



# Land-Centered Narratives To Blue Humanities:

*The Rise of Sea as a Central Setting in Literature*

<sup>1</sup>S. K. Aashika, <sup>2</sup>Dr. P. Sudhalakshmi,

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, <sup>2</sup>Associate Professor,

<sup>1</sup>PG & Research Department of English,

<sup>1</sup>Vellalar College for Women (Autonomous), Erode-12, Tamilnadu, India

## **Abstract:**

Literature has meticulously recorded several geographical spaces, capturing their essence within its preponderance of narratives. It carries the prints of the most fickle elements like time and tide. Time and tide wait to be read and felt in the pleats of the paper. A deep dive into the creases of literature brings out the evolution of land-centred narratives to ocean-centred stories into the limelight. Understanding this transitional evolution is as necessary as culture and history. Ancient literature is mostly terrestrial stories of heroic courage, where the sea functioned as a realtime challenge and unpredictable danger roaring at the margins of the narratives. From the eighteenth century onward, significant developments in maritime expansion and trade placed the sea at the centre of the narration. The sea has flooded the postcolonial narratives with its tides carrying the painful memories of slavery, migration and diaspora in its ebb and flow. Writers surface with impressive stories of maritime history and culture, that are beautified with the natural elements. All this gradual effort of centuries resulted in the emergence of Blue Humanities as an interdisciplinary framework connecting humanities with science. This paper reviews the literature to trace out the changes in the representation of seas across literary periods in order to reflect the evolving human relationship with sea, moving from territorial fixity to fluid relationality.

**Index Terms** - sea narratives, consciousness, trauma, sea as liminal threshold, shipwrecks, technology, environmental degradation, non- human intelligence.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Water not only shapes the lands, it also shapes the future. Rivers and coasts, which gave birth to civilisations, have found primary representation in literature only during the eighteenth century. Because ancient people and their experiences recorded in literature are terracentric. Because of the fear created by the ferocious seas, ancient Muses never cared to sing about life at the depths of water. The tumultuous sea has wrecked the fortune-laden ships of the Renaissance period. Vessels which returned home with spices, unloaded the stories of pirates along with its merchandise. England has become a sea-based capitalist society during the eighteenth century. For the first time, sea gained prominence in literature with works like Robinson Crusoe and Moby Dick. Sea became a contesting space for power and revenge during World Wars, almost silencing the inspiration. The Stark reality of life is represented through the metaphor of sea in the modern era. The therapeutic Victorian sea has become traumatic and vulnerable in postcolonial literature. Environmental degradation, which resulted from the increased human activity at sea has emerged as a life-threatening force. With the emergence of Blue Humanities, sea and littoral zones apart from the ships and voyages gained central place as non-human agents of narration. Marginalised entities gained a prominent voice. Apart from technology, the intelligence of non-humans such as octopuses and whales are represented as guiding and assisting humans in their mysterious thrilling missions. This paper

aims to trace the progress by highlighting the transformations in the imagination of sea in literature across centuries, moving from terrestrial fixity to oceanic fluidity.

## II. THE OUSTED SEA OF CLASSICAL LITERATURE

Time has tied history with ecology in a unique way. The civilisations have emerged from the cradles of the rivers and have grown with the tides of the oceans. Yet, the literature took centuries to grant sea a central narrative authority. Ancient civilisations are rooted in *terra firma*, which means ‘a solid earth’ or ‘firm land’. The sea has been a source of daily bread for the coastal people for several centuries, yet it is a feared entity. Because, the Mediterranean sea, they were primarily engaged with is ferocious enough to drive away the Muses of the ancient Greek poets from its proximity. Virgil’s *Aeneid* describes the Mediterranean sea as,

“They settle on the sea, East and West wind,  
and the wind from Africa, together, thick with storms,  
stir it all from its furthest deeps, and roll vast waves to shore:  
follows a cry of men and a creaking of cables.” (Virgil, 84-87)

It is subject to fierce and dangerous storms, so that the Muses always sing of the sea as tragic space and with caution. Thalassophobic muses of the Greek writers have held seas and oceans at a cautious distance. So, the Greek writers rarely have given them a central role in their narratives. They have never felt at home with the sea; the shift in literary focus from land to sea has taken place in the early eighteenth century. The land-centred narratives of ancient and classical literature like *The Odyssey* register the chaotic, transitory and unpredictable nature of sea as, “Much have I endured in passing through this man’s war, and the waves of the sea laden with suffering” (Morisson). Sea is a narrative device, often introduced as a testing ground for the classical heroes’ adventure and heroism. It is portrayed as an obstacle, divine-controlled space in the journey of the Greek heroes. The sea monsters such as Sirens, Scylla and Charybids are introduced to depict the unpredictable dangers of the sea.

