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**Fluid Histories and Porous Selves: A Blue Humanities
Reading of Elif Shafak's *There are Rivers in the Sky***

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Abstract: This paper examines Elif Shafak's multi-temporal and water-centered novel - *There Are Rivers in the Sky* (2024) through the interdisciplinary framework of Blue Humanities, with particular emphasis on the complementary theories of Tidalectics and Hydrofeminism. The novel traces the journey of a single drop of water across ancient Mesopotamia, Victorian London, and the contemporary world, connecting multiple geographies, temporalities and human lives through the hydrological cycle. Drawing on Edward Kamau Brathwaite's concept of Tidalectics, the study argues that the novel challenges Western land-centered and teleological models of history by presenting time as cyclical, recursive, and fluid rather than linear and progressive. Water functions as a living archive through which submerged memories, traumas, and silenced histories continually resurface across generations. The study further employs Astrida Neimanis's theory of Hydrofeminism to explore how the novel reimagines human identity as porous, relational and materially interconnected with ecological systems. Through close textual analysis of the characters, Arthur Smyth, Narin, Besma and Zaleekhah, the paper demonstrates how bodies and waterways participate in shared networks of memory, vulnerability, and survival. Ultimately, the study contends that Shafak's novel reconceptualizes history and identity as fluid processes of circulation and interdependence, rejecting Western land-centered, teleological and anthropocentric frameworks in favour of an ecologically informed, posthuman and fluid understanding of a more-than-human world.

Keywords: *Blue Humanities, Tidalectics, Hydrofeminism, Water Narratives, Hydrological Cycle, Memory Studies, Posthumanism*

Introduction

Human engagement with oceans and rivers predates the emergence of formal academic disciplines. Although the Blue Humanities has been consolidated as a field only in the early twenty-first century, oceanic consciousness has shaped literary and cultural imagination for centuries. As Gonsalvis argues, oceanic literature examines “the role of oceans, seas and maritime spaces in constructing the histories of migration, empire, environment and identity”, foregrounding water as both physical and metaphorical agent that unites cultures and ecologies (448). This perspective challenges land-centric tradition of literary history and calls for a reorientation towards maritime worlds.

From classical antiquity onwards, the sea has functioned not merely as a setting but as an ontological condition. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the Mediterranean Sea operates as a destabilizing place of banishment, peril and metamorphosis. Biblical narratives such as crossing the red sea similarly configure water as a paradoxical force – both catastrophic and salvific. Greek mythology portrays Poseidon as sovereign of the seas, embodying both chaos and renewal. Such early representations reveal that aquatic spaces have historically mediated human relationships of exile, power, and transformation rather than a passive backdrop.

With the rise of European maritime expansion, this oceanic consciousness intensified into geopolitical reality. Oceanic routes ceased to be mere pathways and became the very foundation of empire, capitalism, bondage, and indenture. Gonsalvis observes that oceanic narratives consistently undermine national borders revealing instead transnational networks of violence and exchange. Gonsalvis drawing on Marcus Rediker describes the ship as “a machine of modernity” underlining the role of maritime technology both as an instrument of commerce and violence (449). Similarly, Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* reconceptualizes the ocean as a diasporic matrix in which identities are formed through circulation rather than territorial rootedness. Thus the ocean becomes a register of displacement and the very engine of global modernity.

Early modern English literature further demonstrates this maritime consciousness. In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, the sea stages shipwreck, colonial encounter, dispossession and political transformation. Romantic writers such as Coleridge in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Byron reimagined the sea as sublime and morally charged. While in the modernist’s texts like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* portray maritime spaces as sites of imperial anxieties and cultural disintegrations. These traditions, taken together, reveal that oceanic imagination long preceded the institutional naming of the Blue Humanities.

The Blue Humanities formally emerged in the early twenty-first century as an extension of Eco criticism and cultural studies; though its intellectual foundations are much older. Scholar's such as Steve Mentz, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Margaret Cohen and Serpil Oppermann advocate for the sea as a central object of literary inquiry. Steve Mentz insists that "the ocean is not a void but a turbulent medium, full of signs, stories and histories" emphasizing its narrative vitality (qtd.in Gonsalvis 449). Similarly, Serpil Oppermann explains, Blue humanities encourages "thinking with water and thinking together beyond the conventions of tentacular anthropocentric thought", thereby challenging land-centered epistemologies and repositioning water as a material and relational force. The Blue Humanities critically challenges land-centered and human-centered narratives by reconceptualizing water as an active and dynamic force within literary and cultural analysis. As Oppermann rightly observes, "as a truly transdisciplinary field, the Blue Humanities studies planetary waters from sociocultural, literary, historical, esthetic, ethical, and multiple other perspectives, and lays bare the broader social implications of hydrologic sciences" (1). Within this framework, water becomes an agent of connection, displacement, memory and transformation, thereby opening up new possibilities for interpreting literary texts that engage with hydrological motifs.

While early Blue Humanities scholarship often focused on oceans, recent work extends the field to incorporate rivers and freshwater systems as crucial sites of memory, displacement and ecological transformation. Rivers, unlike oceans, move through inhabited landscapes and directly shape everyday life, cultural belonging and historical continuity. At the same time their interruption through dams and developmental interventions reveals how water can also become a site of displacement and rupture within human communities.

