The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 4 | Issue 10 | October 2026
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online), SJIF IF(2026): 5.6
Website: www.theacademic.in

Reclaiming the Tides: Female Empowerment, Marine Influence, and Environmental Identity in Monique Roffey's *The Mermaid of Black Conch*

Ms.Ajisha.K, M.A, (Ph.D)
Research Scholar, Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts and Science for Women
Dr.R .Karunambigai M.A, M.Phil, Ph.D
Associate Professor & Head, Department of English,
Sri Ramakrishna College of Arts and Science for Women

DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24395230

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper
Received: 27-10-2026
Accepted: 02-11-2026
Published: 20-11-2026

Keywords:
Blue Humanities, Monique Roffey, The Mermaid of Black Conch, women, oceanic agency, ecological identity, Caribbean literature

ABSTRACT

This article reads Monique Roffey's The Mermaid of Black Conch (2020) through the Blue Humanities, with particular attention to women's bodies, oceanic agency, and ecological identity. Rather than treating the Caribbean Sea as a decorative setting, the article approaches it as a material, cultural, and narrative force that shapes Aycayia's experience of captivity, transformation, belonging, and return. The mermaid's hybrid body unsettles the assumed boundary between human and nonhuman life, while her encounters with patriarchal judgement, colonial histories, and the gaze of outsiders reveal how women and marine environments can both be subjected to practices of possession and control. Drawing on oceanic studies, feminist materialist thought, and postcolonial ecocriticism, the article argues that the novel imagines identity as relational and fluid rather than fixed. The sea is neither simply liberating nor wholly threatening: it offers refuge and power, but it also holds loneliness, danger, and historical memory. This ambiguity prevents the novel's ecological vision from becoming sentimental. The article concludes that Aycayia's story encourages readers to reconsider the ethical relationship between human communities, women's

Disclaimer: The opinions, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, analyses, and statements expressed in this research article are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views, policies, or positions of the Publisher, Chief Editor, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, or their affiliated institutions. The author(s) are solely responsible for ensuring the originality, authenticity, and integrity of the manuscript and for ensuring that it is free from plagiarism, AI-generated content, copyright infringement, data falsification, and any other form of academic misconduct.

autonomy, and the more-than-human ocean. Since recent scholarship has also examined the novel's aquatic poetics and gendered ecologies, this reading is framed as a focused interpretation of the relationship between bodily autonomy, narrative perspective, and the sea's ambivalent agency; its originality should be confirmed through a full review of current scholarship.

Introduction

The sea has long appeared in literature as a route, a border, a source of livelihood, a symbol of freedom, and a site of danger. Yet ocean-centred literary criticism asks readers to move beyond the idea that water is merely a backdrop against which human stories unfold. The Blue Humanities considers how seas and oceans shape cultural memory, social relations, ecological systems, and literary form. It also challenges land-centred ways of imagining place by directing attention to currents, tides, marine life, and the histories carried through water. In Monique Roffey's The Mermaid of Black Conch (2020), the Caribbean Sea is inseparable from the life of Aycayia, an Indigenous woman who has been cursed into the form of a mermaid. Her story makes the ocean a home, a place of isolation, a space of power, and a reminder of histories of gendered and colonial violence.

This article examines the relationship between women and the sea in The Mermaid of Black Conch. It argues that Roffey presents ecological identity as relational: Aycayia's identity cannot be understood through a simple opposition between human and animal, land and water, freedom and captivity. Her hybrid body makes these categories unstable. At the same time, the treatment of Aycayia by other characters reveals how women's bodies and marine beings can become objects of possession, spectacle, and control. The novel therefore offers a productive text for Blue Humanities analysis, particularly when oceanic thinking is combined with feminist and postcolonial approaches.

