

HYDROCOLONIALITY AND THE BLUE HUMANITIES: MAPPING OCEANIC MEMORY AND COLONIAL AFTERLIVES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN NOVELS

Vimal A¹, Anu R², Roopa R Kumar³, Binny Binoy⁴

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Stella Mary's College of Engineering, Aruthenganvilai, Kanyakumari Dist, Tamil Nadu, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of Science and Humanities, Loyola Institute of Technology and Science, Thovalai, Kanyakumari Dist, Tamil Nadu, India

³Independent Researcher, Kollam Dist, Kerala, India

⁴Research Scholar, Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Kumaracoil, Tamil Nadu, India.

Correspondence: Vimal A, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Stella Mary's College of Engineering, Aruthenganvilai, Kanyakumari Dist, Tamil Nadu, India. Email: vimal99.a@gmail.com

Abstract

The emergence of the Blue Humanities has signalled a critical departure from terrestrial biased literary analysis, prompting a thorough re-evaluation of the ocean not merely as a passive backdrop or a metaphorical void, but as an active material cultural agent that shapes histories, subjectivities and epistemologies. By synthesizing the theoretical frameworks of hydrocolonialism, defined as the colonization of, on, or by means of water and material ecocriticism, which recognizes the narrative agency of storied matter, this paper examines how contemporary Indian Anglophone and regional novels map oceanic memory and the enduring afterlives of colonial maritime exploitation. Focusing on Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy (Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke, and Flood of Fire) alongside his tidal fictions, and Joe D'Cruz's regional Tamil masterpiece Aazhi Soozh Ulagu (Ocean Rimmed World), this study illuminates how these narratives decenter hegemonic terracentrism. It explores the material realities of the Indian Ocean as a repository of historical trauma, tracing the oceanic routes of the indentured labor system, the imperial opium trade, and the violent crossings of the kala pani. Concurrently, the paper analyzes how littoral communities, specifically the Parathavar fisherfolk of the Tuticorin coast, articulate indigenous wet ontologies that resist both colonial cartographies and neo-hydrocolonial state infrastructures. By examining the linguistic creolization of Laskari jargon and diglossic coastal dialects, this study argues that these novels produce a fluvial poetics that reclaims subaltern agency below the waterline, offering a radical, decolonial framework for understanding the relational fluidities of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Blue humanities, littoral realism, oceanic memory, colonialism, posthumanism.

1. Introduction

For centuries, the dominant paradigms of humanities scholarship have suffered from a persistent terracentric bias, conceptualizing human history, nationhood and sovereignty almost exclusively through the solid boundaries of dry land (Mania, 2017 and Steinberg & Peters, 2015). Within postcolonial studies, the spatial coordinates of empire have traditionally been mapped onto territorial landscapes, focusing on the drawing of borders, the establishment of agrarian plantations, and the bureaucratic administration of terrestrial spaces (Farisha, 2026 and Hofmeyr, 2022). However, as contemporary scholars within the environmental humanities have increasingly recognized, this terrestrial focus severely limits the understanding of imperial expansion and its ecological and human afterlives (Hofmeyr, 2019). The ocean, which covers over seventy percent of the planet, has historically been treated in Western literature either as a sublime, untamable wilderness standing outside of human history, or as a frictionless highway facilitating the global circulation of commodities and capital (Mentz, 2015). The emerging interdisciplinary field of the Blue Humanities seeks to correct this

epistemological imbalance by centering aquatic environment such as oceans, seas, rivers, and estuaries as vital sites of historical, cultural, and philosophical inquiry (Sawhney, 2025).

By shifting the critical gaze from territory to route, the Blue Humanities challenges standard land-based narratives, asserting that maritime spaces are deeply entangled with human labor, geopolitical power, and environmental transformation (Mentz, 2015). A crucial theoretical development within this aquatic turn is the concept of hydrocolonialism, or hydrocoloniality, a framework articulated by Isabel Hofmeyr and other oceanic theorists to describe the systematic colonization by means of water (Bystrom & Hofmeyr, 2017). Hydrocolonialism demands that critics look 'below the waterline' to investigate how imperial regimes exercised power through maritime custom houses, oceanic legal frameworks like the doctrine of *aqua nullius* (which legally conceptualized the sea as empty, unowned space ripe for colonial partition), the regulation of sea-fares, and the exploitation of both fresh and saltwater resources (Kullberg, 2024).

In the context of South Asia, the Indian Ocean stretching from the eastern coast of Africa to the Malay Archipelago has long served as a highly contested arena where the forces of global capitalism, British imperial authority and ecological vulnerability intersect (Yoon, 2025). The colonial history of this region cannot be understood apart from its maritime dimensions, the forced migration of millions of indentured laborers across the dreaded *kala pani* (black water) to supply plantation economies, the highly lucrative and violent smuggling of opium from the fields of Bihar to the ports of Canton, and the brutal displacement of indigenous coastal populations (Ayushi & Kumar, 2025). Contemporary Indian novelists writing in both English and regional languages have increasingly turned to these maritime histories to map the sedimented traumas and survivals of the subaltern (D'Cruz, 2004).