This theoretical emphasis on water both as a material and narrative force offers, a productive lens for examining contemporary fiction that engages with history, memory and identities. Within this framework, Elif Shafak's oeuvre assumes particular significance, as her fiction persistently interrogates the entanglement of individual lives with larger historical and cultural processes.

Elif Shafak is an award-winning Turkish-British novelist, essayist, and public intellectual whose writing occupies a leading place in the contemporary world literature canon. As a widely acclaimed writer whose works have been translated into nearly sixty languages, Shafak transcends cultural and national identities by integrating Eastern and Western traditions in her stories. Shafak began her literary career as a Turkish-language writer in the 1990s, gaining early recognition for her novel's exploring mysticism, corporeality and the figure of the other. Her subsequent works in English, such as *The Bastard of Istanbul*, *The Island of Missing Trees* *The Forty Rules of Love*, *Honour*, and *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, further solidified her reputation as a writer deeply engaged

in the themes of identity, memory, gender, migration, spirituality and displacement. Across her body of work, Shafak validates how fiction can function simultaneously as an aesthetic practice, an ethical inquiry and a form of socio-political intervention, thus making her a major figure in the field of twenty-first century literary studies. Her fiction frequently connects personal histories with inclusive cultural and historical processes.

Her most recent novel, *There Are Rivers in the Sky* (2024) maintains these thematic concerns while marking a new trajectory towards ecological and a distinct water-centered narrative form. *There Are Rivers in the Sky* is a multi-temporal novel that traces the journey of a single drop of water from ancient Mesopotamia to Victorian London and then to the present day, thereby uniting disparate temporalities and geographies. The text follows the cyclical journey of a water droplet as it reemerges in different guises, such as rain, river and tear, in three different but interlinked lives. In this way, the novel defies the traditional linear approach to storytelling in favor of a vision of history that is one of recurrence, return and continuity.

The narrative structure of the novel interweaves together the lives of three central characters – Arthur Smyth, Narin and Zaleekhah Clarke whose stories unfolds in distinct historical and geographical contexts but connected through rivers such as the Thames and the Tigris. Through these linked lives, water becomes both a life-giving force and a medium of memory, loss and continuity. Shafak uses the recurring symbol of a single drop of water to create continuity across these lives – illustrating that despite temporal and cultural differences, memory and trauma circulate through shared waterscapes, making history a lived process rather than a distant sequence of events. By structuring the narrative through water's cycle, Shafak resists linear historiography and instead presents history as a process of return, recurrence and cyclical progression. This narrative logic foregrounds water not merely as a thematic motif but as a material presence that actively participates in the circulation of memory, absorbing traces of human suffering, formation of human identity and endurance across historical moments. Such an emphasis situates the novel within the contemporary ecological and water-centered approaches in literary studies.

In response to these narrative strategies, the study adopts a Blue Humanities approach to *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, employing Tidalectics and Hydrofeminism as the theoretical tools used for close textual analysis. Rather than treating water merely as a passive thematic element this study reads it as a dynamic narrative force that structures both the temporality and embodiment within the text, while functioning as a carrier of memory and a witness to human experience.

This conceptualization of water in the novel *There Are Rivers in the sky* by Elif Shafak is examined by adopting the Blue Humanities approach with particular emphasis on Tidalectics and Hydrofeminist Solidarity as its primary theoretical frameworks. Tidalectics is employed to examine the novel's non-linear treatment of time and history, highlighting how memory moves in cyclical, wavy tide-like patterns rather than linear progression. Through this lens, water emerges as a liquid archive that preserves traces of past and allows submerged histories to resurface across generations. Complementing this, the concept of Hydrofeminism, a Blue Humanities perspective is used to explore the porous relationship between water and human body that emphasizes interconnectedness rather than isolation or separation. This perspective enables an analysis of how bodies and water continuously exchange matter, memory, and vulnerability within the novel. Together, these lenses support a reading of the text that foregrounds fluidity, relationality and continuity across time and space. These frameworks are particularly suited to the novel because its narrative is structured through cyclical temporality and embodied human-water interdependence manifested through the novel's character.

Methodologically, the study employs close textual analysis of Shafak's novel *There Are Rivers in the Sky* in order to examine how water structures narrative form, memory and human interconnectedness with the text. The core analytical chapter of the project examines water as liquid archive through Tidalectic circulation and explores human-water interconnectedness through Hydrofeminist solidarity. The concluding chapter, synthesizes these readings and reflects on the broader implication of water-centered narrative, demonstrating how *There Are Rivers in the Sky* reimagines history, memory and interconnection through persistent, mobile, and resistant movements of water.

Tidal Histories and Embodied Waters in *There Are Rivers in the Sky*

Tidalectics and Fluid Histories

The narrative structure of *There Are Rivers in the Sky* unsettles conventional notions of linear temporality. Rather than presenting history as a sequence of completed events moving progressively forward, the novel allows past and present to overlap, echo, and recur through persistent imagery of water. Rivers function not merely as geographical settings but as connective agents through which memory, trauma and survival travel across time. The river Tigris, originating in southeastern Turkey and flowing through the cradle of Mesopotamian civilization and the River Thames traverses - both Victorian imperial London in Arthur's timeline and contemporary London in Zaleekhah's 2018 narrative. Through the recurring motif of the same drop of water appearing across different historical moments, the novel forefronts a temporal logic grounded in circulation rather than closure. Such a narrative strategy suggests that history, like water, does not disappear but resurfaces in altered forms.

