

# BLACKNESS, BODIES AND THE FLOW OF BEYOND: READING AFROFUTURIST NOVELS THROUGH THE POSTHUMANIST LENS

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## Abstract

Water is often ambiguous yet powerful and deeply symbolic in black temporality, carrying the weight of a painful history – marked by the Atlantic slave trade and horrors of Middle Passage- while simultaneously representing a force of liberation, transformation, and the reimagining of black futures. In various Afrofuturist artworks, from music and visual arts to literature, water- particularly the ocean and its abyssal currents- emerges as a liminal space where Black identities are reclaimed, reconfigured, and projected into the speculative futures. This paper will give an account on how water is not merely a backdrop but an active dynamic force that destabilizes fixed classical notions of humanity in posthuman discourse in Rivers Solomon's *The Deep* (2019) and Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014).

In *The Deep*, the *Wanjiru* – water breathing descendants of enslaved Africans – navigate an existence shaped by collective memory and adaptation. As Solomon writes, “History was not designed to fit within one person”, emphasizing identity's communal and fluid nature. Similarly, in *Lagoon*, ocean facilitates transformation, dissolving species boundaries and redefining power structures, as reflected in, “we are change, and change in us”. Both novels challenge the western humanist fixation on rigid identity, embracing the boundlessness of aquatic existence.

Through the lens of posthumanism, this account highlights how Afrofuturistic novels reclaims water as not sites of historical trauma alone but as realms of infinite possibility where identity is as fluid, adaptive, and boundless as the ocean itself.

**Keywords:** Afrofuturism, Posthumanism, Water symbolism, Blackness, Fluid identity etc.

## Introduction

Who is considered human? Who is in a position to define humanity and what drives these definitions? The notion of human has never been natural and universal but rather a production of social, political, and philosophical forms, which has taken place throughout the history of humankind. The fundamental idea behind these definitions is the classical principle of man offered by Protagoras as being the measure of everything and subsequently eternalized in the Renaissance Humanism by the Vitruvian Man of Leonardo da Vinci. Nevertheless, it is not a very inclusive model of humankind. These attributes are mainly accredited to a particular image of a human being- white, male, rational, and European. As a result, the black people, the indigenous people and the women who did not fit the mold were usually placed beyond the boundaries of humanity, regarded as an object, inferior, an anomaly or other. This was the dominant definition of the human, also as theorized by Sylvia Wynter in her essay *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/ Power/Truth/Freedom*, (2003), which is a Western, colonial concept, indicating that our ethnoclassical conception of the human is an overrepresented version of itself where it is the human itself (Wynter 2003).

This definition is not a neutral one, rather, it is an instrument of power maintaining racial and cultural superiorities.

Posthumanism is a reaction to these inflexible definitions of humanity and offers a more flexible, dynamic, and broad-based way of defining existence. According to Rosi Braidotti, in *The Posthuman* (2013), that posthumanism opposes the transcendentalism of the Enlightenment subject with an embodied and embedded approach to subjectivity. It questions anthropocentrism -the view that humans are the culmination of evolution-through the lens of the interrelationship of humanity with machines and animals as well as environments. Nevertheless, posthumanism strives to move beyond the human which may be disturbing when most of the racialized populations were never viewed as human in the first place.

Therefore, Afronfuturism decisively contributes to bridging between Blackness and post humanism discourse. It is in this genre that people can explore the ways in which the black communities may reclaim their identities and build their own futures that go against the colonial and racist heritage. According to its creator, Mark Dery, who coined the term in his essay *Black to Future*, (1993) Afrofuturism as a form of speculative fiction has taken up the African-American themes and concerns, and placed them within the 20 th century context of techno culture. Water turns out to be a potent vision in such Afrofuturistic stories. It is like a space that destabilizes human-oriented narratives, false fixed identities, and criticizes human exceptionalism.

Water acts as a point of trauma and healing/ regeneration. It contains the memory of the Middle passage - the forced journey across the Atlantic Ocean which took away enslaved Africans to the America, but it is also the place where Blackness can escape the burden of historical and terrestrial accounts. The Afrofuturistic novels by Nnedi Okorafor in *Lagoon* and *River Solomon in The Deep* are very expressive in this interplay of water and memory with Black posthumanism.

