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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Narratives of Middle East

Course Code: ENG5EJ304(2) • Module 1 Notes

Unit 1: Daring to Drive: A Saudi Woman’s Awakening (Chapter 11) – Manal al-Sharif

The Saudi Women's Driving Movement and Grassroots Defiance

Manal al-Sharif’s memoir *Daring to Drive: A Saudi Woman’s Awakening* (2017) documents a watershed moment in contemporary Middle Eastern feminist resistance. In May 2011, during the regional ferment of the Arab Spring, al-Sharif, a professional IT security specialist working for the state oil giant Saudi Aramco, committed an act that challenged the very architecture of the Kingdom's theocratic patriarchy: she sat behind the steering wheel of a car in Khobar, had a female companion film her driving through public streets, and uploaded the footage to YouTube and Twitter under the campaign banner #Women2Drive.

The Male Guardianship System (Wilayah) and Public Surveillance

In Chapter 11, al-Sharif dissects the crushing web of the Saudi male guardianship system (*Wilayah*), which historically treated adult women as legal minors requiring the permission of a father, husband, brother, or even an adolescent son to travel, work, obtain healthcare, or marry. By criminalizing women's independent mobility, the state effectively confined women within private domestic walls or forced them into absolute financial dependence on hired foreign drivers. al-Sharif recounts her harrowing arrest by the secret police (*Mabahith*) and religious morality police (*Mutawa*), the terror of midnight interrogation, and her imprisonment in al-Malaz Women’s Prison. Her narrative exposes how ordinary women harnessed digital social media to bypass state censorship, transforming private bodily mobility into an unstoppable public revolution for human rights.

Unit 2: Flexible Citizenship in Dubai: Neoliberal Subjectivity – Ahmed Kanna

Ahmed Kanna and the Anthropological Dissection of the "City-Corporation"

Anthropologist Ahmed Kanna’s groundbreaking study "Flexible Citizenship in Dubai: Neoliberal Subjectivity in the Emerging 'City-Corporation'" (published in *Cultural Anthropology*) offers a rigorous ethnographic critique of Dubai's meteoric transformation from an obscure Persian Gulf pearling town into a glittering global metropolis of hyper-capitalism. Kanna interrogates how Dubai markets itself as a post-political, frictionless haven of futuristic luxury, cosmopolitan tolerance, and tax-free consumerism.

Neoliberal Urbanism and Hierarchies of Exploitation

Kanna deconstructs Aihwa Ong’s concept of "flexible citizenship," demonstrating how Dubai functions as a "city-corporation" that produces starkly stratified, precarious subjectivities. At the apex stands a tiny minority of Emirati nationals who enjoy state patronage, alongside a mobile elite of Western expatriate professionals whose whiteness and passports grant them immense economic privilege. At the invisible foundation, however, toils a massive, disenfranchised army of South Asian and African migrant laborers. Bound by the exploitative *Kafala* (sponsorship) system, stripped of civil rights, and confined to remote labor camps like Sonapur, these workers are systematically excluded from the city's glossy narrative of modern success. Kanna exposes how neoliberal authoritarianism re-engineers urban space to sustain severe socio-economic apartheid.

Unit 3: How Men Characters Treat Women in the Arabian Nights – Anatolia Bido-Basista

Gender Dynamics in Alf Layla wa-Layla (One Thousand and One Nights)

In her scholarly study published in the *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, Anatolia Bido-Basista conducts a surgical feminist reading of the frame narrative and internal tales of *The Arabian Nights* (*Alf Layla wa-Layla*). The frame story begins with an apocalyptic crisis of patriarchal paranoia: King Shahrayar, devastated by the adultery of his queen, institutes a reign of terror—each night he marries a virgin from the kingdom, and each morning he has her beheaded to ensure she can never betray him.

Scheherazade: Narrative Therapy, Agency, and Subversion

Bido-Basista examines how men in the tales consistently view women through a deeply misogynistic binary: either as submissive, silent possessions or as deceitful, sexually voracious temptresses (symbolized by manipulative *Ifrits* and unfaithful wives). The narrative revolution arrives with Scheherazade, the vizier's brilliant, highly educated daughter. Refusing passive victimhood, Scheherazade voluntarily enters the tyrant's bedchamber armed not with weapons, but with the therapeutic magic of storytelling. By masterfully weaving cliffhangers across a thousand and one nights, Scheherazade delays her execution, cures Shahrayar's murderous psychic trauma, educates him in empathy and moral justice, and redeems the entire female populace of the realm. Bido-Basista highlights Scheherazade as the ultimate archetype of subaltern female intellect conquering brutal sovereign violence.

Unit 4: Competing Narratives: Historical-Political Deadlock in Cyprus – Bahriye Kemal

Writing Cyprus: Postcolonial Geographies and Partitioned Space

In the foundational introduction to *Writing Cyprus: Postcolonial and Partitioned Literatures of Place and Space*, scholar Bahriye Kemal investigates the agonizing historical and political deadlock that has cleaved the Mediterranean island of Cyprus since the violent events of 1974. Kemal examines how British colonial divide-and-rule tactics fostered aggressive rival nationalisms—Greek-Cypriot *Enosis* (union with Greece) and Turkish-Cypriot *Taksim* (partition)—culminating in inter-communal bloodshed, the 1974 Turkish military invasion, and the construction of the UN-patrolled buffer zone (the "Green Line") that permanently divided Nicosia.

