From Colorado to the Indus: A Comparative Study of Water Memories in Sindhi Mohana Community and the Mojave American Tribe

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Abstract

Water has cultural, spiritual, economic, and political implications that impact the identities, practices, and survival of many communities around the globe. This paper explores the symbiotic relationship between humans and waters (outside us and within our bodies) in Native American Mojave Tribe located in Colorado, U.S.A and the Mohana tribe of Indus, Sindh Pakistan, also referred to as the 'boat people'. For both, water determines historical significance, colonial oppression, and capitalist injustices. Water stands as a living entity intricately woven into rituals and oral traditions. In an eco-dystopic setting, the resistance poetry from these tribes stands in opposition to colonial narratives that consider water as a commodity. For analysis, this paper will consider Mojave American poet Natalie Diaz's poetry collection *Postcolonial Love Poems* (2020) and Pakistani indigenous Sairiki poet Asu Lal Faqeer's *Sindh Sagir Nal* Hamesha (Sindh always with the river). It also discusses local communities and their interconnectedness with the waters of Indus River on land and inside their bodies through the works of Fakir and Diaz. For an in-depth analysis of the texts, Steve Mentz's concept of blue humanities (2023) is deployed which focuses on the role of various bodies of water i.e. ocean, sea, rivers, clouds and rain and the water that lives within our bodies. This focus is to extend the interconnectedness of themes of mourning, ancestry, loss, and resistance concerning water memories in both cultures. Despite the geographical distances, these writers share a similar pattern in their writing which reflects transnational connectedness and universal contact zones.

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Background of the Study

Civilizations have always grown near water because it provides supply for drinking and growing crops. Water does not only serve as a tool for survival, but it also becomes a source of identity, culture, and memory for communities that punctuate it. The fundamental question is, to what extent does the presence or absence of water affect a community? Symbolically, water represents culture, religious values, rituals, and identities in many parts of the world. In the modern world, where our understanding of nature changes, and we reconstruct systems based on modern thought patterns, there is a need to revise the sentiments of indigenous communities and their association with water.

In an interview with *Los Angeles Review* (2020) about his book, Steve Mentz, Professor of English at St. John's University and a scholar of Blue Humanities, is asked by his interviewer, Strohmeyer if "as humans we do live in land, Afterall?". Strohmeyer highlights the significance of land over water, questing Mentz on his emphasis on particularly the blue part of the world. Mentz replies that the green aspect from the ecocritical theories cannot be nullified, however, we learn much from water narrative about its destructive nature, than from land literature in general as he states that " So as our planet gets bluer — as the sea rises and floods our coastal cities—we will benefit from a Blue Humanities perspective" (Mentz, October 2020). With water levels dropping, water scarcity has become a global issue. With water, there are a number of communities that are linked not just for survival but for their cultural practices. The geopolitics, environmental injustices, and discrimination against marginalized communities forces writers like Mentz to highlight the water crisis in today's world.

Water retains memory, which is not only discussed in literature across globe, but it is a scientific phenomenon. Deanne Monica

Pearles in her article *Water Memory* (2019) discusses Jacques Benveniste controversial idea about how water has a memory of objects even when it is diluted. She writes "It is claimed that water can hold a substance's memory, or structural information, that has gone through a series of several dilutions and still make a biological reaction occur" (Pearles, 2019, Introduction). Considering the idea of water having memory, Native American writers talk about ancestral roots connected to the rivers. Also, their memory of ancestors is revived by the use of water, used by their ancestors. As Natalie Diaz states in her poem *The First Water is the Body 2020* that "Even a real Native carr[ies] the dangerous and heavy blues of a river in her body" (p.59). Diaz points out that Mojave body is inseparable from the water.

