

Discourse on the Poetics of Planetary Water: A Study on Blue Humanities

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Abstract

The article introduces the concept of Blue Humanities, its scope and magnitude in today's interdisciplinary and fluid literary scenario. Being relatively a recent trend, the article explains the rubrics of planetary water, the need to educate ourselves in oceanic literacy, and about resetting our relationship with marine life. The contingency to manage our marine environment for sustainable development and to conserve biodiversity are inevitable spectrums in the dynamics of oceanic deliberations. 'Biophilia' can be traced back to a very long past, but with changes that has happened to the planet, oceanic narrative is an imperative discourse in literary circles. The modern shift in the narrative dimension thus is from the green to the blue, from land to the ocean. The article also touches on the recent discussions and imperatives in blue humanities as being part of environmental humanities.

Keywords: Blue humanities, fluidity, conservation, water centric thinking, oceanic studies, environmental humanities

Introduction

What comes to our mind when we think about our seas? The metrics associated with the understanding of our waters if harnessed from scholarly works, will be limited. The oceanic or watery turn in the field of academics/humanities emerged in the 1990's. It is part of postcolonial studies. In the past, the general approach of the scholars was to think only in terms of the human species in a globalized space. When the trope shifted to metaphors of fluidity, it had its impact gradually on academic disciplines as well. This led to the emergence of novel dynamics in the spectrum of literary genres. This move can be seen as hitting a fresh wave into rereading humanities in the postcolonial era of intellectual mobility. But when we trace the history of the positioning of the oceans in our academics, the metaphor of the seas with its facts and mysteries has been an undeniable, though dormant element. But as an element of academic discourse and contemporary debate, the seascape and its rafting envisage a relatively novel narrative agency. With repositioning of rubrics, new perspectives on thinking about the dimensions associated with oceanic writing has emerged. Steve Mentz's confession in his book titled *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* on how he came up with the term Blue Humanities to conclusively refer to the metaphorical vastness of the collective narrative on water is worth reading. "While many neologisms have been proposed, from hydro-criticism to critical ocean studies to ocean

history, the sub-disciplinary modes of cultural and literary studies in the early 2020's mostly gather themselves together under the banner of the "blue humanities" (Mentz 1). Mentz even connected the term "aquatic wave" with blue humanities. As we live in the age of interdisciplinary studies, the term blue humanities exhibit a lot of close association with other disciplines like Zoology, Botany and Aquaculture. It also has its influence on other areas that associates human interaction with the seas. The modern switch in the narrative dimension thus is from the green to the blue, from land to the ocean. Ever since we are into the modern scholarship of disciplinary fluidity, it is no wonder if we see the straddling of the Sciences and the Humanities, especially in the field of academics. Thus, we come across as wide and distant areas as art and environment, marine biology and oceanic literature joining hands to revisit, redo and reconsider clichéd concepts in their respective fields of individual study. This denotes relocation in the focal point, the literary turn, the renewed interest, the change in headers from land to the water. A wide range of scholarship has evolved where the lens is on the water and thus a revisiting of works in literature based on water as the key element has resurfaced.

When water becomes the key focus, the understanding that we inhabit a Blue Planet gain traction. Statistics prove that water makes up 70 % of our planet and how life on land is interdependent with life in the waters. Thus, we can always explore the waters in its divergent manifestations ranging from the aesthetics to the very material of perspectives imagined by us. The prime point is, water is linked to all aspects of human life and this intimacy openly encourages novel ways of thinking. When it comes to scholarly thinking and research in the field of blue humanities, history can be traced from the early decades of the twentieth century. But hard-core works existed even from the time of Homer's *Odyssey*. Several notable body of works in literary and scholarly circles ratify the emergence of this new discourse. Human encounter with water has generated a lot of creative and literary output from eminent writers which speaks about its emerging popularity and relevance. Mentz comments thus about how Blue Humanities serve as the basket for literary and creative output:

Poems and other products of creative thinking thus become exemplary representations of how humans respond to dynamic environments while being themselves representations of that dynamism. The intimacy between humans and water, an element that surrounds our planet and permeates our bodies, provides a rich reservoir for ideas about change, resilience and the possibilities for new ways of thinking and living. (Mentz 14)