The article has three aims. First, it considers the Caribbean Sea as an active presence rather than a passive setting. Second, it explores Aycayia's hybrid body as a challenge to rigid distinctions between human and nonhuman life. Third, it examines the tension between the sea as refuge and the sea as a space marked by loneliness, violence, and historical memory. These concerns are connected: the novel's ecological imagination is inseparable from its representation of gender and power.

The argument does not assume that women are naturally closer to nature or that the sea automatically symbolises female freedom. Such assumptions can reproduce the very stereotypes that

feminist criticism seeks to question. Instead, the article considers how gendered meanings are produced through particular relationships, actions, and narrative choices. The sea's significance lies in its capacity to expose the limits of ownership and fixed identity while remaining materially unpredictable. In this sense, The Mermaid of Black Conch invites readers to think about human life as entangled with wider ecological worlds.

Blue Humanities: Reading with the Sea

The Blue Humanities developed as a response to the tendency of literary and cultural studies to privilege land-based environments. Oceanic criticism considers the sea not simply as scenery or a metaphor but as a complex material space with its own movements, histories, and forms of life. Hester Blum's "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies" calls attention to the ocean as a field that can change the questions literary scholars ask about culture, history, and narrative. Margaret Cohen's The Novel and the Sea similarly demonstrates the importance of maritime environments to literary forms and historical imagination. Steve Mentz's work on oceanic literature further encourages readers to take the instability and materiality of water seriously.

A Blue Humanities approach is particularly useful for reading Roffey's novel because the sea is central to the plot and to Aycayia's sense of self. Her existence cannot be separated from the aquatic world, yet the sea is not presented as an uncomplicated paradise. It provides a space in which she can survive beyond the immediate reach of human society, but it also intensifies her solitude. The ocean is therefore ambivalent: it can shelter, conceal, nourish, isolate, and endanger. This ambivalence is more persuasive than a simple symbolic reading in which water always represents freedom or renewal.

The Caribbean setting also matters historically. The region's seas have been shaped by Indigenous histories, European conquest, plantation economies, forced migration, and the transatlantic slave trade. The ocean connects places, but it also records histories of coercion and unequal mobility. A postcolonial Blue Humanities reading asks who is able to cross the sea freely, who is captured or displaced, and whose relationship with the water is treated as legitimate. In Roffey's narrative, the mermaid's body becomes a point at which these questions converge. Her capture by outsiders turns an extraordinary being into an object to be displayed and controlled, echoing broader histories in which bodies and environments are treated as possessions.

This reading also requires care. The sea should not be reduced to a passive victim, because the novel imagines it as a world with its own scale and rhythms. Nor should it be romanticised as a pure alternative to

human society. The ocean's power exceeds the intentions of the characters. It does not simply obey human needs, and its changing relation to Aycayia complicates the idea that home is a stable location. The Blue Humanities thus helps reveal how Roffey's sea is both a material environment and a force that unsettles human assumptions about control.

Women, Embodiment, and the More-than-Human

Aycayia's hybrid form is central to the novel's challenge to fixed categories. She is not easily contained within familiar distinctions between woman and animal, land and sea, culture and nature. Her mermaid body makes visible the permeability of boundaries that human societies often treat as absolute. This does not mean that her identity is only a symbol. Her body is also the site through which she experiences vulnerability, desire, pain, movement, and changing relationships with other beings.

Feminist materialist thought offers a useful framework for understanding this embodied condition. Astrida Neimanis's Bodies of Water asks readers to consider human bodies as materially connected to water and to other bodies rather than as isolated, self-contained units. From this perspective, embodiment is relational. Bodies are shaped through exchanges with environments, and human identity cannot be fully separated from the material conditions that sustain life. Aycayia makes this interdependence unusually visible because her body crosses the boundary between human and marine existence.

The novel also draws attention to the ways women's bodies are interpreted and controlled by others. Aycayia's difference invites fascination, fear, and attempts at possession. The response to her body is not neutral: it is shaped by gender, race, cultural memory, and the desire to turn the unfamiliar into an object that can be owned or explained. The mermaid's body therefore becomes a site of conflict between selfhood and external definition. Her story asks who has the authority to determine what she is and what her body means.