For further analysis, it is essential to understand water as culture, identity, and memory. Around the globe, there are a number of cultures that have explored a sacred relationship with the waters that surround them. In Indian mythology, the three mystic rivers of Ganga, Yumna, and Saraswati are sources of purification and sacred spaces to perform cleansing rituals. Razit Sharma (2017) in his article *Water Law in Ancient Indi*a highlights "In Vedic seers, several hymns, invoked water, the purifying agent to be gracious to mankind, to purify men like mothers, and remove all physical defilements" (117). Bathing in these rivers was not only ablution but also a cleansing of oneself from moral evils. Even today, we see people in India, performing rituals in Ganga and Yumna rivers, because they hold a sacred bond with it. Water serves as a tool of purification.

This is not just limited to Indian communities, but Native American cultures also thrive on the concept of sacred waters. The Fort Mojave Indian Tribe, Aha Macav, has a mythological history associated to water. It is said Mastamho drove a stick to the ground and drew out the waters that become Colorado river "and with the river came fish and ducks" (National Park Service, n.d.). Furthermore, he gave people the river and everything along with it. Every aspect of the river that it creates was given to these people called *Aha Macav* (the Mojave)—the people who live along the water (Mojave Tribe, 2023).

In Pakistan, the Mohana Community shares a similar sentiment with planetary waters. The Mohanas of Lake Machar are a community of seamen and fishermen living there for many years, but now the population is threatened by extinction. These people call themselves the lord of seas. They are descendants of Mohenjo-Daro old Indus valley civilization. Even after years of struggle, these communities still rely on their source of water.

Water serves as a binding force, a memory, that is a part of the ancestors and then becomes part of the younger generation. We see rituals being performed in Ganga and Yumna rivers, where ancestors' aches are immersed in the river for spiritual purification. To the Indians, this ganga represents unity of ancestral spirit. However, it is problematic for Mohana and Mojave who are trying to find their ancestry in times of Eco-dystopia. Loss of water also serves as a loss of community, ancestry, and memory in some instances. This research, therefore, focuses on key aspects of Blue Humanities where humans and the water connect in many ways:

> Writing, thinking, and creative work that flies the flag of the Blue Humanities responds to water's intimate paradoxes in many modes, from poetry to literary criticism to history, environmental writing, and religious scholarship. (Mentz, XIV)

Although much research has been conducted on Blue Humanities so far, this research takes a step further and discusses the significance of water in relation to many indigenous communities in Pakistan. While Mentz has talked in volumes about the significance of Blue Humanities in canonized English Literature, particularly William Shakespeare, Dilip Memon talks about Blue Humanities in his work *Ocean as Method* (2022) where he discusses ocean narratives considering trade, migration, and Muslim travelers in the colonial era. While he mainly concerns himself with South Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia through histories of Indian indenturement and slavery and engages with the idea of the ocean and enforced movement, this research focuses on the Indus River with

reference to a Pakistani writer discussing water as a central point of inspiration.

Research Questions

1. How does water serve as a symbol of resilience, survival, and resistance in Diaz's *Postcolonial Love Poems* (2020) and Ashu Lal Fakir's *Sindh Sagir Nal Hameesha (2002)*?

2. In what ways does resistance poetry from these communities foreground the broader social and environmental movements for reservation of waters?

The study seeks to examine water's imagery as a symbol of resistance against colonialism, environmental degradation, and cultural oppression in the selected works of poetry and to identify how resistance poetry serves as a medium of advocating environmental justice and the preservation of water as a communal resource.

Theoretical Framework

Mentz in his book *An Introduction to Blue Humanities* (2024) provides a water centric theory that focuses on discussing human interaction with water through culture, history, and literature. He details his argument by using examples from writers such as William Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville as well as newer oceanic voices such as Éduoard Glissant, Craig Santos Perez, and Monique Rofey, and their consistent theme of the ocean. although Mentz's work focuses on literary works, but his theory is not limited to literature only: "In emphasizing literary studies, I do not mean to decenter the scholarship of historians, ecologists, marine biologists, or many others from whom I have learned and continue to learn so much" (Mentz, XV). Thus, a critical examination of this recent field of study requires more attention due to its interdisciplinary approach. Throughout his book, Mentz talks about planetary waters, the physical shapes in which

water exists within our planet with reference to Emily Bronte and Walt Whitman. Furthermore, he mentions the growing collaborative research in the field and quotes canonized work on William Shakespeare and the new poet Crez Santos Perez.

