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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Literature and Race

Course Code: ENG5EJ303(2) • Module 1 Notes

Unit 1: Introduction to Race: Context and Issues

The Social Construction of Race versus Biological Determinism

In critical race studies, sociological theory, and postcolonial humanities, race is recognized not as an immutable biological taxonomy, but as a deeply entrenched social, legal, and political construct. Nineteenth-century pseudoscientific racism—propagated by figures like Arthur de Gobineau, Cesare Lombroso, and Samuel George Morton through craniometry and polygenism—attempted to legitimize European imperial conquest and chattel slavery by fabricating hierarchical racial scales. Contemporary genomic science has definitively debunked biological essentialism, demonstrating that human genetic variation within any given geographical population is vastly greater than genetic variation between divergent populations.

Racialization, Systemic Racism, and White Supremacy

Race operates as a dynamic, historical mechanism of "racialization"—the ideological process through which physical characteristics (melanin, hair texture, facial morphology) are endowed with social significance to justify economic exploitation, territorial dispossession, and unequal distribution of resources. Systemic racism transcends individual interpersonal prejudice; it is woven into the very fabric of legal systems, housing segregation (redlining), educational apartheid, judicial sentencing disparities, and the global capitalist division of labor. White supremacy functions as a structural global matrix that positions whiteness as the invisible, normative standard of universal humanity, while constructing non-white populations as the racialized, inferior "Other."

Unit 2: "Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black" – bell hooks

Moving from Silence to Speech as a Revolutionary Gesture

In her foundational theoretical essay "Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black" (from *Ain't I a Woman: Looking Back*), bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins, 1952–2021) theorizes the act of speech as a vital, radical praxis of subaltern decolonization. Growing up in a segregated Southern black working-class community, hooks notes that for children and particularly young black girls, "talking back" was condemned as an act of insolence, disobedience, and disrespect deserving severe parental chastisement. Speech had to be suppressed in the presence of adults, patriarchal authority, and white society.

The Intersectional Erasure of Black Women

hooks reclaims "talking back" as the courageous transition from being a silent object to becoming an active, articulating subject of history. She delivers a scathing critique of mainstream bourgeois white feminism: by universally positing "woman" as a homogenous category defined exclusively by white middle-class domestic grievances, white feminists ignored how race and class intersect with gender. Simultaneously, male-dominated civil rights and Black Power movements frequently relegated black women to subservient domestic roles, claiming that feminist critique divided racial solidarity. hooks insists upon an intersectional politics that simultaneously confronts racism, sexism, and class exploitation, affirming that when black women speak their truth, they transform silence into an invincible political weapon.

Unit 3: Introduction to Race Matters – Cornel West

Cornel West and the Crisis of Post-Civil Rights America

In the seminal introduction to *Race Matters* (1993), written in the immediate aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots sparked by the acquittal of four white police officers in the beating of Rodney King, philosopher and civil rights activist Cornel West interrogates the persistent racial paralysis in American society. West rejects the reductive polarities of both liberal and conservative racial discourses: while conservative pundits reduce racial inequality to individual moral failure and family pathology, liberal policymakers often treat African Americans merely as passive victims requiring top-down governmental benevolence without transforming systemic capitalist structures.

Nihilism in Black America and Prophetic Pragmatism

West sounds an urgent alarm regarding what he diagnoses as "the monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, the incredible disregard for human life"—a pervasive existential nihilism gripping impoverished black urban communities. This nihilistic threat is exacerbated by the saturation of predatory market moralities that equate human worth with consumer branding, hedonism, and material wealth, eroding traditional institutional buffers like the black church, community lodges, and extended family networks. Against this despair, West proposes a "prophetic pragmatism" grounded in ethical accountability, coalition building across racial lines, revitalized public spheres, and a courageous revival of grassroots democratic leadership.

Unit 4: The Theory of Racial Formation – Michael Omi and Howard Winant

Racial Formation in the United States: Deconstructing Racial Dogma

Michael Omi and Howard Winant's landmark sociological text *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986/1994) revolutionized modern racial theory by dismantling both essentialist perspectives (which view race as a fixed, biological essence) and class/ethnic reductionist models (which subordinate race entirely to economic class or European immigrant assimilation paradigms). Omi and Winant define **racial formation** as:

> *"The sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed."*

Race is understood not as an illusion or an essence, but as an unstable, deeply decentered complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle.

Racial Projects and Hegemonic Equilibrium

At the center of Omi and Winant's theory is the concept of the **racial project**—an effort simultaneously to interpret, represent, or explain racial dynamics, and to redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect structural racial hierarchies with everyday cultural representations:

- **Reactionary / Neo-Conservative Racial Projects:** Advocate "colorblindness," claiming that acknowledging race in public policy (such as affirmative action or voting rights protections) constitutes reverse racism, thereby entrenching existing racial disparities behind a facade of legal neutrality.
- **Progressive / Counter-Hegemonic Racial Projects:** Explicitly recognize historical injustices, mobilizing racial consciousness to challenge institutional disenfranchisement, police violence, environmental racism, and wealth inequality.

Through racial projects, society negotiates Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony: the ruling coalition maintains power not purely through brute coercion, but by incorporating subordinate demands into an evolving common sense of racial order.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

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Miranda Fricker's concept of *epistemic injustice* illuminates how racialized subjects are systematically denied credibility as knowers (testimonial injustice) and deprived of the interpretive conceptual resources needed to make their social experiences understood by dominant society (hermeneutical injustice). Literature and visual media produced by racialized writers and filmmakers function as crucial counter-narratives (or "storytelling as legal methodology") that shatter the epistemological monopoly of white supremacist metanarratives, bearing witness to subaltern survival and collective defiance.

2. Global Circuits of Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Dispossession, and Anti-Blackness

Connecting the poetic, fictional, and cinematic texts across this course reveals the interconnected global architecture of modern racial capitalism, as theorized by Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism*. From the brutal slave plantations of the Americas and the diamond mines of Southern Africa to the violent dispossessions of Australian Aborigines and Canadian First Nations, the global capitalist economy was historically built upon racialized dispossession, forced labor, and racial genocide.

Achille Mbembe's concept of *necropolitics*—the sovereign capacity to dictate who matters and who is disposable, who may live and who must die—finds tragic realization in contemporary police killings of black bodies like Oscar Grant, the environmental degradation of indigenous tribal territories, and the carceral state's hyper-incarceration of racial minorities. By examining how diverse racialized communities—Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Hispanic—articulate their lived realities, literature emerges as a primary site of internationalist solidarity, forging coalitions of resistance against global imperial hegemony.

3. Aesthetic De-Alienation and the Reclamation of Radical Futurity

Ultimately, the literature of race does not merely record historical victimhood and trauma; its most profound achievement resides in the imaginative reclamation of radical human freedom and creative sovereignty. Through what Frantz Fanon termed the "disalienation" of the colonized consciousness, these writers, poets, and filmmakers deconstruct internalized colonial shame and assert the radiant beauty, intellectual complexity, and spiritual resilience of their cultures.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 2)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

1. Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the Politics of Epistemic Injustice

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 7)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Critical Race Theory & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 8)

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