A feminist reading must avoid presenting women as naturally ecological or inherently closer to water. Such a claim would reproduce a familiar association between femininity and nature that has often been used to justify women's subordination. Instead, the novel can be read as exposing the shared logic through which both women and environments are made available for use. The connection is not that women and the sea are identical, but that both may be subjected to systems of control that deny their agency and complexity. Aycayia's experience makes the ethical problem of possession visible.

Her transformation also complicates the idea that liberation requires assimilation into an established human norm. When her body changes, the narrative does not present a stable human identity as the only

acceptable destination. The return of her aquatic nature suggests that identity remains unsettled and that belonging may involve movement between different forms of life and different environments. This does not erase the pain of her experiences; rather, it refuses the assumption that a person's difference must be corrected before that person can be recognised. Aycayia's hybrid identity challenges the hierarchy that places the human above the nonhuman and treats the latter as lesser, exploitable, or voiceless.

The Sea as Refuge, Captivity, and Home

One of the novel's most productive tensions is that the sea can be both refuge and confinement. For Aycayia, the ocean is a familiar environment in which she can move beyond the rules of land-based society. Its depth provides concealment and a sense of scale that exceeds the village and the gaze of outsiders. Yet the sea is also associated with solitude. Being surrounded by water does not guarantee companionship or belonging. Aycayia's relationship with the ocean is therefore not reducible to a simple story of freedom.

This ambivalence is important because it resists turning the sea into a convenient metaphor for emancipation. A romanticised ocean might appear to offer women an untouched space beyond patriarchal power. Roffey's novel is more complicated. The sea can protect Aycayia from some forms of human interference, but it cannot erase the violence that shaped her life or the loneliness that accompanies her existence. Likewise, the land offers the possibility of intimacy and social connection, but it is also where the mermaid becomes subject to scrutiny and control. Neither environment is entirely safe; each creates different possibilities and risks.

The distinction between home and exile also becomes unstable. Home is not simply the place where a body is physically located. It emerges through relationships, familiarity, memory, and the possibility of acting without constant external control. Aycayia's attachment to the sea persists even when she experiences the possibility of life on land. Her connection to the water indicates that identity is formed through more than social acceptance. It is also shaped by ecological relations and bodily memory.

A Blue Humanities interpretation can therefore ask what it means to belong to an environment without owning it. Human ideas of property often depend on boundaries, fixed territories, and the ability to exclude others. The sea resists these assumptions because it moves, connects distant places, and exceeds the scale of individual ownership. The ocean cannot be fully enclosed within a single person's claim. In the novel, this quality of water provides a counterpoint to the attempts to possess Aycayia. Her body and the sea are both treated by outsiders as things to be captured, classified, or controlled, yet neither can be fully reduced to that status.

The sea's agency should not be understood as human-like intention. Rather, its material force shapes the possibilities of action and the meaning of place. Currents, depth, tides, and marine life establish conditions that human characters cannot entirely command. This material agency changes how the reader understands the relationship between character and setting: the environment is not merely a stage but part of the network of forces through which the narrative develops.

Myth, Memory, and Colonial Power

The mermaid figure allows Roffey to connect the novel's ecological concerns with Caribbean cultural memory. Mermaids and other water beings appear in different Caribbean traditions, where their meanings may include protection, danger, sexuality, fertility, and spiritual power. Such figures are not simply decorative fantasy. They can carry histories and cultural understandings that challenge the assumption that the world is fully explained by rational or colonial systems of knowledge.

Aycayia's story draws on Indigenous myth while reworking it through a contemporary narrative. Myth becomes a way of remembering cultural histories that have been interrupted, marginalised, or interpreted through the perspectives of outsiders. The mermaid's body holds together the human and the aquatic, the remembered past and the present, the local and the transregional. In this sense, the novel uses myth to question who has the authority to tell stories about a place and its inhabitants.