## III. THE SEA AS A LIMINAL THRESHOLD

With the arrival of Christianity, the sea in Medieval Literature became a spiritual realm of purification from the sins. It reflected divine order, human vulnerability and exile. However, it turned into a testing ground for morality and character rather than adventure. In Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the sea metaphorically represents the dangers of life. It acts as a realm of suffering, purgation and resurrection. In literature, the medieval sea has sheltered monsters, leviathans and sirens and is scattered with mysterious islands. It marks the liminal space between civilised and the wild. Non-humans challenge the humans at sea. In *Beowulf*, the sea is referred to as a whale-path, swan- road etc... The opening lines of Burton Raffale’s translation of *the Sea Farer* represents the miseries endured by the lonely traveller in the sea voyage as, “It tells how the sea took me, swept me back and forth in sorrow and fear and pain/ Showed me suffering in a hundred ships,/ In a thousand ports, and in me” (lines, 1-5). It contrasts isolated, perilous life at sea with the safe life at land.

## IV. TUMULTUOUS RENAISSANCE SEA AND THE SHIPWRECKS

By the late Middle age, men started travelling across the seas. Sea transformed from being an allegory to geography. The quest for new trade routes across the sea began with the fall of traditional land routes through Constantinople in the hands of Ottomans, marking the beginning of the Age of Discovery. Travel literature has started emerging with *The Travels of Mandeville*. The English men’ success in discovering new sea routes to the other countries and advancements in ship building has enhanced their trading opportunities across the sea. The sailors have returned home not only with the exotic goods and spices, but also interesting, spicy stories and new art forms like sonnets. Thus, the sea has become an interesting space for storytelling as well as a highway for a wealthy future.

The evolution of sea from the chaotic force separating families and wrecking the ships to the reconciling, magical force is clearly represented in the Renaissance Drama, especially in the works of Shakespeare. Sea has acted as a fortune leading highway for the castaways in the early works of Shakespeare such as *The Tempest*. Shakespeare uses maritime disasters such as tumultuous seas and shipwrecks to change the course of the protagonist’s live as in *The Merchant of Venice*, where Antonio’s ship, “of rich lading wracked on the/Narrow Seas” about which Salarino tells to Solanio as, “I think they

call the/place—a very dangerous flat, and fatal, where the/carcasses of many a tall ship lie buried, as they say,” (3.1.3-6). Sea is used to depict the range of emotions of the characters, mostly as a premonition of the upcoming disasters. This is observed in the opening lines where Salarino observes the anxious state of Antonio as, “Your mind is tossing on the ocean;”(MV 1.1.8). Tumultuous seas separate families through shipwrecks in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*. Titania in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* points to the growing maritime trade of time as, “Marking th’ embarkèd traders on the flood,/ When we have laughed to see the sails conceive/ And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind;” (2.1.131-133).

Another popular sea activity of Shakespeare's time is piracy. In Shakespeare’s time, pirates and sea thieves have been a common threat to England's growing sea trade and Shakespeare effectively uses them as a wild card to turn the sequence of the plays. Pirates served as merciful *deus ex machina* in *Hamlet* and *Pericles* and troublesome *diabolus ex machina* in *Twelfth Night* and *Measure for Measure*.

