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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Literature and Oceanic Studies

Course Code: ENG5EJ306(3) • Module 2 Notes

Unit 5: Exploration of Maritime Literature: Fiction and Poetry

The Nautical Canon: From Homer to Herman Melville

Maritime literature encompasses an extraordinary global corpus tracing humanity's existential, commercial, and philosophical engagements with the sea. Homer's ancient Greek epic *The Odyssey* established the archetype of the perilous sea voyage as a spiritual and physical test of human courage against capricious oceanic monsters (Scylla, Charybdis, Poseidon). In English Romanticism, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* transformed the Southern Ocean into a haunted moral landscape, where the thoughtless slaughter of an albatross brings divine retribution, drought, and supernatural purgatory.

Herman Melville's Moby-Dick: The Apex of Maritime Metaphysics

Herman Melville's 1851 epic *Moby-Dick* remains the undisputed summit of world maritime fiction. Aboard the ill-fated whaleship *Pequod*, Captain Ahab's monomaniacal quest to butcher the great white whale becomes an allegorical dissection of American industrial capitalism, technological hubris, and the catastrophic attempt of Western man to dominate and destroy the non-human sublime. Ishmael, the sole surviving sailor, survives by embracing the terrifying mystery of the sea and recognizing human humility before oceanic majesty.

Unit 6: Representation of the Sea in Literature and Art

The Oceanic Sublime: Between Maternity and the Monstrous Void

In literary and visual arts, the sea has perpetually held a dual, paradoxical fascination:

- **The Sublime Abyss and Monstrous Void:** In Western Gothic and tragic literature, the ocean is an incomprehensible, alien monster—the watery grave that swallows ships, homes, and lives without pity. J.M.W. Turner's apocalyptic maritime paintings (e.g., *The Slave Ship*) capture the terrifying, chaotic swirl of oceanic storms overwhelming fragile human vessels.
- **The Primordial Maternal Womb:** Conversely, in animist, romantic, and feminist poetics, the sea is celebrated as the primordial mother (*Thalassa*), the amniotic origin of all biological life. Swinburne, Walt Whitman, and Charlotte Smith celebrate the sea as an immortal, soothing sanctuary of rebirth, rhythmic music, and sensual dissolution.

Unit 7: Maritime Themes in Cultural Identity and Memory

Derek Walcott: "The Sea is History"

In postcolonial oceanic poetics, Saint Lucian Nobel laureate Derek Walcott's landmark poem "The Sea is History" (1979) delivers an extraordinary challenge to European imperial historiography. When colonial historians asserted that the Caribbean has no history because it produced no stone monuments, cathedrals, or marble archives, Walcott points directly to the turquoise waves of the Atlantic: "Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs? / Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, / in that gray vault. The sea. The sea / has locked them up. The sea is History."

The Middle Passage and Kala Pani: Traumatic Oceanic Vaults

The sea is the sacred, unmarked graveyard of millions of subaltern bodies:

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- **The Middle Passage:** The Atlantic Ocean holds the collective memory of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, where millions of shackled African men, women, and children were thrown overboard during the brutal middle passage. As Kamau Brathwaite conceptualizes in "tidalectics," the rhythmic ebb and flow of the tide preserves this ancestral trauma and resilience.
- **Kala Pani (The Black Water):** In South Asian colonial history, crossing the ocean was religiously forbidden to high-caste Hindus, threatening total loss of caste and social identity. British colonialists exploited this taboo, forcibly transporting Indian indentured laborers (coolies) across the Indian Ocean to sugar plantations in Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, and Guyana. Writers like Amitav Ghosh (in the *Ibis Trilogy*) recover these subaltern oceanic migrations, showing how the ship became a crucible of solidarity across fractured caste lines.

Unit 8: Environmentalism and Advocacy in Maritime Literature

Rachel Carson: The Sea Around Us

Marine biologist and visionary writer Rachel Carson revolutionized modern environmental consciousness with her lyrical bestseller *The Sea Around Us* (1951). Carson combined rigorous, cutting-edge oceanographic science with luminous poetic prose, revealing the delicate, unseen balances governing marine life. Her work sounded early warnings regarding marine pollution and industrial exploitation, inaugurating a modern genre of maritime environmental advocacy that calls for ethical restraint and planetary reverence.

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

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

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2. The Ocean as Capitalist Resource Sink versus Sacred Commons

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

1. Hydro-Criticism, Archipelagic Thinking, and Tidalectics

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

1. Hydro-Criticism, Archipelagic Thinking, and Tidalectics

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 7)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 8)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 2 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 9)

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