Steven Mentz (2024) mentions that in the twenty-first century, the shift of Blue Humanities should expand to new territories. He mentions that "writers in the 2020s are widening the focus to engage global, non-Western, and Indigenous materials" (Mentz, p.38). This research, therefore draws its basic argument of expansion with reference to the non-western, Asia Pacific basin of Indus River. Through analyzing poetry written by Pakistani and Mojave American authors, the research aims to determine their relationship with water.

In response to his own limitations in his theory, Steven Mentz mentions Sidney Dobrin: "While I concur with Mentz's diagnostic, it is his loyalty to canonical literary texts that necessarily must be cast of. . .. [Blue Humanities criticism] cannot be limited to maritime canon or even Anglophone literatures more generally" (Mentz,p. 52). According to Mentz, Blue Humanities should not be limited to canonized literature only but should be open to interpretation. His own discussion discusses Shakespeare alongside an indigenous writer. Keeping in mind the key concepts discussed by Steve Mentz, this research pushes the boundary further by highlighting another trajectory of Pakistani Water poetry that discusses indigenous writers of Pakistani literary community.

Discussion

In ecocatastrophic times, there is a need for studying Blue Humanities as it is not just a matter of literary studies but has become a matter of environmental justice and ecological preservation. It is essential to think about how we respond to planetary water around us and what we consider water. Humans' relationship with water has been a complex phenomenon, and it is time to reimagine the ways in which modern world operates around it. In this regard, both ecological and cultural understanding re required.

Water can be used as a tool to study cultures, identities, and memory. In Pakistani Literature many writers like Toufiq Rafat, Daud Kamal, Ashu Laal, and Zulfiqar Ali Bhatti have discussed their poetics of planetary waters. Their poetry is not limited to vast seas and oceans but also discusses the other forms of waters that exist around us as well as the water that lies within our bodies. On the other hand, Native Americans and their association with water still persists in their resistance poetry. Natalie Dias in her book *Post-Colonial Love Poems (2020)* talks about desire against erasure and the sensibility of being Native American in association with the Colorado waters. For them, water represents Native American identity, and its rites and ritual are sacred to the community: "The Colorado River is the most endangered river in the United States—also, it is a part of my body" (p.58)

There seems to be a yearning of water in Ashu Laal's poetry. This yearning spurs from his loss of the Indus River and the memory that is linked with it. The vision of capitalism and increased urbanization programs have affected many natural landscapes of the country. The native people with their indigenous cultures and attachment with the resources are not just deprived of them, but the landscapes have also changed entirely. In his collection, *Sindh Sagir Nal Hamesha(2002),* he talks about the beauty of the Indus River and associates himself with the waters that surround him. The yearning is visible in the opening of this poem, "Darya O Darya, Paani tery Doungy" (River O River, Your waters[1] flow deep)/ "Tu Sada, Piyo Maa, Asan Tery Pongain" (You are our mother and father and we your children) (Lal, p.169) In the beginning of these verses, one can see an address to the river directly. Mentz discusses a similar element in light of Perez poetry, where ocean is the central figure of discussion: "I admire a lot about Perez's poetry, and the "Praise Song" in particular, but this still moment of oceanic representation, in which the sea gets praised only for being the sea" (Mentz, p.32).

[1] The translation of Ashu Lal's work in English is done by the author throughout the article.

The Darya (The River) gets the same central attention in Ashu Lal's work. In Blue Humanities, planetary waters become the center of discussion. It is also important to understand how Lal yearns for the river, by calling to it directly. Not just addressing to the river, but Lal highlights how the water in it flows deep. Like many other indigenous writers across globe, Lal's understanding holds a tie to the ancestral knots. He calls the river mother and father as the river provides for their families but at the same time, the river is a place, where the forefathers have worked and lived. His understanding of the river is a place of unity of child and parents.