## V. SANCTIONED PIRATEERING TO BEHEADED PIRACY

Maritime expansion is a highlight of the Elizabethan era. Interestingly, Queen Elizabeth I sanctioned privateering, a form of piracy, through the Letter of Marque, which licensed the looting of the mercantile ships of rival nations like Spain. It also trained thousands of soldiers in naval combat and navigation. With the Treaty of Utrecht 1713, the Crown withdrew “Letters of Marque”. The resulting unemployment among the thousands of trained privateers turned them into outright pirates. They started looting their nation’s merchant ships, becoming the outlaws of the Golden Age of Piracy (~1650- 1730). People debated on pirates as national heroes or enemies of the nation in common places like coffeehouses, alehouses and taverns. Dr. Robert Blyth in his *Buried Treasure: A Pirate Miscellany* (2025) observes, “Pirate adventures and courtroom trials made good press stories”, with journalists and editors exaggerating pirates stories (qtd. in Royal Museums Greenwich). Pirate novels emerged from these sensational maritime news stories and real pirate narratives. Pirates mostly appear as a threat or exotic figures in the margins of the storyline. Piracy has emerged as a fancy topic for imagination among writers during 1700. Early pirate stories are in the forms of moral warnings, journal accounts and crime biographies such as Alexandre Exquemelin’s *The Buccaneers of America* (1678) and Robert Baldwin’s *The Tryals of Captain John Rackam and Other Pirates* (1721). Captain Charles Johnson’s *A General History of the Pyrates* (1724) has introduced buried treasures, pirate codes, charismatic captains like Black Beard, Anne Bonny and Calico Jack as well as female pirates. But gradually pirates emerged as rebellious characters representing freedom at sea. The sea gained prominence as a central setting for the unravelling of events in the early novels.

## VI. SEA AS AN ADVENTUROUS MAP

By the early 18th century, the land-based society of England turned into sea-based capitalist and colonizer as a result of industrialization. People who once feared the seas, took sea-expedition as an ambition. Humans who were subjected to the power of sea during the 17th century mastered the sea. It is a symbol of ambition, trade and providence. A vivid transformation in the representation of the sea has taken place in 18th century literature. This reflects the move from the ocean as a poetic, transformative and supernatural force to rational, commercial, and realistic arena for human agency and individualism. From being an agent of transformation or separation, sea turned into an agent of subjugation and testing. For the first time, the sea gained prominence in the narratives. Shakespeare’s roaring sea that demands submission turned into a “raging” challenge that yielded to technological mastery and colonial enterprise in the hands of Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) in his *Robinson Crusoe* (1719).

The protagonist, Robinson Crusoe reflects on his obsession with sea as, “I would be satisfied with nothing but going to sea” against his father’s wish.(Defoe, 3) He foresees, “something fatal in that propensity of nature tending directly to the life of misery”, which was to befall him (Defoe, 3) But still he goes to sea; escapes from the pirates; starts a plantation in Brazil; got shipwrecked; being alone did agriculture in a cannibal inhabited island; rescued a captain and his ship on board from the mutinous crewmen and returned to England as a wealthy man. This reflects the 18th century tension between the divine Providence and individual will. (Defoe, 3). The sea is haunted by pirates. Strange, savage beings noted for their notoriety are feared as monstrous beings. His other work, *Life, Adventures, and Piracies of the Famous Captain Singleton* (1720) describes piracy as an economic enterprise.

Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) is an anti-colonial, societal critique rather than survival story. It views the sea as a gateway to the alien societies that reflects the flaws of English society. The sea

empowers Robinson Crusoe. In *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver is often tossed by the sea into unknown societies that challenge his sense of superiority.

## VII. SEA AS ADMIRATION

During the 19th century, the sea was admired with awe and curiosity. Technological advancements have assisted deep sea exploration. Despite the long existing fear, Victorians are fascinated with the beauty of marine life. From this point, marine ecology garnered attention. The first public aquarium was opened in London in 1853. Charles Kingsley's *Glaucus; or The Wonders of the Shore* (1859), a classic Victorian era study of marine history, served as a guide for coastal study and inspired a passion for marine life.

Lord Byron holds the credit for inventing the 19th century sea. In his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1816-1818), as a child and a young man his never-changing love for the ocean is expressed in the 184th stanza of Canto VI as,

"I wanton'd with thy breakers — they to me  
Were a delight; and if the freshing sea  
Made them a terror — 'twas a pleasing fear,  
For I was as it were a child of thee, ()

To him, life at sea was a refreshing delight and a pleasing fear.

The nineteenth century has witnessed the birth of pirate novels. Portrayed as a lawless frontier, the sea represented a refuge from the evils of industrialization and rigid social structures of the Protestant England for the Romantics. R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858) horrified pirates as a threat. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) is a canonical text in pirate novels glorifying piracy from crime to adventure and freedom. He emphasises on harbors, anchorages, shorelines and tides. The littoral spaces are described, not feared. Thus, sea became a site of testing for masculine traits such as adventure.

The Romantic's engagement with the sea marked the return to primordial Nature and spirituality. Jane Austen in her *Persuasion* reveals her love for the sea, when she writes, "All must linger and gaze on a first return to the sea, whoever deserve to look on it at all." (125 ) and also gives a poetic description of sea when Anne and Henrietta is strolling by the sea before the breakfast as,

" They went to the sands to watch the flowing of the tide, which a fine south-easterly breeze was bringing in with all the grandeur which so flat a shore admitted. They praised the morning; gloried in the sea; sympathized in the delight of the fresh-feeling breeze — and were silent (133).

