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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Literature and Oceanic Studies

Course Code: ENG5EJ306(3) • Module 1 Notes

Unit 1: Introduction to Oceanic Studies: History, Scope, and Concepts

The Blue Humanities and the Oceanic Turn

The "oceanic turn" in contemporary literary, cultural, and environmental theory represents a profound epistemological reorientation known as the **Blue Humanities**. For centuries, modern Western intellectual thought was plagued by "terrestrial bias" (or terracentrism)—treating dry continents as the primary theater of human history, nationhood, and culture, while viewing the ocean merely as an inert, empty, frictionless void to be crossed, an inexhaustible resource mine, or an infinite waste dump. The Blue Humanities radically de-centers continental landmasses, conceptualizing the global ocean as a living, dynamic, interconnected planetary circulatory system that shapes human destiny.

Mare Liberum versus Mare Clausum

The legal and philosophical framework of the oceans originated in the 17th-century European contest over imperial trade routes. Hugo Grotius, in his foundational 1609 treatise *Mare Liberum* ("The Free Sea"), argued that the oceans could not be claimed as private property by any sovereign power; the high seas were open to all nations for free navigation and trade (an ideology that facilitated Dutch and British imperial merchant capitalism). Conversely, John Selden argued for *Mare Clausum* ("The Closed Sea"), asserting sovereign maritime ownership. Modern oceanic studies examines how this tension between the ocean as a global commons and the ocean as militarized, privatized territory continues to govern international maritime geopolitics today.

Unit 2: Importance of the Ocean in Human History and Civilization

Ancient Maritime Networks and Thalassocracies

Civilizations have historically been born of and sustained by the sea. Far from isolating human populations, the ocean functioned as the primary highway for cross-cultural encounter, trade, and philosophical exchange. Long before European navigation, ancient Austronesian voyagers navigated thousands of miles across the Pacific Ocean using sophisticated wave-pattern reading, celestial star paths, and bird migrations, colonizing the Polynesian triangle from Madagascar to Easter Island.

The Indian Ocean as a Cradle of Globalization

The Indian Ocean network represents humanity's oldest and most cosmopolitan maritime trade continuum. Governed by the predictable, bi-annual rhythm of the Monsoon winds (*Mawsim*), the Indian Ocean linked the Swahili coast of East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, the Malabar and Coromandel coasts of India, and the Malay Archipelago into a composite, multi-faith mercantile world. As historians like K.N. Chaudhuri and Amitav Ghosh demonstrate, this pre-colonial maritime world was characterized by peaceful cultural hybridization, where Arab, Persian, Jewish, Indian, and Chinese merchants traded spices, textiles, porcelain, and ideas without the militarized violence introduced by European armadas.

Unit 3: Basics of Oceanography

Vertical Oceanic Stratification and Pelagic Zones

A rigorous understanding of oceanic literature requires familiarity with physical oceanography and the vertical architecture of the sea:

- **Epipelagic Zone (Sunlight Zone: 0 to 200 meters):** The upper layer where sunlight penetrates, facilitating photosynthesis. It harbors 90% of all marine life, including phytoplankton (which produces over 50% of Earth's atmospheric oxygen), coral reefs, pelagic fish, and marine mammals.
- **Mesopelagic Zone (Twilight Zone: 200 to 1,000 meters):** Faint, filtered light without sufficient energy for photosynthesis. Inhabited by bizarre creatures with bioluminescence and massive eyes adapted to low light. Home to the great daily vertical migration of marine organisms.
- **Bathypelagic Zone (Midnight Zone: 1,000 to 4,000 meters):** Total, pitch-black darkness, extreme hydrostatic pressure, and near-freezing temperatures. Organisms rely on detrital "marine snow" sinking from the surface.
- **Abyssopelagic and Hadalpelagic Zones (The Abyss and Trenches: 4,000 to 11,000 meters):** Deep ocean plains and tectonic ocean trenches (e.g., Mariana Trench). Characterized by hydrothermal vents, chemosynthetic ecosystems thriving on sulfur, and extreme extremophile adaptations.

