

Women Writers Across Cultures

English 261 - Spring Semester 2008

Janet Hagen

Office Hours: TR 12:30-1:30 / T 3:30-4:30

**see below*

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*For my evening classes, I will be available for Saturday mornings for email consultations. Please email your questions or concerns by Friday evening and I will reply Saturday morning.

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice.

bell hooks – “Talking Back”

. . . identification names not only the history of the subject but the subject of history.

Diane Fuss -- *Identification Papers*

What happens when women become the subject of our studies and readings? Why is it important that this course (and others) focus on women writers? What is the history of women writers? What are their unique contributions to the field of literature studies? What can we learn from them that adds knowledge and depth to our understanding of women from a historical and sociological perspective?

This course is an exploration of women writers from a cross-cultural perspective and what we can learn from their stories. Our approach will be to examine the literature through various critical approaches, mainly formalist, feminist, and postcolonial. (Feminist criticism examines literature within a social and historical context to provide a perspective that focuses on women’s issues relevant to the setting.) Topics for exploration will be women’s (gender) roles in family, social life, relationships, economics, religion, and politics; women’s relation to their country (nation-state); women’s relationships with other women, i.e., “sisterhood”; female sexuality and desire; sexual identity; the female body (construction and representation of); migration and

exile; mother/daughter relationships; motherhood; women's relationships with the written word; and women's participation in activism and resistance.

Course Objectives

- Identify and appreciate the contributions of women writers from a global perspective.
- Develop an understanding of and a respect for other cultural perspectives.
- Recognize the value of using different critical approaches to interpret literature and then be able to use these various approaches in literary analyses.
- Enhance critical thinking skills through reading, writing, and class discussions.
- Develop an interpretation about both the meaning and structure in a work of literature and support this perspective with specifics from the text in the written form of a formal essay.

Required Texts

- See, Lisa. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*
- Alvarez, Julia, *In the Time of the Butterflies*
- Edwidge, Danticat, *The Farming of Bones*
- Rachlin, Nahid. *Persian Girls*
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Sister of My Heart*

Other Required Materials

A two-pocket folder and a stapler

Grade Percentages

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|-------------------------------|-----|
| • Thought provoking questions | 25% |
| • Mid-term essay | 20% |
| • Group presentation | 20% |
| • Final essay | 25% |
| • Class participation | 10% |

EXPLANATION OF ASSIGNMENT AND GRADES

Thought-Provoking Questions (25%): To get at the different meanings in literature, a reader must learn how to read closely. Part of reading closely demands being able to pull out the key issues through the asking of difficult questions – questions that go beyond the surface to explore deeper issues and conflicts. Therefore, every week I will expect you to turn in thought-provoking questions on each work assigned. (See syllabus for required amount.) **These questions are to be turned in at the beginning of class.** (Please deposit them on my desk.) You will not be allowed to turn in questions once class starts, nor will you be able to turn in questions late (after class) or through email. I will use these questions to guide our discussion, so I will expect that you will have put some time and thought into their creation. They may be hand-written if I can read them. (HINT: I recommend that you connect your questions to specific passages, identified with page numbers. I take these questions very seriously, and so should you. If you ask

a simple question that can be answered with a simple answer, you will receive a low grade. The more thought-provoking the question, the higher the grade.) I will begin collecting questions week two (next week).

Midterm Essay (20%): This essay will be a literary analysis of one of the novels and should be written in formal academic essay format, meaning thesis driven. Requirements: 4-5 pages long. Times Roman size 12 font or equivalent. One inch margins. MLA citations and works cited page. Correct use of grammar and spelling. (A sloppy paper will be graded down for careless errors and/or incorrect citations.)

***Reminder: there is an excellent facility on campus to help you with your writing, the Writing Center on the Mohegan Campus (located downstairs in the shop area). You may also submit your essay to the Writing Center through email. Submit your name, banner ID, and a brief summary of the assignment and attach the essay. Send to TRWritingCenter@trcc.commnet.edu*

Group Project and Presentation (20%): Throughout the syllabus I have designated days for group presentations. (Each group will consist of approximately 2-3 people.) The objective of each presentation is to 1) enlighten the audience about the historical and cultural context of the novel and 2) give background information about the author so that the audience can better understand the significance of her work. (This presentation is not to be a literary analysis of the novel.) You may use Powerpoint or some other form of visual aids. Timeframe: 15-30 minutes.

***Topics you should consider for the historical and cultural component: setting, languages, religions, politics, women's and men's roles, importance of rituals, and ethnic majorities/minorities. You will have up to 30 minutes for your presentation. Your grade will reflect how well you introduce the novel and cover the main social and political aspects within a historical and social framework, how thoroughly you present background information on the author, and the overall quality of your presentation.*

Final Literary Analysis Essay (25%): REQUIREMENTS: 5-7 pages long. Times Roman size 12 font or equivalent. One inch margins. MLA citations and works cited page. Correct use of grammar and spelling. (A sloppy paper will be graded down for careless errors and/or incorrect citations.) This essay should be written in formal academic essay format, thesis driven, with a minimum of two outside sources (to be turned in with final copy of essay). You may write on one novel or do a comparative analysis of two novels. Topics for this essay should come out of our class discussions.

Class Participation (10%): This final ten percent of your grade can either help you or harm you, depending on how well-prepared you are and how much you contribute to class discussion and activities. Periodically, I will assign in- or out-of-class writing assignments or group activities. Your participation in these activities will be figured into this grade percentage.