The sea and its creatures are revered and are considered sacred in novels such as J.F. Cooper's *Wing-and-Wing* (1842) and *The Sea-Lions; or the Lost Sealers* (1849). Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick; or The Whale* (1851) sympathises with Whale- Hunting that results in the destruction of *Pequod*. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael who pities whales is saved, while others partake in whale-hunting are drowned. In Coleridge's poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), the ancient mariner is cursed with stillness of life-in-death existence for killing the albatross and other crewmen attain salvation through death from thirst. Ancient Mariner is blessed with rain, when he adored the beauty of the water snakes. Though a Victorian text, *Moby-Dick* reflects Romantic tradition. Its utilitarian view of nature contrasts with the Romantic sacramental view of nature. Stephen Crane (1871-1900) in his short story, *The Open Boat* (1898) describes the chaotic sea as "obstreperous", which means "rough, noisy, uncontrollable".

In England, the sea has become a domestic space for working men during the Victorian Era. Railways, which connected the central city to the coastal regions, brought working class people to the coastal towns for holidays and promenading. Sea-bathing is recommended as a healthy practice. Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) vastly used the phrase "followed the sea" in *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) to denote the deeper engagement of seamen like Marlowe with sea, "their home is always with them—the ship; and so is their country—the sea". Sea is the "mistress" of such sea men. (p.6) It became an escape for industrial city life.

Sea air is recommended by physicians as a cure for miasma-driven respiratory ailments. In *Moby Dick*, Ishmael views the ocean as a therapeutic remedy for his melancholic depression. His turning to sea for suppressing his dark impulses indicates the change in Victorian perspective from dominance to survival. By this time, the sea emerges as a preserver of life by balancing human emotion. This signals the upcoming modern ecological and Blue Humanities perspectives on the role of oceanic spaces in shaping human consciousness. Ishmael's words in the opening lines of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* starkly reflects on this point of view,

" Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of

every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball.” (Melville, 1).

### VIII. SEA IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

The nineteenth century is marked as the “Golden Age of Children's Literature”. The portrayal of the seas in children's literature cannot be overlooked, for it has evolved from the space of mythological danger to complex living systems represented in ranges of blue. Childhood is seen as an innocent phase to be enjoyed rather than to be morally trained. Another bitter side of the Victorian society has turned out to be the child labour. Charles Dickens (1812-1870) in his *Oliver Twist* (1839) narrates the expedition of the workhouse board that “took counsel together on the expediency of shipping off Oliver Twist in some small trading vessel bound to a good unhealthy port”(27). Here, the sea is mentioned as a place for the disposal of the unwanted, impoverished children by Victorian institutions. It served as a symbol of abandonment in the great families of Victorian society, if an advantageous place of possession and reverence cannot be obtained by the children.

Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (1837), is a prominent work of children set in sea with fantasy elements such as mermaids. Its opening lines detail the sea with ‘water as blue as the prettiest cornflower and as clear as a crystal...so deep’, appealing to imagination (1). It describes the undersea castle made of coral walls, with the clearest gothic amber windows and shelled roofs embedded with pearls that befit a queen's diadem, sheltering little mermaids.

C. S. Lewis *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) represents the sea as a profound transformational boundary between worlds. It is depicted as an unknown, dangerous zone. In his fifth book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952), the Great Eastern Sea, the main body of water east of Narnia is explored. Lucy after returning to England, describes the sea as, “In the sea, the deeper you go, the darker and colder it gets, and down there, in the dark and cold, that dangerous things live- the squid and the Sea serpent and the kraken” (138).

Sea has been a never-ending fascination for children with its mesmerizing blue waves bringing cherishable shells and little conches with its white foam, which they used to build sand castles. Similar to Moby Dick, novels like Simon James' *My Friend Whale* (1989), Micheal Morpugo's *Why the Whales Came* (1985) are exclusively about the lives of whales and narwhales and the dangers faced by the whales due to whale hunting. Lauren St John's *Dead Man's Cove* (2010) is a modern classic tale of smuggling set on the Cornish coast.

