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**Hydrocolonial Entanglements and Fluid Modernities:  
Reconfiguring Cultural Formations through Blue  
Humanities in South Asian Literature**

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**Abstract:** The sole focus of the paper lies in its arguments about a new emerging but very prominent aspect of environment which is an integral part of environment and ecology itself I.e. Ocean and Hydrospace which presently studied through the lenses of Blue humanities or Blue Cultural Studies, in this paper this theory is used as a tool to understand and study how culture forms in South Asian Literature and narratives. While breaking away from land-based perspectives, the paper focuses on the role of the ocean as an epistemic and ontological force that produces alternative conceptions of identity, history, and international connections. In dialogue with blue humanities, postcolonial ecocriticism, and hydrocolonialism, the study analyzes how maritime spaces, especially the Indian Ocean, become repositories of colonial contact, diasporic movements, and ecological catastrophes through a theoretical discussion of certain novels by Amitav Ghosh and other works of South Asian literature. This analysis shows that South Asian literary texts reconfigure the ocean as a material presence that challenges notions of territorial sovereignty and promotes cultural hybridity.

**Keywords:** *Blue Humanities, Hydrocolonialism, South Asian Literature, Oceanic Studies, Indian Ocean*

## Introduction

The heightened concerns related to ecological crises have led to a reconsideration of perspectives in the field of literary studies in favor of non-terrestrial orientations, resulting in the development of blue humanities. In this context, blue humanities as an interdisciplinary approach shifts critical focus from terrestrial aspects to the study of oceans' cultural, historical, and ecological relevance. The importance of oceans in understanding human cultural production has been noted in recent scholarship, where they have been defined as "the most important and neglected topic in the humanities."

As such, within the literary tradition of South Asia, the ocean emerges as a space of interaction, movement, and transformation from colonial trade routes through to today's forced migration due to climatic changes. Nevertheless, the ocean is largely understudied by literary critics due to their land-based approach to the formation of nations and identities.

This paper will discuss the ways in which South Asian literature especially that of Amitav Ghosh, contributes to the emergence of the blue humanities.

## Research Objectives

- a. A portrayal of oceans as spaces of cultural and ecological formation through South Asian literature.
- b. The effect of the blue humanities on literary theory.
- c. The relationship between colonization, migration, and environmental crisis in the context of the study of oceans.
- d. The creation of hybrid identities through marine environments.
- e. The rise of oceanic literary studies emerging from the Global South.

## Research Questions

1. How do the blue humanities alter the study of South Asian literature?
2. How does the ocean become a form of knowledge and culture?
3. How does the Indian Ocean become a transformative space within South Asian literature?
4. What role does the ocean play in the formation of hybrid identities?
5. How can oceanic models address contemporary environmental issues?

## **Hypothesis**

In this essay, the assumption is made that literature from South Asia, when considered using blue humanities, becomes an active agent in creating a sense of identity, history, and ecology that transcends traditional land-based and national perspectives.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts the approach of qualitative and interdisciplinary research which integrates literary analysis with theoretical discussion using primary sources together with other sources such as scholarly journals, academic papers written by scholars, professors, and electronic texts.

## **Theoretical Foundation**

In the present era, specifically in the late 2000s till date Blue Cultural studies or Blue Humanities become a wide area of research and development with pioneering figures like Steve Mentz, regarded as the “Father of Blue Humanities” along with other scholars like Elizabeth DeLoughrey , who has depicted and talks about Ocean, Seas and Wet places not just as a tool or space or political control but more of a place of close connection in forming culture and communion where hydrospace works as an active agent in change. This research paper primarily consider this idea and ideologies as crucial to understand the text which are discussed and elaborated below and also not denying others contributions and other ideologies and theories which also can be studied based on these text like Postcolonial studies, Trauma Studies, Psychoanalysis, Marxist studies and researchers are welcome to do further research based on this article.

## **Textual Analysis**

The texts mentioned below mainly analyzed on the basis of these concepts and representations:

- i. The use of oceanic images and symbols in the primary texts.
- ii. The depiction of migration and displacement as themes.
- iii. The history and stories of the sea, hydrocolonialism, and fluid modernities.

## **Postcolonial Ecocritical Approach**

Though this study focuses on the representation of fluid and hydrocolonial spaces as main area from where these texts can be understood better or new fresh perspectives can be developed though studying the colonial impact and how postcolonial theories can also be used to relate more to the ecological crisis where blame game sometimes blur the reality.

## **Comparative Approach**

Texts from South Asian literature are analyzed comparatively to highlight shared oceanic themes and regional specificities.

## **Literature Review**

There has been increased interest in the role of blue humanities within literary scholarship. Das and C. B. observe that blue humanities as study is more focused on “the relation of humanity to aquatic environments,” especially in light of climate change issues. Yet, studies on blue humanities in the context of South Asian literatures are lacking.