Ashu Lal Faqeer addresses how Industrialization and urbanization has impacted the livelihood of fishermen in River Sindh:

> I am working with the native people. We arrange poetry sitting and cultural events and get connected to our land and share our thoughts about it. That's our way to resistance. The fishermen in river Sindh are struggling to survive. Water crisis is a big issue in the whole world but here it is ignored. (Irfan, 2022)

Diaz's *First Water is the Body (2020)* uses a structure of repetition which creates resistance itself. The repetition of the word 'river' describes the yearning for it and its longing that cannot be forgotten easily. As she mentions that "So far, I have said the word *river* in every stanza. I don't want to waste water. I must preserve the river in my body" (p.58). While Diaz mentions river over and over again, she means to conserve it in the next verse. Through her unconventional writing style, Diaz is highlighting instances of environmental justice on two levels: by addressing injustice in water politics and its lack of conservation: "In future stanzas, I will try to be more conservative" (p. 58). Her work is intense as she resists the systems and addresses its lack of concern on the matter.

In this regard, Ashu Lal's poetry also serves as resistance to the modern world. His works focus on highlighting the sentiments of native people. By doing so, he highlights the issue of water

crisis that is ignored by local government and policy makers affecting the lives of native communities to a greater deal. They are at loss both economically and culturally. Lal questions the loss of water from the Indus River and laments at this loss. He talks about how the lamentation of the water itself personifies it as a character that laments at its loss. Lal questions the river about its water, "Kithan tera pani," ,(p.169) highlighting the loss of water from the Indus River (Gurmani, 2025). He informs the river that it laments on the loss of water and questions where its glory has gone: "Darya or Darya, Dussa dil da Jani/Kithan tere pankhun, Kitha tera pani (O River, O River, my heart's dear muse, where have your waters gone/ where the birds both native and guest) (p.169).

Diaz discusses the ancestral ties linked with Colorado river and its name. She discusses the Spanish etymology of the word Colorado and traces its meaning as red silt. Here, she creates a link between the ancestor and the river itself. Like the ancestors, the river also shares the color red. But she points out that these links are made by foreigners to the land as she states: "Natives have been called *red* forever. I have never met a red Native, not even on my reservation, not even at the National Museum of the American Indian, not even at the largest powwow in Parker, Arizona" (p.58). She criticizes and challenges the knowledge of anthropology and archeology that places communities in various groups and colors without giving it any thought. In reality, for Diaz, natives were never red, but this is how they are viewed by others. Here, she puts forth the idea of the gaze, where Natives communities are viewed from the eyes of others, which places them in a compromising state to defend themselves. Thus, Diaz questions preexisting concepts about Natives through her work.

Lal talks about the human connection with waters as he mentions that the time spent at the river side is time worth living. The moment the union of water and community is established, life is lived with its full blossom. Here the question of absence and presence comes to mind. How does the presence of water affect the minds of the community and how does its absence cause yearning among them? As Lal mentions: "Darya o Darya, Pani tady saway/Oh Wala har dam, jera naal rahway (River, O River,

Your waters are green/ The only moment is when I am in union with you) (p.169). Lal fixates on the idea of generations tied together in one unity of the river. He uses the word "Likhri" which means writing as well as destiny. He might be pointing out generations that were destined to live near the river: "Darya o Darya, dhoop tery tickhri/Periyan wich lang, umran de likhri" (Oh River, Oh River, your blazing sunlight gleams/our whole life is spent in your water, embracing) (p.170).