### IX. SEA AS CONSCIOUSNESS

Modernists were influenced by World War I and Darwinism. The Victorian “Sea of Faith”, is dried up by the War. It no longer gave moral guidance. The ocean has turned into a battlefield, marking a mass death. Entry of military and the political tension between nations has brought a battle-born void in the charismatic representation of sea. The therapeutic sea has shrunk into a ‘stream’ of consciousness, taking a psychological and philosophical turn. The inward movement of the narratives from outward voyages to the inner consciousness enables the experimentation of non-linear narration. The sea remains largely anthropocentric in these texts, exposing human limitations. During the early 20th century, modernism framed the sea as an isolated, abstract space removed from the social constraints. Writers like Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway begin internalising the sea.

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, which lacks a fixed plot, represents modernist sea at the beginning of the novel as,

“The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually.” (1).

In the first sentence, Woolf reverses the imperial metaphor for Britain, “the Sun never sets in Britain” to the anxiety prevailing in the British Naval force. The calm ocean indicates the political tension and the forthcoming storm of actions in the oceanic space.

Modernist movements have a profound impact on the representation of the sea. The sea is used as a symbol of the subconscious mind, representing impermanence and flux. It is seen as a vulnerable space with

emphasis on solitude, fragmented self and dissolved identity. It mirrors the psychological fragility of modern people. Modernism marks the transition from the sea of conquest to the sea of consciousness.

## X. EXISTENTIALIST SEA AS REALITY

Major historical events of the mid-twentieth century like World War II created massive destruction and mass displacement. Existence and reality are valued more. Oceanic narratives have focussed on the stark reality of survival rather than adventure. Shaped by the cataclysms of two world wars, twentieth century nautical fictions adopted existential vulnerability for the tales of mastery. The existentialist sea is more work-centric than domestic or recreational space. Fishing, rowing and navigation are represented as popular activities in the sea. The hostile, existential sea metaphorically signifies nothingness or the absurdity of life while striving to live.

Camus' novel *The Plague*, portrays another transformation in the view of sea: The sea, which once was a remedy for Victorian's depression, becomes a symbol of lost freedom and forbidden space for the citizens of Oran due to strict curfew at the wake of epidemic, the Plague, to prevent the spread of infection.

The 1950's and 1960's are viewed as the golden era of seaside holidays in Britain. The sea became a weekend retreat for the business-minded working class people, as it was promoted by post-World War II paid holidays. Albert Camus portrays the sea as an escape from the routine social life. In Albert Camus novels, the sea acts as a relief from the burning climate. In *The Stranger*, "It was like a furnace outside, with the sunlight splintering into flakes of fire on the sand and sea"(36). His act of murdering, disturbs, "the spacious calm" of the beach on which he had been happy. (39) The existential sea has lost its symbolic significance and has become a real space of activities. It is felt through the sensory details as in *The Sea Close by*:

"A little later, the wind freshens and strews the sea with swiftly vanishing camellias. Thus, throughout the morning, we hear our sails slapping above a cheerful pond. The waters are heavy, scaly, covered with cool froth. From time to time the waves lap against the bow; a bitter, unctuous foam, the gods' saliva, flows along the wood and loses itself in the water, where it scatters into shapes that die and are reborn, the hide of some white and blue cow, an exhausted beast that floats for a long time in our wake." (Camus, 1).

The sea acted as a space for measuring human dignity, not victory. Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* portrays sea as a space for self-definition and personal dignity.

## XI. SEA AS A GRAVE

After the post war rapid decolonization, nations have begun looking back to their past histories across the lands and the tides of sea. But their true history is locked in the depths of the sea- sands. Archaeologists have begun diving for secrets of the slave ships in the ocean floor, with insufficient hints from the records. Simultaneously, nineteenth century literature has begun diving deeper into the unexplored abyss of the Middle Passage, with writers such as Henry Wordsworth Longfellow exposing the violence of the slavery that lurks beyond the beauty of the soothing tides of the oceans. To their horror, beneath its surface, they found the haunting remains of the history:

"In the Ocean's wide domains,  
Half buried in the sands,  
Lie skeletons in chains,  
With shackled feet and hands." (Longfellow, 1-4)

Post-colonial writers restored the suppressed narratives of the enslaved bones from the imperial sea. Silenced histories of the slavery and colonial exploitation found expression in post- colonial sea narratives. Derek Walcott (1930- 2017), a Caribbean poet famously calls for the writer's attention to the history of "the bones soldered by corals" in one of the poems, "The Sea is a History", in his 1979 poetry collection *The Star-Apple Kingdom* as,

"Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?  
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,  
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea  
has locked them up. The sea is History." (1-4)

He continues further taking the readers to the haunting depths of the ocean, "Strop on these goggles, I'll guide you there myself." (37).