Works of Amitav Ghosh, in particular, have drawn attention due to their themes relating to climate crisis, migration, and colonial history. The significance of coastal environments as factors of cultural identity and environmental awareness is highlighted in *The Hungry Tide*. Other example is the analysis of oceanic space as an agent of colonial communication and culture in the *Ibis Trilogy* along with Climatic Crisis in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016).

One recent study calls for a combined reading of blue humanities and postcolonial theory, since “ecological and cultural negotiations can be revealed in literary texts through a focus on oceanic spaces.” While contributing to the current discourse, this study does not present a theoretical basis for oceanic reading in South Asian literatures.

The purpose of this paper is to fill this lacuna through synthesizing blue humanities, hydrocolonialism, and postcolonial ecocriticism.

## **Theoretical Framework: Blue Humanities and Hydrocolonialism**

The blue humanities contest the hegemony of land-based knowledge systems by highlighting the sea as a place of mobility and relationality. In contrast to the notion of terrestrial spaces that are marked by demarcations and fixity, seas cannot be contained and encourage flows and relations.

The concept of hydrocolonialism expands upon this idea by looking at colonial practices in relation to the seas. In the case of the Indian Ocean, it was used as a means for imperial conquests and trading. In South Asian literature, we see how the ocean has been portrayed as a locus for both exploitation and resistance. Such a dual portrayal captures the ambiguity of the ocean space.

## Oceanic Archives in South Asian Literary Traditions

### Expanding the Oceanic Canon: South Asian Primary Texts

Whereas earlier debates have emphasized a handful of novels by Amitav Ghosh, an engagement with the literary traditions of South Asia shows that oceanic consciousness has been a part of this region for a long time now.

#### *The Ibis Trilogy* and Colonial Oceanic Networks

South Asian Literature though cannot be limited to Indian writers but to analyze the concepts in this paper Amitav Ghosh is the one I found more suitable who really has a big contribution in depicting ecological crisis, migration, identity, control, cultural memory, trauma, interconnections including Ocean, rivers and other wet places, where his writing like *The Ibis Trilogy* (*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, *Flood of Fire*) along with other works like *Gun Island*, *Ghost Eye*, *The Hungry Tide* and *The Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* bore many representations, imageries, metaphors and incidents related to Ocean history and colonial troops in the geographical area called or marked as South Asia. In the trilogy, Ghosh narrates the complex history of the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean that was dominated by trade, labour migration, and imperialism.

First of all, in *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh recreates the Ibis as an example of oceanic cosmopolitanism since the ship carries a diverse array of people ranging from indentured labourers to colonial officials. In this case, the ocean is not only a means of transportation but also the place where one could undergo the process of transformation and reconstitution. As one crosses the *kala pani*, they become free of any caste distinctions.

Further, *River of Smoke* explores the idea of the Indian Ocean as part of the larger network that connects the ocean with Canton through circulation of goods, languages, and cultures. Finally, in *Flood of Fire*, Ghosh shows the connection between the Indian Ocean and the violent colonisation process. All three books can be described as a manifestation of "*hydrocolonial modernity*".

#### Sri Lankan Texts and Insular Oceanic Consciousness

The ocean in South Asian literature is not exclusive to the Indian mainland. In Sri Lanka, there is a different angle to representing oceans influenced by the country's insular nature and oceanic history. For instance, in Romesh Guneseckera's novel, *Reef* (1994), oceans serve both as a means of sustenance and a fragile ecosystem that needs protection. The author brings up marine settings, specifically coral reefs, to bring out the effect of environmental degradation and political turmoil. In this case, oceans are portrayed as integral to life in ways that affect economic activities and cultural identity.

Furthermore, some novels written by Michael Ondaatje indirectly represent oceans. For example, the novel *"Anil's Ghost"* (2000) depicts issues of archaeology, transnational movements, and displacement that indirectly relate to oceans. Despite the emphasis on civil war in the novel, the insular setting places the novel within an oceanic context, where the sea represents isolation and connectivity.

The ocean in these texts contributes to the *"blue humanities"* by illustrating the dependence between ecological and political systems and the vulnerability of island cultures.

### **Bengali Literature and Riverine-Oceanic Continuum**

The literature of Bengal is another important contribution towards studying the oceans of South Asia. In *"Padma Nadir Majhi"* (1936) by Manik Bandopadhyay, there exists the importance of the river as a space prior to the ocean, which defines the existence of the fishing community and their identity. It captures the vulnerability associated with the dependence on water for livelihood, and at the same time shows the fluid nature of social relations.