This cyclical reconfiguration of temporality calls for a theoretical model capable of resisting teleological historiography. In this regard, the concept of Tidalectics developed by Edward Kamau Braithwaite, a Barbadian poet, cultural theorist and historian, and later elaborated by Elizabeth DeLoughrey, a scholar of postcolonial and environmental humanities, becomes particularly useful. Tidalectics is a Caribbean-centered theory of history and culture that was coined as a counter to the Eurocentric frameworks of Western linear models of progress or dialectics, which view history as a straight line of conflict and resolution, moving from past to present and towards a fixed future. In contrast, Tidalectics proposes a cyclical understanding of history metaphorically rooted in the tidal movements of the oceanic tides. The origin of Tidalectics is grounded in the historical realities of the Caribbean archipelago. As for Braithwaite, the sea is not merely a site of historical trauma but also an archive of memory. In contrast to the European land-based historiography that is grounded in permanent borders and structures, Tidalectics focuses on movement and flux. It recognizes that the same waters that once carried the slave ships continue to circulate, connecting spaces and enabling renewal.

Braithwaite introduced this concept of Tidalectics as an alternative to Hegelian dialectics, advancing a model of history that embraces the cyclical ebb and flow of tides rather than linear progression. Building upon this formulation, DeLoughrey in her book *Routes and Roots* argues that Tidalectics engages an “alter/native” historiography opposed to colonial modes of linear progress, drawing on the continual movement and rhythm of the ocean to resist teleological closure (2). Rejecting the teleological framework of Hegelian dialectics which assumes a forward movement towards a fixed synthesis, Tidalectics instead draws upon the inspiration of the continual rhythm of the ocean to imagine history as recursive and non-linear. As Kamau Braithwaite further clarifies, Tidalectics may be understood as a “tide-alectic”, a movement characterized by the ripple and the continuous motion of the tides. As Fahad argues in his article, this formulation emphasizes a model of cultural and historical movement that is “recursive, incomplete, and open-ended”, rather than determined by linear progression or final resolution (197). In this sense, it not only reconfigures temporality but also introduces alternative epistemologies that resist the materialist and linear biases of Western colonial thought. DeLoughrey further develops this geopoetic model through Braithwaite’s image of “submerged mothers”, who traverse oceanic spaces, “coming from one continent...touching another and receding” (qtd.in DeLoughrey 2). This metaphor evokes a dynamic understanding of history as mobile, connective and continually in motion, rather than fixed within bounded territories. Implicit in this movement is the tension between what DeLoughrey identifies as “roots” and “routes”. While traditional historiography is often obsessed with “roots”, a land-based logic that prioritizes sedentary belonging, fixed borders and the purity of national origins, whereas Tidalectics prioritizes

“routes”. This shift seemingly emphasizes the interconnectedness of seemingly distant geographies, viewing history not as something anchored in a single soil, but as a trans-riparian exchange that is carried, washed up and recycled across space. At the same time the notion of submergence suggests that histories are not always immediately visible. Thus Tidalectics also redefines temporality by presenting the past as continuously present where history, like the return of tides repeatedly resurfaces rather than receding into completion.

It is precisely this Tidalectic rhythm, where the submerged past is never truly settled but continually washes into the present that Elif Shafak explores through the novel’s trans-historical journey of a single drop of water and the restless circulation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Shafak translates the theoretical “rhythm of tides” into a tangible narrative reality through the hydrological cycle – the literal “rivers in the sky”. The novel’s prologue establishes this logic through the image of a single drop of water that first appears as a microscopic speck on the head of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal in 630 BCE Nineveh. The drop’s journey from the King’s palace to the gutters of Victorian London, the sacred peaks of Nineveh and eventually to a modern houseboat, acts as a physical manifestation of Braithwaite’s “tide-alectic” movement.

As it falls upon the head of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal in the seventh century BCE, the drop is not merely a witness to the ruthless expansion of an empire and imperial history but a participant in Tidalectic ebb. The narrative emphasizes that the drop has “passed through a sumptuous palace...and unspeakable cruelties” and “carries within memories of its previous lives” (Shafak 29), thereby presenting water as a material archive of history rather than a transient element. This same water molecule cycled through the atmosphere as the “rivers in the sky” resurfaces in 1840 as a snowflake lands upon the tongue of King Arthur of the Sewers and Slums, born near the river Thames into the suffocating filth of a London slum. This moment marks not a rupture but a continuation, as the past re-enters the present through the material persistence of water, embodying a Tidalectic flow. Arthur’s heightened sensitivity and extraordinary memory may be thus read as an extension of this circulating history, suggesting that even within the industrial margins of London, the traces of earlier civilizations endure.

The molecule’s journey does not end here, but by 2014 the molecule’s Tidalectic journey completes a recursive movement, returning to the bank of the Tigris River. Here it becomes a part of a baptismal ritual destined for Narin, a young Yazidi girl whose life is overshadowed by the impending destruction of her homeland, Hasankeyf, due to the construction of Ilisu dam. The drop now circulates within a threatened Yazidi culture, linking ancient Assyria to contemporary ecological and cultural

loss. For Narin, whose hearing is gradually fading, water becomes not merely symbolic but a sensorial medium via which she experiences continuity with a past that refuses erasure.