This research paper presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of how oceanic memory and colonial afterlives are configured in contemporary Indian fiction, focusing on the critically acclaimed Anglophone works of Amitav Ghosh, specifically his *Ibis Trilogy* (*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, and *Flood of Fire*) and his tidal narratives (*The Hungry Tide*) alongside Joe D'Cruz's landmark Tamil novel *Aazhi Soozh Ulagu*, translated into English as *Ocean Rimmed World* (Ghosh, 2008). While Ghosh's epics capture the vast, transoceanic networks of imperial trade and labor, D'Cruz provides an invaluable, localized 'insider' account of the Parathavar fishing community of the Gulf of Mannar, documenting their intimate, generational relationship with the marine environment and their resistance to both historical and contemporary forces of coastal extraction (Rajan, 2022).

By reading these texts together through the twin lenses of hydrocoloniality and material ecocriticism, this paper illuminates how these writers reconstruct the ocean as a living archive of human and non-human stories. In doing so, they dismantle the anthropocentric and colonial assumptions of modernity, revealing that the struggles for ecological justice and historical memory are inextricably bound to the fluid dynamics of the wet world.

2. Review of Literature

Sawhney (2025) in his research article, examines the Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* with a deep qualitative textual examination in the broad area of Blue humanities, also analyse the lens of ocean narrative which interprets the colonial history through the context of Indian ocean. The researcher conducted the study by the base of the primary text and included the concepts and theories like Maritime Studies, ecocriticism, blue humanities, postcolonial studies and ocean studies. This study claim that ocean as a historic documentation rather than geographical backdrop, which safeguarded the cultural exchange, migration, ecological change, histories of empire, trade, etc. The researcher brings out the theme of Indian ocean as an archive, which elaborate the concept of blue humanities by giving the ocean as a multilingual encounters, cultural memory and environmental history, also representing the maritime language to reflects the hybrid identities and ocean mobility. The entire analysis structured thematically in Indian ocean as colonial trade, opium trade and water as a migration, confrontation, displacement and identity. Furthermore, the paper claims that concept of Blue humanities provide a new framework for gaining globalization, colonialism and environmental sustainability.

Nimavat (2026) research work analyse the Gurunah's *Paradise* (1994) and *By the Sea* (2001) by both interpretive examination and textual reading through the lens of blue humanities. This research work

adopts the in-depth reading of the primary texts by some of the concepts include postcolonial literary studies, ocean criticism and blue humanities, as well as the theories by Hester Blum, Steve Mentz and Isabel Hofmeyr. The emerging concept 'Oceanic Cartographies of Displacement' is used in this study to understanding of Indian ocean as active historical archive more than a geographical setting, which safeguards the memories of trade, cultural hybridity, colonialism and exile. Moreover, the study implements the prominent ideas of littoral consciousness and amphibious poetics, which proposes the narratives of Gurunah is disrupted the traditional land-centred models. Finally, the author sums up that Indian Ocean as a vital part of literary examination and demonstrates how the concept of blue humanities gives the framework for the deep study of ocean and elaborates the future scope for postcolonial criticism.

Reshmi (2024) examines the rise of concept Blue humanities as a new cultural turn, which transfer the study from the perspective of land to water centric by both interpretative methods and theoretical concepts. This study has several concepts and themes, which include history, material ecocriticism, blue humanities, ocean studies and cultural studies to hypothesize the ocean as cultural, ecological and ethical space. This study includes Material Ecocritical Theory by Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovion, as a pivotal framework to participating the contributions of Nicholas Horden, Steve Mentz, Peregrine Purcell and Dan Brayton to claim that the ocean should be primarily understood as active agents. Numerous prominent concepts are included in the research such as aquatic wave, water centric, new thalassology, environmental humanities, etc. which aligning the concept of Blue humanities as an interdisciplinary area that combines the ocean themes to refine the human- ocean relationships. This study sums up that the Blue humanities as a transformative pattern in present era by reframing the ocean to centre of literary and cultural inquiry.