## **Literature Review**

The intersection of posthumanism and Afrofuturism is a good prism through which modern literature discusses identity, memory and trauma. This intersection is dynamic and vibrant since myth and futurism interact forming narratives challenging traditional perceptions of humanity. There has been a mass of published works of research which has delved into nonlinear narrative, memory and resistance.

In her paper titled (Re)-Negotiating Black Posthumanism-The Precarity of Race in Nnedi Okorafor *Lagoon*, (2019), Judith Rahn examines the way that the novel undermines western conceptions of posthumanism by incorporating African and postcolonial perspectives. She also convincingly points out that Okorafor is not only adapting Posthumanist concepts; she injects them with African spiritualities and animist worldviews, that part of the vision of change accesses the local soil so deeply.

On the same note, the research paper, *Breathing and Mourning Underwater: A Black Journey Towards Identity in The Deep*, by Chiara Patrizi (2023) interacts with the novel of *River Solomon* as an Afrofuturist text that is informed by the myth of Drexciya, the origin of which is rooted in traumatic memory of the Middle Passage, recovery of identity and oppressed histories.

Similarly, in the article by Shrutika, *The Deep* by River Solomon, (2024) it can be found that the themes of transgenerational trauma and collective memory and identity formation come out. The paper argues that *The Deep* criticises Western historical conceptions with nonlinear explanations.

The combined findings of these research studies have shown how novels like Nnedi Okorafor in *Lagoon* and Rivers Solomon in *The Deep* challenge the Western narratives through a combination of African, postcolonial, and Afrofuturist viewpoints and redefine the notions of memory, trauma, and history. Although the extensive literature on *The Deep* and *Lagoon* has already been dedicated to the themes of Afrofuturism, trauma, and memory, there is still a critical gap in the usage of water more than as a metaphor in these novels. The end result of the new current discourses tends to ignore the manner in which these novels tackle the classical dogmatic concepts of the so-called Human, that is, by offering some means of movement to water, which can bring new, more flexible forms of being into existence. The present paper aims to fill the gap, emphasizing the role of water as a form of living in its shaping power, which makes it possible to think about new modes of embodiments and selfhood beyond the confines of the human and redefine the Black futures.

## Research Methodology

The research draws upon the qualitative research approach which implies close reading and thematic analysis of *The Deep* and *Lagoon*. The paper will discuss the role of water as a changing force redefining Black identities and evolving traditional human-centered narratives through the prism of posthumanism.

## Discussion

### Chapter 01 Beyond the Shore: Posthuman Blackness and Fluid Histories of *The Deep*

What would happen to the ocean, which had the power to rewrite history, not to be a passive observer of the waves of change, but to be a productive force that would attract scars of humanity into its depths and make them something completely irreconceivable? River Solomon bases his novel of the same name on the song *The Deep* by the Clipping, placing the readers in the world where the water is not a backdrop of the action, but a moving factor, an entity that changes, cures, and reinvent identity. In the novel, the author creates a race of the Wanjiru based on the pregnant African women thrown into the sea in the slave trade. These creatures were more than human beings because they underwent aquatic evolution and were half human and half fish but cursed to forget their existence history. This water-dwellers is beyond human flesh and he creates a society under the sea. In this underworld, Solomon presents new fresh story that takes black experience out of the depth of the ocean and makes them capable of narrating their own history without having them look through the lens of marginalized vision. The proof is the hybrid bodies of the Wanjiru, half human, half fish, a brother of the whales, supported by the environment which does not separate memory and life but mixes them, crossing the strict boundaries of the so-called human as understood by the Western world. The water, according to the vision of Solomon, is not metaphor, it is matter; it is not developing but acting.

Since the very beginning scenes, water is a life sustaining dynamic force. Yetu, the chronicler of the Wanjiru, starts the story with a bleeding disoriented body that lies at the bottom of the oceans. Her physical and psychological injuries depict her ultimate cost of bearing the weight of her people in form of collective memory. Yetu tells her tribe this history, which is extremely painful, but also restores their common memory, every year, at the Remembrance ceremony. To Yetu, the memories, however, are an open wound, a notion of Living in the Wake that is explained by Christina Sharpe in her book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (2016) that explains that the black communities constantly live in the wake of white supremacy. The fact that she then manages to get out of the deep sea to the shallow waters and then out of the water to the surface symbolizes the literal and symbolic journey of passing through layers of identity and self-discovery.

