



**GENDER, MARINE IDENTITY, AND COASTAL RESILIENCE: A
COMPARATIVE ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF EPELI HAU‘OFA’S
OUR SEA OF ISLANDS AND THE NETFLIX K-DRAMA
WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU TANGERINES**

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Abstract

*This paper presents a comparative ecocritical analysis of Epeli Hau‘ofa’s 1993 seminal essay *Our Sea of Islands* and the 2025 Netflix K-drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, focusing on how both works interrogate the relationships between island cultures, marine space and ecology, and global forces. Hau‘ofa’s essay challenges the conventional view of island communities as isolated and marginalised, instead portraying the sea as a vast, interconnected space that forms the foundation of islander identity, culture, and history. Similarly, *When Life Gives You Tangerines* highlights the resilience and wisdom of Jeju Island’s Haenyeos, women divers whose labor and cultural practices are tied to the rhythms of the sea. The study explores how globalisation, tourism, and environmental change impact island communities’ sustainability and ecosystems. By comparing Hau‘ofa’s conceptualization of the ocean and island space with the narrative of the Korean drama, the paper analyses how both texts advocate for a reclamation of island autonomy, cultural memory, and ecological knowledge in the face of external threats. This comparative reading underscores the need to resist the commodification of island cultures and ecosystems and to champion more holistic, sustainable models of living within the marine landscapes.*

Keywords

Ecocriticism, Marine Identity, Feminist Ecologies, Island Cultures, Postcolonialism, Cultural Autonomy, Globalization, Sustainability, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The exploration of ecocriticism in Epeli Hau‘ofa’s *Our Sea of Islands* and the Netflix K-drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines* invites a layered examination of how coastal societies articulate their relationship with the marine environment. Hau‘ofa’s seminal essay reimagines the Pacific Ocean as a unifying space, arguing against colonial narratives that portray island nations as isolated and marginal. Instead, he offers a vision of Oceania as a connected and dynamic cultural expanse shaped by its inhabitants’ long-standing maritime traditions. Similarly, *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, set on South Korea’s Jeju Island, foregrounds the intimate, lived experiences of individuals whose lives are intertwined with the sea. Through the story of Ae-sun and the tradition of the haenyeo – female divers who harvest seafood from the ocean – the series explores the gendered dimensions of marine labour and the resilience of coastal women.

By juxtaposing Hau‘ofa’s philosophical reframing of Pacific identity with the dramatised portrayal of generational struggle and adaptation in *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, this study examines how gender, marine identity, and ecological resilience are represented across literature



and screen. These works urge a rethinking of the ocean not as void or border, but as a site of cultural continuity, gendered labour, and environmental stewardship.

Employing an ecocritical framework, this article explores how narrative and metaphor intertwine to illuminate the often-overlooked contributions of coastal women and communities to ecological sustainability in the face of socio-political and environmental adversity. “There is a world of difference between viewing the Pacific as ‘islands in a far sea’ and as ‘a sea of islands.’ The first emphasises dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centres of power; the second is a portrayal of a world of people connected to each other” (Hau‘ofa, 1994).

This distinction lies at the heart of Hau‘ofa’s intervention and sets the tone for a broader critique of spatial narratives that diminish the importance of oceanic cultures. His insistence on viewing the Pacific as a vibrant, interconnected sea of relationships rather than fragmented territories challenges dominant global hierarchies and provides a framework through which to understand the ecological and cultural vibrancy of coastal life. It is precisely this re-envisioning of maritime space that resonates through the haenyeo culture of Jeju Island, where the sea is not only a source of livelihood but a social commons shaped by and for women.

Metaphors of the Sea: Ecocritical Reflections in *When Life Gives You Tangerines* and *Our Sea of Islands*:

Both *When Life Gives You Tangerines* and Epeli Hau‘ofa’s *Our Sea of Islands* employ the sea as a central metaphor, yet they do so in distinct ways that reflect their cultural contexts and thematic concerns. Hau‘ofa’s essay reclaims the ocean from reductive colonial framings, describing it instead as an expansive space of kinship and ecological symbiosis.

