Course Overview:

This course will focus on African literature of the late colonial and postcolonial periods. Our main concern will be the work of writers from formerly colonized African countries. We will focus on coming of age in two ways. First, many of the books feature youthful protagonists who face the challenges of growing up amid difficult social and political circumstances. Second, we will study the “coming of age” of modern African literature itself.

Although the subject of our study is literature, our approach will be interdisciplinary. While reading the works to appreciate their literary qualities, we will also attempt to view them as products of the cultures and the social and political circumstances that produced them. In other words, we will examine the literary works as complex expressions of their socio-political contexts, as well as indicators of the values and worldviews of the societies in which they were composed. We will explore how 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 studying and because of the special goals of the First-Year Seminar Program, this course will stress diversity in approaches to learning as well as 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 through broad-based methods of inquiry. For one thing, we will employ alternative approaches 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. As your professor, I believe that I can best use my authority by supporting your attempts to develop your authority as committed learners and students.

A major goal of a liberal arts education is to enable students to participate in a multiplicity of powerful, ongoing conversations (sometimes called “discourses”) that shape knowledge in the academy and in the world beyond it. Thus your participation in class discussion is crucial to the success of the course, as we will 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. Please note that our Writing Associate, Adeola, is an important resource in your learning process. He will hold office hours and schedule individual conferences to discuss your writing.

Note: This is a Writing-Intensive (W-Int) course that counts toward the College of A&S Writing Requirement. Students must pass two “W” courses (“Int” or “Adv”) to meet the requirement. This course also counts toward the Cultural Diversity (CD) Requirement.
**Major Objectives:**

- To introduce you to the study of colonial and postcolonial African literature
- To encourage a non-western perspective on the subject matter of the course. This is a challenging 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—that is, to consider literature not only from a literary perspective but also from political, social, and historical perspectives.
- To provide you with a seminar-type setting in which to explore the subject matter in a hands-on, interactive, participatory style. Ideally, this approach will help you to develop these skills:
  - Critical thinking, especially interpreting and evaluating literary texts
  - Writing, especially about literature
  - Discussion skills
  - An awareness of secondary sources and how to employ them

**Course Requirements:**

1. **Regular attendance.** This is crucial. You will be penalized one letter grade for missing more than 2 classes without a sound excuse. I follow this policy not to be punitive or authoritarian or to instill submissive habits in you, but because your participation is essential to our work.

2. **Reading of assigned texts.** See the schedule, below. Note that I expect you to read the secondary sources (critical essays in *Challenging Hierarchies*) as well as the primary texts.

3. **Participation in class discussion.** In general, everyone should aim to participate in class discussion at least once during each class session.

4. **Completion of a journal entry each week.** Entries should explore an aspect of the readings for the week. They should be 2–3 pages and may be typed or handwritten. They are due on Tuesdays, except for the first week’s entry, which is due Thursday, September 3. During weeks when essays are due, I will suspend the journal requirement. *Please note that the journals are central to the course because they show me the quality and progress of your thinking and writing, and they help to shape class discussion.*

5. **Three essays.** The first and second essays should be roughly 6pp each, the third about 8-10pp. You should plan to draft and revise each paper in consultation with classmates, our course Writing Associate (Adeola), and me. Even if you are a highly accomplished writer, you should use the assignments—including the journal entries—as an opportunity to improve.

6. **Presentation/Workshop.** Each student will give a presentation/workshop according to a sign-up sheet that I will circulate. The presentation should take the form of a workshop on a draft of an essay that you are writing for the course. In this way you will be enlightening others by sharing your ideas with them and also learning from others by getting advice on your paper in progress. You will also be able to refine your writing skills as you revise your draft.

7. **Conferences with our WA, Adeola.** I expect everyone to meet at least once with Adeola in conjunction with each of the three essay assignments. Fulfilling this requirement will add 1/3 of a letter grade to your final grade (e.g., moving a B to a B+). Failure to honor the requirement may result in the loss of 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g., moving a B to a B-).
Grading:
This is a graded course. However, as much as possible, I ask you to put aside the pressures that go with grading to adopt a risk-taking mentality that may help you expand your understanding of the literature and improve your approach to learning and writing. Rather than dwell on grading, I hope we can focus on the tasks before us and draw inspiration from the challenges and rewards of reading and writing: discovering, expressing and communicating ideas; solving problems; and informing and enlightening each other. Accordingly, I will use a form of contract grading. If you (1) attend regularly, (2) participate in course activities, and (3) do the required assignments at an acceptable level, you will earn a B. These activities and assignments include reading all the texts, submitting all the weekly journal entries, participating in class discussion, giving a presentation/workshop, and composing three essays. If you pursue your work with exceptional intensity, you may move up to the A range. If you don’t meet the contract, you will get a C, D, or F, depending on how much you fall short (e.g., more than two unexcused absences will cost you a letter grade; not meeting with Adeola will cost you 1/3 of a grade). Rather than put grades on your journal entries and papers, I will provide extensive written comments. At the end of the semester, I will invite you to submit a final self-evaluation (2pp.) that I will consider as I determine course grades.

Honor Code: Please write the honor code pledge on all assignments and sign your name following it: “I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment.” For more information on the honor code, consult the Oberlin College website.

Required Texts
Available at the college bookstore (except for Nervous Conditions and Flowers and Shadows, which are on Blackboard, and “An Ex-Mas Feast,” which is available on The New Yorker website)

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. Purple Hibiscus.
Aidoo, Ama Ata. Our Sister Killjoy.
Akpan, Uwem “An Ex-Mas Feast,” (available online at The New Yorker website)
Beah, Ishmael. A Long Way Gone.
Dangarembga, Tsitsi. Nervous Conditions. (on Blackboard)
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 (on Blackboard).
Soyinka, Wole. Death and the King’s Horseman.