The novel focuses on the aspect of ocean as a transformational agent. The Wanjiru are not just human beings who have adapted themselves to underwater life; they are the hybrid species, they have evolved with the assistance of their second mothers, these are the whales. Water enables this metamorphosis, so they can be in a state of flowing being, where human and non-human characteristics come together in harmony, the boundaries of identity are blurred. Those stories can be seen as a struggle against putting posthuman Blackness into the context of only one particular historical time, providing evidence that the transformative quality of water can enable one to live outside of the linear stories. It is also in the ocean that the Wanjiru build a society where history and memory are not fixed but continuous and therefore flowing. As opposed to the inhabitants of the two legs culture of the surface, the Remembrance Day of Wanjiru is a group, constantly shifting ritual where memories circulate and converge to provide an image of Blackness not traumatized but resilient and flexible.

When Yetu at last comes up to the surface, she is thrown into a world of extreme oppositions - hard, frozen land, civilizations of people, with their systems of history and circles. Nevertheless, the water is an ever-present factor that can lead Yetu to the exploration of her identity. This exploration is enhanced by her attachment to Oori, a surface dweller. Oori struggles with something different where history - in which Yetu is troubled by excess memory and Oori is troubled with the fear of forgetting it. Water that is the vessel of their relationships enables them to balance one another, to not sink into their pasts.

When she comes back home to her people the ocean, again, becomes critical - as a healing medium. Instead of being a lone burden, the Wanjiru decide to share the history and they make the Remembrance not a personal burden but a communal one. History, too, is no longer a burden, but a stream, - something that may support and nourish.

Solomon envisions the world in which Blackness is no longer confined within the categories of colonial violence by dissolving the boundary between human and nonhuman, between history and present, between individual and collective. Rather it is placed in a liquid, shifting space, which cannot be held in form by the movements of the ocean. The Wanjiru do not merely live in the water, but he becomes water. They live in this changeability. In this regard, water performs the role of both archive and architect and carries memory but at the same time transforms it.

In such a way, *The Deep* places water at the center; it is not an image that can be interpreted but a force that can be felt. The condition of possibility of a Black posthuman experience which transcends humanist boundaries and colonial traumas is what sets it into motion. In providing the ocean agency, Solomon provides an image of history as present: troubled, insurmountable, relentlessly prolific.

## **Chapter 02 Drifting Into the Unknown: Blackness, Fluidity and Alien Encounters in Lagoon**

Although you stand on shore have you ever wondered whether to step forward will in any way cleanse you or make you nearer to what you might become? Through water, Nnedi Okorafor presents her vision of the transformative power of water to make ocean not only a backdrop but a flowing fluid that seeps into the boundaries between human and nonhuman in *Lagoon*. The setting of the novel is the busy, travelled background of Lagos that employs water as a transitional point - an entrance point to where natural and supernatural intersect. The water in the *Lagoon* is the through-blood of the story amidst all its parts, bringing there with it the burden of history, hope of freedom and peril of disintegration.

Water as a symbol of change and possibility, the novel begins with the coming of an alien ship in Lagos Bay. The ocean waves which drag Adaora, Agu and Anthony into the deep water denote the entry of a liminal space where traditional human identities are broken down. As the Tuang proverb goes - Aman Iman - water is life and is remembered by Adaora as she struggles to breathe. Adaora is a marine biologist caught in an abusive marriage, Agu is a Nigerian Soldier who is kind and resists the abuses, and Anthony is a gifted Ghanaian rapper who takes pleasure in his music. After the wave, the three find new magic power which enhances their own natural gifted that follow the posthuman discourse. The aliens choose them due to their dormant superhuman powers: Adaora is able to make a force field, Agu is super humanly strong, and Anthony has super human powers that make him sway his audience.

The sea is no longer a scene but driver and requires human identity to be un-introduced in the fixed boundaries of self. The waves that drag Adaora, Agu and Anthony under the ground are not mere elements of the plot - these are gateways, taking them off to the posthuman becoming of human, alien and more-than-human overlapping. Their new powers are not gifts that have no relation to themselves but extensions of what they already are and brought to their realization in being thrown into the generative power of water. The underwater aliens, under the leadership of Ayodele, are the same people that are human in kindness and resiliency, and in this regard, they choose them to assist in rescuing Lagos, its water, and ultimately the world. This scene is some sort of metaphor referring to the washing out of the previous traumas and the hope of being born again. Water is a question of passage to a world in which spiritual, human, and alien can exist side by side, and hence, conforms to Braidotti idea of the posthumanity as the sum of multiple identities.

