



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Oceanic Epistemologies and Trans-corporeality: Reimagining Amitav Ghosh through Anthropocene Narratives

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Abstract

The emergence of blue humanities has revolutionized the correlation between marine space and human society through its critical framework in contemporary literary studies, thereby gaining prominence over the last few years in responding to the environmental crises of the Anthropocene. In exploring the ocean studies, Amitav Ghosh's fictional narratives delve deep into the hydro studies, climate change, and the entwining of human and subhuman worlds. This paper studies Ghosh's works through blue humanities by adopting Philip E. Steinberg, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, and Stacy Alaimo as a theoretical framework. Steinberg's work on the ocean as a place of flows and links gives a geopolitical view. DeLoughrey's postcolonial ecocriticism shows the colonial histories in ocean spaces. Alaimo's idea of trans-corporeality points to real connections between human bodies and the ocean environment. This article attempts to redress this long-standing gap within postcolonial literary studies and oceanic humanities by analysing Ghosh's texts through the lens of these disciplines to open new views on the ocean's representation due to ecological and cultural negotiations. While existential ventures and post-colonialism in Ghosh's works exist, there has so far not been an oriented effort to look at his corpus in terms of maritime humanities.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, Anthropocene, Blue Humanities, Oceanic studies, Trans-corporeality.

Introduction

Blue humanities within the literary scope have emerged as a revolutionary paradigm in contemporary eco-centric research, profoundly elevating the vast oeuvre of the intricate connections between human society and the marine ecosystem. This new-fangled academic exploration has acquired specific importance within the Anthropocene paradigm, as more scholars acknowledge the decisive role of oceanic dimensions in the formation of human history,

culture, and environmental futures. The blue humanities perspective transcends classical land-focused deliberations to consider how oceanic space outlines and gets moulded by human action, thereby providing new approaches to understanding our relationship with the world's seas and watercourses. The literary turn into the sea occurs alongside increasing oceanic degradation, rising sea levels, and disproportionate climate change effects on coastal societies. The contemporary understanding of literature harbours the ocean as beyond just a living ecosystem, as its scope expands to trace the anthropological history, culture, and potential futures. Recent research in environmental studies has increasingly centered on what scholars define as 'hydro-criticism', analyzing the way water bodies influence narrative forms and cultural meanings. This parallels with rising awareness of the ocean's position in climate change, migration streams, and global economic patterns. The blue humanities model furnishes key tools for comprehending these sophisticated relationships and presents new routes to conceptualizing human engagement with marine environments.

Amitav Ghosh's works serve the emerging field of hydro-studies and oceanic spaces in exploring how they relate to human experience. His works are highly aqua-centric, with water as the cleansing life-giver. Trailing from

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the Ibis trilogy to *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Gun Island* (2019), and *Wild Fictions* (2020), all these books provide profound interpretations of bridging the gulf between sea habitats, climate change, and human societies. Analysis of these texts through a variety of theoretical lenses facilitates a complete understanding of the ways in which literary representations of maritime environments can be utilized to inform more general discussions of environmental catastrophe and human experience. This is also to show more significance to the value of Ghosh's work as environmental literature, but to demonstrate the value of blue humanities as a way of approaching current environmental issues. These generate a rich presentation of the oceans as a realm, not only as the setting but as protagonists in the production of human narratives and environmental awareness of maritime imaginations in contemporary literary studies.

Ghosh's writings offer a critical perspective on blue humanities when we consider today's environmental dilemmas. With climate change continuing to impact sea creatures and coastal cities all over the world, people relating to oceanic issues in books becomes increasingly urgent and pertinent. Ghosh's stories, which frequently inquire where the intersection of climate change, human migration, and ocean landscapes lies, teach us valuable lessons on how to enhance our understanding of these pressing global affairs, more so, engage with some of the central questions about human society and seascapes in the age of worldwide environmental catastrophe.

And finally, Ghosh's prose is useful because it combines multiple ways of perceiving sea spaces as his stories combine scientific truths of ancient nature knowledge and personal experiences, weaving together a rich, layered tapestry that defies one-dimensional perceptions of how the human and ocean worlds interact. This multi-disciplinary approach is also in line with the interdisciplinary nature of blue humanities, which draws on a variety of disciplines like environmental studies, cultural geography, and postcolonial theory to produce more complex understandings of maritime spaces. Ghosh's literature contributes to the new field of blue humanities and deconstructs conventional earth-based paradigms for the study of environmental literary studies, and clearly, his writings irradiate the intricate dynamics among oceanic spaces, climate change, and human existence.

