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BA English Honours | Semester VI | ENG6EJ302

Indian Women Writings

Module 4: Autobiographies, Subaltern Testimonies, and Rebel Voices • Comprehensive Notes

Chapter 4: Life-Writing, Subaltern Testimony, and Transgression

From nineteenth-century secret manuscripts to subaltern Dalit feminist memoirs and transgressive Urdu modernism, Indian women's life-writing has consistently challenged patriarchal censorship.

4.1 Rassundari Debi's Amar Jiban (My Life, 1876)

Rassundari Debi's *Amar Jiban* holds the distinction of being the first autobiography published in the Bengali language. Rassundari recounts how, confined to the inner domestic quarters (*antahpur*) of a wealthy household, she taught herself to read in secret by stealing a leaf from her son's primer and a page from the sacred Chaitanya Bhagavata while cooking over the kitchen stove, establishing female literacy as an act of courageous rebellion.

4.2 Ismat Chughtai: Defiance and the Obscenity Trial

Legendary Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai fearlessly tackled female sexuality and middle-class hypocrisy. Her 1942 short story "Lihaaf" ("The Quilt"), which subtly portrayed same-sex desire and neglect in an aristocratic household, resulted in a high-profile obscenity trial in Lahore. Chughtai refused to apologize, asserting that if truth is considered obscene, society itself must be cured of its hypocrisy.

Advanced Critical Theory, Hermeneutics & Literary Praxis

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1. Hermeneutic Paradigms and Textual Mechanics

Critical inquiry into Module 4: Autobiographies, Subaltern Testimonies, and Rebel Voices reveals how textual forms construct meaning through complex aesthetic strategies and structural choices:

- **Structuralism and Semiotic Deconstruction:** The organization of signs, tropes, and syntactical structures establishes narrative authority while simultaneously revealing internal fissures. Binary oppositions embedded within the discourse—such as center versus margin, tradition versus modernity, and subjective interiority versus objective reality—are systematically problematized through textual slippages and ambiguous signifiers.
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- **Feminist, Queer, and Intersectional Critique:** Analyzing the construction of gender roles, patriarchal surveillance, and non-normative subjectivities provides crucial insights into how bodily experience, domesticity, and public agency are mediated across divergent historical moments and cultural landscapes.
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2. Historiographical Context and Reception Theory

Every literary text and cultural artifact is firmly situated within specific historical material conditions. Understanding Module 4: Autobiographies, Subaltern Testimonies, and Rebel Voices requires examining how contemporaneous social movements, intellectual revolutions, and material shifts in print and digital publishing influenced textual production. Furthermore, Hans-Robert Jauss's concept of the "horizon of expectations" demonstrates that textual reception is never static; each successive generation of readers reinterprets these works through evolving ethical, philosophical, and cultural frameworks.

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