

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

AFRICAN FICTION

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PART I : The Early African Fiction and Defense of African Culture

The novel is the most dominant and most pervasive literary genre in Africa today, and correspondingly the most popular. Early African novelists mostly began writing in dialogue with themes of conflict between tradition and modernity. The subject of the African novel then was socially conditioned, the need to assert that Africa was an existing geopolitical entity before the advent of the West, and insist that Africa was sent reeling from its delicate balance by the colonial incursion. Hence the major ideological position taken then was that of cultural nationalism, a scheme geared towards reestablishing the African identity which was gradually fading because of the overbearing force of colonialism. The novelists then used the novel to arouse in the reader a true sense of himself, thereby evoking his past and connecting it to the present. This unequivocally distinguished between an African and a European writing about Africa.

This point makes the African novel different from the western variant on the question of the exploration of the African identity. In this regard the African novel will be better understood when appraised from its historical context in terms of reality that has shaped the consciousness of the writers and their responses in the novels they write. This reality is therefore not static, but changes all the time. The rise of the novel in Africa tallies with the upsurge of great political activity and consciousness. Thus, one will easily notice that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* echoes the past in order to re-interrogate that past to make the present meaningful. Invariably, the theme of cultural nationalism contours the African novel of the late 1950s and 60s.

A close reading of the early African novel will indicate that the novelists give expression to African societies in transition. This is geared towards articulating how the West has politically altered the course of history of the African people and the themes of these novels reflected these alterations especially at the level of culture. Therefore one of the dominant themes of the early novel is that of culture conflict.

Required Text:

Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann, 1958.

Other Readings:

Chinua Achebe. *Arrow of God*. New York, Anchor Books Edition, 1969.

Adrian Roscoe, *Mother is Gold*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1777.

Chinua Achebe. *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, London, Heinemann, 1975.

Emmanuel Ngara. *Art and Ideology in the African Novel*, London, Heinemann, 1985.

Oladele Taiwo. *Culture and the Nigerian Novel*. London. Macmilan, 1982.

Discussion Questions:

How relevant is colonialism to the emergence of the African novel? How apt is the novel genre in expressing the 1950s and 1960s as a period of transition in Africa? In what ways does Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* succeed in telling the reader that Africans had a culture before the coming of the Europeans?

PART II : Late 20th Century Fiction and Politics in Africa

The late 1950s and 1960s marked the beginning of a new epoch in the socio-political history of Africa. Independence came and the African people expressed euphoria over the new tradition. However, the excitement was short-lived as most of the emergent leaders derailed the progressive course on which the continent was navigating. The leaders became dictators with insatiable greed and wielding power so ruthlessly that the masses were completely marginalized. This betrayal became a very important subject in the African novel from the late 1960s.

The novel has become a socio-cultural space where writers from time to time engage African governments on pressing postcolonial concerns. The novel remains the platform where the existential problems of being African are recreated and reflected upon. As the living conditions of Africa continue to remain dire, the novelists continue to engage the governments on their failure to provide the ruled with their desires. The writers deploy numerous rhetorical devices to narrativize the burden of nationhood. The required novel for this course will no doubt introduce students to the various currents and themes and techniques in the modern African novel and how this genre in Africa occupies a very important space in African politics. The novel should be studied in relation to the background of the social history and the life of the writer and his time. The heavy socio-cultural base of the modern African novel, as it engages politics in the continent, is obvious. This is, however, motivated by the vision of the writer who usually regards himself/herself as a teacher. If one considers this point critically, the constant engagement of the novelist with the conditions of the ruled and the direction of politics in the continent explains why the novel will remain a genre where the everyday experience of the African person is articulated.

Attention should be paid to the cynicism of the title of the required text. The African novel gives expression to how independence failed to produce the desired socio-economic bliss which the euphoria of independence indicated at the early period of self-rule. Thus the major theme of the novel remains that of corruption and the disillusionment that accompanies the idea of an African Identity.

Required Text:

Ayi Kwei Armah. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. London: Heinemann, 1968.

Other Readings:

Ngate, Jonathan. *Francophone African Fiction: Reading a Literary Tradition*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey, 1986.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Writers in Politics*. Oxford: James Currey, 1997.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts*. Oxford: OUP, 1998.

Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature*. Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1981.

Olaniyan, Tejumola. *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African American and Caribbean Drama*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.