## XII. SEA WHISPERS HISTORY

The sea became a site of memory, trauma and history, as in the portrayal of the Atlantic *Zong* massacre in Fred D' Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*. It specifically addresses the 1781 *Zong* Massacre, where "the captain proceeded to dump 131 living slaves into the sea... a little sign of sickness would be taken as a cue for throwing slaves into sea and claiming the insurance." (141-142). The sea symbolises "an end without an ending"- a continuous, pervasive presence of racial violence. (Aguiar, 77).

Until the late 1950's the countries used seas and oceans as disposal ground for the atomic waste. The concrete sealed barrels containing radioactive wastes were dropped in shallow waters and that in a few years began leaking into the ocean, posing a serious threat. Activities such as Osborne made artificial reefs of old tyres, disposed of plastic garbage in the oceans sent alarm across the globe by disrupting the marine ecosystems. From 1972's Magna Carta of environmental law to 2023's High Sea's Treaty, these global actions exclusively focus on the preservation of marine ecology.

## XIII. EVOLVING REPRESENTATION OF LITTORAL ZONES

The littoral zones often feared as hostile spaces prone to diseases and corruption before the 19th century evolved into a centre space for exploring identity, ecological crises, and postcolonial history during the 20th century. The late 19th century marks the beginning of the descriptive and observational interest for these littoral zones. It appears as a liminal space and solitary marginal human dwelling. Marshes are viewed as natural environments. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) viewed wetlands with deep reverence. In his essay, 'Walking' (1862), he describes entering a swamp as "entering a sacred place-*sanctum sanctorum*" which is "the strength, the marrow, of nature". He describes the "impermeable and unfathomable bog that attracted him as 'a natural sink' and 'a jewel' which dazzled him (16-18).

By the mid 20th century, marshes are represented as lived spaces inhabited by marginal communities in literature. Widespread loss of wetland biodiversity since the 1900's due to agricultural expansion, urbanisation has demanded attention and immediate action. Developing ecological awareness of the late 20th century brings forth a new sympathetic view on these fragile littoral zones. Literature begins to mourn for disappearing wetlands by criticizing modern land improvements. Annie Dillard explores the littoral zones such as creek in her Pulitzer prize winning work *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) as "an active mystery, fresh every minute." She dwells in the Tinker Creek which according to her is "the world with all its stimulus and beauty" (7). Regional ecofiction such as Amitav Ghosh *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994) has treated marshes as knowledge systems.

## XIV. SEA AT THE CENTRE

The representation of the sea has undergone a significant transformation in twenty-first century literature. In *Silent Spring* (1962), Rachel Carson warned about the fragility of marine ecosystems as a consequence of human interference in natural systems. Western attitude of the ocean as dangerous waterways to new culture is altered by the emergence of The Blue Humanities. It is seen as an intersection of literature, culture and history to the waterspaces. With the coining of the term Blue Humanities by Steve Mentz in 2006, ocean has become a character to be studied rather than a mere backdrop. Blue Humanities has begun by exploring the ocean. Overtime, the field has expanded to explore other water-related settings like rivers, coasts, estuaries and human-water relationships along with the historical, cultural, mythological significance of the water bodies. It has explored the environmental changes across these watery landscapes. It also validates indigenous knowledge of the seas and sea routes that was long-silenced by the Western Colonial Maps.

The sea has gained prominence with globalisation, leading to the interaction of different cultures and practices across continents. Sea narratives create a creole of cultures as in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) where Indian, Chinese and European traders' boarding the *Ibis* generate a hybrid linguistic and cultural world.

The sea also enables hybridity in genre. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) offers an interesting blend of myth and realism, history and fiction, and ecology and folklore. Such blending reflects the ocean's own instability and depth. The sea acts as a fluid space between nations, dissolving the notion of fixed territory in its massive waters. Simultaneously, the sea has become central to narratives of trade, displacement and aspiration. The sea, which has traded slaves for several decades, has created the glimmering hope of better life for stateless refugees, fostering migration.

With the rise of Blue Humanities during 2010, the sea is elevated as non-human agents capable of altering the coastlines, destroying cities, regulating climate and carrying historical memory through its currents.

Like water currents, sea narratives combine past, present and future. Literature mirrors marine life, climate change and environmental fragility, marking the shift towards the ocean ecology.

