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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Literature and Oceanic Studies

Course Code: ENG5EJ306(3) • Module 4 Notes

Unit 13: Maritime History: Exploration, Trade, and Colonialism

The Age of Discovery and the Weaponization of the Sea

The European "Age of Discovery" (15th–17th centuries)—spearheaded by Portuguese and Spanish caravels (Vasco da Gama, Columbus, Magellan) and followed by Dutch, British, and French joint-stock chartered monopolies (VOC and the English East India Company)—fundamentally weaponized oceanic space. European powers transformed the open, composite trading networks of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans into militarized, monopolistic empires enforced by floating naval batteries and coastal fortresses.

The Littoral Subjugation of Asia and Africa

As historians like Brian Lavery and Callum Roberts observe, the conquest of the oceans was the prerequisite for modern European global hegemony. Control of strategic maritime choke points—such as the Strait of Malacca, the Cape of Good Hope, and Ormuz—allowed European merchant cartels to extract raw wealth, monopolize spice trades, and systematically subjugate littoral Asian and African sovereign kingdoms, laying the foundation for modern global capitalist uneven development.

Unit 14: Maritime Communities and Traditions

Coastal Folklore, Boat-Building Science, and Artisanal Knowledge

Traditional coastal fishing communities possess vast repositories of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) developed over centuries. Across the coasts of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Bengal, and Southeast Asia, artisanal fishermen maintain profound intuitive knowledge of ocean currents, cloud formations, fish migration paths, and wind shifts. Boat-building technologies—such as the sewn-plank *Kettuvallams* of Kerala or the dhows of the Arabian Sea—represent masterpieces of sustainable engineering, constructed from local timbers and coir ropes designed to flex organically with wave dynamics.

Sea Songs, Shanties, and Folk Mythologies

Maritime communities created rich oral cultures to endure the mortal perils of the sea. Sea shanties functioned as rhythmic work songs that synchronized collective physical labor aboard ships, while coastal folk mythologies—such as the sacred worship of *Kadalamma* (the Mother Sea) in Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's iconic Malayalam novel *Chemmeen*—enshrined strict ethical codes. In *Chemmeen*, the sea goddess demands moral purity and fidelity; if a fisherman's wife strays on shore, the wrath of Kadalamma summons ferocious oceanic whirlwinds to swallow her husband at sea, illustrating how traditional communities embedded social order directly within oceanic reverence.

Unit 15: Gender and Race in Maritime History

The Masculinist Shipboard Space and Subversive Female Presences

Historically, the sailing ship was constructed in patriarchal ideology as an exclusively hyper-masculine, hermetically sealed total institution. Superstitions claimed that having women aboard brought bad luck and provoked oceanic wrath. However, revisionist feminist maritime history has dismantled this myth, recovering the forgotten presence of women who sailed disguised as male mariners, accompanied captain husbands, or operated as independent pirates (e.g., Anne Bonny, Mary Read, and the legendary Chinese pirate queen Ching Shih, who commanded a fleet of 1,800 ships and 80,000 pirates in the South China Sea).

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Racial Hierarchies and the Lascar Vanguard

Furthermore, maritime labor was historically multi-racial. British merchant and naval ships relied heavily upon **Lascars**—South Asian, Arab, and East African seamen recruited under exploitative, segregated contracts. Despite enduring severe racial discrimination, poor rations, and lower pay than white sailors, Lascars formed the backbone of global imperial maritime trade, creating early diasporic cosmopolitan enclaves in port cities like London, Liverpool, and Cardiff.

Unit 16: Contemporary Issues in Maritime Affairs

Geopolitics, Choke Points, and Maritime Crime

In the contemporary 21st century, the ocean remains the primary geopolitical chessboard of global power. Over 80% of global trade by volume travels across sea lanes. Vital maritime choke points—such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab-el-Mandeb, the Suez Canal, and the Malacca Strait—are flashpoints of military tension, drone warfare, and modern maritime piracy (notably off the coast of Somalia and the Gulf of Guinea).

The Mediterranean Refugee Crisis and Deep-Sea Mining

Two urgent crises dominate contemporary maritime ethics:

- **The Mediterranean as a Liquid Graveyard:** Thousands of desperate African, Arab, and Asian refugees fleeing war, persecution, and climate collapse attempt dangerous crossings in unseaworthy rafts toward Europe. European border regimes (Frontex) have increasingly militarized the sea, criminalizing civilian search-and-rescue ships and turning the Mediterranean into what scholars call a "necropolitical border."
- **The Threat of Deep-Sea Mining:** Multinational corporations are aggressively lobbying the International Seabed Authority (ISA) to permit deep-sea industrial mining of polymetallic nodules in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone of the Pacific. Marine scientists warn that strip-mining the seabed will permanently destroy unique, ancient benthic ecosystems, generate toxic sediment plumes, and disrupt deep-ocean carbon sequestration. Oceanic studies demands that humanity recognize the high seas not as a frontier for corporate plunder, but as a sacred planetary heritage that must be protected for all future generations.

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

1. Hydro-Criticism, Archipelagic Thinking, and Tidalectics

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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 4 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 2)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 3)

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

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 7)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 8)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 4 Blue Humanities & Oceanic Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 9)

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