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BA English Honours | Semester I | Calicut University

Introducing Print and Digital Narratives

Course Code: ENG1FM105 • Module 2 Notes

MODULE II: NON-FICTION

1. The Architecture of Non-Fiction: Witness, Polemic, Satire, and Memory

Non-fiction literature occupies a vital, combative position in the humanistic disciplines. Far from being a passive factual record, literary non-fiction harnesses the full stylistic and rhetorical arsenal of creative prose—irony, dialogue, narrative pacing, and metaphorical imagery—to intervene directly in historical controversies, moral debates, and ideological struggles. While fiction constructs imaginary worlds to illuminate human truth, non-fiction confronts the immediate, unvarnished material reality of the world we inhabit, demanding intellectual accountability and ethical action from its readers.

The non-fictional essay has historically served as a weapon of liberation. From Enlightenment satires and anti-colonial manifestos to subaltern letters of protest and environmental philosophy, non-fiction interrogates power. This module examines four remarkable non-fictional texts: Manu S. Pillai's historiographical excavation of South Indian syncretism, Mark Twain's biting moral satire on social hypocrisy, Rohith Vemula's tragic testamentary indictment of caste violence, and Sumana Roy's meditative eco-critical critique of urban botanical consumerism.

2. Historical Syncretism and the Plural Past: Manu S. Pillai's *A Muslim Deity in a Hindu Temple*

Manu S. Pillai, one of India's most brilliant contemporary narrative historians (famed for *The Ivory Throne* and *Rebel Sultans*), published *A Muslim Deity in a Hindu Temple* in his acclaimed essay collection, *The Courtesan, the Mahatma & the Italian Brahmin* (2019). The essay confronts one of the most urgent cultural battles of contemporary India: the aggressive communal revisionism that attempts to depict medieval Indian history as an unremitting, monolithic civilizational war between Hindus and Muslims.

Pillai excavates the extraordinary, historically documented temple legend of Thulukka Nachiyar (the "Turkish" or Muslim Princess) venerated at the grand Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple in Srirangam, Tamil Nadu—one of the holiest Vaishnavite shrines in South India. According to historical temple chronicles (the *Koil Olugu*) and oral traditions, during the fourteenth-century military expeditions of the Delhi Sultanate into South India, the processional bronze idol of Lord Ranganatha was taken to Delhi as war booty. There, the young Sultan's daughter fell deeply, spiritually in love with the divine idol, treating it with profound veneration as her beloved.

When Vaishnavite devotees traveled to Delhi and successfully petitioned to bring the idol back to Srirangam, the grief-stricken Muslim princess pursued the deity across hundreds of miles to the south. Upon reaching the temple sanctum, she collapsed and merged spiritually with the deity. Far from erasing her memory as a foreign invader, the orthodox Hindu priests of Srirangam consecrated her as a goddess: to this day, an altar inside the temple complex is dedicated to Thulukka Nachiyar, where the deity is worshipped with Muslim offerings, including rotis, chintz drapery, and culinary preparations reflecting her faith.

Pillai uses this historical reality to dismantle modern communal hatred. Medieval Indian history was not a simplistic clash of fundamentalisms, but an intricate tapestry of cultural syncretism, mutual fascination, and shared spiritual devotion. Pillai demonstrates that true patriotism requires embracing the rich, complex plurality of India's past, rather than flattening historical truth into weaponized political propaganda.

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3. Subverting Didactic Hypocrisy: Mark Twain's *Advice to Youth* (1882)

Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835–1910), the supreme master of American satire, delivered his speech *Advice to Youth* on April 15, 1882, to the Boston Saturday Morning Club. During the Victorian era, prominent moralists, clergy, and educators frequently addressed young audiences with sanctimonious, patronizing sermons exhorting them to practice absolute obedience, perpetual honesty, early rising, and pious deference to social superiors.

Twain mimics the solemn structure of the Victorian conduct sermon only to completely invert its moral precepts through devastating satirical irony. In his famous section on lying, Twain declares:

> *"Now about lying. You want to be very careful about lying; otherwise you are nearly sure to get caught. Once caught, you can never again be in the eyes of the good and the pure, what you were before. Many a young person has injured himself permanently through a single clumsy and ill-finished lie, the result of carelessness born of incomplete training... An awkward, feeble, leaky-bottomed lie will not endure; it will be detected within eight-and-forty hours. A feeble lie is always a poor investment."*

Twain's target is not honesty itself, but the rampant social hypocrisy of adult Victorian society. Twain observes that adult civilization runs entirely on mendacity—polite social falsehoods, political deceptions, legal evasions, and diplomatic flattery. Therefore, advising the youth never to lie is absurd and impractical; if they must lie, Twain sardonically argues, they should practice diligently so they can execute seamless, sophisticated lies that serve social decorum!