He asserts, “Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding... Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean”—a line that encapsulates his ecocritical vision of a living, breathing seascape where people and place are not separate, but interdependent.

In contrast, *When Life Gives You Tangerines* explores the sea through metaphors of suffering, survival, and transformation. One of the most harrowing metaphors occurs during a violent sea storm that takes the life of Ae-sun and Gwan-sik’s third child. The sea, in that moment, becomes an agent of irreversible loss. And yet, in the days following, both parents must return to their respective engagements with the ocean: Gwan-sik resumes fishing, and Ae-sun sells his catch at the local market. This cyclical dependence on the same force that caused them grief underscores a key ecocritical tension—that nature, while sacred and sustaining, is also unpredictable and indifferent. It is a theme that finds resonance in ecocritical discourse, which refuses to romanticise nature but instead grapples with its sublime and volatile essence.

Further complexity is added through the depiction of the haenyeo women’s role in the local economy. As the series unfolds, the markets where they sell seafood come under threat due to modernisation and political pressure. These women, who dive without oxygen tanks and brave dangerous tides, find their work devalued as urbanisation attempts to erase local, sustainable economies. Their resistance to this change mirrors Hau‘ofa’s resistance to the narrative of smallness. As he writes, “It is the vastness of our sea that has been forgotten, not its multitude of islands.” Similarly, Jeju’s women divers assert the vitality and sustainability of their way of life in the face of encroaching modernity.

Both works thus draw upon the sea not only as physical geography but as a symbol of resilience, marginality, and survival. Hau‘ofa speaks to the decolonial re-mapping of identity through the ocean, while *When Life Gives You Tangerines* roots its metaphors in embodied labour and personal loss. The sea becomes an archive of memory and grief, but also of endurance and solidarity. In ecocritical terms, these metaphors disrupt anthropocentric views and foreground the



dynamic interplay between human agency and ecological forces — a necessary perspective in times of climate uncertainty and environmental precarity.

Conclusion:

This comparative ecocritical study has illuminated how both *Our Sea of Islands* and *When Life Gives You Tangerines* articulate the sea not merely as a setting but as a vital epistemological and cultural force. Hau'ofa's expansive vision of Oceania as a "sea of islands" challenges colonial and neoliberal mappings that render island communities peripheral. His metaphor of the ocean as kinship and continuity finds a lived parallel in the haenyeo of Jeju Island, whose generational practices, portrayed in the Korean drama, affirm the enduring ties between women, water, and survival.

Crucially, both works resist romanticised portrayals of coastal life. Instead, they foreground the paradoxes of ecological dependency—where nature sustains and endangers, where tradition empowers and is threatened. Through their respective lenses, Hau'ofa and the drama's creators advocate for the recognition of indigenous and feminist ecologies that value communal resilience over exploitative progress. In *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, gender is central to this ecological imagination: the labour of the haenyeo is not just environmentally sustainable, but deeply gendered, rooted in embodied knowledge, matriarchal solidarity, and resistance to patriarchal modernisation. The depiction of these coastal women brings to the fore the often-overlooked intersection between gendered labour and environmental stewardship. While Hau'ofa does not centre gender explicitly, his inclusive vision of Pacific communities leaves space for such feminist readings to emerge.

As climate change, globalisation, and cultural erasure threaten coastal and island societies worldwide, these works invite us to rethink dominant environmental discourses. They call for a shift away from extractive logics and towards place-based knowledge systems that honour the sea not as void or commodity, but as a living entity central to both identity and sustainability. By weaving together postcolonial and feminist ecologies, and by recognising gender as a crucial axis in the construction of marine identity and resilience, this study affirms that the future of marine landscapes—and those who dwell within them—depends on such counter-narratives of care, autonomy, and ecological interdependence.

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