The Spatial Poetics of Memory and Partition Trauma

Kemal demonstrates that both dominant state nationalisms constructed monolithic, exclusionary historical narratives that erased composite Cypriot coexistence. For Greek Cypriots, the narrative centers exclusively on 1974 as the year of catastrophic invasion, displacement, and stolen homes. For Turkish Cypriots, the trauma began in 1963 with constitutional breakdown, siege, and ghettoization. Kemal analyzes how contemporary Cypriot literature, poetry, and memoirs challenge these state-sanctioned deadlocks. Writers from both sides of the barbed wire deploy postcolonial spatiality to dismantle militarized borders, recovering shared memories, hybrid vernaculars, and peaceful multi-faith coexistence.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

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2. Petrofiction, Neoliberal Urbanism, and Ecological Displacement

The discovery and extraction of petroleum remains the single most transformative and traumatic geopolitical event in modern Middle Eastern history. As theorized by Amitav Ghosh and developed in the literary scholarship on "petrofiction," the transition to an oil-dominated economy disrupted millennial-old agrarian rhythms, sustainable nomadism, and communal social structures. The resulting wealth did not democratize the region; rather, it consolidated rentier state monarchies, subsidized authoritarian surveillance apparatuses, and fostered speculative neoliberal urbanism built upon the hyper-exploitation of disenfranchised migrant laborers.

In literary works such as Munif's *Cities of Salt* and anthropological analyses like Ahmed Kanna's study of Dubai, petro-modernity is unmasked as an ecological and social catastrophe. Ancient oases and desert coastlines are replaced by fragile, unsustainable "salt cities" characterized by deep social apartheid and precarious migrant servitude. Literature emerges as an indispensable ecological archive, documenting the irreversible loss of ancestral landscapes while mourning the displacement of indigenous wisdom by corporate transnational capitalism.

3. Gender, Bodily Sovereignty, and Subaltern Transgressions

Middle Eastern women writers and queer creators occupy an extraordinary forefront in the struggle for human liberation. Resisting both the patronizing "white savior" narratives of Western liberal feminism and the suffocating repressions of indigenous religious theocracies and feudal patriarchies, these artists construct autonomous spaces of defiance. Bodily mobility—whether Manal al-Sharif seizing the steering wheel of a car, Marjane Satrapi wearing punk rock badges beneath her mandatory veil, or Mohammad performing aerial queer drag atop a Beirut crane—becomes a revolutionary site of political struggle.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 2)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

1. Orientalism, Imperial Epistemologies, and the Subversion of the Western Gaze

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

1. Orientalism, Imperial Epistemologies, and the Subversion of the Western Gaze

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 7)

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2. Petrofiction, Neoliberal Urbanism, and Ecological Displacement

The discovery and extraction of petroleum remains the single most transformative and traumatic geopolitical event in modern Middle Eastern history. As theorized by Amitav Ghosh and developed in the literary scholarship on "petrofiction," the transition to an oil-dominated economy disrupted millennial-old agrarian rhythms, sustainable nomadism, and communal social structures. The resulting wealth did not democratize the region; rather, it consolidated rentier state monarchies, subsidized authoritarian surveillance apparatuses, and fostered speculative neoliberal urbanism built upon the hyper-exploitation of disenfranchised migrant laborers.

In literary works such as Munif's *Cities of Salt* and anthropological analyses like Ahmed Kanna's study of Dubai, petro-modernity is unmasked as an ecological and social catastrophe. Ancient oases and desert coastlines are replaced by fragile, unsustainable "salt cities" characterized by deep social apartheid and precarious migrant servitude. Literature emerges as an indispensable ecological archive, documenting the irreversible loss of ancestral landscapes while mourning the displacement of indigenous wisdom by corporate transnational capitalism.

3. Gender, Bodily Sovereignty, and Subaltern Transgressions

Middle Eastern women writers and queer creators occupy an extraordinary forefront in the struggle for human liberation. Resisting both the patronizing "white savior" narratives of Western liberal feminism and the suffocating repressions of indigenous religious theocracies and feudal patriarchies, these artists construct autonomous spaces of defiance. Bodily mobility—whether Manal al-Sharif seizing the steering wheel of a car, Marjane Satrapi wearing punk rock badges beneath her mandatory veil, or Mohammad performing aerial queer drag atop a Beirut crane—becomes a revolutionary site of political struggle.

These texts celebrate the courage of ordinary women and marginalized bodies who claim ownership over their minds, desires, and destinies. Through Scheherazade’s ancient narrative magic, contemporary graphic memoirs, and courageous documentary cinema, Middle Eastern literature affirms that genuine liberation is not imported from abroad; it is forged through the courageous, everyday resistance of subaltern subjects asserting their indivisible humanity.

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