

SYLLABUS

ENGL 4684 – Special Topics: Jewish and Muslim Women’s Literature - Fall 2008

Section 92732 • Tue. & Thurs., 12:30-1:45pm • MCB 224

Professor: ERIKA MEITNER
Office: 410 Shanks Hall
Phone: 540.231.7728
Email: meitner@vt.edu
Office hours: Tuesdays, 2pm-3pm • Wednesdays, 11am-12pm • by appointment

DESCRIPTION

This course will examine novels, essays, short stories, memoirs, and graphic novels by Jewish and Muslim women authors, paying particular attention to issues of gender, class, education, nationalism, and religion. We will begin with an overview of Jewish and Islamic religious texts, terms, beliefs, and practices, and move on to explore various themes in Jewish and Islamic women’s literature, including but not limited to storytelling, spirituality, mobility, resistance, sex-segregation, conversion, immigration and assimilation. We will also grapple with more complex questions: determining the line between memoir, fiction, and ethnography; discussing the poetics and politics of women’s representations in literature, as well as literary representations of their faiths; assessing the relationship between religion and culture for women in Judaism and Islam; evaluating issues of personal identity and national identity; and exploring implicit connections between form and content in graphic novels, and other hybrid literary forms. We will conclude by looking specifically towards modern-day America, and the Jewish and Muslim women writing here. While our main focus will be the reading and discussion of literary texts, to develop a better understanding of the issues presented in these works, additional readings and research in theory, history, religious studies, current events, and popular culture will be necessary. This course will be a collaborative effort to synthesize many of the themes and skills that you have acquired in previous English courses, and apply them to new subject material.

SPECIFIC GOALS

This course is designed to:

- acquaint students with cultures other than their own (people, histories, and values), helping them to become aware of power structures and dynamics in other societies as well as their own;
- help students hone their critical skills by exploring the connections between form and content as reflected in literature of various genres;
- serve as a synthesis of, and playground for, ideas students may have already encountered in Introduction to Women’s Literature, Introduction to Ethnic American Literature, Introduction to Critical Reading, and/or Postcolonial Cultural Studies;
- provide students with a comprehensive overview of both Jewish and Islamic religious practices, as well as the cultures surrounding these practices, and the texts that inspire them.

Required Texts at the Virginia Tech Bookstore (also on reserve at Newman Library):

- *Dreams of Trespass*, Fatima Mernissi
- *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*, Faiza Guene
- *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, Gina Nahai
- *Persepolis 2*, Marjane Satrapi

Required Text at Kopy Komer: The Course Reader (CR) (\$30.22) (at 101 McDonald St. at the Corner of Progress & Main; 951-8600; open M-Th 8:30-5:30 & F 8:30-5; they accept **cash or checks only!**)

FORMAT

Each day will consist of a short lecture, with the majority of the class devoted to discussion of assigned texts. Each student will be expected to be engaged in the lectures, asking questions when appropriate, and to participate daily in discussion.

GRADES:

- Class Participation (which includes attendance, class discussions, and the daily class preparation assignments): 20%
- Portfolio (five pieces of writing): 20%
- Mid-Term Paper 1: 20%
- Final Paper 2: 30%
- Oral Presentation: 10%

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. **READING:** Obviously, keeping up with the reading is important. Take notes, underline important or confusing passages, and write down your questions as you go along. If you start each assignment early and give yourself plenty of time, you will not only enjoy it more and learn it more thoroughly, but you will have more opportunities to consult with me (via e-mail, during office hours, etc.) about questions that you might have as you go along. The reading load for this class will be substantial and cumulative. This means that even after the class periods assigned to a given text have passed, we should have opportunities to discuss that text. Please feel free to refer back to previous texts in our discussions of new ones. If you find yourself wishing you could have more time to discuss each text, that is a good sign!
2. **DAILY CLASS PREPARATION:** For each class discussion, bring one observation and one questions (both typed) about the assigned readings. These observations and questions will help develop our discussion along the paths you are interested in, and will also serve as a means for taking attendance.
3. **CLASS DISCUSSIONS:** Everyone should strive to make thoughtful contributions to class discussion on a regular basis. Because we all have different points of view and experiences, everyone's routine, informed participation should make discussion especially rich and valuable for us all. Although engaged listening is important, regular—even perfect—attendance does not constitute participation. Attendance is mandatory: more than three unexcused absences will automatically reduce your final grade. Three latenesses (more than 10 minutes late) count as one absence. While I appreciate knowing in advance if you will miss a class, informing me of it does not necessarily mean that you will be excused for that class. Each unexcused absence (after the first 3) will count 1/3 of a letter grade off your final course grade. (For example, if your final course average is numerically a “B,” but you have 4 unexcused absences, the final course grade will become a “B-.”)
4. **PORTFOLIO WRITING:** You will keep a portfolio of shorter writing for this course—regular entries that will function as a more focused version of a journal. You must write **FIVE** entries across the semester. Each entry should represent your substantial, thoughtful, engagement with a text assigned as reading for the same class for which the entry is due. On days when we read several texts—e.g., several stories—you must focus your entry on one assigned text for that day only: do not attempt to write about all texts assigned for a given day. The class will be divided into groups, and each group will be assigned a particular set of days—so you will be writing about different texts than some of your classmates. If your entries are appropriately focused, they need not be that long (i.e., two or three substantial,

detailed paragraphs incorporating quotations from the text under analysis). Here are the options from which to select in composing your portfolio entries (choose one option only per entry):