OTHER POLICIES

Attendance: In order for the class to be successful it is important that you attend regularly. You will be allowed up to two unexcused absences. After that your grade will be affected negatively. For 3 absences, your grade will be lowered one full letter grade. 4 unexcused absences will result in your grade being lowered two full letter grades, 5 absences three full letter grades. If you miss 6 or more classes, you will automatically fail the course. (An excused absence includes, for example, illness and/or injury and will only be excused with documentation, such as a doctor's note. Missing class because you have to work does not count as an excused absence.)

***Please keep in mind that if you must miss class, you will still be held accountable for the material covered in class and all assignments that are due that day. Any work we do in class cannot be made up, and it is part of your in-class participation grade.

Tardiness: *Be in class on time.* It is very disruptive for everyone already engaged in an activity to have to stop because of late arrivals. Therefore, within the first five minutes of class I will take attendance. If you arrive after I have taken attendance, you will be marked as late. Cumulatively, 3 late marks will equal one unexcused absence, 4 marks, two unexcused absences, and for 5 marks, three unexcused absences. Leaving class early or taking a break to leave the class and return will also be counted towards an unexcused absence. Please note that leaving class early to go to work also counts as an unexcused departure and will be documented.

Deadlines: There is no such thing as late work. For each calendar day that an essay or assignment is late it will lose a letter grade. If you must miss class on the day that an assignment is due, then the paper needs to be placed in my mailbox *before* class. (I will not accept essays via email unless you have previously contacted me and I have agreed to accept your work through email.)

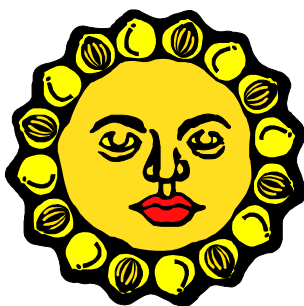
Participation: This is a reading intensive course. (I highly recommend that you read ahead.) Come to class prepared. **All work assigned for a particular day is to be read before class.** Work done in class cannot be made up.

Cell phones: School regulations require that all cell phones and beepers be turned off in learning environments. If it is imperative for you to be available by cell phone or a beeper, please speak to me before class to arrive at a suitable agreement. (Please refrain from text messaging. I find it rude and it will affect your participation grade negatively.)

Plagiarism: Don't do it. It could result in failure of the course and expulsion from the college. New computer programs for teachers allow us to check for plagiarism, so even if you are tempted, my advice is to rethink plagiarizing. All material quoted or paraphrased *MUST* be documented properly.

Students with disabilities: Any student with a hidden or visible disability which may require classroom modifications should see me about her/his disability within the first week or two of class. I will ask you to see the learning disability counselor, Chris Scarborough, on campus so that together we can work out an appropriate plan to meet your needs.

Bad weather: On stormy days, call the school or listen to the news to see if school is canceled. Since I commute, if I can't make it to class I will email you. (Please make sure your email address is current through the Registrar's office.) (If class is canceled, follow the syllabus to keep up on the readings and work.)



COURSE OUTLINE – SPRING 2008

January

- 29 Introduction to course. Why do we read women's stories? What is the history of women writers? Why read women writers from a cross-cultural perspective? What is feminist theory and how do we read and interpret from a feminist perspective? What does it mean to read novels from a cross-cultural context?

February

- 5 Presentation One. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* – 6 questions due.
- 12 No class. Celebration of Presidents' Day.
- 19 *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (finish novel) – 6 questions due.
- 26 Presentation Two. *Sister of My Heart* (read pages 1-167) – 5 questions due.

March

- 4 *Sister of My Heart* (finish novel) – 5 questions due.
- 11 Presentation Three. *Persian Girls* (read entire memoir) – 8 questions due.
- 18 No class. Spring break.
- 25 Peer Review. Bring five copies of your essay to class.

April

- 1 **Formal Essay One Due.** Watch video.
- 8 Presentation Four. *The Farming of Bones* (read entire novel) – 6 questions due.
- 15 Presentation Five. *In the Time of the Butterflies* (read Part I and II) – 8 questions due, 4 from Part I and 4 from Part II.
- 22 *In the Time of the Butterflies* (finish novel) – 6 questions due.
- 29 Presentation Six. *Purple Hibiscus* (read entire novel) – 8 questions due.

May

- 6 Last day of classes. Peer review. Bring to class five copies of your essay.
- 9 **Final Essay Due. (In my mailbox by noon.)**

Reading Guide: Questions for Thought

1. How does women's writing validate their life experiences?
2. In what ways is the nature of women's writing conditioned by and reflective of uniquely female experiences?
3. Women throughout the world have used the literary form as a means of expression. What are they expressing?
4. Is there such a thing as "universal appeal?"
5. Are there commonalities connected to gender which make women's experiences recognizable regardless of their cultural location?
6. How does one escape/challenge the ethnocentric implications of assuming the west as a standard for literary conventions and authority?
7. What are some of the prevalent stereotypes and assumptions about women from different cultures? How do they affect our reading? How do these readings challenge stereotypes about women? How do they build up new bodies of knowledge about women that challenge them (the stereotypes)?
8. How do these stories reflect women's strengths and their attempts to overcome their (culturally imposed) impotence and take control of their lives?