Political Impacts and Sea-Based Movement Through Steinberg's Oceanic Flows

Philip E. Steinberg's theoretical intervention in *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (2001), is a paradigmatic departure from the comprehension of maritime spaces. His "wet ontology" derails mainstream geographic thought regarding oceans as mere voids in between landmasses and contents with oceanic fluidity as a four-dimensional space with perpetual movement and flow. His theory

revolves around three main points: the materiality of ocean space, the social construction of maritime spaces, and the political effects of oceanic mobility (Steinberg 330). His theory cites particularly how oceanic spaces resist cartographic representation and territorial biases. In Steinberg's view, the ocean's fluidity necessarily collapses land-based understandings of sovereignty and property, creating what he refers to as 'hybrid geographies' in which multiple modes of spatial ordering cross-cut and intersect with one another (Steinberg 309-312). This theory provides key concepts for examining how maritime space functions in literature, particularly texts that are concerned with questions of migration, displacement, and environmental change. A great example is Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) located in the Sundarbans archipelago. Ghosh hits a deep chord in formulating Steinberg's 'wet ontology' with his exemplary of hybrid geographies by mixing the land and the sea with maritime assemblages. This intermingling of the transformative topography surplines the water bodies through rivers, sea and estuaries, thus exemplifying Steinberg's oceanic fluidity and spatial transformation theory. The novel's descriptions of Sundarbans' biotope, ruled by water to the rhythm of life, are consistent with Steinberg's 'sea-time' and 'maritime rhythms' concepts because human lives are dictated by tidal cycles and seasons.

This concept is also flagged in Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first book of the Ibis trilogy, where the Indian Ocean is depicted as a contact precinct of cultural exchange, commerce, and forced migration during the colonial period. It serves as an ideal model of Steinberg's theory of how oceanic spaces facilitate complex webs of interaction. The Ibis, which carries indentured labourers and convicts, becomes a microcosm of Steinberg's 'maritime territoriality' (Steinberg 125) in which various spatial controls and power relations are entwined. The subsequent novels of the Ibis trilogy, *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015), promote a deeper understanding of Steinberg's concepts of maritime spaces as arenas of political and economic turmoil. Through the unveiling of Canton's waterfront and the channels of the opium trade, Steinberg's representation of oceanic space has been politically contested here within the socially constructed territory. This highlights how oceanic connections gave rise to colonial trade and exchange. They are echoed by Steinberg's notions of how sea spaces are at the very center of global political and economic relations. Steinberg's theoretical work transcends simple spatial analysis to encompass what he terms 'maritime assemblages' (Steinberg 291). These assemblages comprise physical spaces of the ocean, human actions, technological systems, and ecological processes that coalesce to create complex webs of relations.

His 'volume' idea in oceanic space not only considers surface movement but also vertical ones, like deep-sea

habitats and underwater currents. This illustrates that a three-dimensional understanding of maritime space provides the necessary tools for examining how literature portrays oceanic depth and complexity. Steinberg's concept of 'maritime rhythms' examines how ocean spaces blend various time scales, from tidal terrals of the day to climatic cycles of centuries. His research into what he terms 'sea-time' illuminates the manner in which sea stories form time relationships. This modulated ideology highlights how ocean rhythms can disrupt linear narrative, producing what Steinberg terms 'time turbulence' (Steinberg 202-209). Steinberg's application of the concept of 'sea-time' is exemplified specifically in *The Great Derangement* (2016), in which Ghosh, examines how climate change derails traditional narratives of time. Although a non-fiction and not technically a maritime novel, Ghosh's account of cyclones, increasing sea levels, and coastal frailties corresponds with Steinberg's idea of "time turbulence." The novel shows how oceanic processes disrupt linear accounts of advancement and development and create what Steinberg would describe as temporal disturbances in our perception of environmental alteration. In *The Circle of Reason* (1986), Alu's migration across the Indian Ocean to Al-Ghazira shows Steinberg's concept of oceanic spaces as spaces of transformation and cultural exchange.

In *The Hungry Time*, the dispute over the island colony reveals how water-defined spaces are spaces of political conflict, where forms of spatial structure and domination intersect, which justifies 'maritime territoriality' (Steinberg 15). Kusum's description of the settlers creates a sense of constructed territoriality:

Every day, people died... they came with guns, sticks, and torches. They pushed us back into the river, back into the water. We had nowhere to go (Ghosh 225).

The portrayal of the river dolphin and the scientist's research into it justifies Steinberg's concept of the ocean as a three-dimensional entity (Steinberg 61) involving the human, non-human in maritime assemblages. This lengthens Piyali's recognition of the Orcaella dolphin as a familiar embodiment of the aquatic space.