Discussion Questions:

Observe the title of the novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Discuss how the writer shows cynicism about the state of Africa at the time. How does the novel reflect the failure of Africa's political independence?

PART III : **The 21st Century Fiction** : African Conflicts and the Novel

The failure of most African emergent nations' leaders to sustain the hope of independence celebrated in the 1960s created a sense of disenchantment for the people. This disenchantment gradually transformed into resistance of different kinds. However, most of the crises in Africa have ethnic pigmentation. The attempt to resist government bureaucratic failures led to civil wars of different dimensions. The novel artistically narrativizes these conflicts to reiterate the fact that most of the conflicts stem from the failure of governments to uphold the social contract. Some of the most vulnerable groups during civil strife are women and children. Most African nations returned to democratic rule over the last three decades but the government appears to still celebrate some dictatorial tendencies which continue to create a permanent mood of depression in the psyche of Africans. The novel in Africa has always remained the imaginative space where writers interrogate the direction and relevance of leadership and governance in the continent. Consequently, the novel in Africa continues to advocate socio-political justice and economic emancipation as the cardinal ingredients for the sustenance of a healthy democracy that is people oriented. A keen assessment of contemporary African novel will demonstrate how the writers deploy different rhetorical devices to reappraise politics in Africa and the conflicts these political actions have engendered. Most of these contemporary novels beam their searchlight on the African child who is historically implicated in these conflicts and how these children lose their innocence. The child figure is becoming a very important calibrating index for measuring growth and development of the African continent, especially as the child remains the signification of the future of any nation. Invariably, emphasis shall be placed on the child and the choices he/she makes to survive some of these conflicts in the continent.

Required Text:

Emmanuel Dongala. *Johnny Mad Dog* (New York: Picador, 2005).

Other Readings:

Eustace Palmer. *Of War and Women, Oppression and Optimism: New Essays on the African Novel*. Trenton, NJ: African World Press

Mamdani Mahmood. *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.

Research in African Literatures. 36.2, 2006.

African Literature Today. No. 26, 2008.

Discussion Questions:

The African novel essentially explores how literature of violence succeeds or fails as art. The novelist equally articulates the consequences of war on the African continent and her peoples and demonstrates the symbiotic relationship between history and literature as the writer becomes a witness. How do we read the representation of violence in the African novel? Discuss *Jonny Mad Dog* as a bildungsroman, a novel in which a child loses innocence and grows up.

PART IV : African Women's Writings

This week we focus on the place of women in the literary tradition; an issue that is very current in the discourse on the literature of Africa and its Diaspora. Women writers have emerged at the forefront of the movement to restore African women to their proper place in the study of African history, society, and culture. In this process, the need to recognize the women as literary artists in the oral mode has also been highlighted. Furthermore, the work of women writers is gaining increasing significance and deserves to be examined within the context of canon formation—authors and texts focusing on such topics as the heritage of women's literature, images of women in the works of male writers; women in traditional and contemporary society; women and the African family in the literary tradition; literature as a tool for self-definition and self-liberation; African women writers; female expressions of cultural nationalism in the continent; female novelists of the African continent; Black women dramatists; the poetry of African women.

From close observation of texts one will notice that African female writers continue to deploy literature as a vehicle to redefine gender roles in African society. Female writings address the issue of the marriage institution and how tradition keeps the woman on a leash within the domestic sphere of a dominant patriarchal system. The dominant theme of female writings is that of female subjugation. Such writings explore the socio-cultural inhibitions which impede the development of the woman both at public and domestic spheres in African patriarchal societies.

A study of this week's required text, *So Long a Letter*, will not be complete without discussion of its feminist orientation. It must be clarified that feminism is an umbrella ideology that deals with the condition of women and the need for their empowerment especially politically and economically in predominantly patriarchal societies across the world. While it originated from the Western world and has influenced many African women's writings, feminism has intersections and variants that are dependent on class, race, culture, and societal values. Most African female writers of the first generation like Mariama Ba express a "womanist" form of feminism which advocates women's empowerment as well as complementarity between men and women because of the communal nature of traditional African societies. It is worthy of note that the novel's protagonist, Ramatoulaye, does not mind sharing her husband with another woman and only wants the man to treat both of them equally and she be recognized as the first or senior wife but she is left with empty hands, as she puts it, because she is totally neglected and her husband violates all the codes of Islam and traditional African society that govern polygamy. It is in this sense that *So Long a Letter* is "womanist" in the feminist tradition.