Beneath the uproarious humor lies a profound philosophical critique of moral conformity. Twain urges the youth to think independently, to question authority figures who demand unthinking subservience, and to recognize that the self-proclaimed "good and pure" are often the most morally compromised hypocrites of all.

4. The Testament of a Broken Dream: Rohith Vemula's *My Birth is My Fatal Accident*

On January 17, 2016, Rohith Vemula, a twenty-six-year-old Dalit PhD scholar and student activist at the University of Hyderabad, died by suicide inside a university hostel room. His final farewell letter, found beside his body and beginning with the haunting meditation on human value, transformed overnight into an epochal manifesto of the anti-caste movement, sparking nationwide protests and global academic reckonings regarding institutional casteism in Indian higher education.

Vemula was an aspiring science writer who passionately dreamed of writing about the cosmos, astronomy, and nature like Carl Sagan. However, as an active member of the Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA), Vemula was subjected to relentless institutional harassment: his fellowship stipend was suspended for seven months, he was socially boycotted, expelled from his hostel, and forced to sleep in a makeshift tent outside the administration building under open skies.

CRITICAL DOCUMENT ANALYSIS **Rohith Vemula's Final Testament (January 2016)**

> *"The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind. As a glorious thing made up of stardust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living... My birth is my fatal accident."*

Vemula's prose possesses devastating lyrical power and profound philosophical depth. He indicts an entire civilization that refuses to recognize the intellectual genius and human sovereignty of an oppressed individual, insisting on reducing human beings to their caste label, vote-bank utility, and social hierarchy. The phrase "My birth is my fatal accident" lays bare the horrifying reality of hereditary caste oppression, wherein an individual's life chances, dignity, and survival are violently circumscribed by the accident of birth. Vemula's letter stands as one of the most tragic, essential documents of contemporary Indian literature—an unbearable cry for human emancipation and cosmic dignity that continues to convict Indian society.

5. Eco-Critique and Botanical Consumerism: Sumana Roy's *Our Flowery Fantasy*

Sumana Roy, a distinguished contemporary Indian essayist, novelist, and poet (author of *How I Became a Tree*, 2017), is a pioneering voice in the emerging field of the Environmental Humanities in South Asia. Her essay *Our Flowery Fantasy* (published in *The Indian Express*) offers a sharp, witty, and ecologically urgent critique of the urban middle-class obsession with manicured ornamental gardening, floral consumerism, and artificial aesthetics.

Roy observes how contemporary urban dwellers flock to flower shows, purchase imported hybrid blossoms, and decorate apartments with high-maintenance ornamental plants for social media display. However, Roy exposes the deep ecological alienation underlying this "flowery fantasy." Urban consumer culture fetishizes flowers purely as visual, fragrant commodities, stripping them of their ecological and botanical function. In nature, flowers are reproductive organs whose existence is dedicated to bees, insects, and birds; in the modern urban apartment, flowers are domesticated into aesthetic prisoners, drenched in chemical fertilizers and pesticides to maintain unblemished petals for human visual pleasure.

Roy contrasts this ornamental vanity with genuine botanical intimacy. She notes how native weeds, indigenous wild trees, and rugged shrubs—which provide vital habitats and ecological stability—are aggressively uprooted and labeled "ugly" simply because they do not conform to Westernized, bourgeois standards of floral symmetry. Roy calls for a radical decolonization of human-plant relationships: instead of treating nature as an ornamental backdrop for human vanity, we must learn to appreciate the unmanicured wildness of flora and cultivate humility before the non-human living world.

Advanced Multimodal & Cultural Studies Synthesis

In contemporary cultural studies and multimodal narrative theory, mastering *Introducing Print and Digital Narratives* demands a critical synthesis of textual, visual, and socio-political methodologies. Contemporary narratives transcend the traditional boundaries of the printed codex; they operate within dynamic convergence cultures where oral traditions, cinematic moving images, digital streaming algorithms, and graphic illustrations constantly cross-pollinate. Critical inquiry into Historiography, Satire, Subaltern

Resistance, and Plant Humanities requires examining how ideology, power, and identity are negotiated across diverse narrative media.