This continuity reaches a devastating intensity during the events on Mount Sinjar in 2014, where Narin and her grandmother Besma struggle for survival during the ISIS genocide. In a moment that screams for the material urgency of water, Besma offers Narin the last remaining drop from a plastic bottle, which is the same molecule that once touched Ashurbanipal. Here, the drop does not merely symbolize memory but embodies the ongoing movement of water across time, as it reappears in a radically different context. This shift highlights a Tidalectic pattern in which the same element persists through processes of transformation, linking distant historical moments without collapsing into sameness.

This Tidalectic circulation finds its most intimate manifestation in the 2018 narrative through Zaleekhah, a hydrologist living on a houseboat on the Thames. Here, the transhistorical molecule undergoes a final, biological transmutation as it becomes a tear. Shafak describes this “lacrimal fluid” as the “consummate immigrant”, a substance that is “perpetually displaced and relocated” (77). Thus Shafak utilizes the hydrological cycle as a narrative apparatus to fulfill Braithwaite’s Tidalectic requirement of recursive temporality. By tracing a single chemically identical drop of water across generations, the novel provides a material bridge that dissolves the linear distance between the ancient, imperial and the contemporary. This drop acts as a trans-historical archive, proving that history is not a sequence of completed events but a continuous, fluid circulation where the submerged traumas and invisible fingerprints of the past are never fully erased but perpetually washing into the present in altered forms.

Thus the narrative reliance on the hydrological cycle serves more than a poetic device; it is a direct challenge to the land based logic of linear progress. Thus the presence of the same water molecule at both the siege of Nineveh and the genocide at Mount Sinjar suggests that history in a Tidalectic sense is a haunted circulation. This rhythmic movement of water across generations reflects the Tidalectic principle that nothing is ever truly lost but it is merely trapped in transit which makes history a recursive circulation where past traumas are never settled. Here, through this water molecule, as a borderless agent of connectivity, Shafak prioritizes DeLoughrey’s “routes” over “roots”. Unlike land-based historiography that is centered on fixed borders this fluid archive dissolves the distance between different geographical contexts.

While the hydrological cycle provides the fluid mechanism for history’s recurrence, the clay tablets of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* functions as novel’s literal submerged histories. In Tidalectic theory “submergence” refers to that which is hidden, silenced or physically buried beneath the dominant

narratives of land-based linear progress. This clay tablet in cuneiform script carved from the mud of Tigris and eventually buried under the silt of fallen civilization embodies the tension between the human desire for imperial permanence and the inevitable rhythmic erosion of time.

The burial of King Ashurbanipal's library in 612 BCE represents historical "ebb". For millennia these tablets remained beneath the earth invisible to the linear progress of Western historiography. But this was not a state of absence but submerged preservation. When these tablets are excavated and deciphered in the 19th century and transported to London they perform a Tidalectic movement that DeLoughrey identifies through the metaphor of "submerged mothers". As narratives that "recede" from one continent only to "touch" another, the tablets bring the ancient East into the Victorian West effectively bridging two different shores of human experience. When Arthur deciphers the cuneiform script and excavates the remaining portions of the epic it transitions from a submerged artifact to a circulating object of fascination. Through this unearthing he initiates a Tidalectic flow that dissolves boundaries between millennia. Shafak describes this temporal overlap through Arthur's own realization that the past and present are "not completely distinct. They bleed into each other" (Shafak 65). By excavating and deciphering the cuneiform, Arthur transforms the tablet from a silent buried "root" into a mobile "route" of cultural memory. This circulation across centuries shows that its importance only increases as it touches different timelines. Whether it is Arthur's obsession in the 1840's, Zaleekhah's uncle Malek's modern collection of rare fragments of the epic and Nen's contemporary artistic fascination, the tablet serves as a trans-historical bridge. Its persistence proves that history is a recursive circulation where an object's value is not anchored in its original moment of creation but into its continuous ability to bleed into the lives of those who encounter it centuries later.

This physical retrieval of the clay tablets by Arthur represents a direct disruption of Western teleological historiography. In his archaeological quest at Nineveh, Arthur's act of "digging layers of earth, layers of time" (Shafak 324) serves as material manifestation of Tidalectic surfacing. With the excavation Arthur initiates a journey that rejects the notion of history as a closed, linear process. Far from a static museum relic, the tablet becomes a dynamic legacy through Arthur's decision to gift a fragment of it to Leila which is later passed to Besma as a family heirloom, transforming the artifact into a vessel of ancestral continuity. In this way the tablet functions as a "submerged mother", a piece from the past that recedes from the imperial archive to the personal lives of the marginalized. This fascination even doubles in the modern era through Nen's tattoo parlor that works exclusively with cuneiform characters based on the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, long-forgotten poem. By etching these ancient symbols into the contemporary skin, Nen ensures that the archive is physically carried into the future. This cross temporal exchange confirms the core principle that history does not move towards a fixed resolution; rather, it circulates and is recycled gaining more cultural weight every time it resurfaces.