Also, *"Hansuli Banker Upakatha"* (1947) by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay presents river-based cultures in relation to the larger oceanic systems. Thus, the texts indicate that an analysis of the oceans requires the recognition of their being part of the hydrological continuum of river and delta ecosystems, as well as other coastal spaces.

The modern literary engagements like Ghosh's *"The Hungry Tide,"* which represents the region of the Sundarbans, can help understand how the interconnection of the river and ocean leads to complex interactions of human and non-human entities.

### **Oceanic Diasporas and South Asian Mobility**

Oceanic South Asian Literature is characterized by the depiction of migration patterns through which diasporic populations have come to inhabit the Indian Ocean space. Labor migrations and trades carried out by Indians during colonization are some examples of events that shaped the oceanic cultural production.

For example, the *Sea of Poppies* is one such text, which depicts the journey of laborers who had to be forcefully moved to their respective plantations on the ocean waters. This is similar to the case of Sri Lankan and Bengali texts, which involve discussions about migration, exile, and return. All these literary representations can be studied under the umbrella of blue humanities or blue cultural studies.

### **Ocean as Archive: Memory, History, and Cultural Transmission**

Another key point made in blue humanities is that oceans can act as cultural archives that hold memories of people. In South Asian literatures, the Indian Ocean acts as an archive for the histories of migrations, exchanges, and encounters between colonizers and natives.

For example, in the work *Sea of Poppies*, the Indian Ocean is shown as an arena where “ideologies, technologies, and cultural practices were transmitted”. This approach to history questions conventional views and stresses the importance of oceans in global histories. Thus, oceans can be seen as places where the past and the present meet.

### **Oceanic Identities: Migration, Diaspora, and Hybridity**

“She tried to imagine what it would be like to be in their place, to know that you were forever an outcaste; to know that you would never again enter your father’s house...” (Ghosh, 67).

The spaces of the oceans provide the opportunity for travel and transport of goods, thus creating new identities. Characters in South Asian literature have identities formed through maritime migration. Traditionally, the movement of people in the Indian Ocean has resulted in the creation of diasporic cultures that have fluid identities.

This tradition continues in contemporary literary works, which incorporate themes of climate change migrations in their discussions. The discussion indicates that identities are not fixed but can be understood as a process influenced by migration.

### **Ecological Crisis and Oceanic Agency**

In the Anthropocene era, the relevance of oceans in environmental crises has gained importance. Increased sea levels, ocean pollution, and climate change have turned ocean spaces into vulnerable and resistant zones.

In the literary parlance and within South Asian Literature Writers like Romesh Gunekera, Amitav Ghosh, Michael Ondaatje so skillfully woven the thread to represent Ocean as a powerful agent of change and how it influence the anthropocentric view and rightly portrayed the mutual connection between human and non humans in their works and how destruction of one leads to survival crisis of the other in this process. These ideas can be considered as seminal to understand ecocritical view and ecological relation and its impact on culture formation not only this by here mythological representations are also another aspect to be talked about which needs further elaboration.

## **Oceanic Cosmopolitanism and Alternative Modernities**

Cosmopolitanism believes in the notion and ideology that irrespective of political, social, ethical and other determiners or construct human being belongs to a form of homogenous and single community with equal position and value but Oceanic Cosmopolitanism has very little with this idea and belief rather it operates as a bridge and works beyond territorial borders like in Ghosh *Gun Island* one can find both Sundarban and Venice which interconnects with each other through Ocean, as more of a shred space between the two nation state.

This idea of cosmopolitanism can be traced back to the countries colonial histories, trade, commercial exchange and markets or chains of networks in South Asian literary texts. Though these texts are extensively read in this paper from a blue humanities point of view or ocean centric rather than land centric perspective this forms of modernity and colonial history also has a close relation in the literary parlance within the corpse of South Asian literature.

## **Reconceptualizing South Asian Literary Studies**

South Asian literary studies are more elaborated within the theoretical domain with its close relation with memory, culture, identity crisis, migration, trauma, political control, power relations, partition, mythology etc. by scholars, researchers but these blue humanities or blue cultural study and close reading based on it professes the idea that land centric views are not solely responsible or enough for these cultural transgression and formation to be understood and analyze rather it require a fluid and flexible and ever flowing idea and discourse to understand and break colonial form of pursuing this geographical territory in literary sphere.

## **Conclusion**

This paper along with the representation of fluid and hydrocolonial complexities in the texts considered to be very useful to understand how South Asian authors, writers can be studied in the perspective of blue humanities and how the concept of Ocean as a active agent which contribute to the cultural formation of people within and out of nation reshapes their beliefs and also it helps to understand the ecological crisis and ecology and postcolonial relationship. The blue humanities though a western concept but this paper highlights its possibilities in Third world and South Asian Countries breaking limitations and opening a new domain for further elaboration and study.

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