

— OBERLIN COLLEGE —

**FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR PROGRAM**

**FYSP 129:**

**Coming of Age in African Literature**

— Cultural Diversity Course (CD) —

— Writing Intensive Course (WRi) —

Spring 2007 — Mr. Saaka and Mr. Podis

*Peer Writing Associate:* Ezinwanyi Ukegbu

This course will focus on African literature of the late colonial and postcolonial periods. Our main concern will be the work of writers from ex-colonial countries, writers who have contributed to the burgeoning field that is variously referred to as “postcolonial” or “third world” literature.

Although the subject of our study is literature, we will encourage an interdisciplinary approach. Your two professors, Mr. Saaka and Mr. Podis, are trained in different disciplines: political science and literature, respectively. While reading the works to appreciate their literary qualities, we will also attempt to view them as products of the cultures and of the social and political circumstances that produced them. In other words, we will examine the literary works as complex expressions of their contexts, as well as indicators of the values and world views of the societies in which they were composed. We will be especially eager to explore ways in which the writings reflect particular issues and themes related to the colonial and postcolonial African experience.

Because of the nature of the literature we will be reading and because of the special goals of the First-Year Seminar Program, this course will stress diversity in both approaches to learning and subject matter. In the spirit of liberal arts learning, we will explore literature that is not often read in English courses, and we will do so in a way that draws upon broad-based methods of inquiry. For one thing, we will offer alternatives to the typically western “formalist” or “aesthetic” ways of reading and evaluating works of literature. For another, we will strive for a less authoritarian, more “de-centered” mode of operation in the classroom. Although we (Mr. Saaka and Mr. Podis) are in fact authorities on the subject matter and authority figures in the classroom, we believe that we can best use our authority by cultivating and supporting *your* attempts to develop *your* authority as committed learners and scholars. A major goal of a liberal education is to enable students to participate in a multiplicity of powerful, ongoing conversations, or discourses, that shape knowledge in the academy and in the world beyond it. Thus we view your participation in full-class and small-group discussion sessions as crucial to the success of the course. We will, in other words, attempt to create what scholars call a discourse community within our own class, a community that mirrors the larger scholarly communities that form the curricular focus of a liberal arts education.

In keeping with our belief in the importance of diversity of student input and ideas, we will tend to value the thoughtful consideration of multiple points of view more than we will value the quest for any single correct answer to the complex issues we will be considering. This open-ended, participatory approach reflects not only our own educational philosophies—developed during a combined total of 65 years of teaching at Oberlin College—but also those of the First-Year Seminar Program. Moreover, it is consonant with the anti-authoritarian spirit of the postcolonial literature we will be reading.

### **Major Objectives:**

- To introduce you to the study of colonial and postcolonial African literature
- To provide and encourage a *non-western perspective* on the subject matter of the course (no simple task, since we are working within a western educational institution and most of us come to the course with decidedly western perspectives.)
- To offer an interdisciplinary approach to the study of literature (i.e., to consider literature from political, social, and historical—as well as literary—perspectives)
- To provide you with a seminar-type setting in which to explore the subject matter in a hands-on, interactive, participatory style. This seminar approach will focus on helping you to develop your skills in the following areas, all of which are important to liberal arts learning:
  - Critical thinking, especially interpreting and evaluating literary texts
  - Writing, especially writing about literature
  - Discussion skills

### **Course Requirements:**

- **Regular attendance.** This is crucial. You risk a failing grade if you miss more than two classes without an acceptable excuse. We are enforcing this rather strict attendance policy not to be punitive or authoritarian or to instill submissive habits in you, but because the interactive, participatory-style inquiry we wish to encourage will not work unless people are present to interact and to participate.
- **Reading of assigned texts.** These are listed on the schedule that follows.
- **Participation in class discussion.** Usually, everyone in class will be called on to participate in discussion at least once during each class period. Of course people are encouraged to say more than that as discussions proceed.
- **Completion of a journal entry each week.** Entries should explore some aspect of the readings for the week. They should be approximately 2–3 pages in length and may be typed or handwritten. They will be due in class every Tuesday, except for the first week's entry, which is due on Thursday, February 8. During weeks when formal essays are due, we will suspend the journal requirement. Please note that we place a great deal of importance on your journal entries because they show us the quality and progress of your thinking (and writing) about the literature, and they also provide us with ideas for guiding class discussion.