The submerged nature of this archive is not merely physical but deeply ideological and gendered. Shafak highlights this through the specific image of the blue lapis lazuli tablet dedicated to Nisaba, the original goddess of storytelling. In a move that mirrors the patriarchal logic of erasure where Nisaba's name was forced into oblivion to be systematically replaced by the male deity Nabu. Before this erasure Nisaba was the "goddess of literacy, literature and libraries" (Shafak 405). She was so central to the cultural psyche that "people incise her symbol on monuments and hang her image above the thresholds of their homes. Her name is carved on temple walls, inscribed on amulets" (404). But later on when male-centric order took hold they created new rules that restricted women from becoming council leaders, where they were not allowed to rule or even access education and literacy. This eventually led to the slow death of the feminine authority of Nisaba who later became the forgotten goddess whose "name to be uttered with caution" (Shafak 406). King Ashurbanipal's decision to keep the tablet secretly isolated represents a double submergence because the clay tablets are physically hidden beneath the silt while their feminine power is ideologically buried beneath a history that redefined literacy as a male-only domain. As she represents the ancestral origin of storytelling that was intentionally drowned by the later histories, she embodies the very essence of Braithwaite's "submerged mother". She is the mother of the archive who was forced into the depths of oblivion who waited for a Tidalectic shift to bring her back to the surface.

This submerged mother resurfaces through Arthur's second journey to Nineveh where he unearths the lapis lazuli tablet dedicated to Nisaba. Arthur's discovery is a Tidalectic act of recovery as he retrieves a fragment of the past that the linear history of the patriarchs tried to delete. The circulation of the forgotten goddess does not terminate in the Victorian era; instead, it washes up in the 2018 narrative through Zaleekhah's friend Nen whose tattoo parlor bears the name "The Forgotten Goddess" (Shafak 235) through which her story gains more prominence. By bringing the blue tablet back into light, Arthur initiated a "route" for Nisaba's legacy to travel. As in the modern era she is no longer a "root" stuck in the ancient mud of Nineveh but she is the living symbol of Nen and Zaleekhah. This resurfacing destroys the linear progress of the patriarchs who falsely believe in the idea that history moves in a straight line and leaves women's stories behind. Instead, the forgotten Goddess proves the Tidalectic truth that the past is never truly finished but it is a recurring tide, that when rediscovered returns with even more power to shape the identity and memory of the present.

By weaving together the hydrological cycle and the submerged clay tablets, Shafak fulfills the core requirement of Tidalectics, which is the rejection of a final resolution or a closed history. Ultimately, the trans-historical journey of the molecule and the clay archive reveals Tidalectic movement of receding and touching, burying and revealing. The submerged past is not a distant memory but a persistent and fluid presence that refuses to remain anchored in a single soil. Through

this narrative, Shafak demonstrates that the invisible fingerprints of our ancestors are often the most contemporary. By prioritizing “routes” over “roots”, the novel ensures that history remains in recursive flow where every end is simply the beginning of a new tide. While Tidalectics explains history as fluid and recursive the novel also explores water at the level of human body and identity. This shift from external histories to embodied water experiences brings in the relevance of Hydrofeminism.

Hydrofeminism: Bodies of Water and Relational Identity

Hydrofeminism is a modern feminist and ecological theory developed by Astrida Neimanis. It reconsiders the relationship between the human body, gender, and the environment through the lens of water. The theory challenges the traditional Western view that sees the human body as separate, fixed and independent. Conversely, it presents the body as fluid, relational and linked to the natural world. Neimanis captures this idea in her book *Bodies of Water* with the statement “we are bodies of water” (1). This idea suggests that human beings are materially connected to rivers, oceans, and ecosystems.

Neimanis argues that the human body is not a closed system but constantly exchanging materials with the environment. She states in *Bodies of Water* that “our wet matters are in constant process of intake, transformation, and exchange” (2). This emphasizes that the body is dynamic and ever-changing. The water within us moves through various forms, connecting us to the larger ecosystem. As a result, the boundaries between the body and environment become unclear. Water serves as a medium for interaction, helping to maintain this connection.

Hydrofeminism critiques the individualism prevalent in Western thought. Neimanis argues that the notion of a self-contained individual is unrealistic, calling it “Discrete individualism is a rather dry if convenient myth” (*Bodies of water* 2). This implies that humans cannot exist independently as they are always connected to other bodies and environmental systems through water. Therefore, identity is not fixed but instead fluid and relational. This concept challenges strict gender roles and promotes a more flexible understanding of identity.

The theory aligns closely with posthuman feminist thought, which dismisses human-centered viewpoints. Neimanis quotes in *Bodies of Water* that “we have never have been (only) human” (2), pointing out that human existence is shaped by non-human elements like water, air, and other ecological forces. This perspective supports a shift from anthropocentrism to a more inclusive view of life, where humans are seen as part of a large ecological network instead of as dominant beings.

Hydrofeminism also highlights the connection between water and time. Water links bodies across generations and histories. Neimanis states in *Bodies of Water* that “water extends embodiment in time – body, to body, to body” (3). This suggests that the water in our bodies has been part of other

bodies in the past and will continue to exist in the future. Thus, water carries memory and creates a continuous flow of existence that ties the past, present and future together.

The theory further explains that water connects different bodies across time and space, creating a shared existence. In “Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water” Neimanis emphasizes that water acts as “a conduit and mode of connection” (86), linking human and non-human worlds. As she further asserts “water connects the human scale to other scales of life, both unfathomable and imperceptible. We are all bodies of water, in the constitutional, the genealogical and the geographic sense” (Hydrofeminism 87).

Hydrofeminism furthermore carries strong ethical and ecological implications. Since human bodies consist of water and connect to environmental systems, any harm to water resources directly impacts human life. Neimanis highlights this by stating that “this meaningful mattering of our bodies is also an urgent question of worldly survival” (*Bodies of water*1). This emphasizes the need for environmental responsibility and sustainable practices. Hydrofeminism urges individuals to recognize their connection to nature and to take action to protect ecosystems.