Oceanic Circulation: The Global Conveyor Belt

The global ocean is not stagnant water; it is animated by the **Thermohaline Circulation** (the Global Ocean Conveyor Belt). Driven by differences in water density caused by temperature (thermo) and salinity (haline), deep cold polar water sinks at the poles and flows along the ocean floor, while warm surface waters flow toward the poles (e.g., the Gulf Stream). This vast circulation regulates global climate, distributes nutrients, and moderates terrestrial temperatures, making human life on Earth possible.

Unit 4: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of the Ocean

Bridging Marine Sciences and Oceanic Humanities

Interdisciplinary oceanic studies demands the synthesis of marine biology, physical oceanography, maritime archaeology, environmental history, and literary hermeneutics. Marine science provides empirical data regarding ocean acidification, microplastic saturation, and coral bleaching; however, science alone cannot transform public consciousness or heal human alienation from nature. Oceanic literature and art provide the emotional, imaginative, and ethical frameworks necessary to cultivate empathy for the non-human marine world, transforming cold scientific statistics into urgent narratives of ecological care and planetary stewardship.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

1. Hydro-Criticism, Archipelagic Thinking, and Tidalectics

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Similarly, Barbadian scholar-poet Kamau Brathwaite coined the term **tidalectics** to challenge the linear, progressive teleology of Western Hegelian dialectics. Tidalectics mimics the rhythmic, cyclic motion of the oceanic tide—flowing in, crashing against the shore, and retreating back into the infinite depths. By substituting the circular rhythm of the tide for the straight arrow of continental conquest, tidalectics honors the enduring presence of displaced ancestral memories, subaltern voyages, and oceanic cycles of regeneration.

2. The Ocean as Capitalist Resource Sink versus Sacred Commons

Throughout modern history, global capitalism has maintained a contradictory, predatory relationship with the ocean. As Allan Sekula observed in *Fish Story*, containerized maritime shipping is the invisible engine of contemporary globalization, enabling the hyper-exploitation of global supply chains while remaining largely invisible to land-locked consumer consciousness. The ocean is simultaneously treated as an unmeasured "free" highway for corporate cargo ships and an unregulated sewer for industrial chemicals, agricultural runoff, and plastic garbage.

Against this extractivist violence, indigenous oceanic cosmologies—from Pacific Island traditions of *Moana* to South Asian worship of the sea as maternal protector—affirm that the ocean is a sentient, sacred, relational ancestor. Literature serves as a vital sanctuary for recovering these indigenous hydro-ethics, reminding modern technocratic societies that human life cannot survive without healthy, living oceans. To harm the sea is to poison the planetary womb that sustains all terrestrial life.

3. Oceanic Necropolitics and the Littoral Borderlands

In our contemporary era of global displacement, the sea has increasingly become a violent borderland. Achille Mbembe's concept of *necropolitics*—the sovereign determination of who is disposable and who must die—is chillingly enacted across the high seas. Western states deploy sophisticated satellite surveillance, naval blockades, and legal loopholes to push back migrant boats, outsourcing border enforcement and allowing thousands of refugees to drown in the Mediterranean, the Channel, and the Caribbean.

Oceanic literature and visual art bear solemn witness to these drowned subaltern bodies, refusing to allow state border regimes to wash away their names and stories. By documenting both the ecological agony and the human tragedies unfolding across the waters, Oceanic Studies articulates an urgent moral imperative: we must decolonize our relationship with the seas, dismantle maritime apartheid, and cultivate a planetary consciousness grounded in oceanic reverence, climate justice, and universal human solidarity.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 2)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

1. Hydro-Criticism, Archipelagic Thinking, and Tidalectics

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

1. Hydro-Criticism, Archipelagic Thinking, and Tidalectics

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 7)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 8)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 1 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 9)

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