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BA English Honours | Semester IV | ENG4CJ204

Literary Criticism

Module 1: Foundations of Literary Criticism: Classical Aesthetics East and West • Comprehensive Notes

Chapter 1: The Foundations of Classical Literary Criticism

Literary criticism begins with the philosophical interrogation of artistic representation, aesthetic pleasure, and civic morality. Classical civilizations in Greece, India, and East Asia developed sophisticated theoretical apparatuses that continue to govern literary hermeneutics. From the mimetic debates between Plato and Aristotle to Anandavardhana's doctrine of aesthetic suggestion and Dante's defense of vernacular speech, classical criticism addresses fundamental questions concerning the ontological nature of literature and its emotional impact on human consciousness.

1.1 Classical Transcultural Critical Terms

To engage with world aesthetics requires mastering foundational critical vocabularies:

- **Rasa & Bhava (Indian Aesthetics):** Formulated in Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra*, *Bhava* represents the latent emotional state (e.g., love, sorrow, anger, terror) evoked by dramatic presentation, which transforms in the cultivated spectator (*sahridaya*) into *Rasa*—a transcendent, detached aesthetic bliss.
- **Rhetoric & Logos (Greek Tradition):** Rhetoric is the art of persuasive discourse, while *Logos* represents rational philosophical argument and cosmic order, counterbalancing emotional pathos and ethical ethos.
- **Yugen & Wabi-Sabi (Japanese Aesthetics):** *Yugen* denotes profound, subtle grace and mysterious depth that cannot be expressed in direct words; *Wabi-sabi* embodies the serene acceptance of transience, simplicity, and imperfect organic beauty.
- **Mimesis, Catharsis & Verisimilitude:** Mimesis signifies artistic imitation of life; Catharsis refers to the emotional purgation achieved through tragedy; Verisimilitude denotes the internal plausibility and lifelikeness of a narrative.

1.2 Plato's Theory of Mimesis: The Moral Critique of Art

In Book X of *The Republic*, Plato mounts a historic philosophical assault on poetry and the visual arts, banishing poets from his ideal Republic. Plato's critique is grounded in his Theory of Forms:

- **Ontological Distance (Thrice Removed from Truth):** The eternal, immutable Form (e.g., the Idea of a Bed) created by God is true reality. The physical bed constructed by a carpenter is a secondary copy. The painter or poet who portrays the bed merely creates a shadow of a copy, rendering art "thrice removed from the truth."
- **Psychological & Moral Corruption:** Plato argues that poetry appeals to the irrational, emotional, and appetitive elements of the human soul rather than the rational intellect, fostering emotional weakness and moral indiscipline among citizens.

1.3 Aristotle's Poetics: Catharsis and the Defense of Tragedy

Aristotle's *Poetics* provides a systematic counter-defense of dramatic art against Plato's charges. Aristotle redefines **mimesis** not as mere photographic imitation, but as a creative, philosophical recreation of human action according to the laws of probability and necessity. Consequently, poetry is more philosophical and serious than history, because history deals with what *has* happened, while poetry explores what *may* happen.

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Aristotle defines tragedy as an imitation of a serious, complete action that, through **pity and fear** (*eleos* and *phobos*), effects the proper **catharsis** (purgation) of these emotions. Far from emotionally destabilizing citizens, tragedy provides a healthy psychological and ethical release, restoring emotional balance and moral clarity.

1.4 Promoting the Vernacular: Dante's De Vulgari Eloquentia

In his landmark treatise *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (circa 1302–1305), Dante Alighieri mounted the earliest systematic defense of vernacular vulgar tongue over the rigid hegemony of scholarly Latin. Dante argues that the vernacular, learned naturally in infancy without formal grammatical rules, possesses organic vitality and emotional intimacy. He advocates for an "illustrious vernacular" (*volgare illustre*) refined across Italian dialects, establishing modern vernacular European literature.

1.5 The Poetics of Suggestion: Anandavardhana's Dhvani Theory

In ninth-century Kashmir, Anandavardhana composed the *Dhvanyaloka*, fundamentally revolutionizing Sanskrit poetics by declaring that **suggestion (dhvani)** is the very soul of poetry (*Kavyasyatma Dhvanih*). Anandavardhana classifies linguistic meaning into three hierarchical tiers:

- **Abhidha (Literal Denotation):** The primary dictionary meaning of words.
- **Lakshana (Secondary Metaphorical Indication):** The figurative sense derived when literal meaning fails.
- **Vyanjana (Aesthetic Suggestion / Dhvani):** The unstated, resonant meaning that flashes upon the cultivated reader's mind, producing transcendent *rasa*. True poetry transcends obvious statement; it speaks through rich acoustic and thematic suggestion.

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- **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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- **Ecocritical and Spatial Dynamics:** Physical topographies, built environments, and non-human ecologies function as active participants in the narrative economy. Space is never neutral; rather, it reflects socio-economic stratification, environmental exploitation, and geopolitical borders that delineate belonging and exile.

2. Historiographical Context and Reception Theory

Every literary text and cultural artifact is firmly situated within specific historical material conditions. Understanding Module 1: Foundations of Literary Criticism: Classical Aesthetics East and West 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.

3. Comparative Aesthetic and Thematic Matrix

The following analytical matrix summarizes key comparative dimensions across traditional interpretive paradigms and modern critical frameworks relevant to Module 1:

Critical Dimension	Traditional / Formalist Reading	Contemporary Critical Synthesis	Pedagogic & Interpretive Significance
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