

**The Materiality of the Deep: Blue Labour, Interspecies Kinship and the
Starfish Metaphor in Bina Nayak's 'Starfish Pickle'**

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Article Received: 16/03/2026
Article Accepted: 19/04/2026
Published Online: 20/04/2026
DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.04.429

Abstract

This research intends to analyse the core elements of Blue Economy, Human and Non-Human inter-relation and the metaphorical significance of Starfish in Bina Nayak's "Starfish Pickle" through the lenses of Blue Humanities and the Anthropocene. Materiality of the deep activates water to be the central agency for transformation in the life of the protagonist 'Tara Salgaonkar' - economically, socially and emotionally. Starfish known for its act of regeneration co-relates itself to the protagonist who is constantly shown as a metaphor of survival and resilience throughout the Anthropocene. The novel moves beyond regional fiction to address global maritime anxieties. This underwater narrative spill tea over some hidden areas of work life pressure of divers and the water economy.

Keywords: Blue Labour, Blue Humanities, Anthropocene, Interspecies Kinship

Introduction

Bina Nayaks "Starfish Pickle: A Goan Adventure" was published in the year 2021. The protagonist of the novel 'Tara Salgaonkar' shown as a diver always feels closer to water rather any other entity. Her passion for diving takes her to challenge herself in the quite realms of underwater rescues throughout her life in Goa. She is a free, aqueous spirited girl inclined towards water forming a circle of life and death in water.

The highlight of the novel caters to the Goan culture and local rooted traditions like carnival, fiestas and festivals being now and then brought up in the novel. Tara's favourite hobby lies in collecting starfish from underwater diving and collecting it in the glass tanks she owns. She manages to clean the tank and feed the starfish in her busy schedule too. Her

kinship with the starfish claims to be her space for self-actualization providing her with fluid identity over her physical and material ones.

The novel explores the themes of trauma, memory, and healing. It provides a new way of understanding the resilience that is through deep water healing and stress relief. It navigates the complexity of human grief of breaking apart and re growing. The trauma at the workforce in the dredging company allows to think about the blue labour and the pressure built up meeting the expectation at the maritime work.

Also, the constant pressure of being a female diver in the field full of masculine authority, it terrifies her being the only female expected to do domestic or tourist centric roles rather than something too risky to handle like diving. Tara's unconventional choices keeps her apart from the terrestrial expectations of the Goan society.

This recent approach of academic interest in 'Blue Turn' emphasises the ocean not merely as a metaphorical being or a site of aestheticism but as an agent that shapes the behaviour of humans and the underlying culture. Tara's affection towards the deep sea suggest a post anthropocentric view that enables the sovereignty of non human existence over the human mastery on landscape.

Here, Tara Salgaonkar represents a new form of 'Subaqueous Subjectivity' where the boundaries between human body and marine environment is negotiated through materiality of deep. Materiality of the deep is not merely the occupational hazard but it is the space that allows the protagonist to liquidate herself and regenerate herself in a multispecies reality.

The hydro centric perspective of the novel elevates the presence of environmental awareness and oceanic capability of transformative agency through immersion and preservation in salt and water. The deep relevance of starfish pickle towards the end benefits readers to understand the longstanding position of female saturation giving it the lenses of hydro femineity becoming one with the interspecies, the protagonist related the most. This aqueous identity remains with her throughout her life.

I. Materiality of the Deep

'Starfish in the ocean are stars on probation, when Starfish die they become Tara in the Sky' (page 237) – Here these lines come as a stark realization of terrestrial compliance with the star on earth that is Tara Salgaonkar who continues to struggle and shows extreme resilience till death.

Tara was in a state of probation to survive till she resonates herself like a starfish in a pond. This transformation to death is not the end of challenges but the reincarnation of self into meditative position of starfish deeply preserved in salt and water allowing her to

get in the actual resonance of being one with the other entitled to be.

She carries the heaviness of her mother's past and grief which she dissolves whenever she dives in the deep blurring the terrestrial pressures that relies on gossip and social glorification. Ocean does not differentiate Tara based on her caste, gender, past and grief but welcomes her in the sphere of displacement and acts as an agent of liberation.

Furthermore, Materiality of the deep functions as a site of sensory recalibration. Here on the land where Tara is judged by glances, gazes, gossips and judgements, there in water all the noise and senses towards the pre-notions are gone with the assurance of peace and calmness attained through the immersion in water.

The deep-sea water provides a sanctuary of truth that prevails through the salinity of the water and reduces Tara in her own self not a loss of self but as a sign of purification. The weight of the land proves to be the sole burden on Tara which she manages to shed off in water.

Tara always carried the guilt of her mother's suicide poked often by her grandmother which made her to disregard herself on numerous occasions. She shifted her love inclinations many times with no intention of getting settled proving her unstable mental health as a major hurdle of her love life. But Tara's cure always laid in deep waters and her love for Starfish pulled her towards a never ending loop of intimacy.