1. Contemporary Critical Dilemmas and Theoretical Frameworks

Scholars and cultural analysts interrogating Historiography, Satire, Subaltern Resistance, and Plant Humanities navigate fundamental dialectics across multimodal forms:

- **Textual Purity versus Multimodal Convergence:** While traditional literary criticism privileged purely linguistic elements (syntax, metaphor, meter), contemporary digital and print culture mandates multimodal literacy. Theorists like Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen demonstrate that visual layout, typography, soundtrack, color grading, and framing constitute semiotic modes that convey independent ideological meaning. Analyzing Historiography, Satire, Subaltern Resistance, and Plant Humanities necessitates reading images, sounds, and texts as unified semiotic systems.
- **Subaltern Agency and Representation of the Peripheries:** The democratization of digital media has empowered marginalized communities—Dalit writers, queer creators, racial minorities, and colonized voices—to dismantle elite cultural hegemony. Spivak's query "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is answered through grassroots digital storytelling, protest poetry, and independent docu-fiction that bypass corporate and caste gatekeepers.
- **Commodification versus Counter-Hegemonic Dissent:** Late capitalism possesses a voracious ability to co-opt radical dissent into marketable consumer commodities (from commodified protest songs to commercialized fair-skin debates). Cultural critics must rigorously distinguish between superficial aesthetic tokenism and authentic, transformative counter-hegemonic critique.

2. Comparative Analytical Assessment

A structured comparative assessment delineates the aesthetic, structural, and political dimensions across conventional print and contemporary multimodal narratives in Introducing Print and Digital Narratives:

Evaluation Dimension	Traditional Print Paradigm	Contemporary Multimodal / Digital Paradigm	Strategic Scholarly Impact
Sensory Engagement	Monolithic linguistic decoding relying entirely on typographical symbols.	Multi-sensory orchestration combining voice, music, cinematography, graphic art, and text.	Deepens affective immersion and cognitive retention across diverse learning demographics.
Narrative Speed & Span	Linear temporal progression unfolding across chapters and extended book formats.	Non-linear compression (flash fiction, micro-memoirs, lyrical shorts, multi-layered visual montage).	Cultivates intense hermeneutic focus, demanding active inferential decoding from audiences.
Cultural Inclusivity	Metropolitan, elite literary circles defining canonical acceptability.	Decentralized grassroots expression celebrating indigenous dialects, queer narratives, and subaltern histories.	Democratizes knowledge production and dismantles institutional exclusionary barriers.
Societal Intervention	Reflective aesthetic distance often divorced from immediate public activism.	Immediate real-time intervention in human rights, environmental justice, and anti-caste movements.	Converts literature into an actionable catalyst for civic mobilization and legislative awareness.

3. Glossary of Multimodal and Cultural Theory Terms

Theoretical Term	Origin / Scholar	Comprehensive Definition & Media Application
Multimodality	Kress & van Leeuwen	The integration of multiple semiotic modes (visual, verbal, gestural, auditory) within a single communicative event or artifact to generate holistic meaning.
Convergence Culture	Henry Jenkins	The cultural paradigm where old and new media collide, grassroots and corporate media intersect, and the power of media producers and consumers interacts in unpredictable ways.
Counter-Hegemony	Antonio Gramsci	Cultural and intellectual resistance designed to critique and dismantle the pervasive, normative common-sense ideologies of the ruling class.
Transmedia Storytelling	Jenkins / Scolari	A narrative technique where distinct elements of a fictional universe are dispersed across multiple delivery channels (books, web, games) for a unified entertainment experience.
Affective Labor	Hardt & Negri	Labor that produces or manipulates affects, feelings of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion, increasingly central to digital media economies.
Defamiliarization	Viktor Shklovsky	The artistic technique of presenting common things in an unfamiliar or strange way to enhance the perception of the familiar.

4. Methodological Roadmap for Cultural Analysis

Conducting scholarly analysis of Historiography, Satire, Subaltern Resistance, and Plant Humanities follows an organized four-phase critical protocol:

- **Phase 1: Semiotic Decoding:** Systematically identifying signifiers, visual symbols, musical motifs, and linguistic registers employed in the text or media work.
- **Phase 2: Historical and Ideological Contextualization:** Situate the work within its specific socio-economic milieu—analyzing caste hierarchies, postcolonial borders, gender expectations, or corporate media environments.
- **Phase 3: Intertextual Dialogism:** Juxtapose the primary work with related global cultural artifacts, examining how local traditions dialogue with international artistic currents.
- **Phase 4: Critical Reception and Ethical Evaluation:** Assessing the impact of the narrative upon public consciousness, ethical responsibility, and the cultivation of human empathy.

Advanced Multimodal & Cultural Studies Synthesis

In contemporary cultural studies and multimodal narrative theory, mastering *Introducing Print and Digital Narratives* demands a critical synthesis of textual, visual, and socio-political methodologies. Contemporary narratives transcend the traditional boundaries of the printed codex; they operate within dynamic convergence cultures where oral traditions, cinematic moving images, digital streaming algorithms, and graphic illustrations constantly cross-pollinate. Critical inquiry into Module 2 Extended Cultural and Media Commentary requires examining how ideology, power, and identity are negotiated across diverse narrative media.

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1. Contemporary Critical Dilemmas and Theoretical Frameworks

Scholars and cultural analysts interrogating Module 2 Extended Cultural and Media Commentary navigate fundamental dialectics across multimodal forms:

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