3. Objectives

- (i) To theorize the concepts of hydrocolonialism, hydrocoloniality, and the Blue Humanities within the specific socio-historical and material coordinates of the Indian Ocean world, highlighting the shift from telluric to aquatic models of spatial and historical analysis.
- (ii) To investigate how Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* and *The Hungry Tide* construct the ocean and tidal estuaries as living, fluid archives of colonial trauma, resource extractivism, and subaltern resistance, tracing the dissolution of land-based caste and social hierarchies during the *kala pani* transit.
- (iii) To analyze Joe D'Cruz's regional Tamil novel *Aazhi Soozh Ulagu* (*Ocean Rimmed World*) as an indigenous littoral narrative that articulates a unique neytal (coastal) ontology, demonstrating how localized marine life worlds and cultural memories resist both historical colonial interventions and contemporary postcolonial state led development.
- (iv) To examine the 'narrative agency' of 'storied matter' in the selected novels, demonstrating how non-human materiality actively co-authors historical memory and challenges anthropocentric, linear narratives of progress.
- (v) To explore the linguistic registers of maritime and littoral communities, analyzing how the usage of the creolized Laskari ship-jargon in Ghosh's trilogies and the diglossic, localized Parathavar Tamil dialect in D'Cruz's text operates as a form of linguistic hydro-decoloniality that resists the standardization and containment of imperial and national languages.

4. Research Gap

While existing scholarship in the environmental humanities has made significant strides in exploring the ecological dimensions of postcolonial literature, a critical gap remains in the comparative synthesis of transoceanic Anglophone narratives and vernacular, regional littoral fictions within South Asia. Much of the prevailing research on the Blue Humanities and hydrocolonialism has been anchored in Atlantic-centric frameworks, particularly focusing on the Middle Passage and the transatlantic slave trade, which often overlooks the distinct material, historical, and linguistic realities of the Indian Ocean's indenture and coolie systems.

Furthermore, within the sphere of South Asian literary studies, ecocritical analyses have frequently suffered from a persistent terrestrial division, separating agrarian themes (such as land dispossession,

peasant struggles, and riverine irrigation) from the distinct ecological realities of coastal, estuarine, and marine environments. Studies on Amitav Ghosh's maritime fiction are abundant, yet they rarely put his global, transoceanic epics into direct conversation with regional, vernacular 'insider' narratives of fishing communities, such as Joe D'Cruz's *Aazhi Soozh Ulagu*.

This scholarly bifurcation has resulted in a critical blindness, elite, Anglophone 'route-based' fictions are celebrated for their cosmopolitan transnationalism, while regional 'place-based' littoral narratives are often marginalized as mere regional ethnography, failing to recognize their profound theoretical contribution to 'wet ontologies' and global environmental justice. By bridging this gap, this paper demonstrates how the dialogue between Ghosh's global oceanic networks and D'Cruz's localized coastal ecologies produces a highly nuanced, decolonial understanding of hydrocoloniality, one that addresses both the macro-structures of imperial capitalism and the micro-politics of subaltern coastal survival.

5. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, critical-interpretive methodology centered on the practice of 'reading for water' and 'hydrocritical reading' (Winkiel, 2020). This method departs from traditional textual close-reading by systematically tracing the material, metaphorical, and structural presence of liquids, flows, and aquatic infrastructures within the narrative architecture of the novels. Rather than treating the aquatic setting as a static background, 'reading for water' interrogates how the physical properties of water, its volumetric depth, solvency, tides, currents, and salinity intra-act with human historical processes, bodily labor, and cultural memory (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014).

The primary literary corpus selected for this study represents two distinct yet deeply interconnected dimensions of South Asian maritime fiction. Amitav Ghosh's transoceanic Anglophone epics (*Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke*, *Flood of Fire*) and his estuarine novel *The Hungry Tide*, alongside Joe D'Cruz's vernacular littoral narrative *Aazhi Soozh Ulagu* (*Ocean Rimmed World*). The analytical approach operates through a multi-layered comparative framework:

5.1 Archival Reconstruction Tracing how both authors construct the ocean as a living, material archive of colonial trauma, tracking the physical and bodily traces left in the water by the indentured labor system and coastal displacement.

5.2 Littoral Mapping

Comparing the shifting, volatile spaces of Ghosh's Sundarbans mangroves with D'Cruz's sandy Gulf of Mannar coastline to demonstrate how these littoral zones resist cartographic containment and represent spaces of subaltern survival.

5.3 Linguistic Analysis

Investigating the creolized Laskari jargon in the *Ibis Trilogy* and the diglossic Parathavar Tamil dialect in *Ocean Rimmed World* to analyze how non-standard maritime language disrupts the linguistic hegemony of the colonial and postcolonial state.

By applying this comprehensive qualitative approach, this paper links the macro-critiques of global hydrocolonial capitalism with the micro-histories of localized, non-human, and subaltern coastal survival.

6. Theoretical Framework

To construct a robust theoretical foundation for mapping oceanic memory in contemporary Indian novels, this study integrates three majors, overlapping fields of contemporary critical theory, Isabel Hofmeyr's concept of Hydrocolonialism, the Blue Humanities (as articulated by Steve Mentz, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Philip Steinberg), and Material Ecocriticism (developed by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann).