Why Blue Humanities

The widening scholarship and literary outpour in blue humanities led to a confluence in conceptions and orientations which encompasses diverse and expansive ways in which humans engage with water. The dynamics involved the relationship between water and humans, especially that involves the foregrounding of human relationship with water. Water has never been an alien metaphor in the exploration of arts and literatures if we analyse literary history. Sea has always complimented human drama for being enigmatic, fiercely alien and exotically fathomless. Further, the human -water entanglement has raised the bar for scholars to lens the waters as an entity. It focuses on what water has been in literature to the new turn of what water means as a new mode of study. Hester Blum the renowned scholar in oceanic literature begins her article *Introduction: Oceanic Studies* remarking on the shift in focus from the past to the present and on its impending urgency:

The ocean has lapped at the margins of the critical courses that literary, historical, and cultural studies have shaped in recent decades. Whether in Atlantic, Black Atlantic, transnational, or hemispheric studies; or in ecocritical, spatial, planetary, or temporal reorientations, the seas have bounded, washed, transported, and whelmed the terms and objects of such inquiries. Oceanic studies, ... proposes that the sea should become central to critical conversations about global movements, relations, and histories. And central not just as a theme or organizing metaphor with which to widen a landlocked critical prospect: in its geophysical, historical, and imaginative properties, the sea instead provides a new epistemology - a new dimension - for thinking about surfaces, depths, and the extra-terrestrial dimensions of planetary resources and relations. (Blum 151)

Water has assumed a multi-dimensional flux for writers and scholars. It ranges from the discourse of its aesthetics to the global implications. This has found its way into the current literary and environmental trends of today. Sea has been a symbol that has been there in literature and art. It permeates in us deep emotions which involve the sublime to the tragic, hope to despair, not to forget the thriller rides of nostalgia and longings. The representation of the sea thus is not a novel phase in literary circles.

The dynamic relationship of humans and water has paved the way for variations of Humanities like Blue Humanities to emerge as part of the narrative of higher education. Further multiple range of divisions in the Humanities spectrum like digital, environmental, medical, energy, health, legal, urban are areas where scholars find pivotal points to debate on. Exploring the waters makes it clear that deep blue has always been a concern and fascination to scholars and ordinary people alike. Water studies encompass a plethora of narratives ranging from the past of the water to the present into future thus by rafting the waters in a pan mode.

Water has gained importance recently in terms of making it contingent on the part of humans to expand our literacy about it. A lot of elements concerned are at stake namely climate, food amongst others and it reminds us that ocean remains a storehouse of resources for us to plot out our sustainable future. One approach to teaching Blue Humanities is to make the humans aware about the effect of the downside of human occupation in the seascapes. The ocean is vast and it surprises us with our incompatibility to unlock the mysteries encompassing it. Since our knowledge about water is very limited, we need to create holistic understanding about how we acknowledge the oceans. Under the rubrics of Blue Humanities, a more critical focus has emerged on the oceans with emphasis on maritime history, blue ecocriticism, environmental humanities and so on. But a lot more is yet to be explored, where in which the research gap is and hence there is room for the interaction of humans and waters that will add to our better understanding of the oceans.

When it comes to bettering our oceanic literacy, indigenous knowledge about the communities that inhabit the coasts goes a long way. It helps us in understanding and building our relationships with the ocean ecosystem. Coastal indigenous communities and their indispensable coexistence with the marine world goes a long way in speaking for developing policies which will aid to their protection along with that of the marine world. The behaviour of the ocean is different when it comes to gauging relationship with the people residing in each area. But people and local communities, who are the real show stoppers, are seen under represented. This observation is true when it comes to their involvement in the decision-making processes connected with

establishing goals on sustainable development.

Local livelihoods and indigenous culture go hand in hand in providing for and building sustainable goals for the marine life and ecosystem. The indigenous people share a unique relationship with the environment they live in. The credit for this goes to their close association with nature and their firm belief that there need to be a balance between land and water territories. They assume the role of game changers when it comes to transforming and managing better their respective regions ecosystem. Indigenous population has always been the custodian of the land and the sea for thousands of years. That proclaims why they have a unique relationship and connectivity with land and water.

To manage marine and coastal environments to protect the conservation of biodiversity, indigenous population and their communities should be encouraged to partake in the decision-making process of conserving the respective part of their oceans. Conservation of biodiversity from the viewpoint of the indigenous population should be a justifiable stride in tackling crisis related issues including marine conservation and for planning a more equitable frame work for the future of ocean communities. The need for the indigenous to participate in the wellbeing of the marine environment is because of a variety of factors that put pressure on the growth of the marine environment. Long term plans should be laid down to prioritize indigenous values and concerns because that will help in providing a baseline of trust and understanding between them and the people living on the mainland.

