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BA English Honours | Semester I | Calicut University

Introduction to the World of Literature

Course Code: ENG1CJ101 • Module 1 Notes

MODULE I: LOVE ACROSS TIME

1. The Poetics of Love: Historical, Aesthetic, and Cultural Trajectories

Love represents one of the most enduring, complex, and universal themes in world literature. Across millennia, poets, dramatists, and storytellers have employed the idiom of romantic, spiritual, and tragic desire to explore the boundaries of human subjectivity, mortal vulnerability, and social belonging. Far from being a static emotional trope, literary depictions of love reflect the evolving socio-cultural, philosophical, and political architectures of their respective civilizations. From the classical Tamil landscapes of ancient India and medieval courtly lyrics in Europe to the revolutionary verses of anti-colonial Urdu poetry and contemporary queer African diaspora writing, the discourse of love operates as both an intimate personal sanctuary and a radical site of resistance against societal orthodoxy.

Examining love across chronological and geographical frontiers demands an acute hermeneutic sensitivity to differing aesthetic conventions. Classical traditions frequently codified emotional states into intricate poetic landscapes, where physical geography served as an objective correlative for the interior life of the lover. In contrast, modern and post-colonial writers often politicize romantic sentiment, demonstrating how personal intimacy is inescapably entangled with the traumas of colonialism, exile, racism, and state violence. This module charts the transformative arc of love poetry across five distinctive voices, establishing a profound cross-cultural dialogue spanning over two thousand years.

2. Classical Dravidian Poetics: Avvaiyar's *What He Said* (Kuruntokai 40)

Ancient Sangam literature, flourishing in South India between 300 BCE and 300 CE, represents one of humanity's most sophisticated poetic systems. Preserved in the classical anthology *Kuruntokai* (one of the eight anthologies, *Ettuthokai*), the Sangam poems are formally bifurcated into *puram* (exterior, public themes of war, valor, and kingship) and *akam* (interior, private themes of love, desire, and separation). Sangam love poetry does not indulge in personal autobiography; rather, it adheres to the strict conventions of the *tinai* system, wherein five physiographic landscapes correspond to specific psychological stages of love:

- **Kurinji (Mountainous region):** Signifies the clandestine union of lovers, symbolized by the blooming kurinji flower, waterfalls, and nocturnal rendezvous.
- **Mullai (Pastoral forests):** Signifies patient waiting, domesticated fidelity, and quiet domestic hope during the lover's absence.
- **Marutham (Fertile river plains):** Signifies marital unfaithfulness, domestic quarrel, jealousy, and the lover's estrangement.
- **Neytal (Seashore):** Signifies profound grief, lamentation, and desolate longing by the ocean.
- **Palai (Parched wasteland):** Signifies perilous travel, arduous journey, and painful separation across harsh terrain.

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TEXTUAL EXCERPT **Kuruntokai 40: *What He Said* (Translated by A. K. Ramanujan)**

> *What could my mother be to yours?*
> *What kin is my father to yours anyway?*
> *And how did you and I meet ever?*
> *But in love our hearts have mingled*
> *as red earth and pouring rain:*
> *What could they be to each other?*

In this celebrated poem, attributed to the venerable female poet Avvaiyar (or Cempulappeyaniyar), the speaker dissolves all conventional social hierarchies through the transcendent mystery of romantic union. The opening rhetorical questions dismantle the social scaffolding of caste, pedigree, kinship, and ancestral lineage. In ancient feudal societies where marital alliances were strictly transactional mechanisms for preserving aristocratic property and blood purity, the speaker asserts that their emotional communion owes nothing to parental negotiation.

The climactic metaphor—"as red earth and pouring rain"—stands as one of world literature's most indelible images of indivisible synthesis. When seasonal monsoon rain strikes red ferruginous soil, the two elements fuse irrevocably: the clear water absorbs the rich red pigment and minerals of the earth, while the parched soil drinks the life-giving moisture, generating life and fertility. Neither can ever be extracted, distilled, or separated back into its original component state. Ramanujan's translation captures the radical egalitarianism of this Sangam lyric, celebrating a love that bypasses human institutions to become an elemental force of nature.