The concept of hydrocolonialism, first introduced in embryonic form by Bystrom and Hofmeyr in 2017 and fully developed in Hofmeyr's monograph *Dockside Reading: Hydrocolonialism and the Custom House* (2022), signals an analytical commitment to understanding a world indelibly shaped by the imperial uses of water. Hofmeyr's framework insists that colonialism did not merely happen on land; rather, it was deeply dependent on the colonization by means of water. This includes the physical control

of maritime trade routes, the legal partition of oceans, the construction of harbor infrastructures and the bureaucratic policing of texts, bodies, and commodities at the port of entry manifested through the institution of the colonial custom house.

Hydrocolonialism seeks to lay bare these colonial constructions and representations of water in order to undo them. It prompts literary scholars to read 'laterally, vertically, and contrapuntally' between different water-worlds and hydro-imaginaries, tracking how imperial powers codified water to serve global capital, while simultaneously recognizing how the fluid, unpredictable materiality of water provided openings for subaltern resistance and trans-local negotiation. The theoretical expansion of this term into 'hydrocoloniality' further emphasizes the ongoing, structural afterlives of these maritime colonial relations in postcolonial nation-states, where modern infrastructural operations and capital extraction continue to eviscerate coastal communities and their local hydro-epistemologies.

Complementing the political-economic critique of hydrocolonialism is the broader philosophical intervention of the Blue Humanities. Scholars like Steve Mentz have championed a paradigm shift away from dry-land thinking, arguing that maritime events like shipwrecks, storms and oceanic drift produce profound epistemic dislocations that require new, innovative narrative forms. The Blue Humanities insists that oceans are not metaphors for boundless freedom or psychological depth, but are material environments populated by bodies that labor, suffer, and die.

To conceptualize this material liquidity, Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters have advanced the concept of 'wet ontologies'. A wet ontology recognizes the sea's material and phenomenological distinctiveness, its constant motion, its volumetric depth and its generative capacity as a model for a 'world of flows, connections, liquidities, and becomings'. By thinking with water, the Blue Humanities challenges the static, cartographic logic of the modern nation-state, substituting stable borders with dynamic routes and highlighting the relational connections that link coastal spaces across vast distances.

To understand how the ocean registers, preserves and projects the memory of these colonial and ecological entanglements, this paper draws upon the theoretical paradigm of material ecocriticism. As formulated by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, material ecocriticism is the study of the way material forms which including bodies, toxic substances, landscapes, and elemental forces, intra-act with each other and with the human dimensions, producing configurations of meaning and discourses that can be critically interpreted. Central to this framework is the concept of 'storied matter' and 'narrative agency'.

Rejecting the Cartesian dualism that views non-human matter as passive, inert, and devoid of meaning, material ecocriticism posits that all matter possesses its own agency, inherent creativity, and expressive capacity. The physical world is viewed as a 'corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed'. When applied to maritime literature, the ocean itself becomes a living, material archive. The salt, the waves, the sedimented shipwrecks, and the marine species are not mere scenic backdrops, but are co-constitutive narrative actors whose material expressions can be read alongside, and often in resistance to, written historical records.

To synthesize these environmental and political frameworks, this study incorporates a crucial posthumanist critique of sovereign human agency and authorship. The traditional, land-locked understanding of history has long relied on the Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous, rational human subject as the sole author and driver of historical progress, a concept that closely mirrors the Romantic ideal of the solitary, individual literary author. However, poststructuralist theorists like Roland Barthes (1977) and Michel Foucault (1979) have famously challenged this sovereign authority, declaring the 'death of the author' and reinterpreting authorship not as a personal identity, but as a historically variable 'author-function' embedded within institutional and linguistic networks.

This theoretical paper makes a crucial, second-order conceptual leap by mapping this digital and linguistic model of distributed agency onto the ecological coordinates of the ocean. Just as digital writing is revealed to be a hybrid, distributed activity involving human prompts and computational

machines, the recording of oceanic history is a hybrid, distributed process involving human bodies, colonial archives, and the powerful, non-human agency of the sea itself. The ocean operates as a material 'co-author' of history, its currents, monsoons, and biological processes actively shape, dissolve, and preserve the traces of human actions.

Thus, the 'death of the terracentric author' of history occurs when we recognize that human agency is always distributed within a larger, watery, more-than-human network. This posthumanist lens allows us to read contemporary Indian maritime novels not as the products of a single human consciousness depicting a passive sea, but as literary expressions of a distributed, eco-material archive where human memory and oceanic agency are profoundly entangled.

To further ground this critique of power and containment within maritime spaces, this study draws on Michel Foucault's (1975) theorization of disciplinary power, surveillance, and the production of 'docile bodies'. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault traces how modern power operates through total institutions such as prisons, military academies, and hospitals, which regulate bodies through the strict partitioning of space, the implementation of minute, repetitive time-schedules, and continuous, internalized surveillance.

