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Research Article

Blue Humanities and The Representation of Ocean in English Literature: A Study with Reference to Herman Melville's Moby Dick and Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and The Sea

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Abstract

Blue Humanities is an interdisciplinary field in literary and cultural studies that focuses on the oceans, seas, rivers and other water bodies as central subjects of human experience, history and imagination. In literature, Blue Humanities examines how the writers represent the sea and water resources, emphasising themes such as environmental crisis, maritime history, colonialism, mobility and the interconnectedness of humans and non-human life. It encourages the readers to view oceans not merely as backgrounds but as active agents that influence narratives and societies. Scholars such as Steve Mentz and Stacy Alaimo have significantly contributed to the development of Blue Humanities, arguing for a more ecological and ocean-centred understanding of literature and culture. The emergence of Blue Humanities has shifted critical attention from terrestrial spaces to oceans and aquatic environments as sites of cultural, ecological and economic significance. Moving beyond conventional ecocriticism, Blue Humanities investigates the interconnectedness of marine spaces with history, colonialism, capitalism, migration and environmental crises. This study examines the representation of the ocean in selected works of English literature through the theoretical framework of Blue Humanities focusing on Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). The paper explores how maritime narratives depict the ocean as an ecological entity, a site of livelihood, a medium of imperial trade and a space endangered by climate change. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Steve Mentz, Serpil Oppermann and Sidney I. Dobrin, the study argues that ocean literature foregrounds oceans as active agents shaping social, economic and ecological realities. Through textual analysis, the paper tries to trace that maritime literature provides a valuable framework for understanding the relationship between humanity and aquatic environments in the Anthropocene. It highlights the significance of Blue Humanities in expanding ecocritical discourse and interdisciplinary approaches to literary studies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Blue Humanities is the study of water and marine environments in literature and culture, highlighting the ecological, historical and cultural significance of oceans and other aquatic spaces. It challenges land-centred (terrestrial) perspectives and explores how aquatic environments shape culture, identity, ecology, migration and politics. It is an interdisciplinary field that studies oceans, seas, rivers and other aquatic spaces as dynamic agents that shape culture, history, ecology and human experience. Both maritime literature and ocean literature fall within the broad framework of Blue Humanities though they emphasize different aspects of human-water relationships. Maritime literature contributes to Blue Humanities by exploring seafaring life, voyages, trade, colonialism and human encounters with the sea. The texts such as Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* reveal how maritime spaces influence human identity, labour and survival. Ocean literature aligns more with Blue Humanities and moves beyond anthropocentric perspectives to emphasize the agency of oceans, marine life and aquatic ecosystems. The works like Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us* highlight ecological interconnectedness, environmental crises and the entanglement of human and non-human worlds. In Short, maritime literature foregrounds human experiences on the sea, while ocean literature expands the focus to the ocean itself as a living, ecological and cultural force. Hence, Blue Humanities provides the theoretical framework within which maritime literature and ocean literature can be studied:

The recent developments in environmental humanities have generated renewed interest in oceans and marine ecosystems. Traditionally, criticism on environment has concentrated on terrestrial landscapes, forests and rural spaces, leaving oceans relatively unexplored. However, the scholars such as Steve Mentz have argued that the sea should be regarded as a central category in literary and cultural studies. In *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* Mentz contends that human history and culture have always been shaped by aquatic environments and therefore literary studies must move beyond 'landlocked thinking' (Mentz 4). Blue Humanities represents a branch of environmental humanities that examines oceans, rivers, seas and maritime cultures as dynamic spaces of interaction between humans and non-human entities. It challenges anthropocentric perspectives and seeks to understand how aquatic environments influence history, economics and cultural imagination. Serpil Oppermann observes that Blue Humanities extends ecological criticism beyond terrestrial boundaries and encourages scholars to reconsider the role of water in shaping civilization (Oppermann 445).

English literature contains a rich tradition of maritime narratives that reveal changing attitudes toward oceans. In nineteenth-century literature, the sea often appeared as a space of adventure, commerce and imperial expansion. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* presents the ocean as both a source of

wealth and a realm beyond human control. In the twentieth century, Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* portray the sea as an intimate companion that sustains human life. The contemporary writers such as Amitav Ghosh employ maritime settings to address issues of ecological crisis, migration and climate change. The oceans in literature function as ecological agents, economic spaces and cultural archives.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing prominence of environmental humanities, critical attention has largely remained focused on terrestrial ecologies. The oceans and maritime spaces have often been treated merely as settings or symbolic backgrounds rather than active ecological and cultural forces. Consequently, there exists a significant gap in literary studies regarding the representation of oceans and their relationship to human history, colonial expansion labour, and environmental crises. Moreover, though considerable scholarship exists on ecocriticism, few studies have examined maritime literature through the framework of Blue Humanities. The existing interpretations of texts such as *Moby-Dick*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Amitav Ghosh's novels primarily focus on symbolism, postcolonialism or environmental concerns without sufficiently emphasizing aquatic perspectives. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing the representation of oceans in English literature through the theoretical lens of Blue Humanities.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The prime objective of the study is to examine the theoretical foundations of Blue Humanities in literary studies besides analyzing the representation of oceans in selected works of English literature. It also aims to investigate the relationship between marine environments and human livelihood in maritime narratives. It also intends to explore the role of oceans in colonial expansion, migration and ecological crises besides demonstrating the relevance of Blue Humanities in understanding contemporary environmental issues.

Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that the representation of oceans in English literature reflects the interconnectedness of ecological, cultural, economic and political dimensions of human life, and that Blue Humanities provides a more comprehensive framework than conventional ecocriticism for interpreting maritime narratives. It also hypothesizes that oceans in English literature function not merely as physical settings but as active ecological and cultural agents. The maritime narratives reveal the interconnectedness between human societies and aquatic environments and thereby contribute to the development of Blue Humanities as an important critical paradigm.

Necessity of the Study

The significance of the present study lies in its attempt to dwell upon Blue Humanities in English literary tradition. The contemporary environmental crises including climate change, rising sea levels, marine pollution and biodiversity loss have

made oceans central to global concerns. Literary studies must therefore engage with aquatic environments to understand their cultural and ecological implications. Furthermore, the study fills a gap in existing scholarship by providing a comprehensive analysis of maritime literature from the perspective of Blue Humanities. It contributes to interdisciplinary research by connecting literary studies with environmental humanities, oceanic studies and ecological thought. The study also tries to show that literature can offer valuable insights into contemporary debates surrounding sustainability and the Anthropocene.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The theoretical foundations of Blue Humanities have been established primarily through the works of Steve Mentz. In *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (2023), Mentz argues that literary studies must transcend land-based perspectives and recognize oceans as spaces that shape history and culture. He emphasizes fluidity, uncertainty, and interconnectivity as defining features of aquatic thinking. Serpil Oppermann and Sidney I. Dobrin, in *Blue Ecocriticism: Coastal Waters, Critical Issues* (2019), extend ecocritical studies beyond terrestrial environments and examine the cultural significance of marine ecosystems. They argue that oceans should be regarded as active ecological agents rather than passive spaces. Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality" provides another important theoretical perspective. In *Bodily Natures* (2010), Alaimo emphasizes the interconnectedness between human bodies and ecological systems. Her approach is particularly useful in understanding marine environments as spaces where human and non-human agencies intersect.

With regard to primary texts, numerous studies have explored *Moby-Dick*. Richard J. King interprets Melville's novel as a narrative of ecological awareness and maritime culture. However, most analyses focus on symbolism and philosophy rather than Blue Humanities. The studies on Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* emphasize existential themes and the dignity of labour. The critics such as Carlos Baker have highlighted Santiago's relationship with nature, but aquatic perspectives remain underdeveloped. Thus, while considerable research exists on individual texts and ecocriticism, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies examining maritime literature through the framework of Blue Humanities. The present study seeks to bridge this gap.

5. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach. It is based primarily on textual analysis of selected literary works, namely Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). The study employs the theoretical framework of Blue Humanities developed by Steve Mentz and the principles of Blue Ecocriticism proposed by Serpil Oppermann and Sidney I. Dobrin. The secondary sources including books, journal articles and critical essays have been consulted to contextualize the

analysis. Close reading of the texts forms the primary method of interpretation. The study analyses how oceans are represented as ecological spaces, economic resources and sites of cultural interaction. It also examines the themes of marine labour, colonial trade, migration and climate change in order to establish the relevance of Blue Humanities to contemporary literary criticism.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Ocean and the ship as Ecological and Metaphysical Force in *Moby-Dick*

One of the central propositions of Blue Humanities is that oceans are not passive settings but dynamic entities that shape human experience. Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) demonstrates this perspective. Unlike terrestrial narratives that privilege human mastery over nature, the novel presents the sea as an uncontrollable and mysterious force. Ishmael's attraction to the sea suggests humanity's dependence upon aquatic environments. He observes that people are instinctively drawn to water and remarks that "meditation and water are wedded forever" (Melville 19).

The ship the Pequod which is termed as 'cannibal of a craft' by the narrator Ishmael and its whaling voyage reveal the economic importance of oceans in nineteenth-century capitalism. Named after a historic Native American tribe that wiped out in the 17th century, the Pequod is an ornate ship adorned with the bones and teeth of previously hunted whales. Whale oil constituted a major source of energy before the emergence of petroleum industries. The Pequod, commanded by Captain Ahab, embarks on a commercial whaling expedition that reflects the nineteenth-century maritime economy where whales were valuable sources of oil and other commodities. The voyage thus exemplifies an early form of the Blue Economy which indicates the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth and human well-being. However, unlike contemporary notions of sustainability, the whaling industry depicted in the novel is characterized by extraction and exploitation revealing the dangers of treating marine life solely as economic capital.