It is common knowledge that the oceans cover about seventy percent of the Earth's surface. It is the presence of water that makes our planet unique. Also, water and its presence play an important role in making life on this earth feasible. Hence the relationship and connection between humans and water takes on a level that is physical, cognitive and even emotional. This feeling of 'biophilia' can be traced back to the time when people ventured out to the seas in their rafts in search of adventure and livelihood, food and commerce. That was in the past. Since then, some incredible changes have happened to both the water and the humans. The current state of the oceans is a narrative that has some impressive dynamics.

In short, our history with the oceans has a long past and when we trace the long past, we realise the need to protect the oceans for a sustainable future. It is for our mutual existence. From the perspective of arts and literature, the cultural turn towards the seas began in the early nineteenth century. Stories connected with the oceans are by no means novel, but the attention that it has gained is a recent wave. When it comes to painting and the arts, drawings and other representations with oceanic themes, the centre of focus was always on horizons. A whole lot of writers did flavour the imaginative side to exploring seas and the waters in their works.

Ranging from Homer to Defoe, Melville, Verne, Conrad, Steinbeck, literature had a turbulent rafting through the waters. Then came the emergence of new collaborations with different areas connected with the seas. Water emerged and gained prominence as the central narrative. Earlier the narrative was on sea but as part of the scientific world. Then came the viewing of the waters through the eyes of the humanities. This is where we find the scope of the range of the human relationship with the oceans. There is undoubtedly an invincible bond between people and ocean relationships, but that has not been fully articulated. With the arts and humanities turning blue, an attempt to embrace how humans engage with water, about water centric thinking has surfaced with new branches, approaches and methodologies to support it. Narratives that celebrate the seas to the recent trends in environmental humanities and eco criticism has affected and boldly shaped contemporary discussion on discourses connected with the blues. Serpil Oppermann's

words in her work titled *Blue Humanities Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene* reaffirms the modern status of this emerging developmental field. “The blue humanities have therefore, induced new ways of interacting and thinking with water, and different narrative strategies to represent the contemporary agencies about human water relations” (Opperman 4).

Recent Deliberations

Considering the healthy link between environmental humanities and blue humanities, the interdisciplinary matrix has its primary attention, amongst others, on the health of marine life and its associated environment. The responsibility that humans owe to ecological stability is of immense importance in today’s world. In the purview of ecology and ecological studies, issues related to oceanic pollution and marine ecosystems should come primarily in academic discussions and deliberations. There is the need to stop thinking about our ocean spaces as areas for waste dumping. Humans should accept and respect the mobile boundaries between oceans and lands.

In this context, discussions about water ecosystems and how it has become an area of anthropogenic activity and factors leading to new dangers of the adverse effects of oceanic pollution need to be addressed. With population explosion, exploitation of the environment, especially the seas have become a topic of eco critical deliberation. Sidney I Dobrin in his renowned work *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative* observes thus about the need to expand our ecocritical lens in matters oceanic: “...blue ecocriticism is at once an attempt to emphasise the significantly overlooked importance of ocean in ecocritical work and to call to question the critical function of doing so” (Dobrin 8).

Blue Humanities as an emerging discipline attains greater traction when the adverse effect of human intervention on the seas get investigated. This is mainly an expansive realm addressed by Blue Humanities. The death scenarios for and of marine life, polluted water bodies are scientifically incorporated in the current concerns of Blue Humanities. Because of the discipline’s collaboration with other genres, a pan perspective framework involving the challenges of ocean geographies is incorporated. Further, researchers will go a long way in mitigating and manoeuvring humans to think positively about our need to have an inextricable link with our marine bodies. Much of our adverse attitude to the way in which we behave towards our seas is due to our negligence. There is no doubt that our marine life is under huge threat. Marine animals in their natural habitat are a fascinating sight. But the ocean is a delicate ecosystem. The balance of marine ecosystems and ocean health can be disturbed by human activity. It can range from pollution to overfishing to climate change that hampers the symphony of oceanic balance.

Ecological Imperatives

Pollution can be termed as the slow poison that consumes and destroys our precious sea life. It is commonly accepted that plastic pollution is the major hazard in endangering the life of the marine species. They often mistake plastic objects to be food and upon consuming leads to fatal injuries and even tragic death. Since we live in an ecosystem that is complicated, the adverse effect of pollution on marine life affects humans too as we consume seafood. Oil spills and other pollutants are causing irreparable damage to our marine ecosystem every year. The combination of chemicals and other associated hazardous pollutants which is a by-product of

land wastage, when gets immersed in water become toxic to water and human life. The debris in the ocean get accumulated and deposited in the oceans owing to a lot of mismanagement in treating waste products in land areas.

