

AS 100.445
African Fiction as History
Fall 2015

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Office Hours: T & Th, 4:30-5:30

Meeting Time: T & Th, 3:00 – 4:15 pm
Meeting Place: Gilman 219

Description and Scope

Taking the African historical novel as its focus, this course sits on the boundary between literature and history. No prior experience with Africa or African studies is required (though it is certainly welcome). All the novels selected for the course engage the experiences of Africans in historical context. The reading consists of a particular kind of African fiction: that which lends itself well to illuminating the *historical experiences* of different African people. The chronological focus of the reading is the last two centuries. We will read the novels in the chronological order of the events they recount.

In conception and assigned readings, this is neither a typical history nor a common literature course. It might best be characterized as an African humanities course whose subject matter is the relation of historical fiction to human experience and social criticism. The coverage of Africa's history and literature presented here is not comprehensive. The course is, rather, an inquiry into several themes of significance to African history and society. The joys and conflicts of African life and the political and cultural preoccupations of Africans are especially accessible through literature. Literature is also a useful entry into historical interpretation, for novelists are, by the nature of their work, both theorists and historiographers as well as astute observers of the human condition.

We will investigate the literary qualities of the works we read but also employ fiction as an entry into understanding the historical forces operating in Africa and the varied experiences of different African people over the last two centuries. We will also strive to understand the positions that authors take on the themes about which they write. African literature is often on the cutting edge of political criticism. This is in part because much African literature has been produced and published in the sometimes turbulent context of decolonization and independence, and has consciously engaged historical experiences of relevance to African reading audiences. Many a writer has served time in Africa's jails for words interpreted by the powerful as trenchant, unwelcome commentary on modern political, cultural, and social life.

Required Novels, University Bookstore & Print Reserve

(Many are also available electronically—indicated by “e” at the end of the citation below—and may cost less purchased directly via the internet. Because we are reading novels, you may choose any edition.)

- Thomas Mofolo, *Chaka*. Translated by Daniel P. Kunene. First published in 1925. The rise and fall of an African leader in southeast Africa, nineteenth century. e.
- Dalene Matthee, *Fiela's Child*. First published in 1985. The realities and absurdities of race and identity in nineteenth-century South Africa. e (Nook).
- Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. First published in 1959. A West African farmer experiences the colonization of his society. e.
- Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Paradise*. First published in 1994. The life and travails of a young man in early colonial Tanzania.
- Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*. First published in 1979. A mother's struggles in colonial Lagos, Nigeria. e.
- Ousmane Sembene, *God's Bits of Wood*. First published in 1960. The 1947-48 Dakar-Niger Railway Strike.
- Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*. First published in 1961. A Muslim West African boy's struggles with faith, race, and alienation as he pursues an education. e.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Weep Not, Child*. First published in 1964. The effects of the Mau Mau war (Kenya, 1950s) on the lives of ordinary men and women. e.
- Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Nervous Conditions*. First published in 1988. A coming of age novel about a girl set in white ruled colonial Rhodesia during the 1960s.
- M. G. Vassanji, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. First published in 2003. e.
- Hisham Matar, *In the Country of Men*. First published in 2006. The politics of 1970s Libya and its effects on a family as seen through the eyes of a boy. e.
- Mariama Ba, *So Long a Letter*. First published in 1980. The life of a middle-class Senegalese woman during the late colonial and early independence eras. e.
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. First published in 2006. A fictionalized tale of the Biafra war in Nigeria, 1967-69. e.

Required Coursework:

1. Attend every class. You must notify the professor *beforehand* if you are going to miss a class.
2. Read the assigned novels for the week by the Tuesday class and be prepared to discuss them in both class meetings of the week.
3. Informal weekly reaction/thought papers. These are informal (grammar, spelling, and organization are not checked) but must be typed, not handwritten. One page, single spaced, is adequate. These papers must be turned in to the professor at the end of class on Tuesday. The paper should record your informal reaction to the week's assigned reading. You can, for example, use the questions listed below in item 4 as a guide if you

wish. Each paper should also raise three or more questions or issues for the class to deliberate, and you should raise these verbally during discussion. The questions should be thought-provoking ones for your fellow students to consider, not simple informational questions for the professor to answer. Ten points will be subtracted from your final grade for each reaction paper not turned in on time. You must turn in only *your own* reaction paper.

