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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Indian Literature: Selected Readings

Course Code: ENG5EJ301(1) • Module 3 Notes

Unit 9: Legends of Pensam – Mamang Dai

Mamang Dai and the Ethereal Geographies of Arunachal Pradesh

Mamang Dai, celebrated poet, novelist, and Sahitya Akademi laureate from Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh, reshapes the landscape of Indian English literature through her lyrical fiction *The Legends of Pensam* (2006). Writing from within the rich oral ethos of the Adi community, Dai brings the remote, mist-shrouded riverine valleys of the Eastern Himalayas into vibrant imaginative focus. Her work functions as an act of cultural cartography, recovering indigenous histories often flattened by mainland Indian metanarratives or colonial ethnographic taxonomies.

The Concept of 'Pensam': The In-Between Zone

The philosophical backbone of the novel is encapsulated in the Adi word *Pensam*, which translates as the "in-between" realm—the nebulous space between day and night, life and death, history and myth, the material world of mortals and the unseen spirit realm of nature. Rather than adhering to linear Western novelistic plotting, Dai structures the narrative as an interlocking cycle of oral memories, ancestral chronicles, and village folklore passed around the hearth. In Pensam, extraordinary occurrences—spirits taking shelter in ancient banyan roots, hunters vanishing into river currents, shamans interpreting the rustle of leaves—are woven seamlessly into the texture of daily rural existence.

Colonial Encounters, Modernity, and Ecological Memory

Through memorable figures like Hoxo, Rakut, and the legendary journey of Noel Williamson (the colonial political officer whose murder triggered the British punitive expedition of 1911), Dai traces the traumatic transition of tribal Arunachal from pristine isolation to modern administration. However, modernity does not fully dissolve indigenous wisdom. The Siang River remains an immortal, pulsating deity that cannot be dammed by bureaucratic hubris. Dai shows that in Adi cosmology, human beings do not dominate nature; they exist as humble guests within an animist landscape where rocks, trees, and spirits demand ethical reverence and reciprocity.

Unit 10: Fishmonger – S. Joseph

S. Joseph and the Malayalam Dalit Poetic Vanguard

S. Joseph is a seminal voice in the contemporary Malayalam Dalit poetry movement that emerged with explosive force in the late 1990s. Rejecting the high-caste Sanskritized metaphors, romantic nostalgia, and urban cynicism of previous generations, Joseph pioneered a minimalist, raw, sensory-grounded idiom that illuminates the everyday labor, humiliations, and quiet dignity of subaltern communities in Kerala.

The Sensory Reality of Labour and Caste Segregation

In "Fishmonger" (*Meenkaran*), Joseph focuses his unflinching poetic gaze upon the figure of the fish seller traveling from house to house under the blazing sun. In orthodox caste society, the fishmonger's body is historically coded with impurity: the pungent smell of raw fish, slimy scales, muddy feet, and damp wicker baskets signify contamination to upper-caste sensibilities. Joseph overturns this discriminatory hierarchy by elevating the physical reality of labour into an aesthetic marvel. The poem captures the shimmering silver of freshly caught sardine and mackerel, the muscle-strain of pedaling an old bicycle across village lanes, and the essential sustenance the fishmonger provides to the community's stomach.

Dignity, Humanity, and Counter-Hegemonic Modernity

Joseph subtly contrasts the fishmonger's authentic, sweaty exertion with the hypocritical gentility of the domestic households he serves. The transaction is not merely commercial; it exposes structural social distancing, where coins are dropped from a height or washed before handling to avoid tactile pollution. By rendering the fishmonger's voice, labor, and interior world with acute psychological delicacy, Joseph constructs a counter-hegemonic aesthetic. The smell of fish is transformed from a marker of caste degradation into an honorable scent of life, survival, and honest working-class existence.

Unit 11: Sairat – Dir. Nagraj Manjule (2016)

Nagraj Manjule and the Revolution in Marathi Dalit Cinema

Nagraj Popatrao Manjule's blockbuster film *Sairat* (Wild / Ardent, 2016) shattered Indian cinematic paradigms by transforming an ostensibly conventional inter-caste youth romance into a ferocious, sociological dissection of Brahminical patriarchy and feudal caste violence. Emerging from an underprivileged Dalit background in rural Solapur, Maharashtra, Manjule dismantled Bollywood's escapist, sanitizing depictions of rural India, grounding his visual narrative in uncompromising caste realism.

Subversion of Bollywood Tropes and Gender Dynamics

The first half of *Sairat* mimics and masterfully subverts mainstream romantic tropes: set to the grandiose, sweeping orchestral score of Ajay-Atul, the romance between Prashant (Parshya), an impoverished lower-caste Mahar fisherman's brilliant son, and Archana (Archie), the fiercely independent, bullet-riding, tractor-driving daughter of a ruthless Maratha feudal politician, appears exuberant and triumphant. Archie aggressively commands the romance, rescuing Parshya from police custody and orchestrating their escape. Manjule subverts traditional passive femininity, presenting Archie as an assertive force shattering normative patriarchal decorum.

The Brutality of Urban Displacement and the Horror of Honour Killing

The second half of the film delivers a devastating shock to romantic idealism. Fleeing rural Maharashtra, the young lovers end up in the squalor of a Hyderabad slum, where love is stripped of cinematic glamour and tested by severe economic misery, linguistic alienation, and precarious domestic friction. Through sheer resilience, they rebuild their lives, achieve employment, and raise an infant son. The catastrophic climax arrives when Archie's brother and relatives arrive at their flat bearing wedding gifts, seemingly seeking reconciliation. In a chilling, wordless sequence devoid of background music, Manjule shows the toddler wandering back into the apartment with bloody footprints, discovering his parents butchered in cold blood on the floor. *Sairat* brutally forces the spectator to confront the terrifying permanence of caste hegemony: in modern India, honor killing remains the violent mechanism through which feudal society annihilates egalitarian love and subaltern mobility.