## **XV. SEA AS A FRAGILE AND VULNERABLE SPACE**

From 2015 onwards, climate change has reshaped literary imagination. Climate fiction emerged as a prominent genre, portraying submerged cities. Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017) portrays a half-submerged coastal city of Manhattan and its journey in the successful cultural and ecological adaptation to rising sea levels.

Environmental degradation also becomes a recurring theme. Writings have emerged focussing on the environment of the sea, where the characters achieve new levels of self-awareness at the face of environmental challenges. Contemporary literature deals with a wide range of issues like oil spills, plastic pollution, acidifying oceans and species extinction, framing humans as primary contributors to planetary crisis. The anthropocene ocean choked with plastics is visualized in Nick Hayes graphic novel, *The Rime of The Modern Mariner* (2011). It symbolises the collective guilt of humans as responsible for the plastic-strewn ocean that killed albatross.

The narratives are no longer anthropocentric, i.e. centered on the human experiences alone. Creatures and elements that occupied the margins of the narration have begun swimming to the centre stage, playing an important role in shaping the lives of the protagonist. Non-human intelligence of octopuses, whales and dolphins and their assistance to humans is spoken in novels such as Shelby Van Pelt's *Remarkably Bright Creatures* (2022).

The isolated protagonist of the 20th century continued to the 21st century writing, but they are more associated with the non-human life forms than with human society as in *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018). Simultaneously, the sea functions as a home, a workplace and a cultural and ecological biodiversity, sustaining the coastal communities.

Mythical and disappearing water bodies gained voice to reprimand insensible human actions of polluting water bodies and spoiling their sanctity. In Kavita Kane's *Saraswati's Gift*, the vanishing river reprimands human environmental negligence as, 'In your arrogance, you forgot the gift I presented to mankind. You forgot to preserve Nature, its beings; be it the vale or the hills, the flowers or the trees, the air or the waters. You ravage all, in your blind worship of profit and power, war and violence.' (9).

In short, twenty-first century sea narratives focus on ecology, identity, geopolitics, climate, and transnational experience, the interdependence and coexistence of humans and non-human entities. Unlike the land-based narratives separated by the feuds and fixities of territorial boundaries, contemporary sea narratives see the ocean as an entity under constant flux, connecting people across history, culture, memory and geography. The sea, as a dynamic narrative force, erodes the rigidity of postcolonial borders and reimagines the relationship between humans and non-humans.

## **XVI. CONCLUSION**

The shift from land-centered narratives to the Blue Humanities has brought a significant transformation in literary studies. For many decades, literature has considered the land as the primary stage for human action, identity, and history. However, the rise of the sea as a central setting challenges these land-centred narratives. With the arrival of Blue Humanities, the ocean emerges not as an empty backdrop or mere route of voyage. As a dynamic space and an inevitable agency, sea shapes culture, memory, power, and ecological consciousness.

Writers register the sea as a place of historical significance due to its major role in facilitating migration, trade, exile, and environmental crisis. The sea blurs the boundaries between nations, species, and even genre. As a unifying force, it dismantles the fixed notions of identity and belonging. Oceanic narratives unveil the submerged tragic histories of colonialism, slavery, and global exchange. It also draws attention to contemporary issues such as climate change, rising sea levels, and degradation of the ocean environment. By this, nautical literature expands its imagination beyond the comfort of the land to the unpredictable waters of the sea.

Ultimately, the movement toward Blue Humanities shapes our view of seas as a space central to human and non-human stories. By diving into the sea, literature invites readers to rethink relationships between environment, power, and narrative itself—drawing new currents for critical inquiry and creative expression in an ocean-conscious world.