The colonial history of the Caribbean complicates the relationship between land and sea. Ocean routes enabled trade and cultural exchange, but they also facilitated conquest, forced movement, and exploitation. The sea cannot be understood only as a symbol of openness because mobility has never been equally available to everyone. For some, it has meant travel and opportunity; for others, it has meant capture, displacement, or the loss of home. A postcolonial reading therefore asks how the novel's marine imagery carries unequal histories of movement and power.

Aycayia's capture is significant because it converts a being connected to a different ecological and cultural world into a spectacle for human consumption. The act of capture expresses more than individual cruelty: it reflects an attitude that assumes unfamiliar life can be possessed once it has been made visible. The mermaid's difference becomes something to display rather than a form of existence to respect. This echoes colonial ways of categorising people, cultures, and environments as objects of knowledge and control.

At the same time, the novel does not suggest that myth can simply restore a lost or untouched past. Cultural memory is active and contested. The mermaid story is retold, transformed, and placed into dialogue

with contemporary concerns. Its power lies in its ability to make the present answerable to histories that remain unresolved. The sea functions as a medium through which such histories can be imagined, though not neatly repaired. Its depth and movement suggest that memory is layered, mobile, and difficult to contain within a single authoritative account.

Narrative Form and Oceanic Relations

The novel's shifting perspectives and temporal movement contribute to its oceanic imagination. Rather than presenting identity as a single, uninterrupted line, the narrative moves among voices and times, allowing different experiences to coexist. This structure resembles the movement of water only in a carefully qualified sense: the form does not literally imitate the sea, but its shifts and returns challenge the idea that a story must progress in a perfectly linear direction. The result is a narrative in which memory, myth, and present experience remain entangled.

Narrative voice is also important because Aycayia's experience cannot be fully represented by an outside observer alone. Giving space to her perspective complicates the tendency to treat the mermaid as an object of wonder. She is not simply something to be looked at; she is a subject who experiences the world, interprets her surroundings, and has attachments that cannot be reduced to the desires of others. The question of voice is therefore connected to the question of agency. To listen to Aycayia is to recognise that the unfamiliar being has an interior life and a perspective of her own.

Yet the novel's narrative does not eliminate the problem of representation. A contemporary author retelling Indigenous myth must negotiate the distance between cultural traditions, historical power, and literary invention. This makes the act of storytelling ethically complex. The text can draw attention to marginalised memory while also raising questions about who retells that memory and how. Such tensions should not be resolved too quickly; they form part of the novel's wider engagement with identity, history, and belonging.

The oceanic perspective also invites attention to relations rather than isolated individuals. Aycayia's identity emerges through her relationships with the sea, with other characters, and with the social world that tries to define her. These relationships are unequal, and not all of them are caring. Nevertheless, the novel suggests that no being exists entirely alone or outside material connections. The ecological implication is that human communities are not separate from the environments they inhabit. Their actions are part of larger networks of life, history, and consequence.

This approach helps avoid a purely symbolic reading of the sea. The ocean is meaningful not only because it represents freedom, femininity, or memory, but because it is a living material environment that shapes bodies and relationships. Its agency is relational: it acts through currents, habitats, movement, and the conditions it creates for human and nonhuman life. Roffey's narrative consequently encourages readers to think beyond the opposition between an active human subject and a passive natural world.

Discussion: Toward an Ethics of Oceanic Belonging

The relationship between women and the sea in The Mermaid of Black Conch raises an ethical question: what would it mean to recognise another being without claiming ownership over it? Aycayia's treatment demonstrates the harm caused when difference is approached as a spectacle or a resource. The novel's ecological dimension extends this problem beyond the individual. The same assumptions that permit the control of a woman's body can also support the exploitation of environments when both are understood as objects available for use.