Tara's role as a diver meant to take a heavy toll on her physical self which contained exhaustion, shock, trauma wherein her tasks lied in recovering lost bodies, items underwater giving her labour a material history making her a mediator between her hidden grief and the indifferent clarity of the deep.

II. Blue Labour

Tara fitted in the role of a mermaid while the work that she does requires a lot of hard work involving the gritty work of waste management and industrial maintenance marking the presence of extreme tiredness and post trauma.

Her fondness of water doesn't land her up in clean, crystal water instead throws her in dirty, murky water, sometimes full of oil and garbage to pull drowned bodies. This back breaking job gives her night terrors yet she prefers to remain a water baby throughout her life.

The kind of work Tara was involved in required a manly strength to pull out bodies and stuff underwater, wear heavy diving suites and perform like a man. This was very well defied by Tara being a female against the social conventions.

One of the impacts of underwater diving mentioned in the text is decompression sickness caused when divers hastily come out of the water allowing nitrogen rush in the

blood. This causes choking and suffocation as it lacks oxygen in body, clearly evident in Tara's encounters with deep diving. She was suffering from decompression sickness.

The romanticism in recreational diving halts in the idea of dredging firm which gave life and death threats. This positions her as a Janitor of the Anthropocene. Her personal trauma is mirrored in the environmental trauma she is put in. She is a broken person trying to fix the broken eco system.

In one of the incidences when Tara was honoured in the carnival for her brave act of Andalusia at the carnival in the form of a mermaid, she created a ruckus by screaming and shouting as if she was experiencing a bout of depression and anxiety. She was called the madwoman of the carnival. Everybody including her grandmother was in shock.

That day she doesn't stay at her house instead she goes to Carlos. There unexpectedly she experiences night terror again as if hundreds of bed bugs crawl on the bed making it impossible for her to sleep. She sleeps for 24 hours straight. Tara is sent on a three months paid holiday by the owner of the dredging company to give rest from her work.

III. Interspecies Kinship

'She prefers ocean to sky' (page 237) – Tara belonged to ocean. She was more aquatic than territorial. She connected with the water emotionally. Her deep down grief melted with the water and somehow carried her struggles away.

Whenever she dived, she engaged herself in primitive trade by getting corals and shells for herself. Tara's connection with interspecies alienated her from humanity. She struggled with tangled relations on land and freed herself from those in water.

By forming a kinship with the industrial water, she enacts as a form of Blue Post Colonial agency. She rejects the terrestrial structure of Goa and accepts the murky yet liberating truth of the oceanic imageries. Her kinship with the material water – oil, dirt, garbage makes her a mediator between human waste and marine resilience.

Tara surrounds herself with starfish tanks at home rather than any living existence around her. She tries to create an aquatic set up to feel more closer to her own type. She creates Blue Domesticity surrounding her with marine life.

She rejects human companionship for non-judgemental, silent presence of marine kin. The Starfish offers her a kinship of silence as she suffers from the noise of outside world making her life confused and perplexed.

Her kinship is rooted in the cycle of discarded. She finds pleasure in garbage and wreckage as she feels that her own self is discarded too. She reconciles with the starfish allowing her to survive a back breaking industry reality and adopting regenerating logic of

benthos over rigid moralities of Terra Firma. It is a model of invertebrate resilience.

IV. Starfish Metaphor

The Starfish has the natural ability to re grow its lost limbs in the natural habitat. Just like the Starfish, Tara too lost her limbs in the form of trauma and she tried to re gain it naturally through underwater diving releasing herself from all the boundaries and bonds on land.

This act of self growth and liberty can aligned with the trait of Starfish as it exactly mirrors the process in the life of the protagonist “Tara Salgaonkar”.

Tara’s life on earth is trapped and pickled due the societal expectations in Goa. Similarly, Starfish in water is the star of the deep, while it gets pickled when taken on land. Tara’s state of vulnerability increases on land comparatively than in water. Both are stars but both are forced to go through dirty and muddy reality of their own world.

The name of the protagonist is Tara means Star. The metaphor bridges the gap between the two worlds where Tara belongs to another universe rather than her place of belonging. Tara links more to the identity of Starfish and water.

Tara’s belongingness to water makes her identical to non human species and allows to adapt the traits of non human agency. The revelation of the alignment came to Tara many times through dreams, night terrors and hallucinations. Her perfect world lied in water and it ended in water.

The starfish metaphor functions as an anti ontological device. It permits the protagonist to navigate the pickle of Goan society, by adopting the strategy of echinodermic resilience where identity is not a fixed core but a regenerative limb capable of being cast off and re grown within the materiality of the deep.

Conclusion

Bina Nayak’s *Starfish Pickle* explores the themes of Blue labour, interspecies kinship and starfish metaphor to position water as a space of re growth and resilience. The novel uses starfish metaphor to portray the regeneration of Tara’s life and self in a patriarchal society.

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