Steinberg's concepts of maritime labor and mobility can be understood in terms of the representation of the lashkar community in *Sea of Poppies*, of his Ibis trilogy. The rich description of shipboard life and navigation practices captures what Steinberg refers to as the 'social construction of the ocean' (Steinberg 37) through maritime labor. The conversion of the ship from a slaver to one carrying indentured laborers shows how maritime spaces enable what Steinberg refers to as "hybrid geographies," where various types of social organization converge. Ghosh's *Gun Island* develops Steinberg's idea of 'Maritime Territoriality' through the different forms of space control clash in the oceanic space and the issues of climate refugees and ecological displacement in contemporary times. The

structure of the novel, making leaps between Sundarbans, Venice, and Los Angeles, determines the oceanic relationship with worldwide trends of migration. The flooding in Venice illustrates how sea spaces upset conventional territorial frameworks, and new spatial patterns are formed as a response to environmental transformation (Steinberg 117). The story of the conflict between the nature of Deen Datta, the hero, spans across centuries through oceans and railways linked with dilute routes and transformations in ecological balance. By tracing a journey from the Sundarbans to Los Angeles and Venice, Ghosh explores the multiple ways in which historical maritime relationships are still literally mapping contemporary patterns of migration and environmental change.

The water seemed to be rising not merely from the canal but through the stones of the pavements and floors of the buildings (Ghosh 131).

This shows how maritime spaces resist fixed boundaries and give rise to what Steinberg calls 'hybrid geographies' (Steinberg 127). The novel's treatment of climate refugees justifies the invocation of oceanic flows, which shows how current patterns of forced migration flow along paths set down by previous trading patterns when considered through the journeys made by Rafi and Tipu over both legal and illegal, maritime routes. The flooding in Venice as presented in the novel, can be an example of how rising sea levels can call into question the traditional demarcation between land and sea, as a way of demonstrating Steinberg's hybrid concept of geographies. In Ghosh's book of Essays, *Wild Fictions*, the maritime themes radically push the boundaries of how a literary form can represent oceanic spaces. The interwoven narratives are an observation of environmental alterations that occur at various scales and time scales, from individual bodies to the global systems. The very structure of the work reflects Steinberg's idea of ocean flows, as the different plots counter linear developments and produce fluid linkages and recurring patterns (Steinberg 132).

The various modes of spatial control that intersect and clash in oceanic areas are useful insights for literary approaches to coastal areas and international waters. These constructs affect political and economic relations, providing important insights into understanding literary depictions of ocean spaces. This explains how modern capitalism has reorganized perceptions of sea space towards new means of controlling space and exploiting resources. At a more expansive spectrum, Ghosh's works construct an abundance of theoretical visions of Steinberg, in the comprehension of oceanic epistemologies.

DeLoughrey's Postcolonial Ecocriticism of Ghosh in Understanding Oceanic Routes and Roots

Elizabeth DeLoughrey's analysis bifurcates postcolonial theory on the one side, and its applicators on the other

side, to validate how colonial histories continue to condition current engagements with oceanic spaces. In the work of Elizabeth DeLoughrey, 'tidalectics' is a technique for maritime storytelling that makes a point shift from the linear and terrestrially-oriented storytelling. She establishes the recursion, circular nature of oceanic narratives, and a link between oceanic tales and colonial histories in determining the aqua-space (DeLoughrey 337-348). DeLoughrey's theory of 'tidalectics' comes to deep expression in *The Hungry Tide*, in which Ghosh probes the recursive link between colonial history and the contemporary environmental crisis in the Sundarbans, exposing the transitional nature of maritime narratives. The novel's design of oscillating between past and present narratives is oceanic storytelling. Taking recourse to Nirmal's diary pages and Piya's present-day research, Ghosh illustrates how colonial histories are brought to light in contemporary environmental landscapes, specifically in their treatment of uprooted populations and marine preservation efforts. Textual consideration of the Bon Bibi legend is a compelling exhibit concerning traditional ecological knowledge, which shapes oceanic views. This tale illustrates how mythological and scientific understandings of marine environments interact to influence one another, showcasing DeLoughrey's 'tidalactics'. (DeLoughrey, 410-418). Fokir's role is that of a local fisherman who assists Piya in her research and embodies a kind of knowledge regarding marine spaces that can only be developed through centuries of interaction with tidal landscapes. The Bon Bibi Joharnama is an explanation of the traditional ecological knowledge underlying the movements of living beings in marine spaces is viewed through the lens of the Bon Bibi legend. This explains how scientific and mythological views of the undersea world coalesce and correspond with each other, thereby exhibiting the notion of 'tidalectics'. The role of Fokir and his assistance to Piya symbolize his experience and thus becomes the principal source of the knowledge he possesses.

