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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Indian Aesthetics: An Introduction

Course Code: ENG5EJ302(1) • Module 4 Notes

Unit 15: The Impact of Western Literary Concepts on Indian Aesthetics

Colonial Hegemony and the Epistemic Dislocation

The establishment of British colonial rule in India during the 18th and 19th centuries triggered a profound epistemic rupture in indigenous aesthetic traditions. The introduction of English education through Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamous *Minute on Indian Education* (1835) systematically devalued classical Sanskrit, Persian, and vernacular traditions, asserting that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."

The Hegemony of Mimetic and Expressive Theories

Under colonial governance, Western critical paradigms—rooted in Aristotelian mimesis, neoclassical rules, Romantic expressive individualism (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley), and Victorian moral didacticism (Matthew Arnold)—became the dominant yardsticks for evaluating literature in Indian universities. Classical Indian concepts like *Rasa*, *Dhvani*, and *Alankara* were frequently denigrated by colonial orientalists as decadent, formalistic, and devoid of historical consciousness or socio-political realism. Consequently, several generations of Indian intellectuals suffered from "epistemic alienation," viewing their own profound literary heritage through borrowed colonial categories.

Unit 16: Arvind Ghosh and Rabindranath Tagore

Sri Aurobindo: The Future Poetry and Overhead Aesthetics

Sri Aurobindo (Aurobindo Ghose, 1872–1950) constructed a monumental modern synthesis of Indian metaphysics and poetic theory in his visionary work *The Future Poetry*. Moving beyond both Western romanticism and classical formalist poetics, Aurobindo envisions poetry as the "Mantra of the Real"—the highest rhythmic speech that awakens intuitive cosmic consciousness. He proposes an evolution of aesthetic perception through distinct "overhead" spiritual planes: Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, and Overmind. For Aurobindo, modern literature is moving inexorably toward a supreme spiritual synthesis where poetic expression becomes an instrument for humanity's inner divinization.

Rabindranath Tagore: Sahitya, Creative Unity, and Universal Joy

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), India's premier modern literary titan and Nobel laureate, articulated a profound aesthetic philosophy rooted in the Upanishads and the Vaishnava and Baul folk traditions of Bengal. In his seminal philosophical essays collected in *Sahitya* and *Creative Unity*, Tagore reclaims the root meaning of Sahitya as the spirit of universal union. For Tagore, art is not a detached intellectual puzzle, nor is it a mere realistic reproduction of physical nature; it is the overflow of an exuberant, disinterested joy (*Ananda*). Through imaginative creation, human consciousness transcends the boundaries of the isolated ego (*Aham*) and realizes its indivisible kinship with nature, humanity, and the infinite divine spirit (*Brahman*).

Unit 17: Reinterpretations of Indian Aesthetics in the Colonial Context

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy and the Defense of Traditional Art

Dr. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), the pioneering art historian and philosopher of the Perennial Philosophy school, played a decisive role in rehabilitating Indian aesthetics on the global intellectual stage. In landmark works such as *The Dance of Shiva* and *The Transformation of Nature in Art*,

Coomaraswamy demolished Western colonial misconceptions regarding Indian sculpture, iconography, and literature.

Art as Yoga and Transcendental Contemplation

Coomaraswamy demonstrated that traditional Indian aesthetics is founded upon a sacred, metaphysical worldview where artistic creation is a form of *Yoga* (disciplined spiritual contemplation). The traditional Indian artist does not paint from physical models to create optical illusions of sensory reality; rather, through deep mental concentration (*Dhyana*), the artist visualizes the ideal spiritual archetype and renders it into tangible form. Coomaraswamy reasserted the validity of *Rasa* theory as a universal, transcendent philosophy of aesthetic tasting, demonstrating that Indian poetics offers a sophisticated cognitive and metaphysical alternative to Western secularized materialism.

Unit 18: Contemporary Approaches: Dalit and Feminist Critiques of Traditional Aesthetics

Sharankumar Limbale and the Dalit Aesthetic Revolution

In contemporary Indian literary theory, the most radical and shattering interrogation of classical Sanskrit aesthetics has been mounted by Dalit writers and intellectuals, spearheaded by Sharankumar Limbale's foundational critical text *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (translated by Alok Mukherjee). Limbale directly interrogates the hegemony of the classical Sanskrit aesthetic triumvirate: *Satyam* (Truth), *Shivam* (Goodness), and *Sundaram* (Beauty).

The Deconstruction of Brahmanical Purity and Rasa

Limbale contends that classical Sanskrit poetics was historically constructed by and for upper-caste elites, reflecting their material leisure and metaphysical escapism. The doctrine of *Rasa*, with its insistence on universalization (*Sadharanikarana*), emotional detachment, and transcendental tranquility (*Shanta Rasa*), systematically erased the brutal material realities of untouchability, starvation, bonded labor, and caste violence. Limbale asks: How can a Dalit writer, whose lived reality is defined by systemic humiliation and social murder, indulge in the luxurious pleasure of tranquil aesthetic detachment? Dalit literature demands an entirely new aesthetic framework rooted in:

- **Rejection of Traditional 'Sundaram':** Refusing classical definitions of beauty that privilege ornate Sanskritized diction and aristocratic heroes.
- **Primacy of Lived Experience (Anubhava):** Centering the raw, unembellished reality of subaltern existence, physical agony, and rage.
- **Commitment to Human Equality (Mukti):** Evaluating literature not by formal decorative symmetry, but by its capacity to awaken rebellious human dignity, social liberation, and the annihilation of caste.