3. Medieval European Erotic Lyric: *Western Wind* (Anonymous, c. 15th Century)

Representing the transition from Middle English to early Modern English lyricism, the anonymous four-line poem *Western Wind* (preserved in the Royal MS App. 58 manuscript alongside musical notation) is universally recognized as a masterpiece of emotional condensation and pastoral longing.

ORIGINAL MIDDLE ENGLISH TEXT ***Western Wind* (British Library Royal MS 58)**

> *Westron wynde, when wyll thow blow*
> *The smalle rayne downe can Rayne?*
> *Cryst, yf my love wer in my armys,*
> *And I yn my bed a-gayne!*

In just four brief lines, the lyric binds erotic desperation with meteorology. The "western wind" refers to the gentle Zephyr that heralds the arrival of spring in the British Isles, softening winter's frozen soil and bringing the generative "small rain" necessary for agricultural resurrection. However, the poet does not observe this pastoral renewal with dispassionate serenity. The arrival of spring intensifies the agony of physical absence.

The abrupt exclamation "Cryst!" (Christ!) disrupts the rhythmic lilt with raw, colloquial desperation. This is not high medieval courtly romance (*amour courtois*) where an aristocratic knight worships an unattainable

lady from afar through elaborate chivalric rituals; it is an earthy, urgent plea for physical touch and domestic intimacy ("in my bed again"). The poem exposes the deep vulnerability of the exile, traveler, or soldier stranded far from home, yearning for the warmth of the beloved's body as the only true sanctuary against mortal coldness.

4. Scottish Romanticism and Folk Lyricism: Robert Burns's *A Red, Red Rose* (1794)

Robert Burns (1759–1796), Scotland's national bard, stood at the vanguard of the Romantic movement, rescuing vernacular oral song from scholarly neglect. Published in James Johnson's *The Scots Musical Museum*, *A Red, Red Rose* is a lyrical ballad that transforms traditional Scots folk motifs into a timeless hymn of absolute romantic devotion.

TEXTUAL STANZAS **Robert Burns: *A Red, Red Rose***

> *O my Luve is like a red, red rose*
> *That's newly sprung in June;*
> *O my Luve is like the melody*
> *That's sweetly played in tune.*
>
> *So fair art thou, my bonnie lass,*
> *So deep in luve am I;*
> *And I will luve thee still, my dear,*
> *Till a' the seas gang dry.*
>
> *Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,*
> *And the rocks melt wi' the sun;*
> *I will love thee still, my dear,*
> *While the sands o' life shall run.*

Burns begins with two sensory similes: the visual and olfactory freshness of the "red, red rose" blooming in early summer, and the auditory harmony of a perfectly tuned musical melody. These comparisons emphasize the youthful vibrancy, beauty, and emotional symmetry of the beloved. Yet, Burns immediately recognizes the mortal paradox of the rose: while organic flowers inevitably wither and musical notes fade into silence, romantic commitment must transcend biological mortality.

To overcome this transience, Burns deploys cosmic hyperbole (adynaton). The speaker's love is pledged until "a' the seas gang dry" and "the rocks melt wi' the sun"—geological and cosmological impossibilities that project romantic fidelity beyond human lifespans into apocalyptic eternity. By grounding high romantic idealism in the melodic cadence of the Scots vernacular ("bonnie lass", "a'"), Burns democratizes poetic ecstasy, demonstrating that profound metaphysical devotion belongs to working folk rather than aristocratic salons.

5. Revolutionary Urdu Lyricism: Faiz Ahmed Faiz's *Before You Came* (*Mujh Se Pehli Si Mohabbat*)

Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911–1984), arguably the greatest Urdu poet of the twentieth century and recipient of the Lenin Peace Prize, fundamentally revolutionized the classical Persian-Urdu *ghazal* tradition. In his iconic poem *Mujh Se Pehli Si Mohabbat Mere Mehboob Na Maang* ("Do Not Ask of Me, My Love, That Love of Old", translated by Agha Shahid Ali as *Before You Came*), Faiz stages a dramatic dialectical rupture between romantic absorption and anti-imperialist social conscience.