## **Course Requirements (continued):**

- **Three essays.** The first and second papers should be 5-6pp each, the third about 8-10pp. Because this course is designated “writing intensive,” we require that considerable effort be put into producing your papers. We expect everyone to draft and revise each paper over a period of several weeks in consultation with classmates, the course tutor (Ezi), and the instructors. Writing intensive courses exist to encourage continuing improvement in students’ writing skills. Even if you are already a highly accomplished writer, you should use the assignments in this course as an opportunity to work at becoming better. You will find that writing is an essential mode of inquiry and expression in a liberal arts education.
- **Class presentation.** Each student will give a presentation according to a sign-up schedule that will be passed around. We would like the presentation to take the form of a workshop on a draft-in-progress of a paper that you are writing for the course. In this way you will be teaching others by sharing your ideas and also learning from others by getting advice on your work in progress. After considering the advice, you will have the opportunity to revise.

## **Grading:**

Your grade will be based on our assessment of your journal entries, your participation in class discussion, your presentation (i.e., the workshop on your draft-in-progress), and your three essays.

## **Required Texts:** (all except *Flowers and Shadows* are available at the college bookstore)

Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*.

Aidoo, Ama Ata. *Our Sister Killjoy*.

Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *Nervous Conditions*.

Emecheta, Buchi. *The Bride Price*.

Laye, Camara. *The Dark Child*.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o. *Weep Not, Child*.

Nwapa, Flora. *Efuru*

Okri, Ben. *Flowers and Shadows* (**available on ERes, Password FYSP129**).

Podis, Leonard, and Saaka, Yakubu. *Challenging Hierarchies*.

Soyinka, Wole. *Death and the King’s Horseman*.

## **Schedule of Class Meetings and Assignments:**

### **Week 1 – Tuesday, February 6**

- Introduction of students, professors, and peer writing tutor
- Overview of major goals related to Liberal Arts Learning:
  - Critical Thinking: Rigor, Depth, Breadth, Open-Mindedness
  - Discussion Skills: Both Speaking and Listening
  - Writing: Thoughtfulness, Clarity, Insight, Thoroughness
- Review of syllabus, especially themes and issues related to colonial and postcolonial African Literature
- Assignment for Thursday: Read Podis & Saaka, *Challenging Hierarchies*, “Preface” (pp. xi–xiii) and “Introduction” (pp. 1–10). Also, read Saaka & Podis, “Ongoing Dialogues in African Literature,” on Oberlin Online. The web site address is [http://www.oberlin.edu/news-info/observations/observations\\_saaka\\_podis1.html](http://www.oberlin.edu/news-info/observations/observations_saaka_podis1.html)
- Additionally for Thursday, write your first journal entry. In your entry, you should discuss any reactions you have to the readings, raise questions you have about approaching this field of study, and discuss any experience you have had with colonial or postcolonial literature. Please bring the journal with you to class on Thursday, February 8. We will ask everyone to choose an excerpt from the journal to read aloud to the class.

### **Thursday, February 8**

- Podis/Saaka, *Challenging Hierarchies* “Preface” (pp. xi–xiii) & “Introduction” (pp. 1–10) Saaka/Podis “Ongoing Dialogues in African Literature,” Oberlin Online. Available at [http://www.oberlin.edu/news-info/observations/observations\\_saaka\\_podis1.html](http://www.oberlin.edu/news-info/observations/observations_saaka_podis1.html)
- **Note:** First journal entry is due in class today. Plan to read part of your entry aloud.
- Assignment for next week: Laye, *The Dark Child* and Aidoo, “Male-ing Names in the Sun” (Chapter 5 in *Challenging Hierarchies*). Write your second journal entry and bring it to class next Tuesday.

## **Part I: Childhood Quests/Culture and Tradition**

### **Week 2—February 13 & 15**

Historical and Political contexts: French colonialism and the Negritude movement/ British Colonial Education

- Laye, *The Dark Child* (or *L'Enfant Noir*)
- Podis & Saaka, *Challenging Hierarchies*, Chapter 5, “Male-ing Names in the Sun,” by Ama Ata Aidoo (pp. 87–97).
- **Note:** Second journal entry due in class on Tuesday, February 13 (journals due every Tues.)