Supplemental Reading
The library has created a resource guide for doing research on African literature: http://www.oberlin-college-library.org/sp/subjects/guide.php?subject=FYSPI29
Also, for research help, please consult with our designated librarian, Eboni A. Johnson.
Schedule of Class Meetings and Assignments:

Week 1 — Tuesday, September 1

• Introductions

• Brief overview of goals related to Liberal Arts Learning:
  --Critical Thinking: Breadth, Depth, Problem-Solving, and Open-Mindedness
  --Discussion Skills: Listening, Speaking, Facilitating Dialogue
  --Writing: Thoughtfulness, Thoroughness, Clarity, Order, and Expressiveness

• Review of syllabus

• 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

• For Thursday, write your first journal entry. Today in class we will briefly review some sample journal entries from past semesters. In your entry for Thursday, you should discuss reactions you have to the readings, raise questions you have about approaching this field of study, and discuss whether you have had any prior experience with colonial or postcolonial literature. Please bring the journal entry with you to class on Thursday, September 3. I will ask everyone to choose an excerpt from the journal entry to read aloud in class.

  Thursday, September 3

• Podis/Saaka, Challenging Hierarchies “Preface” (pp. xi–xiii) & “Introduction” (pp. 1–10)

• Note: Your 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, September 8.

Part I: Childhood Quests/Culture and Tradition

Week 2 — September 8 & 10

French colonialism and the Négritude movement/ British Colonial Education

• Laye, The Dark Child (L’Enfant noir in the original French version)

• 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, September 8 (journals due every Tues.)
Week 3—September 15 & 17
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., October 8). Schedule conferences with our course Writing Associate, Adeola
- Sign up for presentation/workshops

Week 4—September 22 & 24
Gender, Tradition, and the Colonial Context

- Nwapa, Efuru
- Schedule conferences with Adeola (to continue each week until paper is due)
- Presentation/workshops begin.

Week 5—September 29 & October 1
Gender and Education in the Colonial Era

- Emecheta, The Bride Price
- Presentation/workshops based on Essay #1

Week 6—October 6 & 8
Ongoing Dialogues in African Literature

- We will finish discussing The Bride Price this week.
- Podis and Saaka, “[U]ntil the Lions Have Their Own Historians’: Chinua Achebe and the Ongoing Dialogues of Modern African Literature” (Handout)
- Because there is a paper due this week, no journal entry is due.
- Presentation/workshops based on Essay #1

Note: Final draft of the first essay is due in class on Thursday, October 8. In class, I will ask people to read aloud from their papers and to say what they learned and how it relates to what we’ve discussed in class. By circulating everyone’s ideas, we can stress that scholarly knowledge arises from discourse communities—people who conduct ongoing conversations 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—October 13 & 15
Education and Political Change

- Ngugi, Weep Not, Child


Week 8—October 20 & 22
Fall Vacation

Part II: Resistance and Adaptation

Week 9—October 27 & 29
Clash of Cultures?

- Soyinka, Death and the King’s Horseman

- Second essay assigned (due Thursday, November 19)—Schedule conferences with Adeola

Week 10—November 3 & 5
“Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint”

- Aidoo, Our Sister Killjoy


- Conferences with Adeola, as scheduled. (To continue until Essay #2 is due)

Week 11—November 10 & 12
Women’s Struggles for Equality in Colonial and Postcolonial Society

- Dangarembga, Nervous Conditions (available on Blackboard)


Week 12—November 17 & 19
Coming of Age in Neocolonial Society, Part I

- Okri, Flowers and Shadows (available on Blackboard)


- Because there is a paper due this week, no journal entry is due.

- Final draft of the second essay is due in class on Thursday, November 19. I will again ask people to read aloud an excerpt from their paper and to speak about what they learned and how it relates to what we’ve been discussing. Think of your paper as a contribution to an ongoing conversation among members of our classroom discourse community.
Week 13—November 24 (Note: No class on November 26—Thanksgiving Day)
Coming of Age in Neocolonial Society, Part II

• Tuesday: Begin Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*
• Thursday: Thanksgiving Day—No Class
• Final essay assigned (due Thursday, December 17)

Week 14—December 1 & 3
Coming of Age in Neocolonial Society, Part III

• Tuesday: Finish discussing *Purple Hibiscus*
• Thursday: Begin Beah, *A Long Way Gone.*
• Sign up for conferences with Adeola

Week 15—December 8 & 10

• Finish discussing *A Long Way Gone.*
• Akpan, “An Ex-Mas Feast,” available on *The New Yorker* web site: http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/06/13/050613fi_fiction1

December 12 through December 15: READING PERIOD—NO CLASSES

• Continue working on your final paper. It is due Thursday, December 17, at 11:00 a.m. as an email attachment
• Conferences with Adeola, as scheduled.

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The last class meeting is Thursday, December 10. The final draft of the third essay is due *Thursday, December 17*, at 11:00 a.m. Please submit it electronically, as an email attachment. There is no final examination for this course. I invite you to submit a self-evaluation (two pages or so) in which you are free to suggest the grade you believe you have earned. While I cannot promise to give you that grade, I will consider your self-evaluation seriously as I determine final grades. (Please review the detailed statement on grading at the top of p. 3 of this syllabus.)