



**International Journal of English Literature and  
Literary Theories**

**International Peer Reviewed and Refereed English Journal**

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORIES (IJELLT)

ISSN: 3107-6505

Vol.:2: Issue: 2: 2026.

(International Peer Reviewed and refereed English Journal)

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**Literary Theories**

### Colonial Trauma and Loss of Indigenous Identity in Monique Roffey's Novel 'The Mermaid of the Black Conch'

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**Abstract:** This study discusses Colonial Trauma and Loss of Indigenous Identity in the *The Mermaid of the Black Conch* by Monique Roffey. According to Chinua Achebe "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter" History often speaks from the perspective of the colonizer and neglects the voices of indigenous people. It has ignores their voices simply. Colonizers power structures suppress indigenous cultures, languages, and communities. Colonizers not only take control of another countries land, but also enslave people and objectify women sexually. The Taino are the native people of the Caribbean. It is set on the fictional island of Black Conch, a small fishing village. When European colonizers capture indigenous women and treat them as sexual objects. The central Character, Aycayia, a young Taino woman resists, and refuses their desires. As a result of her resistance, she is cursed and transformed into a mermaid. The indigenous people loss their identity, land, and culture due to the oppression of the European colonizers. This research paper explores how colonialism imposes trauma and causes the loss of identity. Aycayia's transformation powerfully represents this trauma and her liminal condition between human and non-human, as well as her gradual recovery cultural memory.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Trauma, Sexual Violence, Resistance, Loss, Indigenous Identity.

## Introduction

Monique Roffey is a Trinidadian- born British writer, Memoirist, and Creative writing lecturer. She is the author of six novels and all are internationally acclaimed. Among the other works, *The Mermaid of the Black Conch* (2020) won the Costa Book of the Year and Costa Novel Award in 2020. Her novels often explore Caribbean landscapes, Postcolonial themes, Myth, Memory, and Environmental issues. At present, She works as a Professor at Manchester Metropolitan University and as a tutor for the National Centre for writing.

According to George Lamming, “The colonial experience is a profound process of alienation” The power of colonialism separates people from their own land, language, culture, and identity. In Caribbean literature, the history of Caribbean strongly influences many of the novels, which portrays the trauma, memory, slavery, loss of identity, resistance, and survival. The Taino woman, Aycayia is controlled by a European colonizer and endures the curse for centuries in the sea. Her condition represents the loss of identity and her eventual recovery of life through love. When she transforms back into human form, she experiences the similar exploitation from American tourists. This clearly mirrors that, across time, the same structures of colonial power continue, the sufferings of indigenous people persists..

## Colonial Trauma

When Aycayia resists and fights to protect herself from the European colonizer from where colonial violence begins. Frantz Fanon states that, “Colonialism produces psychological trauma that alienates the colonized from their past” (Fanon 36). This idea is clearly visible in the novel. As a result of her resistance, she is punished by the colonizer and transformed into a mermaid. This demonstrates that colonizers not only take the land, but take over female bodies. This punishment plunges her into deep trauma leaving her in a liminal state between human and non- human. The transformation of her body exposes the silenced indigenous voices of indigenous people. Ultimately, it suppresses her human agency.

“She hadn’t heard music for a longtime, maybe a thousand years, and she was irresistibly drawn up to the surface, real slow and real interested”.(5) She lives in the sea for centuries. A human turned into a mermaid, instead to living in her homeland. She is forced to exist in the ocean, which is unimaginable. She loses her entire human form and this causes deep psychological disturbance due to Oppression. At one point, she is captured by American tourists and treated as a fishing trophy. This exposes that, even in modern times, structures of power continue to operate and control the lives indigenous people. “She had risen from the waves, chosen him, a humble fisherman”. (3)

David Baptiste, a local fisherman rescues Aycayia from the tourists. She feels safe with David. After living in the sea as a mermaid for centuries, she forgets her language, human form, and culture. With the help of the fisherman, she gradually relearns how to speak, walk and behave like a human. This process helps her recover memories of her past and reconnect with her cultural identity.

### **Loss of Indigenous Identity**

When Aycayia slowly regains her human form, she begins to remember her name, language, and indigenous community. It is difficult to imagine her living in the water, a place where she doesn’t belong. There is no kinship around her. Both the European colonizer and the American tourists treats her as an object. Meanwhile, David Baptiste, a local fisherman saves her life, provides shelter and protects her from others. He helps her recover her human form. His house becomes a space of healing where she gradually regains her memory.

One of the most significant aspects of her loss of identity is her inability to speak; she communicates only through songs, sounds, and broken words. The People on the island identify her as a mermaid, an exotic creature, and trophy. By labeling her in this way, they attempt to control and erase her identity. When David teaches her language, she begins to remember her past. Her memory, however is not stable; it remains fragmented. With David’s help, she gradually rebuilds her identity. Thus, Colonialism erases the identities of indigenous peoples and disrupts their lives.

“I have dived into the walls of Ocean

I would have died very soon as a woman Forty cycles? Children, Husband  
Life of land and life of birth and death

Instead, I lived for more than a thousand cycles Inside the sea” (6)

She says that the sea saves her life for centuries, protecting her from oppression and provides shelter. Generally, the ocean functions only as a backdrop; however, in this novel, the sea acts as an agent. It is complex for her to exist between human and non-human forms. At the end of the novel, Aycayia chooses to live in the sea. This decision expresses her self-determination and autonomy. Exploitation continues across both past and present. She experiences the oppression both as a human and as a mermaid. Therefore, she ultimately decides to live as a mermaid in the sea.

### **Conclusion**

This paper argues that colonial trauma is not merely a historical phenomenon but a continuous force that shapes bodies, identities, and cultures. Aycayia's curse represents colonial violence and the loss of indigenous identity. Thus, her pain, and sufferings proves that she endures profound trauma. In the end, she stands as a powerful symbol of survival, resistance and self-determination.

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