This study argues that the colonial merchant ship (like the *Ibis* in Ghosh's work) and the enclosed coastal fishing camps governed by colonial-era laws are maritime manifestations of Foucault's total institutions. The imperial state sought to discipline the bodies of indentured 'coolies' and 'lascar' sailors, subjecting them to rigid hierarchies, bodily punishments, and spatial containment to maximize their utility for imperial capitalism.

However, as the subsequent analysis will demonstrate, the uncontrollable, fluid materiality of the ocean, its storms, its solvency, and its resistance to cartography, constantly disrupts these disciplinary mechanisms, transforming these sites of absolute containment into unpredictable arenas of subaltern resistance and horizontal, posthuman solidarity.

7. Discussion and Analysis

7.1 The Indian Ocean as a Living Archive

The colonial history of the Indian Ocean is marked by the violent imposition of British maritime hegemony, a regime of hydrocolonial governance that transformed the open, culturally diverse trade networks of the region into highly securitized, commercial pipelines for the benefit of the British Empire (Yoon, 2025). In Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*, this historical transformation is examined through the twin narratives of the East India Company's opium trade with China and the systematic recruitment and transport of indentured Indian laborers (coolies) to sugar plantations across the globe (Yoon, 2025 & Sawhney, 2025).

Central to this narrative project is the *Ibis*, a former blackbirding slave ship refitted to carry both opium chests and indentured laborers. The ship functions as a floating, material archive of colonial trauma (Bystrom & Hofmeyr, 2017). Ghosh meticulously details how the physical structure of the vessel, its cramped holds, wooden timber, chains, and cargo manifests, retains the historical sediment of multiple systems of exploitation, from the Atlantic slave trade to the Indian Ocean coolie trade (Hofmeyr, 2022).

For the characters onboard the *Ibis*, such as the high-caste widow Deeti, the untouchable leather-worker Kalua, the bankrupt zamindar Neel Rattan Halder, and the French orphan Paulette, the voyage across the Indian Ocean constitutes a terrifying, irreversible crossing of the *kala pani* (black water). In Hindu orthodox traditions of the nineteenth century, crossing the ocean was believed to cause a permanent loss of caste, social purity, and identity (Bystrom & Hofmeyr, 2017). The colonial state actively utilized this cultural dread as a tool of spatial and psychological dislocation, using the sea as a medium of social erasure to render subaltern bodies docile, useful, and compliant for plantation labor (Foucault, 1975).

The *Ibis* operates as a maritime 'total institution' (Goffman, 1961), where the colonial ship-masters employ disciplinary techniques of surveillance and physical containment to mold the displaced laborers

into useful, standardized inputs of agricultural production (Tamizh, 2022). The daily schedule, the enforcement of silence, and the distribution of rations in the cramped hold are designed to erase individual agency, creating a highly disciplined, submissive labor force

However, as the Ibis moves further away from the land, the fluid materiality of the ocean begins to act as a decolonial solvent, directly subverting the terrestrial mechanisms of disciplinary containment (Bystrom & Hofmeyr, 2017). The rigid, terrestrial hierarchies of caste, religion, and gender that governed life in the villages of Bihar and the salons of Calcutta begin to dissolve in the briny, unstable space of the sea. Onboard the ship, the displaced individuals, stripped of their ancestral identities, are forced to negotiate new forms of relationality.

They form deep, horizontal ties of kinship, declaring themselves to be jahaj-bhai (ship-brothers), a term that subverts the traditional, vertical structures of caste and bloodline. The ocean, therefore, emerges not only as a site of coercive displacement but as a space of radical potentiality, where subaltern subjects can reconstruct their identities and forge collective modes of survival (Ayushi & Kumar, 2025).

The historical reality of the ocean as a living archive is also registered through its capacity to preserve the memories of those who have been erased by official imperial records. As the narrator observes in *Sea of Poppies*, “the river flowed on, carrying the memory of countless lives” (Bystrom & Hofmeyr, 2017, p. 12). The material water acts as a repository of historical crimes, the bodies of drowned coolies, the discarded waste of colonial trade, and the silent suffering of the displaced.

By tracing these oceanic routes, Ghosh's fiction aligns with the Blue Humanities project of recovering maritime histories that have been systematically silenced by land-based, national histories. The sea becomes a hauntological space where the ghosts of colonial violence refuse to be laid to rest, constantly erupting into the present through the movements of the tides and the memories of the descendants of the jahaj-bhai (Ekta, 2025).