In *Moby Dick* (1851), the sea becomes a source of wealth and industrial expansion. However, Captain Ahab's obsessive pursuit of the white whale transforms the ocean into a site of ecological violence. His desire to dominate nature reflects anthropocentric attitudes that Blue Humanities seeks to challenge. From the perspective of Blue Humanities, the voyage transcends its commercial function and foregrounds the ocean as a dynamic space that shapes human experience, culture and ecological relationships. The sea is not merely a backdrop for human activity but an active force that influences the lives and destinies of the crew. The white whale, Moby Dick, embodies non-human agency and challenges anthropocentric assumptions about humanity's dominance over nature. Captain Ahab's obsessive pursuit of the whale

symbolizes the destructive consequences of excessive exploitation and the desire to conquer the natural world. The ship 'Pequod' itself represents a microcosm of global maritime culture bringing together sailors of diverse races, nationalities and religions. The voyage illustrates the interconnectedness of human societies through the oceans, a central concern of Blue Humanities. At the same time, the novel anticipates contemporary ecological concerns by exposing the unsustainable nature of extractive marine industries. The catastrophic destruction of the Pequod at the end of the novel serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of disregarding ecological balance. Thus, *Moby-Dick* bridges the concerns of the Blue Economy and Blue Humanities. While the whaling voyage highlights the economic significance of marine resources, it also invites readers to recognize the ocean as a living, interconnected environment whose exploitation carries profound ethical and ecological implications.

Steve Mentz argues that oceans symbolize instability and unpredictability, forcing human beings to confront their limitations (Mentz 38). Ahab's destruction demonstrates the consequences of attempting to impose absolute control over non-human forces. The sinking of the Pequod symbolizes the failure of human arrogance before marine power. Consequently, *Moby-Dick* represents the ocean as an active ecological force rather than a mere geographical setting.

The Sea and Sustainable Livelihood in The Old Man and the Sea

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) portrays a more intimate relationship between humans and the marine environments. Unlike Ahab, Santiago does not seek mastery over nature. Instead, he regards the sea with affection and reverence. The sea is not merely a setting but a living, dynamic presence. Santiago terms the sea affectionately as 'la mar,' attributing to it a feminine character and treating it with reverence rather than domination. This perspective reflects an ecological consciousness that recognizes the ocean as a vital and sentient space. Santiago's relationship with the sea is based on mutual dependence revealing the intricate connections between human livelihood and marine environments.

The marlin, which Santiago catches after an epic struggle, is not portrayed merely as prey or an economic resource. Instead, Santiago respects the fish and repeatedly refers to it as his 'brother,' acknowledging its dignity and strength. Such representations challenge anthropocentric notions of human superiority and align with posthumanist concerns central to Blue Humanities. The marlin emerges as a non-human agent whose life possesses intrinsic value beyond its commercial worth. Furthermore, the novella reflects themes associated with the Blue Economy. Santiago depends on fishing for survival illustrating the economic significance of marine resources for coastal communities. However, Hemingway does not celebrate exploitation. The subsequent attack by sharks and the loss of

the marlin's flesh underscore the fragility and unpredictability of marine ecosystems suggesting the limits of human control over nature.

The narrative also evokes themes of solitude, endurance and coexistence. Santiago's struggle is not a battle against nature but an interaction with forces greater than himself. The sea, birds, fish and currents form an interconnected world in which human beings are participants rather than masters. From a Blue Humanities perspective, *The Old Man and the Sea* transcends a simple tale of human resilience. It presents the ocean as a vibrant ecological space and advocates a vision of coexistence between humans and marine life emphasizing respect, interdependence and the ethical dimensions of humanity's relationship with the sea. Santiago's relationship with the marlin also reflects ecological ethics. He repeatedly acknowledges the fish as his brother and admires its dignity and strength. Even while struggling for survival, he recognizes the value of marine life beyond its economic significance. This attitude contrasts with industrial exploitation and suggests a sustainable relationship with aquatic resources.

Santiago's approach towards the sea and the marlin challenges anthropocentric assumptions and emphasizes coexistence, reciprocity and ecological awareness. The novel portrays the sea not as an object of conquest but as a realm of mutual dependence. Hemingway anticipates contemporary concerns about humanity's ethical responsibilities toward aquatic environments. Thus, *The Old Man and the Sea* emerges as a significant text within Blue Humanities advocating a more harmonious and sustainable relationship between humans and the oceanic world.

6. CONCLUSION

The aforesaid discussions reveal that Blue Humanities offers a significant intervention in contemporary literary criticism by shifting attention from terrestrial landscapes to aquatic environments. Through an analysis of *Moby-Dick* and *The Old Man and the Sea*, the study establishes that oceans are represented as dynamic ecological and cultural forces rather than passive backgrounds. Melville's novel reveals the dangers of anthropocentric domination over marine nature, while Hemingway's novella foregrounds sustainable coexistence between humans and the sea. Both the texts demonstrate that oceans shape economic systems, cultural identities and ecological realities. Blue Humanities thus expands the scope of ecocriticism by emphasizing fluidity, interconnectedness and planetary consciousness. In an age characterized by climate change and ecological uncertainty, the study of oceans in literature becomes not merely an academic pursuit but an ethical necessity. Maritime literature reminds readers that human existence remains inseparable from aquatic worlds and that environmental sustainability requires a renewed understanding of our relationship with the seas.

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