### **Week 3—February 20 & 22**

British Colonialism and its impact/ Anglophone literature

- Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*
- Podis & Saaka, *Challenging Hierarchies*, Chapter 7, “From Stereotype to Individuality: Womanhood in Chinua Achebe’s Novels,” by Chioma Opara (pp. 113–123).
- Assignment of first essay (due Thurs., March 15). Schedule conferences with Ezi.
- Sign up for presentations

### **Week 4—February 27 & March 1**

Gender, Tradition, and the Colonial Context

- Nwapa, *Efuru*
- Podis & Saaka, *Challenging Hierarchies*, Chapter 1, “Literature, Feminism, and the African Woman Today,” by Ama Ata Aidoo (pp. 15–35).
- Schedule conferences with Ezi (to continue each week until paper is due)

**Week 5—March 6 & 8**

Gender and Education in the Colonial Era

- Emecheta, *The Bride Price*
- Presentations

**Week 6—March 13 & 15**

Ongoing Dialogues in African Literature

- We will finish discussing *The Bride Price* this week.
- Saaka and Podis, “Prolegomena to the Study of Ongoing Dialogues in Modern African Literature: Achebe and the Themes of the New Conversation” (Handout)
- **Because there is a paper due this week, no journal entry is due.**
- Presentations
- **Note: Final draft of the first essay is due in class on Thursday, March 15.** In class, we will ask people to read aloud an excerpt from their paper and to speak about what they wound up writing, what they learned from the experience of writing it, how it relates to what we’ve been discussing in class, and whether they might be interested in working on it any further. We are hoping that in this way we can all benefit from the work everyone has done on their papers, rather than having them addressed only to us, the professors. Through the process of circulating everyone’s ideas among all the members of the class, we wish to emphasize that scholarly knowledge is in fact shaped through the creation of discourse communities—groups of people who conduct ongoing conversations (both written and oral) about the subjects of their study. Such communities are the basis of the disciplines that we study in a liberal arts curriculum. Discussing what everyone has written should also enable us to revisit the texts and issues we have been focusing on in the first few weeks of the course.

**Week 7—March 20 & 22**

Education and Political Change

- Ngugi, *Weep Not, Child*
- Podis & Saaka, *Challenging Hierarchies*, Chapter 15, “Representations of Cultural Ambivalence: The Portrayal of Sons and Daughters in Postcolonial African Literature,” by Yakubu Saaka and Leonard A. Podis (pp. 263—288).

**Week 8—March 27 & 29**

**SPRING VACATION**

## **Part II: Resistance and Adaptation**

### **Week 9—April 3 & 5**

Clash of Cultures?

- Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*
- In *Death and the King's Horseman* volume, also read Gates, “Being, the Will, and the Semantics of Death”(pp. 155–164) and Jeyifo, “Ideology and Tragedy” (pp. 164–171)
- Second essay assigned (due Thursday, April 26)—Schedule conferences with Ezi.

### **Week 10—April 10 & 12**

“Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint”

- Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy*
- Podis and Saaka, *Challenging Hierarchies*, Chapter 14, “Sojourners in the Lands of Former Colonizers,” by Vincent O. Odamtten (pp. 247–261).
- Conferences with Ezi, as scheduled. (Will continue until paper #2 is due)

### **Week 11—April 17 & 19**

Women's Struggles for Equality in Colonial and Postcolonial Society

- Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*
- Podis & Saaka, Ch. 3, “ The South End of a North-South Writers' Dialogue: Two Letters from a Postcolonial Feminist 'Exmatriate,'” by Micere Mugo (pp. 63–83).
- Presentations

### **Week 12—April 24 & 26**

Questioning Colonialism and Patriarchy

- We will continue reading and discussing *Nervous Conditions*
- Podis/Saaka, Chapter 2, “The Woman Artist in Africa Today,” by Micere Mugo (pp. 37–61).
- **Journal entry for this week is suspended because the paper is due.**
- **Final draft of the second essay is due in class on Thursday, April 26.** We will again ask people to read aloud an excerpt from their paper and to speak about what they wound up writing, what they learned from it, how it relates to what we've been discussing, and whether they might be interested in working on it any further. Remember to conceive of your paper as a contribution to an ongoing conversation among members of our discourse community.

**Week 13—May 1 & 3**

Coming of Age in Neocolonial Society

- Okri, *Flowers and Shadows*
- Final essay assigned (due Wednesday, May 16)

**Week 14—May 8 & 10**

Resisting Neocolonialism: Creating a Usable Past, Envisioning a Hopeful Future

- Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*.
- Podis & Saaka, Chapter 16, “*Anthills of the Savannah* and *Petals of Blood: The Creation of a Usable Past*” (pp. 291–309).
- Sign up for conferences with Ezi.
- Presentations

**Week 15—May 14-May 16 (No Classes—Reading Period and Exam Period)**

- Continue working on your final paper, which is due Wednesday, May 16
- Conferences with Ezi, as scheduled.

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**The last class meeting is Thursday, May 10. The final draft of the third essay is due Wednesday, May 16 at 2:00pm in either Rice 208 or King 139. There is no final examination for this course.**