4. A class presentation. Each student will choose a novel in the assigned reading on which to make a presentation at the beginning of the Tuesday class on the week it is being discussed. The presentation should include a discussion of the life (biography) and writings of the author and a discussion of the novel itself. What is the novel about? What historical event or era, and place, is it set in? What background information on this era, event, place, or theme is important to understanding the novel? What positions does the author take? What perspective on the issues or historical period does the author advocate? What do you think about the novel and the positions the author takes? Provide as much information about the author, the historical era, and the author's interpretation as you can based on your research. Your presentation should be at least 15 minutes and you are encouraged to use multimedia if you desire. You should prepare for your oral presentation carefully.

5. A research paper on your chosen novel for #4, at least 7 full pages, double-spaced, times new roman font, 12 point font, 1 inch margins. This should be an expansion of your class presentation and be a discussion of the novel, the historical event/era it is about, and its interpretations. You have a fair amount of leeway in this paper. The paper is due by the Thursday class in the week after your in-class presentation; it must also be electronically uploaded to Turnitin.com.

6. A second research paper on an additional novel of your choice, at least 7 full pages, double-spaced, times new roman, 12 point font, 1 inch margins. You may choose from novels listed below in the syllabus or suggest a different novel to the professor (subject to his approval). The paper should be of the same nature as the paper described in #5. This paper is due in the professor's office mailbox on or before Tuesday, November 17 at 4 pm; it must also be electronically uploaded to Turnitin.com. I will accept this paper any time before November 17 and I encourage you to do it as early as possible.

7. A take-home final exam of at least 7 full pages, double-spaced, times new roman, 12 point font, 1 inch margins. The question or questions (from which you may choose one) will be supplied at the end of class on December 3 and is due in the professor's office mailbox on or before the end of the scheduled final exam time for the class: Thursday, December 17, at noon. Your final exam must also be electronically uploaded to Turnitin.com.

Grading:

Oral presentation	200 points, or 20%
Each research paper	200 points each, or 20% each
Final exam	300 points, or 30%
Attendance & participation	100 points, or 10%

Class Schedule:

One: Aug 27	Introduction
Two: Sep 1 & 3	Mofolo, <i>Chaka</i>
Three: Sep 8 & 10	Matthee, <i>Fiela's Child</i>
Four: Sep 15 & 17	Achebe, <i>Things Fall Apart</i>
Five: Sep 22 & 24	Gurnah, <i>Paradise</i>
Six: Sep 29 & Oct 1	Emecheta, <i>The Joys of Motherhood</i>
Seven: Oct 6 & 8	Sembene, <i>God's Bits of Wood</i>
Eight: Oct 13	Kane, <i>Ambiguous Adventure</i>
Nine: Oct 20 & 22	Thiong'o, <i>Weep Not Child</i>
Ten: Oct 27 & 29	Dangaremba, <i>Nervous Conditions</i>
Eleven: Nov 3 & 5	Vassanji, <i>The In-Between World of Vikram Lall</i>
Twelve: Nov 10 & 12	Matar, <i>In the Country of Men</i>
Thirteen: Nov 17	Ba, <i>So Long a Letter</i>
Fourteen: Dec 1 & 3	Adichie, <i>Half of a Yellow Sun</i>

Potential Novels for your Second Research Paper:**D. T. Niane, *Sundiata, An Epic of Old Mali* (1960)**

Recounts the origins of the Mali empire from oral traditions.

Maryse Condé, *Ségu* (1985)

Islam and the slave trade among the Bambara in the eighteenth century.

Helon Habila, *Waiting for an Angel* (2002)

Detention of a journalist in Sani Abacha's Nigeria (1990s).

Abdulrazak Gurnah, *By the Sea* (2001)

A merchant refugee from Zanzibar applies for asylum in England.

Abubaker Tafawa Balewa, *Shaihu Umar* (1955)

A kidnapped and enslaved child in turn-of-the-century northern Nigeria.

Buchi Emecheta, *The Slave Girl* (1977)

The life of a slave girl in southern Nigeria during the early colonial period.

Amadou Hampaté Ba, *The Fortunes of Wangrin* (1973)

The story of a rogue and operator in colonial French West Africa; an interpretation of colonialism.

T. Obinkaram Echewa, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* (1992)

The Aba Women's War of 1929 (southeast Nigeria).