Building on these ideas, Hydrofeminist thinking is further expanded in *Thinking with Water* by Astrida Neimanis, which emphasizes the relational and political dimensions of water, highlighting how water connects bodies, environments, and social systems in complex and unequal ways. Rather than viewing water as a passive resource, the theory understands it as an active force that shapes communities, identities, and power relations. The text *Thinking with Water* explains that water forms a shared political ground, stating that “we – in the broadest of senses – all have water in common... it is an intimately and continuously shared ‘matter’ (Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis 6). This reflects a key Hydrofeminist idea of aqueous relationality and Eco politics, where water creates both connection and difference among individuals and communities. Thus, Hydrofeminism draws attention to issues of justice, inequality, and responsibility showing how water is central to understanding social, environmental, and political life.

The book *There Are Rivers in the Sky* by Elif Shafak is an exemplification of Hydrofeminist ideas in literature. Water in this book is not something that can simply be touched; rather, it acts as a powerful force that connects people, their histories, and the places they inhabit. The novel posits water as a carrier of memory, transformation and interdependence, reflecting Hydrofeminist ideas that human lives are inextricably linked with ecological systems. Through its narrative structure across different times and places, the text shows how rivers influence human experiences, making it impossible to separate individual identity from the natural world.

The transition from theoretical concepts to narrative application allows us to see how these fluid connections manifest in human stories. While Hydrofeminism provides the vocabulary for understanding our wet matters, literature provides the lived experience of these ideas. This connection is most clearly seen in the life of Arthur Smyth in *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, where the abstract theory of Hydrofeminism becomes a tangible, lifelong journey. His story bridges the gap between the philosophical body of water and the physical reality of a human existence shaped by the flow of rivers and the weight of memory. Arthur's existence highlights how water blurs the lines between the self and the environment. Born into the tidal flow of the Thames in 1840, Arthur's hydro-birth begins a lifelong journey marked by a constant need for water. This essential substance breaks down the barriers between individuals and their environment. His exploration of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* shows that our bodies are open vessels constantly interacting with the world's collective body. Elif Shafak emphasizes this when she says, "Water remembers. It is humans who forget" (Shafak 18). Arthur's eventual death near the Tigris symbolizes a return to the global circulatory system rather than just the end of life. His life as a whole is circumscribed by rivers. By giving his physical form back to the river, Arthur shows that the human body is just a temporary home for a fluid entity that has traveled through time, connecting his Victorian life to the ancient past and the larger hydro-social cycle.

Besma and Narin embody a Hydrofeminist reality where the boundaries between the human body and the natural world are fluid. For Besma, water is an ancestral medium of healing rather than a mere resource; as a water-diviner, her power originates from a biological and spiritual resonance between her own internal chemistry and the Earth's hydrology. She teaches Narin that dowsing is not a form of mastery but a profound act of communication: "Ultimately, Grandma says, the implements are just a medium—rod, twig or pendulum; it is the human body that responds to sources in nature. The water inside us communes with the water outside us" (Shafak 96). This communion defines their spiritual purpose and survival, as Besma utilizes her sensitivity to locate clean sources, noting that a skilled diviner can sense the depth and purity of hidden streams. Their story eventually transitions from this sacred cycle of becoming into a landscape of trauma and displacement when their lives are violently disrupted by the arrival of ISIS. Captured while in search of the very water that sustained her lineage, Narin's separation from the river highlights the vulnerability of the body when met with human brutality. However, the spiritual tether to water remains her ultimate sanctuary, as Besma reminds her, "Water, It will take away all the pain and fear. And, even if you cannot find a flowing stream, remember it is in you. You are made of water" (Shafak 378). Even as Narin is forced into a landscape of displacement, this liquid memory ensures that her heritage is never truly severed, as she carries the enduring strength of the river within her own cells.

In the modern era, Zaleekhah, a hydrologist connects her past to her present by blending her family roots with her career and feelings. Here, water serves as both her career topic and a source of personal comfort. Living on a houseboat, Zaleekhah explores the river's rhythmic instability to address her internal struggles. The text portrays water not as a passive background but as a living record that connects individual pain to collective human history. For Zaleekhah, "all she wants, right now, is to retreat, a silent admission of defeat for someone tired of trying to survive - less a departure than a homecoming, a return to water" (Shafak 79).

This sense of returning to the water transforms her houseboat on the Thames into a space where the lines between personal grief and the river's public flow blur, allowing for a process of cleansing and renewal. "She trusts the currents of the Thames will help her succeed, the way they have helped so many others" (Shafak 78). Zaleekhah's path shows that healing comes not from being alone but from recognizing her place within fluid global cycles. This connection to her environment is evident in her routine, as her repeated gestures have become daily rituals. Ultimately, the novel uses Zaleekhah to illustrate human existence as a watershed. This concept shows that we thrive through a constant exchange with the world, proving that our survival depends on our natural connection to one another. Thus these character experiences with water bodies together articulate the Neimanis's idea of fluid identities, shaped and dependent on water and the ecosystem.

Arthur's journey from the slums of Victorian London to a respected intellectual position is not just a story about moving up in society. It illustrates Neimanis's hydrofeminist idea that we have never been (only) human. Arthur's life is shaped and changed by a non-human element, the ancient clay tablets that hold the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. This ancient object serves as an ecological force, connecting his struggling human reality with a vast, timeless network of history and water.