The alien leader, Ayodele comes out of the sea. Her body consists of metallic like particles rather than biological cells with a capability of shape shift and adaption that is equivalent to that of water itself.

She does not adhere to strict definitions in line with post humanist concept of everchanging. She restores African identity by assuming a dark-skinned human form and using the Yoruba name Ayodele to indicate that identity as well as water can flow and redefine itself. With hundreds of other humanoid aliens appearing at the ocean, they easily infiltrate the human throng, making the distinction between the familiar and foreign unclear. Her message of peaceful coexistence with alien with humanity stimulates a redefinition of identity outside race. As the confusion sets in, the ordered soldiers shoot the invaders, who are corrupt. Ayodele changes the dead soldiers to plantain tree when she is attacked. Such a gesture of breaking up the old destructively violent force in the making of the new life-giving force of water underlines again that mankind is not the center of everything there exist other greater fluid forces of action, such as nature. The Nigerian President later on, is miraculously transformed by Ayodele. The fact that the answers can be found in the water is reflected in her cryptic statement, which reveals the importance of water as the gateway to new knowledge.

Later on in the story, the characters take a dangerous trip over to the alien race to the Elders. The sea creatures they meet some of them being monstrous and violent represents the struggle of the nature to human endeavor to dominate it. This is a trial of the ocean, where only those who are able to readjust and use their latent abilities live. The best example of identity as a barrier as well as a bridge can be stated with Anthony use of sound waves to scare away sea monsters. The most obviously symbolic manifestation of water power of identity redefining identity is perhaps the transformation of Adaora into a mermaid like being. and it is not only a physical transformation when she sprouts gills and a tail resembling a fish when she realizes more deeply how much she belongs to the ocean. She completely fits the concept of the marine witch, something her husband, who is superstitious, once called her. She recovers her strength, her personal self. This metamorphosis also addresses the topic of Blackness as a dynamic identity that is moving, strong and well connected to the ancestral and natural worlds. Ultimately, Ayodele proposal to offer new alien technologies to Nigeria as a symbol of rebirth is accepted by the president that presents not only individual change but also change in the society.

Ultimately, Lagoon water is not merely an actualization of trauma or an avenue to renewal, in figurative senses, but rather it brings into being other kinds of existence. The ocean I becomes a partner in the posthuman becoming, chiseling out identities that are not static and societies that have to be remodeled. Okorafor puts Lagos into the whirlwinds of change to re-brand Blackness not as historic but as an active, dynamic entity, something that can redefine the futures of the individual and the world as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

In *The Deep* and *Lagoon*, the authors redefine water as the power of transformation, which is capable of resetting the past only to push the limits of humanity. Both novels accept posthumanism that brings identities that move between strict human categories, and also reclaims Blackness as a shifting, changing state of being.

The theses at work make the space of transformations ocean, which collides with anthropocentrism narratives and instead offers new modes of being-human and nonhuman, past and future, memory, and possibility to have merged with each other in radical, unmapped ways.

The sea in both the novels is the final posthuman space the one that rejects the solid lines of land. The Wanjiru in *The Deep* and the transformed beings in *Lagoon* are not a part of the conventional human groups because they represent a type of Blackness that is not restricted, flexible, and impossible to define. The two novels emphasize the porous nature of bodies, be they human bodies, alien bodies or water bodies, being affected by their contacts with water. These novels do not just put Blackness into the hypothetical futures- they insist on the fact that Blackness is posthuman in itself existing outside the boundaries of human concepts. Water is demonstrated as not a place of erasure but rather rebirth where the identity of the black is not just recalled but re-imagined in a way that goes beyond the human limits. Making the water the center of everything, Solomon and Okorafor re-invent the meaning of being human, being black and being in the world that is ever-changing. It gives out a radical concept of identity as a liquid that is not constrained by historical traumas but is devoted to endless new possibilities. Blackness does not sink in the depth of the ocean, it flows, rises and reinvents the world.

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