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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Indian Literature: Selected Readings

Course Code: ENG5EJ301(1) • Module 1 Notes

Unit 1: Lihaaf (The Quilt) – Ismat Chughtai (1942)

Historical and Sociocultural Context of Progressive Urdu Literature

Ismat Chughtai (1915–1991) occupies a central and rebellious stature within the Progressive Writers' Movement (Anjuman Tarraqi Pasand Musannifeen-e-Hind). Published in the prestigious Urdu literary journal *Adab-e-Lateef* in 1942, "Lihaaf" (The Quilt) provoked unprecedented moral outrage within colonial India's patriarchal Muslim feudal bourgeoisie. The story immediately resulted in Chughtai being summoned to the Lahore High Court under Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code on charges of obscenity. Chughtai, alongside Sadat Hasan Manto, refused to offer an apology or pay an arbitrary fine, fiercely defending the writer's autonomy to represent subterranean social realities that respectable society hypocritically veiled behind purdah and aristocratic domesticity.

Narrative Technique: The Innocent Child Focalizer

The profound genius of "Lihaaf" resides in Chughtai's brilliant use of an adolescent first-person female narrator. Sent by her mother to stay at the lavish haveli of the wealthy Nawab, the young girl observes the domestic claustrophobia of Begum Jan without possessing the adult conceptual vocabulary to name the homoerotic desires and sexual transactions unfolding before her eyes. By employing an uncomprehending juvenile focalizer, Chughtai constructs a devastating critique of feudal domestic architecture: the narrator sees shadows, hears sighs, watches the rhythmic, elephantine undulations of the embroidered silk quilt, yet registers them with uncanny innocence. This technical choice entirely disarmed the British colonial prosecutor, as the word "homosexuality" or explicit anatomical descriptions do not appear once in the narrative; the obscenity resided entirely in the prurient minds of the accusers.

Feudal Heteropatriarchy, Neglect, and the Politics of Purdah

Chughtai exposes the devastating emotional and physical abandonment suffered by aristocratic women within feudal Zenanas. The Nawab, an ostensibly pious and cultured gentleman, maintains complete indifference toward his wife Begum Jan, reserving his genuine romantic and physical attentions for adolescent male proteges and gossamer-clad boys whom he sponsors under the guise of intellectual mentorship. Begum Jan is trapped as a decorative trophy within a gilded cage—her youthful body withered by psychosomatic distress, skin itching with nervous torment, starved of physical affection and existential validation. Purdah, rather than protecting female modesty, functions as an oppressive prison isolating women from human warmth and economic self-determination.

Rabbo and Homoerotic Healing: Transgression and Resistance

The entry of Rabbo, the maidservant endowed with miraculous massage techniques, disrupts Begum Jan's slow descent into madness and atrophy. Rabbo's rhythmic, intimate kneadings restore vitality, radiant luster, and somatic pleasure to Begum Jan's ailing frame. Chughtai does not frame their relationship through exoticized Western clinical taxonomies of lesbianism, but rather as an organic, mutually sustaining sanctuary carved out of the very fissures of feudal female confinement. While class hierarchies persist between mistress and maid, their tactile complicity dismantles patriarchal surveillance. When the quilt rises like an eerie monster in the nocturnal gloom, it symbolizes both the terrifying emergence of repressed feminine desire and the explosive defiance of female bodily autonomy asserting itself against institutionalized patriarchal negation.

Unit 2: In Praise of Tamil – Subrahmanya Bharati

Subrahmanya Bharati and the Tamil Cultural Renaissance

Mahakavi C. Subrahmanya Bharati (1882–1921) revolutionized modern Tamil poetry by shattering rigid scholastic neo-classical conventions and fusing anti-colonial militancy with passionate linguistic renaissance. Writing at the dawn of the Swadeshi movement, Bharati recognized that cultural decolonization required the liberation of the vernacular from both elite Sanskrit hegemony and British colonial epistemic violence. His poetic manifesto "In Praise of Tamil" (*Senthamizh Nadenum Pothinile*) serves as an evocative anthem of linguistic nationalism, celebrating the classical antiquity, phonetic melodiousness, and philosophical grandeur of the Tamil tongue.

Linguistic Antiquity and the Sangam Heritage

Bharati grounds his eulogy in the deep temporal architecture of the Sangam era, tracing Tamil's pedigree back to the divine sage Agastya and the immortal poetic corpus of the *Tolkappiyam*, *Thirukkural*, and the epic twin poems *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai*. Unlike colonial linguistic hierarchies that privileged European classical tongues (Greek and Latin) or orientalist frameworks that centered Sanskrit as the sole mother of Indian civilization, Bharati boldly asserts Tamil's sovereign, primordial status. He portrays the language as a living goddess—fused with the sweetness of honey (*Thentamil*), endowed with diamond clarity, and pulsating with timeless youthfulness (*Kanni Tamil*) capable of articulating cutting-edge modern scientific inquiry without sacrificing its ancient sacred resonance.