7.2 Littoral Realism and Neytal Epistemologies

While Amitav Ghosh's novels chart the expansive, transoceanic routes of imperial commerce, Joe D'Cruz's *Aazhi Soozh Ulagu* (Ocean Rimmed World) provides a profound, localized counterpoint by centering the lived realities of a specific coastal community (D'Cruz, 2018). Set over a period of five decades from 1933 to 1985, along the Tuticorin coast of southern Tamil Nadu, the novel is an insider account of the Parathavar (also known as Bharathavar) fishing community, a group of seafarers and fisherfolk whose survival has been intimately tied to the marine environment for millennia.

The Parathavars are unique in that they converted to Roman Catholicism in the sixteenth century under the influence of Portuguese missionaries, seeking protection from local rulers and Arab traders in exchange for control over the highly lucrative pearl fisheries of the Gulf of Mannar (The Hindu, 2015). This historical conversion, however, did not liberate them from the brutal structures of caste prejudice or economic exploitation, instead, it created a complex, hybridized identity where Catholic religious practices segued seamlessly into the indigenous myths, rituals, and ecological relationships of the coastal landscape (D'Cruz, 2015).

D'Cruz constructs his narrative around the classical Tamil literary concept of neytal, one of the five tinai (ecological/poetic landscapes) of Sangam poetry, characterized by the marine and littoral zone and defined by the themes of longing, anxiety, and the precariousness of life. Unlike the other tinai landscapes, which achieved relative stability through agriculture or urbanization, the neytal land is marked by radical uncertainty, a space where “the vastness of the ocean... provides daily sustenance and brings death in unpredictable, uncertain ways” (D'Cruz, 2015).

D'Cruz's littoral realism rejects the romanticized, Western aesthetic of the sea as a pristine, sublime wilderness, instead, he portrays the ocean as a space of intense physical labor, bodily suffering, and ecological co-constitution. The narrative structure of *Aazhi Soozh Ulagu* is built upon a profound temporal and spatial tension. It interlaces the agonizing story of three generations of fishermen, Godhra Pillai, Susai, and Siluvai, who are stranded mid-ocean on a routine fishing expedition in July 1985, with

the larger, historical chronicle of the Parathavar community's transition from traditional catamaran-based fishing to mechanized, state-promoted modern trawling.

The stranded fishermen's struggle for survival, marked by hunger, thirst, and terminal heroism, acts as a microcosm of the community's broader existential crisis in the face of modern capital and technological transformation. Crucial to D'Cruz's neytal ontology is the documentation of the community's indigenous ecological knowledge, particularly their traditional foodways and conservation practices (D'Cruz, 2026). The Parathavars' relationship with the sea is defined by a deep understanding of marine biology, weather patterns, and sustainable extraction.

D'Cruz meticulously catalogs their dietary habits, including the consumption of specific marine species like the stingray (thirukai), the tiger shark (varipulian) and the maangaai chalai, which was traditionally administered to lactating mothers for its nutritional value (D'Cruz, 2026). He describes traditional preservation techniques, such as the salting and drying of fish and the practice of burying fish in underground pits, locally known as oorai to ensure food security during the volatile, non-fishing monsoon seasons.

These practices are not mere anthropological curiosities, they represent a sophisticated, localized 'hydrosocial' relationship that balances human survival with the preservation of the marine ecosystem (Boast, 2014). This local, sustainable ontology directly clashes with the hydrocolonial and neo-hydrocolonial forces of modernization. The introduction of mechanized trawlers, backed by colonial and later postcolonial state policies, disrupted the traditional ecological balance of the Tuticorin coast. While trawling promised short-term financial gains, it ultimately led to the gradational collapse of fish stocks, the destruction of fragile coral reefs, the accumulation of debt among small-scale fishers, and the breakdown of communal solidarity (Farisha, 2026 & D'Cruz, 2018).

In his contemporary political life and public activism, Joe D'Cruz has actively opposed massive state-sponsored infrastructural projects along the coastline, such as the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Project and the proposed International Container Transshipment Terminal at Enayam arguing that these projects represent a continuation of colonial-style territorial grabs that treat the coastal ocean as empty, disposable space (*aqua nullius*), while eviscerating the livelihoods of the traditional fishing communities who serve as the true custodians of the marine ecology.

Aazhi Soozh Ulagu thus stands as an eloquent, literary archive of a community's resistance against the slow violence of environmental degradation and state-driven maritime capitalism, asserting that the ocean is not a resource to be mined, but a mother to be revered and protected.

7.3 Storied Matter and Non-Human Agency

A central tenant of material ecocriticism is the rejection of anthropocentrism, urging a critical recognition of non-human entities as active, agentic force-multipliers in human affairs (Oppermann, 2014). In the maritime fictions of Amitav Ghosh and Joe D'Cruz, this non-human agency is manifested through the portrayal of volatile marine environments, elemental forces, and complex ecological networks that actively shape the narrative trajectory, resisting human control and comprehension.

