, Arethusa, Camus, and the Muses' spring. Even the sea god, however, denies guilt for the king's death; his Herald Triton claims that "neither the waves nor the Felon winds have doomed this gentle swain" (Milton 91-2). Human failure rather than divine hostility introduces the attack on the corrupt clergy of England both suggesting the incapacity of human-ordering systems to match the divinely-created natural world. Images of redemption in *Lycidas* come not from classical poetry or human technology but from Christian revelation, first through St. Peter, '*The Pilot of the Galilean Lake* (Milton 109), and later through 'the dear might of him that walked the waves' (Milton 173). The turn toward Christian triumphalism: 'Weep no more, woeful shepherds; weep no more; for Lycidas, your sorrow is not dead. Poseidon blames the flawed human tools that failed to navigate his ocean: "It was that deadly and perfidious bark built in the eclipse and rigged with curses dark that plunged so low that hallowed head of thine." (Milton 100–2). The ship is shown as a hubristic piece of technology, its rigging incapable of withstanding the weird domain of the water. As a result, the seas reflect the boundaries of human intrusion. They serve as a metaphor for locations on the globe where mortal bodies cannot safely travel.

Although references to maritime tides and waves are less prominent now, they have historically affected and even energized debates about migration. According to the *Literary Digest*, in the early twentieth century, colonial rulers frequently used ocean analogies to emphasize the hazards of Chinese, Japanese, and Indian migration to the white settler dominions. Oceans provided an emotive picture for authorities to emphasize their racial worries

about the seaborne movement from east to west. But the Literary Digest left out that the seas were equally essential as physical locations of death and hope. The ocean was critical to the survival of people above and below deck, including slaves, indentured workers, and migrants, including the Komagata Maru passengers. It surrounded and encircled the ship, dictated the risky circumstances of navigation, and extended into an unknown future, opening up new frontiers of possibilities. The oceans were locations of colonial brutality for Gurdit Singh, who chartered the Komagata Maru, but they also inspired alternate imaginaries of liberation.

According to Kedarnath Singh, the sea created fresh and renewed prospects for anti-colonial solidarity and battles against British imperial power. Oceans have figured significantly in narratives of adventure, conquest, trade, and money in the European imagination, but not frequently as historical locations. Some European thinkers identified Europe with the sea, while others connected non-Europe with the land. Despite these links, the water was supposed to be a blank realm devoid of history, politics, or law. Conrad, a seafarer turned literary prodigy, understood the importance of the sea to human experience and imagination. Conrad's literary ideas came from his many years of seafaring, and he devoted much of his creative energy to depicting life in marine environments. Yet, as the opening epigraph indicates, seas are rarely viewed as having a past or a history in his creative works: 'The ocean has no compassion, no faith, no law, no memory.' What is needed to comprehend the sea as a fundamental locus of communal memory? The solution to this issue necessitates a geographical, historical, and ethical reorientation, one that shifts our focus away from Terra firma and towards the planet's vast, interconnected, and aquatic areas. This fundamental shift fundamentally transforms our understanding of the past, of remembering and forgetting, of memory, and history. Texts, files, and documents are no longer the sole types of historical evidence. It also contains tales and memories, as well as artifacts and items such as corpses, pieces, and shipwrecks that enliven life and death

In the Indian epic, the Lanka Kanda of Ramacharitmanas, Hanuman, the son of the wind, declared, "My Lord's strength could have previously dried

up the ocean's waters beneath the fierce fire that lies beneath the sea." Then it was replenished by the deluges of tears shed by your enemies' weeping wives, and that is what makes it saline. According to the Epics and Puranas, a bird reportedly gave birth to 3 babies on a beach. A massive ocean wave swept in and carried off the infant birds. To teach the lesson to the ocean, the bird began removing water from the ocean with her beak, thereby drying it gradually. The sage Agastya inquired about the purpose. The bird recounted how the merciless ocean had swept away her offspring. Agastya, a compassionate sage, declared, "I will take action against the merciless ocean for his error" and departed. One day, while the sage Agastya was conducting his worship and reciting prayers on the seashore, a massive ocean wave swept away all of his worship items. The Agastya was extremely enraged and recalled the bird's previous complaint. He took the entire ocean into his hands in three Anjali (the hollow formed by joining both hands). The sea lost all its water. The deities asked sage Agastya to replenish the oceans. The Agastya refilled the ocean through yogbal, which is why it became saline. Thus,

Agastya's accomplishment redefines Hindu maritime literature as an early form of blue humanities, combining physical seawater influence with spiritual control over elemental disorder.