- a. Perform a brief close analysis of a few lines or a paragraph from an assigned text. In doing so, be sure to describe what the quotation says and how it says it, to tell your reader where it comes in the text, and to explain the significance of the quotation. Paraphrasing the quotation without explaining its significance is not adequate. Consider these questions if you feel stumped: Why is this particular quotation interesting? Does it use language in especially meaningful, striking, strange, or beautiful ways? Does it change or confirm how you understand the rest of the text? How does it relate to the main themes of the course?
- b. Relate a class reading—as specifically as you can—to an earlier one that we have read for this class. Use the description of Option 1 as a guide for how to perform close analyses on the class readings that you compare to each other. Option 2 is an elaboration on and extension of Option 1: in this case, you connect one text assigned on the day the portfolio entry is due with one text from a previous class period. The connections you can make between different class readings should be especially helpful for you when it comes time to write your papers.
- c. Work through your confusion about an especially difficult text by writing an explanation of what, specifically, seems to be the source of your confusion. Does a particular use of figurative language seem to obscure the work's meaning? Do you feel that you need more historical context to understand the work? Are you experiencing cultural or conceptual disorientation—or is this a genre you are not used to? If this is a theoretical text, you may be dealing with dense language. Root your efforts to work out your confusion in a particular passage from the text, and quote from that passage. Choose a passage that best illustrates the aspect of the text that confuses you, and take it apart. *Finally, be sure to make some reasonable guesses about what the passage might mean.*

Bring your portfolio entries to class. I might ask you to read aloud from or to summarize your entry for that day to spark class discussion. Volunteering to read or to speak from your portfolio will prevent me from calling on you to do so!

5. PAPERS: In addition to your portfolio entries, you will compose two essays for this course: Paper 1 (due 10.14.08) must be 5-7 pages; Paper 2 (due 12.9.08) must be 8-10 pages. While your papers should engage with issues raised in class, they must focus on your own ideas about the texts that you analyze. Your papers can take ideas from your portfolio entries, or any other small writing assignments you may have done for the class, and develop them. Each paper should expound a thesis (position or argument) of your own design, and each should include substantial, detailed, careful close readings of quotations from the texts under analysis. I strongly encourage you to consult with me about your final paper well before it is due to discuss a final paper topic, or prior to the end of the semester to discuss a working draft of your final paper. These papers must be typed (word-processed) on standard paper, double-spaced, in MLA format, with 1-inch margins, in a standard 12-point font, such as *Courier*, *Times*, or *Times New Roman*. You must follow MLA style when quoting from other texts and creating a works cited list. Be sure to use the proper format for quoting verse, and make certain to use block quotations appropriately. Papers are due during class on the dates assigned. Unless advance arrangements have been made, late papers will be penalized.

6. **ORAL PRESENTATION:** You will give a 10-minute presentation on your final paper, and answer questions from the class. The presentations will follow a conference panel format, so that you might share your work with colleagues to generate scholarly discussion on a particular topic, and receive their feedback on your work.

SOME LAST NOTES:

- **GRAMMAR:** Grammar and Mechanics should be correct in all of your writings for this course. If you know you have trouble, see me, or get help at the Writing Center on the third floor of Shanks (http://www.composition.english.vt.edu/wc/WC_Home.html).
- **PLAGIARISM:** The Virginia Tech Honor System Constitution sets forth the vital principle that “Every student has the right to live in an academic environment that is free from the injustices caused by any form of intellectual dishonesty.” Therefore, the Virginia Tech Honor Code will be upheld in this course for all work submitted. See the Honor System website at www.honorsystem.vt.edu.
- **DISABILITY STATEMENT:** Reasonable accommodations are available for students who have a disability. Students should contact the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD), 150 Henderson Hall, 231-3788 (V), 231-1740 (TTY); Susan P. Angle, spangle@vt.edu, www.ssd.vt.edu. “Students with disabilities are responsible for self-identification....To be eligible for services, documentation of the disability from a qualified professional must be presented to SSD upon request.” If you are a student with special needs or circumstances, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or feel that you may need an accommodation because of a disability (learning disability, attention deficit disorder, psychological, physical, etc.) please make an appointment with me as soon as possible during my office hours.
- **ILLNESS:** To excuse an absence due to illness, I will need a note from Schiffert Health Center or a doctor.
- **IMPORTANT DATES:** Last day to add classes or to add/drop audit option 8/29; last day to drop a class without a grade penalty 10/3.

E-PORTFOLIOS:

A note for English majors who have e-portfolios set up: Because this is an ethnic literature class, your required essays or oral reports could be used in your ePortfolio to demonstrate:

Knowledge and understanding of the discursive, social, historical, biographical, linguistic, or cultural contexts out of which or against which literature is written.