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The River Between* (1965)

Christianity and the 1929 "female circumcision crisis" in Kikuyuland, Kenya.

Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure* (1962)

The dilemmas of education for a Muslim family in colonial Senegal.

Ferdinand Oyono, *Houseboy* (1956)

Depicts honestly but with humor the often brutal life of a houseboy in the service of a French commandant during the colonial era.

Peter Abrahams, *Mine Boy* (1946)

A young man copes with mine labor and life in Johannesburg in 1940s South Africa.

Bessie Head, *A Question of Power* (1974)

Race and the dilemmas of the "Coloured" in Apartheid Southern Africa.

Mongo Beti, *Mission to Kala* (1957)

A student who failed his exams returns home in Cameroon and becomes embroiled in local marital politics,

M. G. Vassanji, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003)

Indians in Kenya during the late colonial era, and Mau Mau.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967)

A tale of the secrets of the liberation struggle in Kenya on the eve of independence.

Ama Ata Aidoo, *Changes: A Love Story* (1991)

Postindependent Ghana, the dilemmas of gender, love, and sex.

Moses Isegawa, *Abyssinian Chronicles* (1998)

War, rape, poverty, and AIDS in Uganda during and since the rule of Amin.

Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People* (1966)

Politics in early postcolonial Nigeria.

Meja Mwangi, *Kill Me Quick* (1973)

Educated street youth in Nairobi, Kenya.

Meja Mwangi, *Going Down River Road* (1976)

Life in Nairobi, Kenya.

Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters* (1965)

Six Nigerian academics in the early postcolonial period.

Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1968)

Work and moral dilemmas involving corruption in post-independent Africa.

Nuruddin Farah, *Sardines: A Novel* (1981)

Family life and Islam in Somalia under the ruler of a dictator.

Nuruddin Farah, *Maps* (1986)

Somali relationships during the Ogaden war.

Pepetela, *Mayombe* (1980)

Soldiers of the MPLA (Angola) and their war against Portuguese colonialism in the 1960s.

Nawal el Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* (1979)

A prostitute is condemned for murdering her pimp; women's lives in post-independent Egypt.

Sony Labou Tansi, *The Antipeople* (1983)

Two young women vie for the attention of a married school principle; a story of postcolonial central Africa in upheaval.

Benjamin Kwakye, *The Clothes of Nakedness* (1998)

The dilemmas of unemployment in postindependent Accra, Ghana.

Mia Couto, *Sleepwalking Land* (1992)

A tale of refugees and Mozambique's postcolonial wars.

Mia Couto, *Last Flight of the Flamingo* (2000)

Mozambique and the international community after the war, with criticism of all.

Sindiwe Magona, *To My Children's Children* (1990)

A young woman comes of age in Apartheid South Africa.

Naguib Mahfouz, *Chitchat on the Nile* (1966)

The decadence of Egyptian society during the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Naguib Mahfouz, *The Thief and the Dogs* (1961)

The life of Said Mahran, a thief recently released from jail and intent on having his vengeance on the people who put him there (Egypt).

Naguib Mahfouz, *Miramar* (1967)

In the Miramar guest house (Alexandria, Egypt, 1960s), a young girl hired to do chores for the residents provokes jealousies and conflicts that inevitably lead to violence and tragedy.

Ahmadou Kourouma, *Allah is not Obliged* (2000)

A tale of an orphan who becomes a child soldier when traveling to visit his aunt in Liberia.

Ahmadou Kourouma, *The Suns of Independence* (1968)

A critical treatment of post-colonial governments in Africa.

Tsitsi Dangaremba, *The Book of Not* (2006)

A sequel to *Nervous Conditions*; Tambu's travails in late colonial and early majority-rule Zimbabwe.

J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (1999)

A professor has an affair with a student in post-Apartheid South Africa and his life falls apart.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003)

A new world is opened to two children who visit their aunt in Nsukka (Nigeria) from their religious and dysfunctional home in Enugu.

Chris Abani, *Becoming Abigail* (2006)

Abigail is brought as a teenager by family from Nigeria to London; they subsequently try to force her into prostitution.

Tahar Ben Jelloun, *The Last Friend* (2006)

Two men recount their childhood and imprisonment in Tangier, Morocco, and begin to realize their differences.