Born into the unbearable stench of the Thames-side slums, Arthur's early life is marked by hardship, yet his sensitivity to non-human elements is present from the start. As a child, he is haunted and inspired by the Lamassu, the colossal, winged stone guardians of ancient Mesopotamia. These celestial beings exist in his imagination as powerful non-human witnesses to a world far beyond the grime of London. This connection is deepened by a book he discovers in his youth, *Nineveh and its Remains*. This text acts as a transformative material force, opening his mind to the reality that human life is inextricably linked to the earth and its buried treasures. At Bradbury and Evans, his first job placed him in a world of ink and lead, where human ideas were physically pressed onto paper.

His transformation begins when he discovers the fragments of Nineveh. In hydrofeminist terms, the clay is not just a lifeless object. It plays an active role in his survival. This non-human entity offers him a fluid identity that goes beyond his social class. By teaching himself to read cuneiform, Arthur

stops being a dominant figure trying to control his surroundings. Instead, he becomes a vessel for the clay's story. The Mesopotamian civilization itself is a land built on the stories of water, where the inhabitants depended on the rivers for much more than mere survival, for them, water was a spiritual entity. This deep seated connection is captured in the realization that "Rivers are fluid bridges - channels of communication between separate worlds. They link one bank to the other, the past to the future... the living to the dead" (Shafak 432). As the novel describes, "Mesopotamian lore understands that water is the defining force of life." (Shafak 432)

Arthur's rise to fame is closely linked to his connection with this non-human material. While the Victorian society saw the Thames as a sewer and the Mesopotamian ruins as mere treasures, Arthur views them as part of a larger ecological system. His inherent extraordinary skills helped him to decipher the cuneiform clay tablet of Mesopotamian civilization. He understands that human history is written in silt and water, supporting the idea that ecological forces influence human destiny. For Arthur, the clay tablets are not just artifacts, they are part of a cycle where human efforts and natural elements intersect.

Arthur's significance comes from his intellectual and social decision to avoid being a dominant figure. He finds greatness by recognizing his connection with the earth and the rivers that shape it. By traveling back to the source of the Mesopotamian civilization, Arthur enters a hydrofeminist environment where people were understood as more than just isolated bodies, but as entities shaped by other non-human elements which in their case was predominantly rivers and canals that shaped their lives. This is evident in description of Mesopotamia by Shafak in the novel as according to them "sweeping currents and tidal pools [that] shelter the secrets of foregone ages. The ripples on the surface of water are the scars of a river. There are wounds in its shadowy depths that even time cannot heal" (Shafak 432).

By mixing his own identity with the ancient clay, mud and water, Arthur embodies the Hydrofeminist shift that his life proves that humans are just one ripple in a much older, wetter, and more intricate planetary story. As he later reflects, "From his pocket Arthur pulls a small, wooden object. He has whittled a tiny lamassu. A lovely, lively creature, though it does not match the craftsmanship of Mesopotamian artists. But it is a guardian spirit, and he will place it by his mother's side to protect her when he leaves London" (Shafak 252). This moment occurs during Arthur's visit to his mother at the Hanwell Insane Asylum. Before embarking on his journey to the River Tigris to retrieve the clay tablet which he believes carries a protective spirit, he leaves the carved Lamassu by her side. This act proves we are more than human, forever linked to the spiritual and material history of water.

This deep connection between Arthur and the clay resonates in the lives of all people. It suggests that no one is an isolated island of thought. We often believe in human exceptionalism, which means we think we are the only masters of our lives. Yet, like Arthur, our identities are always influenced by the non-human elements we interact with. From the cellular level to the cultural, we are made up of many parts. The water in our bodies comes from the planet's cycle. It is a non-human element that links our survival to the health of distant rivers and rains. When we hold a book, a garden tool, or a family heirloom, we are not just using an object; we are having a conversation with matter that shapes our posture, our memories, and our potential. Just as the cuneiform fragments were a powerful influence for a boy from the London slums, the objects we encounter daily act as mental anchors. A musician needs the wood and string of their instrument to be called a musician, a scientist relies on the glass in the lens. We are, in reality, a fluid identity shaped by our tools, water and surroundings. This understanding humbles our sense of self. It moves us from being dominant figures that are trying to control the world to being vessels that tell a larger, material story. In the end, every human life reflects this Hydrofeminist idea that we are never just human because we cannot exist, think, or remember without the ancient clay of the world around us.

Conclusion

This study examined the role of water as a central narrative and conceptual force in *There Are Rivers in the Sky* by Elif Shafak through the lineal frameworks of Tidalectics and Hydrofeminism within the interdisciplinary field of Blue Humanities. By employing close textual analysis, the project has explored how water structures narrative form, memory and human interconnectedness. The critical inquiry reveals that the Blue Humanities serves as an interdisciplinary umbrella field that reorients the traditionally land-locked or terrestrially biased focus of the traditional humanities towards water as an active and central force. Rather than treating water as a passive backdrop, this field positions it as a central, active and storied medium that rigorously shapes human history, culture and experience. Within this field Tidalectics and Hydrofeminism function as fluid epistemologies of knowing the world through water rather than land. These frameworks are closely connected through their shared rejection of the rigid, dry and linear Western thinking in favor of fluid, cyclical and interconnected worldviews.