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, set in the fragile estuarine ecosystem of the Sundarbans the vast archipelago of mangrove islands spanning the border between India and Bangladesh this non-human agency is embodied in the shifting tides, the dense mangrove forests and the apex predator of the region, the Bengal tiger. The Sundarbans represent an amphibious waterscape where the distinction between land and water is daily erased by the incoming tides.

The mangroves themselves act as dynamic, material boundaries, trapping silt, buffering storms, and providing a nursery for countless marine species. Ghosh portrays this environment as a 'living, breathing entity' that refuses to submit to the cartographic and engineering designs of the state (Kullberg, 2024). The tidal country forces human characters such as the elite, Delhi-educated translator Kanai Dutt and the American-born marine biologist Piya Roy to confront the limitations of their terrestrial, scientific epistemologies.

Piya's search for the rare Orcaella-Irrawaddy dolphins requires her to abandon her high-tech satellite tracking devices and rely on the local, embodied hydro-knowledge of Fokir, an illiterate fisherman who reads the movements of the water, the wind, and the behavior of marine life (Yoon, 2025). The ocean and its tidal estuaries in Ghosh's work are characterized by 'slow violence' a term coined by Rob Nixon to describe environmental degradation that occurs gradually, out of sight, and is often ignored by mainstream media. This slow violence is contrasted with the sudden, catastrophic violence of the monsoon storm, a recurring elemental force that acts as a primary narrative agent in both *The Hungry Tide* and the *Ibis Trilogy*.

The storm is not a mere plot device to induce terror; it is a manifestation of the planet's thermodynamic agency, a force that disrupts human geopolitical structures, ship navigation, and socio-economic plans, forcing a radical leveling of social classes. In the climactic storm of *The Hungry Tide*, Fokir sacrifices his life to shield Piya, anchoring their bodies to a mangrove tree. This tragic event highlights the concept of 'trans-corporeality' articulated by Stacy Alaimo to describe the material interpenetration of the human body and the physical environment (Sarkar & Sreeramulu, 2025). Human flesh, mangrove bark, salt water, and the wind become physically and narratively entangled, demonstrating that human survival is always dependent on and vulnerable to the non-human world.

In Joe D'Cruz's *Ocean Rimmed World*, this elemental agency is similarly manifested in the dramatic descriptions of shark hunts (*sura vettu*) and deep-sea voyages. The Parathavar fishermen do not view the sea as a passive resource, but as a space populated by powerful non-human subjects with their own intentionality and agency. The shark is portrayed not merely as prey, but as a formidable, respected opponent whose tracking, capture, and battle require a deep, reciprocal engagement with the ocean's currents and depths.

The sea itself, characterized by its unpredictable currents and thermal layers, is an active character that can easily swallow catamarans and modern trawlers alike (D'Cruz, 2018). The stranded fishermen in Aazhi Soozh Ulagu must read the 'language' of the sea, the color of the water, the smell of the wind, and the behavior of passing fish to sustain their lives, demonstrating that in the littoral zone, human survival is a constant, material negotiation with the expressive, storied matter of the ocean.

7.4 Linguistic Fluidity and Littoral Dialects

The hydrocolonial project of containment and standardization was not restricted to maritime shipping routes and harbor infrastructures, it was deeply concerned with the policing and standardization of language. Colonial administrations sought to impose standardized, European national languages as the sole mediums of law, governance and literary representation, actively suppressing the hybrid, fluid linguistic practices of maritime and coastal populations. In response to this linguistic imperialism, both Amitav Ghosh and Joe D'Cruz employ a highly innovative form of hydro-decoloniality by centering fluid, non-standardized maritime languages that disrupt the linguistic hegemony of both the colonial empire and the postcolonial nation-state (Manià, 2017 & D'Cruz, 2004).

In the *Ibis Trilogy*, Amitav Ghosh reconstructs the historical linguistic world of the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean through the extensive usage of Laskari jargon. Laskari was the polyglot, creolized language of command spoken onboard the commercial and military vessels of the British Empire, drawn from a diverse mixture of English, Hindustani, Malay, Chinese, Arabic, Malayalam, and Portuguese.

Rather than utilizing a standardized, literary English, Ghosh populates his novels with a dense, rhythmic 'Babel' of maritime terms, such as *lascar* (sailor), *tindal* (boatswain's mate), *mallee* (gardener/deckhand), and *seacunny* (helmsman), creating a challenging, immersive linguistic environment for the reader. This linguistic choice is a deliberate act of decolonial book history and postcolonial translation (Visconti, 2024). By restoring Laskari to the center of his epic, Ghosh de-centers the narrative authority of Standard English, demonstrating that the language of maritime modernity was not a pure, European import, but a creolized, collaborative creation of subaltern sailors from across the Global South.