Certainly, a sense of grief is felt, as Diaz discusses the word 'tears' and relates it with the river. There is a sense of yearning like in Lal's work which discusses the absence and presence of water as she states: "When Mojaves say the word for *tears*, we return to our word for *river*, as if our river were flowing from our eyes. *A great weeping* is how you might translate it. Or *a river of grief"* (p.58). Diaz further discusses drought and questions its significance in today's world. She is not just placing words to analyze their meanings, but by talking about drought, she is referring to the environmental issue concerning the lack of water bodies in the world. She raises a universal concern of conservation of water regardless of communities and tribe. According to Diaz, humanity must understand the challenge at hand: "The word for *drought* is different across many languages and lands. The ache of thirst, though, translates to all bodies along the same paths—the tongue, the throat, the kidneys. No matter what language you speak, no matter the color of your skin" (p 58).

Likewise, Lal refers to the ancestral culture of sitting by the river. He addresses the river once again and denotes that the sun and its reflection shine brightly on the water surface. This gives us an understanding of the natural rustic lifestyle of his community. He later notes that generations have passed, and our families have spent a great amount of their life near the river. Here Lal highlights the significance of cultural identity and memory that is linked with these waters. The absence of connection has resulted in the projection of melancholy and sadness. Lal associates his inner voice with the river. He says that though the river is gigantic and powerful, and its waves reach great heights, there is a melancholy in these waves. This

could be writer's inner pathetic fallacy. As he writes: "Darya O Darya, Uchi teri Mari (River O River, huge are your waves)/ Mari de undr mungan de mari (But in your waves lives melancholy). Here Lal talks about the possibility of a bright future, where among deep forest, there will come a day when the union with the waters will eventually take place. Lal's depiction of the natural landscape and his focus on details share a picture of life of people living near the Indus River: "Darya O Darya, Jungalan de Sawain (River O River, Amidst the shade of thick jungles) / Kahin Din ta ho si, Khushi sadi Nanway (There might be some day, when happiness will meet us) (p.170).

Like Lal, Diaz also calls to action, urging readers to recognize the sacredness of water and the stakes of its preservation. Diaz situates herself and her people as protectors of water, drawing attention to the urgent need for collective responsibility. Although deeply rooted in the Indigenous experience, Diaz extends her appeal to all humanity, reminding readers of our shared dependence on water, she writes in the end: "Will we remember from where we've come? The water" (p.64).

Conclusion

The basic premise of this paper was to understand in what ways oceans and water bodies influence cultural identities and literary writing particularly in selected Pakistani and Mojave American water poetry. The second premise discusses whether or not indigenous writing shares universal thematic concerns of environmental justice. In *The First Water Is the Body* Natalie Diaz masterfully blends personal narrative, environmental advocacy, and Indigenous spirituality. The poem challenges readers to reconsider their relationship with water—not as an inanimate resource but as a vital, living part of existence. Through her poetic craft, Diaz underscores the urgent need for solidarity in protecting water, land, and Indigenous rights. Likewise, the Indus River civilization holds its culture identity with its association with water. Water is a key element of their lifestyle and most importantly the lifestyle of their ancestors. Depriving these communities from water is depriving them of their cultural identities. Diaz creates an analogy of depletion of

water and native American population as she states that like the water, the community also seems to vanish from the earth. Lal and Diaz discuss the marginalized community and how water politics plays its role in depriving people of their rights. Writing, then, becomes a form of resistance where the water transfigures into memory, ancestry, and revival. All these writers place water as the center of their discussion and the main character of their theses.

Indeed, Blue Humanities as a discipline and method of study opens new trajectories for research in Pakistan. Pakistani poetry is rich with images showing water as the center of the narrative. Many writers have written about water as a romantic and sacred sight like Duad Kamal, but there are writers who are resisting like Ashu Lal, whose purpose for writing for water is to preserve its essence and the legacy of his community. Although this research is specifically conducted in light of the Indus River and Aztec communities, the research has promising trajectories concerning the Anthropocene i.e. marine life in Pakistan and the US. Further research can be conducted on Pakistani Folktales and Native American Mythologies to study waters within them.

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