**XVII. WORKS CITED**

- [1] Aguiar, Fred D'. *Feeding the Ghosts*. First, The Ecco Press, 1999.
- [2] Arora, Jasleen. "Imagery of Sea in the Feeding of the Ghosts." *Term Paper*, Jan. 2020. [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu), [www.academia.edu/104483261/Imagery\\_of\\_sea\\_in\\_the\\_Feeding\\_of\\_the\\_Ghosts](http://www.academia.edu/104483261/Imagery_of_sea_in_the_Feeding_of_the_Ghosts).
- [3] Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. Penguin Books, 1960.
- [4] Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Vintage Books, 1946.
- [5] Camus, Albert. *The Sea Close By*. 1953. *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, Essay first published in *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, 1954, uploaded as PDF by The Philosopher (thephilosopher.net), Nov. 2024, [thephilosopher.net/camus/wp-content/uploads/sites/94/2024/11/The-Sea-Close-By-Albert-Camus.pdf](http://thephilosopher.net/camus/wp-content/uploads/sites/94/2024/11/The-Sea-Close-By-Albert-Camus.pdf).
- [6] Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Houghton Mifflin, 1962.
- [7] Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. ibiblio, [www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Conrad/Heart\\_Darkness.pdf](http://www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Conrad/Heart_Darkness.pdf).
- [8] Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. Planet Publish, [www.planetpublish.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Robinson\\_Crusoe\\_BT.pdf](http://www.planetpublish.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Robinson_Crusoe_BT.pdf). Accessed 5 Feb. 2026.
- [9] Hayes, Nick. *The Rime of the Modern Mariner*. Jonathan Cape, 2011.
- [10] Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. Scribner, 2003.
- [11] *History of Pirates: The "Golden Age of Piracy."* [www.rmg.co.uk/stories/maritime-history/pirates-history-golden-age-piracy](http://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/maritime-history/pirates-history-golden-age-piracy). Accessed 5 Feb. 2026.
- [12] Jowitt, Claire. *Shakespeare's Pirates: The Politics of Seaborne Crime*. [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu), [www.academia.edu/15619360/Shakespeare\\_s\\_Pirates\\_the\\_Politics\\_of\\_Seaborne\\_Crime](http://www.academia.edu/15619360/Shakespeare_s_Pirates_the_Politics_of_Seaborne_Crime). Accessed 5 Feb. 2026.
- [13] Kane, Kavita. *Sarasvati's Gift*. Ebury Press. Penguin Books. 2021.
- [14] Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick; or, The Whale*. Uberty, [uberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/herman-melville-moby-dick.pdf](http://uberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/herman-melville-moby-dick.pdf). Accessed 5 Feb. 2026.
- [15] Morison, Samuel Eliot. "The Sea in Literature." *The Atlantic*, 1 Sept. 1955. *The Atlantic*, [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1955/09/the-sea-in-literature/641300/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1955/09/the-sea-in-literature/641300/).
- [16] Owens, Delia. *Where the Crawdads Sing*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2018.
- [17] Raffel, Burton, and Robert Payson Creed. *Poems from the Old English*. [2d ed.], University of Nebraska Press, 1964.
- [18] Richardson, Robert Osborne. *Virginia Woolf's The Waves: A Reading*, by Robert O. Richardson. 1969.
- [19] "Shakespeare and Shipwrecks | Blogs & Features." *Shakespeare's Globe*, [www.shakespearesglobe.com/discover/blogs-and-features/2025/07/31/shakespeare-and-shipwrecks/](http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/discover/blogs-and-features/2025/07/31/shakespeare-and-shipwrecks/). Accessed 5 Feb. 2026.
- [20] Gillis, John. R. "The Blue Humanities." *Humanities: National Endowment for the Humanities*, Vol.34, no.3, May/June 2013, [www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/mayjune/feature/the-blue-humanities](http://www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/mayjune/feature/the-blue-humanities). Accessed 5 Feb. 2026.
- [21] Sobocki, Sebastian I. *The Sea and Medieval English Literature*. Boydell & Brewer, 2007. Print.
- [22] Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Treasure Island*. Puffin Classics, 2016.
- [23] Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*. Edited by Claude Rawson and Ian Higgins, Oxford University Press, 2008. *Oxford World's Classics*, DOI: 10.1093/owc/9780199536849.001.0001.
- [24] *The Merchant of Venice - Act 1, Scene 2 | Folger Shakespeare Library*. [www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/read/](http://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/read/). Accessed 5 Feb. 2026.
- [25] Van Pelt, Shelby. *Remarkably Bright Creatures*. Ecco, 2022.
- [26] Virgil. *The Aeneid*. 2015th ed., Roman Roads Media, [files.romanroadsstatic.com/materials/romans/Aeneid-RRM-etext\\_v1.0.pdf](http://files.romanroadsstatic.com/materials/romans/Aeneid-RRM-etext_v1.0.pdf).
- [27] Woolf, Virginia. *The Waves*. 1931. Ninth Impression, The Hogarth Press, 1960, Internet Archive, Digital Library of India.
- [28] The Sea Is History by Derek Walcott - Poems. Academy of American Poets. [poets.org/poem/sea-history](http://poets.org/poem/sea-history). Accessed 5 Feb. 2026.