Required Text:

Mariama Ba. *So Long a Letter*. London: Heinemann, 1981.

Other Readings:

Aidoo, Ama Ata. *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Heinemann, 2002.

Zulu Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*. Ibadan: Evans, 1972.

Stella and Frank Chipasula (Eds.). *African Women's Poetry*. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1995.

Jones, Eldred D. *Women in African Literature Today*. *African Literature Today* 15, 1987.

Amadume, Ifi. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed Press, 1987.

Salome C. Nnoromele, "Representing the African Woman: Subjectivity and Self in The Joys of Motherhood," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 43.2 (Winter 2002): 178-90.

Sarr, Ndiawar. "The Female Protagonist as Part of A Transitional Generation in *The Joys of Motherhood*," *Bridges: an African Journal of English Studies/Revue Africaine D'Etudes Anglaises*. 5.2 (1993): 25-33.

Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, & Difference*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997.

Discussion Questions:

If African and Black theorists and scholars emphasize the uniqueness of African feminism in "motherism" and "womanism," to what extent is Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* a "womanist" novel? How does the African female writer re-address the politics of gender in African literature?

PART V : The Contemporary African Female Writer

Contemporary female African writers continue to deploy literature as a pragmatic means to negotiate the lopsided gender calculus in Africa. The writers demonstrate how women negotiate their way between tradition and modernity. Beside the gender tensions both at the domestic and public spheres, the female writers give expression to other responsibilities beyond motherhood and wifehood that the modern African woman is saddled with.

Since the publication of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* in 1966, modern African women's writings have come a long way and gone through several stages of metamorphosis. In Week 8 we read and discussed Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* that posthumously won the Noma Prize for African writing in 1981 and publicized the works of African female writers. From their concerns with giving voice to the silenced by telling their own stories and revamping their images as against earlier portrayals by male writers, African contemporary female writers have shifted focus from the plight of women within domesticity to assess their participation and contributions in the public domain. These writers now create female characters that are equipped with appropriate resources such as education, economic autonomy, resilience, and rational/intellectual thinking that help them negotiate their identities and freedom from patriarchal dogmas and societal restrictions. This type of character delineation relocates women from the margins to the center. Contemporary African women's writings are replete with fictional representations of various efforts by women to join the mainstream and be acknowledged as capable of developing the individual selfhood and the nation within and outside domestic spheres. Their works reflect a balanced portrayal of women in realistic terms as they not only present women in contrastive positions of suffering victimhood but also exercising their agency.

Ifeoma in this week's required text, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is such a female character. She is a university lecturer, a single parent because of widowhood, who does not depend on her rich brother but takes care of her family and even father well. It is telling that she does not want her elders to pray for her to have more children but to be promoted in her workplace, the academy.

Required Text:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *Purple Hibiscus*. New York: Algonquin Books, 2003.

Other Readings:

Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, & Difference*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997.

Discussion Question: How does the woman negotiate her way between tradition and modernity in contemporary African literature? As individuals who negotiate their identity around marginal spaces, the female writers use literature to demonstrate how female characters negotiate liberation from tradition in order to articulate the fact that women can use their resources in other spheres beyond the domestic space.

PART VI : Post-Apartheid Fiction

As a society just emerging from the throes of apartheid, the post-apartheid South African fiction continues to deal with issues bordering on suspicion and the search for identity. One of the major issues post-apartheid South Africa explores is the challenge of reconciliation and forgiveness. Emphasis should be placed on the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa. The novel fuses African responses to modernity deriving from an oral culture with European responses to modernity based on written genres.

A major dilemma that will continue to confront researchers studying the post-apartheid fiction in English is how to house white and black writers under the same roof, given that previous scholarship has often distinguished South African fiction on the black/white binaries, or the so-called realist/modernist genres. Furthermore, the many debates that had provoked the post-apartheid liberal order had attempted to highlight areas to be privileged without making room for equal regard to the experiences of pain meted out on the population through the course of history. It is probably for this reason that a number of white scholars have persistently insisted on the defacement of history in the discourse of the new fiction. However, other scholars have retained the persuasion that literary scholarship should remain a search for social justice. This week shall consider the emergence of a new tradition of writing in South Africa after apartheid. Emphasis will be placed on the fact that post-apartheid South Africa is still a state in transition; that is a nation undergoing enormous transformation not only in the political arena, but also in practically every facet of its social imaginary. Invariably, the fiction after apartheid will function as a map for reading the new dimensions the social relation has taken decades after the fall of apartheid.