Anti-Colonial Mobilization and the Democratic Poetic Idiom

Bharati's linguistic adoration was inextricably intertwined with anti-imperialist mobilization. He democratized Tamil literature by adopting simple, rhythmic, folk-inspired meters that could be sung by common working people, peasants, and students in street demonstrations. In "In Praise of Tamil," linguistic pride becomes an engine of egalitarian empowerment: Bharati envisions a revitalized Tamil society liberated from caste casteism, gender subjugation, and foreign exploitation. To praise Tamil is to commit oneself to the radical renewal of the collective social body, transforming mother tongue into an invincible spiritual weapon of liberation.

Unit 3: Tribal Verse – Ganesh N. Devy

G.N. Devy and the Epistemic Politics of Indigenous Languages

Professor Ganesh N. Devy's foundational work on tribal oral literature and his monumental *People's Linguistic Survey of India* (PLSI) dismantled mainstream postcolonial amnesia regarding India's indigenous communities (Adivasis). In "Tribal Verse," Devy challenges the Eurocentric and Sanskritic prejudices that privilege the written script over oral discourse. Mainstream literary historiography has systematically marginalized tribal poetic expressions as primitive, folklore, or pre-literary curiosities, thereby legitimizing linguistic imperialism and cultural erasure.

Orality, Memory, and Ecological Animism

Devy elucidates the complex aesthetic and philosophical foundations of tribal verse across various indigenous languages such as Bhili, Santhali, Gondi, Mundari, and Korku. Unlike Western and modern bourgeois Indian literature characterized by hyper-individualism and alienated commodification, tribal verse is inherently communal, performative, and ecologically embedded. Devy demonstrates that tribal languages perceive time not as a linear, progressive arrow, but as an undulating cyclic continuum where the living, the ancestral spirits, forests, animals, rivers, and mountains inhabit an indivisible relational web. Songs of birth,

agricultural sowing, hunting, marriage, and death do not exist as isolated decorative artifacts; they are vital epistemological archives sustaining community survival and ecological equilibrium.

Linguistic Genocide and Cultural Resistance

Devy sounds an urgent alarm against linguistic endangerment. In independent India, the constitutional refusal to recognize languages spoken by fewer than 10,000 people (under the 8th Schedule) has triggered catastrophic language loss, which Devy terms "epistemicide." When a tribal language vanishes, an entire cosmological library, unique botanical knowledge, and communal history are permanently extinguished. Devy's analysis of tribal songs highlights their subtle yet subversive resistance to state expropriation, mining corporate plunder, and developmental displacement. Tribal verse emerges as an urgent counter-discourse asserting Adivasi sovereignty over *Jal, Jangal, Zameen* (Water, Forest, Land).

Unit 4: I Have Fallen in Love – Akka Mahadevi

The 12th-Century Vachana Revolution and Virashaivism

Akka Mahadevi (c. 1130–1160) was a towering female mystic-poet of the radical 12th-century Virashaiva (Lingayat) Sharana movement in Karnataka. Led by visionary social reformers like Basavanna and Allama Prabhu, the movement launched an unprecedented egalitarian revolt against Brahmanical orthodoxy, Sanskrit ritualism, temple-centric worship, and rigid caste hierarchies. The Sharanas expressed their profound mystical insights through the *Vachana* (literally, "that which is said")—a direct, unmetered, deeply personal prose-lyric composed in spoken vernacular Kannada, radically accessible to the lowest subaltern castes.

Chennamallikarjuna: The Lord White as Jasmine

In her passionate Vachana "I Have Fallen in Love" (translated brilliantly by A.K. Ramanujan in *Speaking of Siva*), Akka Mahadevi articulates the peak of *Madhura Bhakti* (mystical bridal devotion). Rejecting mortal suitors who are subject to decay, sickness, jealousy, and death, Mahadevi consecrates her absolute soul to Lord Shiva, addressed intimately as *Chennamallikarjuna* ("The Lord White as Jasmine"). The jasmine evokes divine purity, supreme fragrance, and ethereal beauty that transcends sensory corruption. Her love is not a passive subservience but an unyielding, revolutionary spiritual obsession that shatters all worldly obligations.

Radical Asceticism, Renunciation, and Bodily Emancipation

Forced into a marriage with the feudal King Kaushika, Akka Mahadevi set stringent conditions regarding her spiritual autonomy. When Kaushika violated her sanctity and demanded physical submission, she committed the most audacious act of rebellion in medieval Indian history: she discarded her royal garments, ornaments, and worldly identity, choosing to wander completely naked, draped only in her flowing locks of hair. In "I Have Fallen in Love," Mahadevi defiantly interrogates societal definitions of shame, modesty, and female ownership. By stripping away clothes—the primary social signifier of gender, caste, and marital property—she declared that the female body belongs neither to father, husband, nor sovereign king, but dissolves entirely into the unblemished divinity of Shiva. Her poetry represents the apex of medieval feminist spiritual liberation.

Supplementary Critical Discourse: Module 1 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 1 Advanced Thematic Analysis (Part 2)

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

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Supplementary Critical Discourse: Module 1 Advanced Thematic Analysis (Part 4)

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