The central finding of this research is that the novel defies dominant Western frameworks that view history and identity as fixed and bounded. Through the lens of Tidalectic theory by Edward Kamau Braithwaite, the study demonstrates that history in the text does not follow a linear trajectory but instead unfolds through cycles of return, repetition and resurfacing. This challenges binary Western-centric teleological models of time that privilege progress and closure and instead presents

history as dynamic, unstable and continuously in motion with no clear closures but altered resurfacings.

This is clearly evident in the novel's recurring motif of a single water molecule, linking ancient Nineveh, Victorian London and the contemporary world illustrates history as an interconnected hydrological flow. Similarly, the journey of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* tablets and Goddess Nisaba's recovery from obscurity being buried archives to Victorian excavation and modern interpretations shows how submerged histories resurface across time, disrupting colonial narratives of historical completion and silence.

At the same time the application of Hydrofeminism as articulated by Astrida Neimanis reveals that the novel rejects the Western conception of the human subject as isolated and autonomous, instead frames the body as porous, fluid and materially interconnected with environments. This is mirrored in the novel's characters whose identities are formed, maintained and inextricably dependent upon watery bodies. This is evident from Arthur's birth to death dependence on water, Besma and Narin's embodied relationships with rivers as both survival and memory, and Zaleekhah's lived experience of emotional and ecological return to the Thames. These narratives collectively suggest that human existence is not separate from nature but continuously formed through aqueous relationality.

Thus by closely analyzing both these theories of Blue humanities scholarship, bring to the combined finding that water serves as a unifying narrative logic in the novel where both history and identity are interconnected and are a part of a continuous system of circulation. In this sense, water is no longer presented as a passive element but as a dynamic material force that moves across generations, witnessing human experiences and reappearing in altered forms. Through this movement, it not only connects different temporal and spatial moments but also enables the resurfacing of past traumas within new historical contexts, suggesting that violence and suffering are not confined to the past but persist through cyclical return. As water in the novel proves to be an active, living archive and witness that carries the fingerprints of our ancestors.

Furthermore, the study also finds that water functions as a force that dissolves rigid boundaries between past and present, geography and identity, and human and non-human existence. By flowing across rivers, bodies, and environments, water disrupts fixed categories and instead presents existence as relational, fluid, and interconnected, calling for a fluid understanding of the world. In doing so, the novel challenges the stability of borders and identities imposed by colonial and anthropocentric frameworks with water reinforcing a more fluid and inclusive understanding of the world.

This interpretation is further strengthened by the significance of the novel's title, *There Are Rivers in the Sky*, which symbolically reflects the central logic of circulation and interconnectedness across the novel's multiple generations. The title evokes the hydrological cycle, suggesting that water constantly moves between earth and sky, linking different spaces and times. In this sense, Shafak brings in a fluid outlook in her novel where she treats water as the material force that proves we are all inseparably linked to our past and our identities as not fixed or isolated. Rather, she argues identities as fluid, shaped by our "routed" belongings and our interdependence with water and the ecosystem.

Therefore, the central contribution of this study lies in its articulation of a fluid understanding of history and identity as interconnected and borderless processes, unified through the hydrological logic of water as represented in the novel's narrative structure, characters, and processes of identity. Thus the novel through these adopted paradigms, calls for a shift away from the dry anthropocentric, and linear modes of thought towards a more relational and fluid outlook on the world where human and non-human, past and present are inseparably linked with water functioning as both a storied matter and posthuman agent possessing its own agency. As such a transition from land-based, dry frameworks in favor of fluid perspectives also aids in deconstructing hegemonic colonial and patriarchal structures, creating spaces for the reclamation of historically buried and silenced subaltern voices.

The scope of the study is situated with the field of Blue humanities scholarship and focuses on the literary representation of water in *There are Rivers in the Sky*. It specifically examines how water operates a connecting and witnessing force across different times and places. The study is limited to analyzing how the rivers in the novel and the hydrological cycles in correlation to the selected theories rather than engaging with broader oceanic or scientific perspectives.

Methodologically the research employs close textual analysis to understand how water shapes narrative structure, character formation and resurgence of history. It does not attempt a historical or sociological study of the events referenced in the novel but rather focuses on literary representations. The theoretical scope is also limited to the combined use of Tidalectics and Hydrofeminism without extending to other theoretical frameworks.

The relevance of the study lies in its connection to the contemporary ecological and social concerns. In a time of escalating climate crisis and environmental degradation this research highlights the importance of understanding human life as deeply connected to natural systems like water. By advancing identity as fluid and relational, this research encourages a more responsible and sustainable way of thinking about the environment.

At the same time the study is also relevant in a postcolonial context as it defies Western Eurocentric ideas of history as linear and complete. Instead it shows how histories of violence and displacement continue to resurface in altered forms over time. Through this perspective, the research emphasizes that literature is not only a site of artistic expression but a powerful medium in mitigating ongoing global issues. It shows how a fluid water-based perspective can contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable way of thinking about identity, history and the environment. Such a view also dismantles dominant narratives that silence marginalized voices.

Future research can expand this study by comparing *There Are Rivers in the Sky* with other modern works that focus on water as a central element. This would help in identifying whether similar patterns of fluid history and identity appear across different texts and cultures. Further studies could also explore other theoretical approaches within environmental humanities to deepen the analysis of water and ecology in literature with a more focused examination of hydro-political concerns such as displacement resulting from dam construction, water scarcity and ecological injustice which could provide a more nuanced and materially grounded perspective on the intersections between literature, environment and power.

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