Reading

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Zakes Mda. *Ways of Dying*. New York: Picador, 2002.

Other Readings:

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Attridge, Derek. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004.

Attwell, David. *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.

Chapman, Michael, Colin Gardner, and Es'kia Mphahlele, eds. *Perspectives on South African Literature*. Johannesburg: A D. Donker, 1992.

Sanders, Mark. "Ambiguities of Mourning: Law, Custom, and Testimony of Women before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission." Ed. David Eng and Kazanjian. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003. 77-109.

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Discussion Questions: We will reflect on how fictional narratives challenge the dualisms of Western thinking, whether between the past and the present, the human and the non-human, the rural and the urban, the living and the dead. How does the fiction reconfigure history in post-apartheid South African fiction? In what ways does the writer's imagination create new forms of personal and political identity?

PART VII : The Contemporary African Short Story

The short story for long has not been a popular form in African literature compared to poetry, fiction, and drama. This is despite the fact that, in form, it is closest to the folktale of the oral tradition that is indigenous to Africa. Although the African short story remains unpopular relative to other forms of narrative if one considers the issue of literary criticism, it is none the less alive and well. Written in indigenous or European languages, the short story is published in the popular press or in elite literary journals, in collections of narratives or anthologies of African literature. The short story continues to thrive because of its liveness compared to the more wieldy novel or play when it comes to publishing. Among its best known practitioners are Chinua Achebe, Ama Ata Aidoo, Barbara Kimenye, Alex LaGuma, Ben Okri, Sembene Ousmane, and Tanure Ojaide.

The short story form equally articulates and gives expression to the African experience in both colonial and postcolonial societies. One can say that African short stories use diverse narrative modes to express the African condition. Writers use modes ranging from irony as in Achebe's stories and fantasy as in Ben Okri to the surrealism in Kojo Laing's stories. In these writers and newer short story writers' works, there is constant blending of the highly realistic with the supernatural to express the human experience of modern Africans still deeply affected by traditional beliefs or postmodern concerns.

In recent times, the short story has generated interest through the Caine Prize for African Writing specifically meant for the short story. As has been happening, many writers known for their novels, poetry, and drama are writing short stories on a more popular scale. Dike Okoro-edited *Speaking for the Generations: Contemporary Short Stories from Africa* is one of the most recent anthologies and includes some well-known writers such as Benjamin Kwakye, Odun Balogun, and Tanure Ojaide and younger ones as Ayobami Adebayo, Prince Mensah, and Khadija El Younossi. The stories capture different vignettes of the contemporary life from all corners of the continent. Helon Habila also has put together a wide range of short stories in *The Granta Book of the African Short Story* that includes old and late writes like the South African Alex La Guma and the Zimbabwean Dambudzo Marechera and living writers such as the Nigerian Uwem Akpan. It is interesting to note that many of the younger writers live in the West and many of their stories too are set in the West and not in Africa. Those living in the West or have their stories set in the West include Aminatta Forna, Uwem Akpan, and E.C. Osondu. These short story writers are not concerned about the nation but about individuals and society, pushing to the background political and national issues.

Required Text:

Dike Okoro, ed. *Speaking for the Generations: Contemporary Short Stories from Africa*.

Other Readings:

Achebe, Chinua. *Heinemann Book of Contemporary African Short Stories*. Oxford, UK: Heinemann, 1987.

Achebe, Chinua and C.I. Innes, eds. *African Short Stories*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1985.

Akpan, Uwem. *Say You're One of Them*.

Habila, Helon, ed. *The Granta Book of the African Short Story*. New York: Granta, 2011.

Larson Charles. ed. *African Short Stories*. New York: Collier, 1970.

Discussion Questions:

What is the relationship between the short story and the traditional story telling tradition in Africa? The short story in Africa is often simple; its brevity appeals to readers. It is a flexible, unpretentious, and sound literary form which reflects the discontinuous and disconcerting realities of African life. One of the major issues we shall consider this week is to examine the natural response of the reader to the proliferation of short stories and their considerable success; this will in turn help us establish their origin and development in the search for the source of their power and appeal. Therefore, the questions and objectives raised above for this week will serve as preliminary study of several fundamental aspects of tales and short stories, their difference and similarity in narrative structure, characterization, and intention. What distinguishes the short story from the novel is the magnitude or scope. By this we mean coverage. This will be another fundamental issue we shall assess.