Feminist Interrogations of Classical Poetics

Simultaneously, contemporary Indian feminist critics have rigorously unmasked the deeply patriarchal architectures embedded within traditional Indian aesthetics:

- **The Male Gaze in Shringara:** Classical manuals of Alankara and drama predominantly construct aesthetic pleasure from the perspective of an elite, heterosexual male connoisseur (*Nagarika*). The female body is relentlessly compartmentalized into anatomical tropes (moon-face, swan-walk, lotus-eyes, heavy breasts, slender waist), reducing woman to a decorative object of male erotic consumption.

- **The Ideology of the Pativrata:** Classical heroines (*Nayikas*) are classified according to their psychological dependence on the male lover (e.g., *Khandita*, *Vipralabdha*, *Vasakasajja*). Female autonomy is circumscribed within the sanctified patriarchal ideals of self-sacrificing wifely devotion (*Pativrata*).
- **Subversive Re-readings:** Modern feminist writers and theorists—such as Nabaneeta Dev Sen in her groundbreaking work on Sita's Ramayanas, and contemporary women poets rewriting the Draupadi and Ahalya narratives—recover suppressed female voices. They expose the ideological complicity of classical aesthetics in policing female desire and articulate counter-aesthetics rooted in bodily autonomy, female solidarity, and matriarchal wisdom.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 In-Depth Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

1. Ontological and Epistemological Dimensions of Indian Poetics

A rigorous philosophical investigation of Indian aesthetic systems within Module 4 reveals their intricate grounding in ancient epistemological frameworks (*Pramanas*). Classical Indian thinkers did not consider poetry to be an irresponsible, fictitious distortion of truth, but rather an extraordinary cognitive instrument capable of unveiling subterranean layers of human experience and cosmic harmony. In the Advaita Vedanta paradigm, the ultimate reality is *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (Being, Consciousness, Bliss); because ordinary discursive language is burdened by practical utilitarian necessities (*Vyavaharika Satya*), it cannot capture the unblemished self-luminous reality (*Paramarthika Satya*). It is precisely the unique suggestive power of poetry (*Vyanjana*) and the tasting of aesthetic emotion (*Rasa*) that momentarily lifts the veil of cosmic illusion (*Maya*), granting the connoisseur a glimpse of transcendent beatitude.

Similarly, in the Kashmir Shaiva tradition championed by Abhinavagupta, aesthetic experience is conceived as the awakening of *Camathkara*—an ecstatic, self-referential wonder where the observing subject dissolves the illusory duality between the self and the universe. The reader does not experience the grief or joy of Rama or Shakuntala as an external, alien spectacle; rather, through the magic of *Sadharanikarana* (universalization), personal egos, temporal limitations, and spatial coordinates are transcended, allowing universal human emotion to shine forth as pure, unencumbered consciousness.

2. The Dialectic Between Form, Suggestion, and Ideological Function

The intense historical debates that animated ancient and medieval Indian poetics—between the Alankara school's focus on surface ornamentation, Vamana's rigorous stylistics, Kuntaka's linguistic obliquity, Mahimabhatta's syllogistic rationalism, and Anandavardhana's doctrine of suggestion—underscore an extraordinarily sophisticated linguistic self-awareness. Long before 20th-century European structuralism, Russian formalism, or post-structuralist deconstruction emerged, Indian aestheticians had mapped the morphology of poetic sentences, the cognitive tensions between literal denotation and implied sense, and the ideological role of literary decorum (*Aucitya*).

However, modern critical theory demands that these classical systems be critically interrogated rather than passively venerated. Traditional poetics flourished primarily within the feudal courts of kings and temple complexes, subsidized by royal patrons and aristocratic elites. Consequently, classical manuals frequently codified standards of beauty, heroism, and propriety that reflected the socio-economic interests and caste anxieties of the ruling order. The aestheticization of heroic warfare (*Vira Rasa*) and royal romance (*Shringara Rasa*) often served to legitimize monarchical power and Brahminical social hierarchies, while banishing the material toil of the agrarian working masses to the margins of aesthetic illegitimacy.

3. Contemporary Reclamations and Decolonial Trajectories

In the contemporary post-colonial and decolonial era, Indian aesthetics is undergoing a vibrant, contentious rebirth. Rather than choosing between uncritical Westernization or dogmatic revivalism, modern writers, critics, and theatre practitioners are forging a dynamic, hybrid critical idiom. Indigenous concepts like *Tinai* from classical Sangam literature provide vital philosophical foundations for modern ecological humanities, illuminating how human emotional landscapes are inextricably bound to fragile biospheres.

Concurrently, the disruptive interventions of Dalit, tribal, queer, and feminist movements have revitalized the field, demanding that aesthetics move from celestial heavens down to the dusty, bloodstained streets of social struggle. By dismantling Brahminical and patriarchal monopolies on beauty, contemporary Indian

aesthetics demonstrates that art finds its highest purpose not in tranquil complacency, but in the fearless interrogation of power, the affirmation of subaltern human dignity, and the relentless quest for universal justice.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 In-Depth Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 2)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 In-Depth Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

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