Unit 12: Mohanaswamy – Vasudhendra

Vasudhendra and the Pioneer of Queer Kannada Literature

Vasudhendra is a trailblazing contemporary Kannada writer whose collection of interconnected short stories, *Mohanaswamy* (translated into English by Rashmi Terdal), broke new ground as the first openly gay collection of fiction in Kannada literary history. Drawing partly from autobiographical experience, Vasudhendra crafts a profoundly tender, heartbreaking, and honest portrait of a middle-aged, small-town homosexual man navigating the suffocating social taboos, religious rituals, and heterosexual mandates of middle-class South Indian society.

The Trauma of Compulsory Heteronormativity and Rural Isolation

The narrative explores Mohanaswamy’s journey from a conservative village near Bellary to the modern IT hubs of Bangalore. Vasudhendra captures the acute psychological torture experienced by queer individuals in small-town India, where terms like "gay" do not exist, and homosexual inclinations are demonized as demonic curses, mental madness, or moral degeneracy. Stories in the collection illuminate the grotesque "conversion therapies" imposed by desperate parents, including temple exorcisms, quack medical treatments, and the devastating pressure of compulsory heterosexual marriage.

Abandonment, Resilience, and the Reclamation of Selfhood

A core emotional arc of the collection revolves around Mohanaswamy's betrayal by his long-term partner, Karthik, who capitulates to familial expectations by abandoning Mohanaswamy to enter into an arranged heterosexual marriage. Vasudhendra captures the unbearable silence of queer mourning—a grief that cannot be publicly articulated or socially legitimized. Yet, *Mohanaswamy* refuses to conclude in victimhood. Across subsequent stories, the protagonist reclaims his bodily and emotional sovereignty: he learns to swim, embraces his solitude, seeks companionship without shame, and affirms his right to love and exist. Vasudhendra's work represents a historic milestone, indigenizing queer discourse and liberating it from elite metropolitan enclaves to resonate across vernacular Indian realities.

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Supplementary Critical Discourse: Module 3 Advanced Thematic Analysis (Part 1)

1. Socio-Political and Dialectical Frameworks

A comprehensive examination of Indian literary production within this domain necessitates an exploration of the underlying structural, economic, and institutional realities that govern both textual composition and critical reception. Subaltern historiography, pioneered by Ranajit Guha and further theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, illuminates how elite colonial and nationalist archives systematically suppressed the political consciousness and expressive vitality of marginalized castes, tribes, and women. Texts produced across diverse linguistic geographies function not merely as autonomous aesthetic objects, but as contested ideological fields where hegemonic power structures are interrogated, subverted, and imaginatively restructured.

The dialectic between regional vernacular idioms (Bhasha literatures) and the globalized medium of Indian English writing reveals enduring tensions regarding authenticity, translation, and cultural ownership. While English offers an indispensable secular counterweight to regional feudal oppressions and provides international visibility, it carries the historical imprint of colonial education and metropolitan privilege. Conversely, regional writings capture the sensory, phonological, and idiomatic particularities of lived local existence that resist seamless assimilation into homogenized global registers.

2. Gendered Interventions and the Deconstruction of Domesticity

Across both pre-independence and contemporary periods, Indian women writers have consistently deconstructed the sanctified domestic sphere. The private domain of the home, historically exalted in patriarchal and nationalist discourses as the pure repository of spiritual virtue and national tradition (the *Andar Mahal* or inner sanctum), is systematically exposed as a primary site of ideological policing, bodily containment, and psychic violence. Whether examining the claustrophobic feudal Zenana in Chughtai, the ascetic wandering of medieval Bhakti saints like Akka Mahadevi, or the hereditary executioner's chamber in K.R. Meera, literature becomes a radical instrument for unmasking the institutional linkages between family, property, and patriarchal ownership.

Feminist interventions within Indian literature emphasize the intersectionality of gender with caste, class, community, and ecological degradation. Dalit feminist thought, articulated by thinkers like Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru and embodied in the creative narratives of Gogu Shyamala and Bama, asserts that upper-caste feminist discourses have frequently overlooked the compounded vulnerabilities endured by subaltern women. Subaltern women bear the triple burden of economic exploitation by feudal landlords, systemic caste humiliation by dominant communities, and domestic subordination within their own households.

3. Subalternity, Caste Realism, and Counter-Hegemonic Aesthetics

The emergence of Dalit, tribal, and minority literatures has decisively transformed Indian aesthetics, demanding a fundamental re-evaluation of classical Sanskrit aesthetic standards rooted in harmony, detachment, and tranquil contemplation (*Shanta Rasa*). Writers and critics emerging from subaltern locations argue that traditional aesthetic categories often functioned to legitimize Brahmanical social order by sanitizing or ignoring the brutal physical realities of untouchability, manual scavenging, and bonded labor.

In contrast, counter-hegemonic aesthetics prioritize lived experience (*Anubhava*) over speculative scholastic contemplation, embracing raw, colloquial, sensory, and confrontational idioms. The literary representations of labor—whether the fishmonger pedaling through village heat, the Madiga artisan crafting leather shoes, or

the Santhal rebel confronting state counter-insurgency—shatter bourgeois aesthetic decorum. Literature ceases to be an elite diversion of leisure; it operates as an urgent, living manifesto for social justice, human dignity, and constitutional equality.

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Supplementary Critical Discourse: Module 3 Advanced Thematic Analysis (Part 2)

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Supplementary Critical Discourse: Module 3 Advanced Thematic Analysis (Part 3)

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Supplementary Critical Discourse: Module 3 Advanced Thematic Analysis (Part 4)

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