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BA English Honours | Semester II | ENG2CJ101

Reading Fiction

Module 4: Exploring the Margins: Subaltern Voices, War, Ecology, and Intersectional Resistance • Comprehensive Notes

Chapter 4: Literature of the Margins and Subaltern Aesthetics

Subaltern literature emerges from historically oppressed, disenfranchised, and silenced communities who write against institutional erasure. Antonio Gramsci's concept of the subaltern, amplified by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Dalit literary theorists, emphasizes that genuine counter-hegemonic discourse originates from lived experiences of structural violence. In Indian and South Asian contexts, subaltern fiction engages with caste segregation, the horrors of Partition, ecological displacement, and state-sanctioned violence against indigenous bodies.

4.1 Dalit Testimony and Structural Oppression: Shankarrao Kharat's "A Corpse in the Well"

Shankarrao Ramchandra Kharat's "A Corpse in the Well" (an excerpt from his landmark autobiography *Taral Antaral*) presents a searing indictment of untouchability and feudal caste apartheid in rural Maharashtra. The Mahar community, relegated to the geographical and social periphery of the village, is compelled by custom to perform humiliating, unpaid labor (vethbegar), including disposing of carcasses and retrieving decomposing corpses from wells.

When an unidentified corpse is discovered in a village drinking well, the upper-caste landowners refuse to pollute themselves, commanding the narrator's father to retrieve it. Kharat depicts the somatic horror of the task alongside the father's excruciating moral dilemma—rebellion guarantees starvation and violent retribution, while compliance reaffirms caste subjugation. Kharat's documentary realism strips away pastoral romanticism, revealing the brutal material apparatus of caste cruelty.

4.2 The Trauma of Partition and Somatic Brutality: Saadat Hasan Manto's "Open It" (Khol Do)

Saadat Hasan Manto's short story "Khol Do" ("Open It") captures the unfathomable violence, dislocation, and moral collapse of the 1947 Partition of India. Sirajuddin, an elderly refugee who loses his wife during riots, is separated from his beautiful daughter Sakina amidst the chaos of displacement. In a refugee camp, Sirajuddin pleads with a group of armed Muslim "social volunteers" to locate Sakina.

The tragic irony of the story unfolds when the volunteers find Sakina but proceed to brutally gang-rape her in the forest. When Sakina is brought unconscious to the camp hospital, the doctor gestures toward the window and says simply, "Khol do" (open it). Hearing the command, Sakina's traumatized body mechanically unknots her salwar trousers, responding to conditioned sexual terror. Sirajuddin shouts in joyous relief, "She is alive! My daughter is alive!" while the horrified doctor stands paralyzed. Manto's spare, unembellished prose exposes the complete failure of ideological nationalism and the savage victimization of women's bodies as territory of conquest.

4.3 Inter-Species Ethics and Subaltern Ecology: Kritika Pandey's "The Great Indian Tee and Snakes"

Kritika Pandey's Commonwealth Short Story Prize-winning story "The Great Indian Tee and Snakes" weaves inter-religious romance, caste consciousness, and environmental metaphor. Set in a small town in Jharkhand, the narrative follows an unspoken connection between a young Hindu woman who assists at her father's tea stall and a Muslim boy who sells snacks.

Pandey employs the metaphor of the snake and local flora to examine how communal hatred, fueled by majoritarian political discourse, poisons everyday coexistence. The natural world and everyday rituals of tea-making offer an alternative space of intimacy and solidarity, challenging religious orthodoxies and authoritarian polarization.

4.4 State Hegemony and Indomitable Defiance: Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" (translated and critically contextualized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) is a towering text of tribal resistance and postcolonial feminist insurrection. The protagonist Dopdi Mejhen is a Santhal tribal guerrilla insurgent fighting for land rights and water access against landlord exploitation and state armed forces in West Bengal.

Captured by Senanayak, a military specialist versed in counter-insurgency theory, Dopdi is subjected to custodial torture and multiple rapes. In the morning, when ordered to wash and dress before Senanayak, Dopdi tears off her clothes and walks entirely naked toward him, her mangled breasts bleeding. She laughs fiercely in his face, challenging him to clothe her and proclaiming that there is not a man alive who can make her feel ashamed. Dopdi's naked, tortured body becomes a terrifying weapon of subaltern resistance that disarms the state's military apparatus, turning patriarchal shame into revolutionary power.

Advanced Critical Theory, Hermeneutics & Literary Praxis

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Critical inquiry into Module 4: Exploring the Margins: Subaltern Voices, War, Ecology, and Intersectional Resistance reveals how textual forms construct meaning through complex aesthetic strategies and structural choices:

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3. Comparative Aesthetic and Thematic Matrix

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