The language itself reflects the material realities of the ship, fluid, hybrid, and resistant to terrestrial categorization. Laskari is a linguistic manifestation of the *jahaj-bhai* kinship, a shared tongue that

allowed diverse populations to labor and survive together on the volatile waters of the Indian Ocean. In Aazhi Soozh Ulagu, Joe D'Cruz achieves a similar linguistic subversion through his usage of the highly diglossic, localized dialect of the Parathavar fishing community (The Hindu, 2015). Tamil is famously one of the most diglossic languages in the world, characterized by a sharp divide between the formal, literary register and the informal, spoken dialects.

D'Cruz's novel is written almost entirely in the authentic, spoken dialect of the Tuticorin coast, a linguistic choice that presented significant challenges for mainstream publishers and translators (The Hindu, 2015). This dialect is rich in age-old coastal vocabulary, incorporating maritime terms, weather indicators, and species-specific biological taxonomies that are completely absent from standard Tamil dictionaries. D'Cruz's text restores the authentic, indigenous names of different species of marine life, documenting their physical characteristics and behavioral patterns as understood by the community.

The linguistic texture of *Ocean Rimmed World* also retains the historical traces of the community's colonial and religious encounters, blending ancient Sangam Tamil poetic resonances with Portuguese-derived terms for religious offices, church practices, and maritime technologies. By writing in this localized, littoral register, D'Cruz reclaims the literary legitimacy of the subaltern voice, asserting that the coastal dialect of the Parathavars is not a corrupted form of standard Tamil, but a sophisticated, historically rich language of ecological survival and cultural memory (D'Cruz, 2004).

This linguistic reclamation acts as a powerful barrier against the homogenizing, land-biased linguistic policies of the postcolonial state, ensuring that the community's unique, hydrosocial relationship with the sea is preserved within the living archive of Tamil literature.

8. Summation

The comparative reading of Amitav Ghosh's transoceanic Anglophone epics and Joe D'Cruz's vernacular littoral narrative reveals a profound, shared commitment to dismantling the terracentric biases that have long dominated South Asian historiography and literary criticism. By centering the material coordinates of the Indian Ocean and its coastal margins, these novels demonstrate that the histories of colonial capitalism, labor exploitation, and cultural hybridity are inextricably bound to the fluid dynamics of the wet world.

Through the theoretical lenses of hydrocolonialism and the Blue Humanities, the ocean is re-conceptualized not as a frictionless highway for trade or a passive void, but as an active, volumetric archive of subaltern memory and trauma. Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* and *The Hungry Tide* expose how the British Empire established its global hegemony through the violent, hydrocolonial regulation of bodies, languages, and resources—from the forced migration of indentured laborers across the *kala pani* to the extraction of resources in volatile estuarine zones.

Concurrently, D'Cruz's *Aazhi Soozh Ulagu* provides a vital regional counter-narrative, showing how the Parathavar fishing community articulated a unique, sustainable *neytal* ontology that resisted both Portuguese religious colonization and modern, state-driven neo-hydrocolonial infrastructural projects. Furthermore, by drawing upon the insights of material ecocriticism and posthumanism, this paper has demonstrated how these texts celebrate the narrative agency of storied matter, distributing historical and literary agency across hybrid networks of human and non-human actors.

The monsoons, the tides, the marine life, and the shifting coastlines are not mere theatrical backdrops but active historical participants that co-author the destinies of the subaltern characters. Linguistically, the fluid, polyphonic registers of Laskari jargon and diglossic coastal Tamil dialects operate as powerful instruments of hydro-decolonization, de-centering the standardized, cartographic languages of colonial and national governance. Eventually, these contemporary Indian novels offer a radical, aquatic epistemology that is urgently needed in the era of the Anthropocene, a framework that challenges us to go 'below the waterline' to discover new modes of relationality, survival, and ecological justice in our troubled, warming world.

8.1 Future Scope

The critical intersections of hydrocoloniality, the Blue Humanities, and material ecocriticism mapped out in this paper open up several rich avenues for future academic inquiry within South Asian and global environmental literary studies.

Initially, future scholarship could benefit enormously from extending the comparative framework established here to other regional, coastal languages of the Indian subcontinent, such as Malayalam, Odia, and Bengali, to investigate how diverse littoral communities across India's vast coastline articulate their unique hydrosocial relationships. Additionally, the emerging interdisciplinary domain of the Prompt Humanities, which critically investigates the linguistic, rhetorical, and posthumanist dimensions of human-AI collaboration—presents an exciting frontier for maritime literary studies

By putting the material, historical memories of the ocean into dialogue with the digital, distributed networks of contemporary knowledge production, environmental humanities scholars can continue to develop powerful, decolonial hermeneutics that are robust enough to address both the historical traumas of our past and the complex, ecological challenges of our collective planetary future.

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