DeLoughrey examines how colonial practices have shaped landscapes through colonization into a discourse on marine environments and cultural perceptions of others, which she articulates as 'submarine futures' (DeLoughrey 403), and how colonial histories continue to surface in today's environmental issues. The conceptual framework makes three propositions about maritime spaces and the role they played in fostering colonial expansion, the effects of colonial practices on marine environments, and how resource extraction and environmental exploitation are continuing in contemporary times. DeLoughrey's concept of 'archipelagic thinking' finds manifestation in the Ibis trilogy's *Sea of Poppies*, where Ghosh embodies the Indian Ocean as an archipelago in itself, containing integrated ports and cities, all fused to form the *Jagaj Bhai* (shipmates). It inhabits a multi-ethnic population, ranging

from the Bengali raja, the Bhojpuri couple, a mulatto, to the Cantonese sailors, all of whom gravitate into DeLoughrey's 'alternative modernities'. This stands as a repository of varied maritime traditions and systems of knowledge that existed and resisted colonial power networks. In *Gun Island*, we follow a similar trail, where the legend of a gun merchant, linking the Bengali folk tradition and European trading histories, shows how colonial maritime networks continue to inform present relationships with oceanic spaces. Its exploration through historical flows resonates with current environmental challenges and human migration, denoting DeLoughrey's submarine future. Tangentially, the treatment of traditional ecological knowledge through the exploration of various cultural ways of knowing marine environments, *Wild Fictions* illustrates how alternatives contribute to environmental knowledge by engaging with indigenous maritime traditions that exemplify DeLoughrey 'oceanic epistemologies' (DeLoughrey 447). This can be illustrated in the fishermen's predictions of the weather and water patterns that facilitate traditional fishing practices, and as such remains an inherent intangible part of maritime genealogical knowledge within the fishermen.

DeLoughrey's theoretical orientation also incorporates 'archipelagic thinking', which investigates how networks of islands and maritime connections offer resistance to continental perspectives (DeLoughrey 367). Her concept of 'submarine futures' has been further elaborated by introducing a reading of what she terms 'oceanic archives,' the discussion being on how oceanic histories emerged and were retained through both cultural memory and the trace of environment (DeLoughrey 303-315). *Gun Island* justifies DeLoughrey's 'submarine futures' hypothesis, where the novel's interweaving of Bengali mythology with the contemporary climate crisis represents DeLoughrey's concept of 'oceanic archives.' In its adoption of Deen's work on the *Bonduki Sadagar* myth, Ghosh shows how sea histories are archived in cultural memory and in environmental residue. The juxtaposition of oceanic ecological collapse and climate refugees analyzes the colonial practices' impacts on contemporary environmental issues, highlighting DeLoughrey's 'critical ocean studies', which in itself is an examination of how various cultural traditions understand and represent maritime spaces. This can also resonate with what DeLoughrey calls 'alternative modernities', a mode of examining how non-Western maritime traditions offer different models for understanding human-ocean relationships (DeLoughrey 346).

The concept of Ocean Aesthetics delves deep into various cultural viewpoints, which DeLoughrey calls 'sea ontologies', purporting how native sea knowledge systems show alternatives to Western methods. This creates a 'marine cosmopolitics' where diverse culture thrives in sea space that shapes today's environmental

politics. *The Great Derangement* responds to DeLoughrey's 'marine cosmopolitics' where Ghosh digs into how cultural approaches to sea spaces deal with climate change. His criticism of modern novels' failure to show climate change resonates with DeLoughrey's thoughts on 'ocean aesthetics', calling for new novel forms that can include non-Western sea culture and eco-friendly practices.

barracudas had never been seen in these waters before... now they were everywhere. And the colour of the water seems to be very different, for a moment I thought it was real until I noticed the seaweeds underneath. They have appeared recently (Ghosh 271).

DeLoughrey refers to these new patterns of species movement as "submarine futures," and this demonstrates how climate change produces them (DeLoughrey 108). Her concept of 'oceanic epistemologies' offers helpful resources for interpreting how various cultural traditions have conceived and portrayed maritime space. This approach is especially pertinent for examining how contemporary writers engage with traditional ecological knowledge and alternative ways of approaching the relationship between humanity and the ocean. In *The Circle of Reason*, Ghosh depicts the Indian Ocean as a place of cultural encounter and resistance. Colonial narratives of modernity and advancement are in opposition to the novel's portrayal of seafaring societies and epistemologies. Ghosh demonstrates how seascapes provide ways of understanding and community building that circumvent colonial classification systems through characters like Zindi and her migrant group.