Over fishing and climate change also contribute to destroying the balance of our oceans. Since we have broken the ocean and filled it with trash, the oceans have become hostile towards humans. Though finding it hard to endure, it pulses with an eerie attraction that is exclusive. The marine diversity needs to be protected. Blue Humanities as an intellectual discourse encourages dialogues on anthropocentric deliberations. It opens up novel narratives on water ecologies and human water relationships. This human turn to the sea is encompassed in Blue Humanities which is an emerging trend in academic scrutiny. Thus, blue scholarship encompasses studies involving environmental history, anthropology, art, eco materialist theory and other related discourses involving introduction of new neologisms involving intellectual plurality.

Human connections to the sea and the representation of oceans in literary fields is not a thing of recent academic pursuit. Sea has always been an inspiration in shaping human imagination. It has found its way in literature in the form of travelogues, poetry, songs, films and other media. But the oceanic turn in the Humanities, repositioning of attention from land to sea is an emergent area of research. This turn gained significance since blue humanities consider the ocean as an entity with social and material elements to it. Foregrounding oceans, issues related to various aspects of human life, relationship between human and non-human life, fluctuating weather patterns, crisis faced by marine life owing to anthropogenic activities have made Blue Humanities a fluid discipline.

The life of the oceans being diverse, Blue Humanities have made its study one of literary and cultural perspective. Moreover, without losing connection with literary and aesthetic aspects of the oceans, Blue Humanities has raised the bar of literary aspirants in bringing this field to focus. This is mainly because Blue Humanities offer numerous ways to look at our waters especially its aesthetic, historical, religious, political, social and material manifestations. Since water plays a long way in shaping our cultural practices and identity, Blue Humanities can be brought under the wider scope of Cultural studies too. Thus, we realise, acknowledge and relate the significance of the blue to different facets of human existence. People always love to and take an extra step to protect what they love. Establishing a human connection, an emotional bond can always work to create motivation needed for change in human behaviour. After all, water shapes human and non-human life in equal prominence.

Ever since we are into the modern scholarship of disciplinary fluidity, it is no wonder if we see the straddling of the Sciences and the Humanities especially in the field of academics. Thus, we come across as wide and distant areas as art and environment, marine biology and oceanic literature joining hands to revisit, redo and reconsider clichéd concepts in their respective fields of individual study. This denotes a rearrangement of the literal turn, the renewed interest, the changed rubric from land to the water. A wide range of scholarship has evolved where the lens is on the water and thus by a revisiting of works in literature based on water as the key element has resurfaced. The sea has an everlasting charm of knowledge that is associated with it. Oppermann comments thus "... the sea is always compounded of textuality and materiality: it is both factual and metaphorical. In addition to this, the sea was and still is always /already storied as it can be interestingly expressive and creative partaking in the collective poetry of life" (Oppermann 18).

Conclusion

When water becomes the centre piece of deliberation, the understanding that we inhabit a blue planet gain traction. Statistics prove that water makes up 70% of our planet and how life on land is interdependent with life in the water. Thus, we can always explore the waters in its divergent manifestations ranging from the aesthetics to the very material of manifestations imagined by us. The prime point is, it is linked to all aspects of human life. Scholarship in blue humanities in the modern century include a combination of blue water and human ideas. In fact, it explores the awkward fit between humans and water. The bond is considered awkward mainly because we depend on water, love it, but it cannot be our home.

The flag that flies Blue Humanities permeates as distinct and vast areas ranging from poetry to literature, criticism to history, environmental writing and even religious scholarship. In the initial stages of the scholarship concerning Blue Humanities, only oceanic/ salt water bodies were included. With change in time, an impulsive trans positioning happened, resulting in the inclusion of narratives including water bodies beyond oceanic waters. This smaller bodies of water began to get representation. That it was salty till a time, then began to accommodate fresh from another time. In other words, sea and fresh water narratives are included in the emergent scope of the genre of Blue Humanities. It has grown out from oceans to include rivers, lakes, glaciers and numerous variant forms of planetary water.

Blue Humanities should be elevated to the position of a cultural and literary criticism wherein which water stands at the centre, places water where land used to be, tries to craft new vocabularies and critical methods to enable richer connections between humans and water in all its forms. To engage with the blue means, to step hypothetically outside the familiar land-based concerns. This is a challenge. To deal with anything that is outside our familiar territory can be welcoming, refreshing and at the same time catastrophic in nature. But the promising prospect and scope of the challenge is that there can be a definite future for human intimacy with water. Blue Humanities is here to stay and surely will have much to say and do in our changing ecological conditions.

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