CRITICAL EXCERPT **Faiz Ahmed Faiz: *Before You Came***

> *Before you came, all things were what they were:*
> *the sky was just the sky, the road was just the road,*
> *the glass of wine was just a glass of wine.*
> *Now everything is like my heart, a flutter with blood...*
> *There are other sorrows in the world than the sorrow of love,*
> *other consolations than the consolation of a beloved's embrace.*

In classical Urdu poetry, the beloved's face is routinely treated as the center of the universe, and romantic yearning is elevated to divine mysticism. Faiz begins by acknowledging the intoxicating, transformative power of the beloved's presence, which paints the ordinary world in luminous emotional hues. However, Faiz abruptly shatters this aesthetic sanctuary by directing his gaze outward toward the brutal material realities of colonized and post-colonial South Asia.

The speaker confronts grotesque sights: human bodies sold in the marketplace of misery, festering wounds oozing pus in dark alleys, starving children, and the crushing machinery of capitalist and feudal exploitation. In the face of widespread human suffering, solipsistic romantic indulgence becomes an ethical impossibility. Faiz does not reject his beloved; rather, he expands the capacity of love itself. The lover's heart must open beyond personal passion to embrace collective solidarity with oppressed humanity. The sorrow of romance is eclipsed by the greater, more urgent sorrow of social injustice.

6. Contemporary Queer African Diaspora: Yrsa Daley-Ward's *Sthandwa Sami*

Yrsa Daley-Ward, an acclaimed contemporary writer and poet of mixed Jamaican and Nigerian heritage raised in England, represents the vibrant vanguard of modern spoken-word and diasporic literature. Her poem *Sthandwa Sami* (an isiZulu term of profound endearment translating to "My Beloved") interrogates love at the fraught intersection of queer identity, generational trauma, racial vulnerability, and immigrant displacement.

Daley-Ward writes with radical vulnerability, stripping poetry of ornamental artifice to deliver sparse, visceral, and emotionally charged lines. In *Sthandwa Sami*, love is not depicted as an idyllic fairy tale or an idealized abstraction; it is portrayed as an intense, messy, and healing encounter between two wounded human beings. Daley-Ward explores the profound courage required to love openly within queer relationships, particularly within traditional African and Caribbean diaspora cultures where patriarchal conservatism and homophobic stigma often enforce silence and shame.

The use of the isiZulu phrase *Sthandwa sami* reclaims ancestral linguistic heritage while subverting patriarchal boundaries. Love becomes an act of psychological decolonization and radical healing. To embrace another person wholly—including their fractured histories, ancestral ghosts, and bodily insecurities—is an act of profound political courage. Daley-Ward's verse proves that contemporary love poetry remains as fiercely relevant and revolutionary as ever, charting new frontiers of intimacy and self-acceptance in a fractured world.

Advanced Critical Theory & Hermeneutic Synthesis

In contemporary literary scholarship and critical humanities, examining *Introduction to the World of Literature* requires traversing diverse theoretical methodologies. Literature does not exist in an ideological vacuum; it actively produces, subverts, and interrogates the historical, material, and socio-political conditions of human society. Contemporary scholars engage with texts through multi-faceted critical frameworks, synthesizing formalist textual rigor with cultural materialism, feminist critique, decolonial methodologies, and media ecology.

1. Theoretical Debates & Hermeneutic Perspectives

Academic investigation into Evolving Poetics of Love Across Cultures and Millennia reveals fundamental dialectical tensions across critical traditions:

- **Formalist Autonomy versus Cultural Materialism:** New Criticism and Russian Formalism argue that literary works possess organic unity, accessible primarily through close reading of intrinsic devices (irony, paradox, defamiliarization, metre). Conversely, Marxist and cultural materialist theorists contend that literary forms are determined by historical modes of production, class struggle, and ideological state apparatuses. Analyzing Evolving Poetics of Love Across Cultures and Millennia requires balancing close aesthetic appreciation with rigorous ideological demystification.
- **The Postcolonial Imperative and Canon Revision:** Canonical Western literature historically established eurocentric aesthetic benchmarks that marginalized indigenous and colonized voices. Modern postcolonial hermeneutics, formulated by theorists like Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, re-reads canonical representations through the lens of orientalism, subaltern agency, and cultural hybridity, restoring voice to suppressed histories.
- **Affective Resonance and Reader-Response Hermeneutics:** Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish emphasize that literary meaning is realized in the interaction between the textual horizon of expectations and the reader's interpretive community. In the digital age, literature expands from a static artifact into an interactive, communal event where reception actively recreates narrative reality.

2. Comparative Analytical Framework

A structured comparative assessment delineates the aesthetic, structural, and political dimensions across conventional and contemporary paradigms in Introduction to the World of Literature:

Critical Dimension	Classical / Canonical Approach	Contemporary Critical Paradigm	Transformative Scholarly Impact
Authorial Agency	Biographical intentionalism prioritizing the author as the sole locus of meaning.	Post-structuralist critique (Barthes's "Death of the Author"; Foucault's "Author-Function") decentering origin.	Fosters democratic, pluralistic interpretations liberated from authoritarian single readings.

Critical Dimension	Classical / Canonical Approach	Contemporary Critical Paradigm	Transformative Scholarly Impact
Genre Architecture	Rigid Aristotelian genre hierarchies separating high tragedy, epic, and low comedy.	Hybrid, border-crossing forms (docu-fiction, digital hypertext, graphic poetry, micro-memoir).	Deconstructs patriarchal and elitist aesthetic boundaries, admitting popular and vernacular forms.
Linguistic Medium	Standardized literary dialects conforming to metropolitan academic lexicons.	Multilingualism, vernacular registers, dialectal code-switching, and digital slang.	Validates regional linguistic identities and resists imperial cultural homogenization.
Societal Engagement	Art-for-art's-sake aestheticism or didactic moral instruction for individual virtue.	Intersectional political critique addressing race, caste, gender, ecology, and capital.	Positions literature as an active weapon for democratic rights and systemic social transformation.

3. Glossary of Essential Critical and Literary Terms

Term	Theoretical Etymology	Scholarly Definition & Application in Context
Aesthetic Distance	Kantian Aesthetics / Bullough	The psychological and emotional detachment that enables a spectator to contemplate an art object objectively without immediate pragmatic involvement.
Hermeneutic Circle	Schleiermacher / Dilthey / Gadamer	The methodological principle that understanding the text as a whole depends on understanding individual parts, while comprehension of parts depends on grasping the whole.
Objective Correlative	T. S. Eliot (1919)	A set of objects, a situation, or a chain of events which serves as the formula for a particular emotion, evoking that emotion immediately in the reader.
Intertextuality	Julia Kristeva (1966)	The relational nature of texts, positing that any literary work is an absorption and transformation of multiple prior cultural utterances and textual fragments.
Subalternity	Antonio Gramsci / Spivak	Populations socially, politically, and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure of the dominant colonial or capitalist ruling class.
Affective Turn	Brian Massumi / Sedgwick	A paradigm shift across humanities prioritizing bodily feeling, raw emotion, and visceral pre-cognitive responses over purely cognitive textual decodings.

4. Pedagogical and Analytical Roadmap

Scholarly engagement with Evolving Poetics of Love Across Cultures and Millennia proceeds through a four-phase methodological progression:

- **Phase 1: Textual Archaeology and Contextual Grounding:** Investigating the author's historical epoch, socio-political crises, publishing contexts, and linguistic variants. Scholars identify how contemporaneous ideologies shaped the original compositional framework.
- **Phase 2: Formal and Rhetorical Decentering:** Conducting meticulous close reading to map syntactic rhythms, tropological figurative schemes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche), narrative point of view, and tonal variations within the text.
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- **Phase 4: Synthesis and Contemporary Recontextualization:** Connecting textual themes with contemporary existential crises, such as climate displacement, digital surveillance, democratic erosion, and human resilience.

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