Ghosh's typification of the eco-bodies and environment through Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality

The concept of trans-corporeality as developed by Stacy Alaimo tends to attach some theory to the matter of stakes, inside which human bodies and environmental systems actively connect each other. She draws attention to environmental phenomena directly affecting human bodies, thereby challenging conventional boundaries between human and non-human worlds (Alaimo 330). This specifically emphasizes how chemical, biological, and physical processes connect human bodies to larger environmental systems. Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality is more vividly and perceptibly represented in Ghosh's depiction of climate change impacts. From the characters' individual experiences with extreme weather events, changing marine ecosystems, and environmental toxicity, it is evident how global environmental changes are mapped within individual bodies. The appearance of marine species in unexpected places, such as venomous sea snakes in the Sundarbans, shows how environmental changes are forging novel forms of trans-corporeal connection between humans and marine life.

In *Wild Fictions*, the human-ocean relationships are assessed through the corporeal connections disassembled.

The detailed descriptions, on the other hand, show in an unvarnished fashion how environmental changes are affecting human bodies and communities. Through descriptions of the effect of marine pollution on coastal communities, Ghosh's *Wild Fictions* seeks to provide concrete illustrations of 'material memoirs' of Cairo. As one of the stories said, "the taste of petroleum lingered in the fish long after the visible traces of the spill had disappeared," (Ghosh 249), signaling how industrial pollution generates trans-corporeal connection among human and marine systems. Alaimo's concept of 'material memoir' also scrutinizes how environmental exposure and experience become part and parcel of human bodily experience. This stress on three vital aspects- the interrelation of bodies with environments from a physical perspective, the scientific knowledge that underlines these connections, and lastly, the political ramifications of recognizing human embodiment in environmental systems (Alaimo 215). In her discourse on what she calls 'blue affect', she investigates how emotional and physical responses to marine environments shape human understanding of oceanic spaces. Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* analyses the human-ocean relations, constituting a representation of Steinberg's notion of fluid spaces through illustrating the uneven manner through which tidal patterns mould both the landscape and the life chances of humans within that landscape. It shapes interaction in a complex fashion between different types of knowledge of the sea and the local historical knowledge in practice. For instance, Piya Roy uses GPS technology for river dolphins, which is outnumbered by Fokir's traditional knowledge. Kanai becomes the basis for observing the human-ocean relations through the lens of the Sundarbans. Fokir's deep intuitive knowledge of the marine life, his untimely death in the storm, relates to the non-human beings of the ocean against the catastrophic environmental background. Piyali's scientific study of the marine mammals, Orcaella (river dolphins), shows how marine life forms defy usual distinctions between human and nonhuman beings:

It was as if the river itself had come alive, and what she was looking at was not water but a live animal (Ghosh 252).

Conclusion

The theoretical framing of Amitav Ghosh's works through the lens of blue humanities gulfs the significant crevices within the marine space, highlighting its momentous implications for contemporary literary studies. It pivotally reckons the shift of focus from land-centric literary studies and introduces an inclusive oceanographic surveillance. In Ghosh's novels, accessing maritime spaces unearths connections between the environmental, social, and political. This trajectory provides new paradigms for environmental literature away from reductive messaging and interacting with pressing environmental issues. Ghosh also calls attention to the ending of radical narrative-reading

through the colonial dimension, thus exposing the ongoing impacts of colonialism. Therefore, Ghosh's writings form a clarion call to maritime spaces in constructing Indian postcolonial theory in the realms of blue humanities. His approaches navigate distinctive ways for postcolonial literary studies, refracting kaleidoscopic descriptions of sea spaces as a grand briefing on environmental crises and human experience, collaging maritime environments in explorations of configuring human-environment relations. This single lens demonstrates how literature may attempt to present the physical effects of such changes and retain literary merit. This approach, in addition to enhancing Ghosh's calibre in its attention to environmental issues, demonstrates the value of blue humanities as a means by which to engage with environmental issues of the present day through detailing the role of the embodied experience in environmental literature. Through the incorporation of blue humanities, literary thought dislodges anthropocentric and terrestrial inclinations, announcing disciplinary and ethical revolution in the imagination of human-nature relations. In Ghosh's works, the ocean gains a resistance, a passage for migration and an intertwining within the ecology, spreading the debates over climate change, colonization histories, and environmental justice.

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