Similarly, in the context of Tamil history and Literature, one of the well-known Chola kings was Karikalan. He established a naval force and conducted a conflict against Sri Lanka, subsequently seizing twelve thousand individuals as prisoners and utilizing them in constructing an embankment along the River Kaveury, as documented in the Sri Lankan chronicle, Rajavali. Karikala fought a war against Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka was a resourceful island, boasting a wealth of natural and living things, including elephants, parrots, and snakes that were exported to Rome. Following the battle, commodities from Sri Lanka arrived in Tamilakam, particularly in the renowned port city of Kaviripoompattinam, which was a fabulous and famous city of the Chola dynasty. The early literature Pattinapalai described miscellaneous commodities imported from various distant lands to Kaviripoompattinam and sold within and outside Tamilakam. Sri Lanka was renowned for its pearls due to its proximity

to the Palk Strait, located in the northern region. The southernmost extent of Tamilakam bordered the Palk Strait, which was renowned for its pearl fishery. The Pandiya kingdom was renowned for pearls, similar to Sri Lanka, which was also well-known for its pearl source, thanks to its geographical conditions.

In Sri Lanka, there were abundant resources; to manage the movement of these resources, the Chola king Karikala conquered the region. Following his efforts, commodities arrived at Kaveripoompattinam and were then exported to other nations. The Greek merchants obtained goods from Sri Lanka for their country from warehouses located on the West coast.

It appears that they went to Tamilakam to purchase the items, rather than to Sri Lanka for trade purposes, without having to take a voyage to Sri Lanka. Poompuhar and Muziri were significant commercial ports and marketplaces for a diverse range of goods. The Yavana obtained the goods either from Kaveripoompattinam or from Muziri and then exported them to their countries. The Sri Lankans exported their merchandise to Muziri, the port of Chera, from which the Westerners transported them to their own countries. The third division of the sea battle was the capture of the port, which was the key entry point for foreigners into Tamilakam. Removal of barriers facilitated the establishment of smooth and attractive trade contacts. The capture of ports highlighted the significance and widespread acclaim of the King. The port of Muziri was situated on the West coast, serving as a notable and accessible entry point for Westerners into Tamilakam. It may have been Arabs, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans who first came into contact with Muziri and Tondi, only after which they were fully integrated into Tamilakam. The port of Muziri was under the control of the Chera kings and the Chera region was renowned for its pepper, which was a highly prized spice by Westerners, particularly the Romans.

Ancient tales and poems—like Manimekalai, which continues the epic—describe Poompuhar, a city that once flourished by the sea. Eventually, the ocean consumed it. Some attribute this to erosion, others to a tsunami, but regardless, the city disappeared beneath the water. It's a striking reminder: no matter how grand our cities become, nature ultimately has the last say. Even the most

remarkable accomplishments, built by the sea's bounty, can vanish instantly—erased by a force as unstoppable as Kannagi's famed fury.

In Australian Blue Humanities, an edited collection titled *Critical Approaches to the Australian Blue Humanities*, edited by Maxine Newlands and Claire Hansen, discusses the Australian perspective as the focus of the first interdisciplinary volume, which examines humanity's complex relationships with water environments amidst conditions of aridity, ephemerality, politicization, and climate crises.

By incorporating oceanography (marine sciences) and the disciplines of limnology (freshwater sciences), social sciences, and the environment overlaps. The humanities are critically examined in the field of blue humanities. The planet's troubled seas and distressed freshwaters are caused by multiple factors, such as sociocultural, literary, historical, aesthetic, ethical, and theoretical aspects.

"Stories can change our customary ways of thinking about troubled waters and help us discover deeper meanings about our entangled relations with water that gave us and all that is biological the gift of life on this planet. Thus, though it may sound like a bold claim, I want to conclude by affirming that solutions lie in the new stories we tell, and in stories told by aquatic narrative agencies that enable us to think with water." (Oppermann 57)

Therefore, the field offers comprehensive analyses of human interactions with fluid sites from both material-linguistic and sociocultural standpoints, and provides analytical frameworks and critical pathways for studying these relations.

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