This parallel should not be mistaken for an assertion that women and oceans experience power in identical ways. Their histories and material conditions differ. The value of the comparison lies in examining the structures of thought that make possession seem natural and that deny agency to those considered subordinate. A feminist Blue Humanities approach can expose these structures while remaining attentive to the specificity of gender, race, colonial history, and ecology.

The novel also complicates the idea that ethical belonging depends on complete assimilation. Aycayia's hybrid existence resists the demand that she become fully legible within one category. Her story suggests that relationships can be built across difference, but such relationships require recognition rather than control. The ocean's fluidity offers an image of connection without complete sameness. It brings different spaces into relation while preserving movement and uncertainty.

At the same time, the sea should not be turned into a perfect ethical model. It can be dangerous and indifferent to human desire. The point is not that humans should imitate the sea, but that oceanic thinking can challenge rigid boundaries and encourage attention to interdependence. It reminds readers that life takes place within material systems that cannot be completely mastered. An ethics of oceanic belonging would therefore involve humility, respect for nonhuman life, and an awareness of historical inequalities.

This reading offers one possible contribution to the study of Roffey's novel: it places bodily autonomy and narrative perspective at the centre of the relationship between gender and oceanic agency. Existing scholarship has already examined the novel's aquatic poetics, gendered ecologies, and postcolonial

dimensions. Consequently, the present argument should be treated as a focused synthesis rather than a claim that the general connection between women and the sea has been overlooked. A final version for publication should compare its claims closely with recent articles and sharpen the distinction between its approach and those studies.

Conclusion

Monique Roffey's The Mermaid of Black Conch presents the sea as a complex presence that shapes identity, memory, vulnerability, and belonging. Through Aycayia's hybrid body, the novel challenges the boundaries between human and nonhuman life and questions the assumption that difference justifies possession or control. The Caribbean Sea becomes a space of refuge and loneliness, connection and danger, cultural memory and historical violence. Its ambiguity prevents the ocean from becoming a simple symbol of freedom.

A Blue Humanities reading reveals that the novel's ecological concerns cannot be separated from its representation of gender and power. Aycayia's treatment exposes the violence of turning a living being into an object of spectacle, while her attachment to the sea challenges the idea that belonging depends on conformity to a fixed human identity. Feminist materialist and postcolonial approaches help show how bodies, environments, and histories are entangled without reducing them to the same experience.

Ultimately, The Mermaid of Black Conch asks readers to reconsider the relationship between human autonomy and the more-than-human world. The sea is not merely a setting for human drama; it is a material environment with its own force, rhythms, and forms of life. By bringing women's embodied experience into conversation with oceanic agency, Roffey's novel encourages a more relational understanding of identity and a more cautious ethics of belonging. Such a reading is especially relevant in a world where marine environments are increasingly threatened and where the histories of colonial exploitation continue to shape human relationships with the sea.

Works Cited

Blum, Hester. "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies." PMLA, vol. 125, no. 3, 2010, pp. 670–677.

Cavalcanti, Sofia. "Atlantic Archipelagic Women's Narratives as Fractal Models of Resistance: The Case of The Mermaid of Black Conch." Atlantic Studies, vol. 23, no. 2, 2026, pp. 172–182. https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2025.2603804.

Cohen, Margaret. The Novel and the Sea. Princeton University Press, 2010.

Mentz, Steve. Ocean. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

Neimanis, Astrida. Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

Renaud, Leighan M. "'I Have Seen the Sea': Caribbean Aquatic Poetics in Monique Roffey's The Mermaid of Black Conch." Humanities, vol. 14, no. 7, 2025, article 154. https://doi.org/10.3390/h14070154.

Roffey, Monique. The Mermaid of Black Conch. Peepal Tree Press, 2020.

Schamp, Jutta. "'Does My Voice Count?': The Reconfiguration of Myth and Gender in Monique Roffey's The Mermaid of Black Conch." Journal of Global Postcolonial Studies, vol. 12, no. 2, 2024. https://doi.org/10.5744/jgps.2024.2283.