

RELJ 227 – Jewish and Islamic Women’s Literature
Instructor: Erika Meitner (erikam@virginia.edu)
2006 Summer Session III, July 13 – August 10
CAB B026, M – F, 10:30am – 12:45pm

SYLLABUS:
JEWISH & ISLAMIC WOMEN’S LITERATURE

RATIONALE

Both Judaism and Islam are legalistic, Abrahamic religions of practice, and often have distinct cultures and customs surrounding those practices. Both religions, in their most fundamentalist form, are also often oppressive to women in a variety of ways. In addition, prior to the rise of Arab nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the complicating factor of Zionism, Sephardic Jews and Muslims generally shared the same geography. Over the last century women in both religions, historically silenced by male-dominated textual traditions and codified misogynistic customs, have started and continue to raise their voices and tell their stories by producing literature, art, and critical work of all kinds that speaks to their experiences.

There are many practical advantages to combining the two fields of Jewish and Islamic women’s literature, and letting their individual richness inform one another. Women—in particular those who deal with gender issues—are on the forefront of reconfiguring textures and boundaries in both fields in a variety of ways to include studies of non-traditional texts, as well as non-textual source materials. The academic worlds of Jewish and Islamic women share many other similarities, including entrenched male religious textual traditions, feminist scholars who work on reinterpretations and hermeneutical overhauls of those textual traditions, and interests in identity politics, multiculturalism, and post-colonial theory. In addition, Islamic and Jewish women currently share the trend of a revival of orthodox women’s religiosity, Middle East nationalism (albeit different versions), a history in America as immigrants, and a history of cultural stereotyping.

SPECIFIC GOALS

This course is designed to:

- 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 command and inspire them, with emphasis on differences and similarities as reflected in literature of various genres
- 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
- investigate how women’s religion (and their own accounts of their theology, spirituality, and practice) differs from what might be considered normative in each tradition; and,
- analyze critically differences and similarities as reflected in literature of various genres.

DESCRIPTION

The course will begin with an overview of Jewish and Islamic religious texts, terms, beliefs, and practices, and move into basic readings on women and religion from Jewish and Islamic perspectives. Readings will include selections from: Susannah Heschel, Judith Plaskow, Blu Greenberg, Sylvia Barack Fishman, Leila Ahmed, Miriam Cooke, Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, and others. We will also investigate material religion as an alternative and companion to theological and textual study, using work from Vanessa Ochs, Jenna Joselit, and Faegheh Shirazi. In addition, we will explore various themes in Jewish and Islamic women's literature, including but not limited to storytelling, spirituality, mobility, resistance, sex-segregation (harem/shtetl), conversion, immigration and assimilation. We will also consider 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; and assessing the relationship between religion and culture for women in Judaism and Islam. We will conclude by looking specifically towards modern-day America, and the Jewish and Islamic women writing here.

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.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Participate in class discussion and complete assigned readings. (We might begin keeping reading responses in journals if it seems like it might be helpful to discussions.)
2. Two short papers of 5 pages each on course topics—one close reading paper, and one compare/contrast paper.
3. Specific assigned days of discussion-leading.

COURSE READINGS

See attached calendar. Readings due on the day they're scheduled.

IN-CLASS FILM SHOWINGS & LOCATIONS

July 14, Friday – *Half the Kingdom*

Room 322B in Clemons Library

We will meet in our normal classroom, and walk over to Clemons together at 11:00am.

July 18, Tuesday – *Aladdin*

We will meet in Room 407, in Clemons Library at 10:30am.

July 31, Monday – *Hidden Faces*

We will meet in Room 322B, in Clemons Library at 10:30am.

August 7, Monday – *Heir to an Execution*

We will meet in Room 322B, in Clemons Library at 10:30am.

Please note: The majority of the class readings are available in the Course Reader (CR), which is available for purchase at The Copy Shop on Elliewood Avenue. The Course Reader should be available by Friday. The readings for July 14 (Fri) and July 17 (Mon) will either be on toolkit, or you will receive hard-copies of them on the first day.

July 13 (Thurs) Introduction to Judaism & Islam	
July 14 (Fri) Women & Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selections from <i>Islam: The Straight Path</i> (68; 74-81; 82-100) by John L. Esposito • “What is a Jew?” from <i>Settings of Silver</i> (3-14) by Stephen M. Wylen • “Introduction” to <i>Women Claim Islam</i> (vii-xxix) by Miriam Cooke • IN-CLASS FILM: <i>Half the Kingdom</i>
July 17 (Mon) Women & Storytelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Story of Lilith (64 – 69), from Louis Ginzberg’s <i>Legends of the Jews</i> (on toolkit) • Selections from <i>Arabian Nights</i> (ix-xiii; map/1-25) • “Mercy” by Gina Nahai (129-137) from <i>The Modern Jewish Girls’ Guide to Guilt</i> • “A Conversation with my Father” by Grace Paley (232-237)
July 18 (Tues) The Poetics & Politics of Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selection from <i>Not Without my Daughter</i> (1-72) by Betty Mahmoudy (CR) • Please also read online amazon.com reviews of the BOOK <i>Not Without my Daughter</i> • IN-CLASS FILM: <i>Aladdin</i> • TO BE READ & DISCUSSED IN-CLASS: “Disney’s Magic Carpet Ride: Aladdin and Women in Islam” by Christiane Staninger in <i>The Emperor’s Old Groove</i>
July 19 (Wed) Biography / Ethnography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selections from <i>Number our Days</i> (“So What do you want from us here?” on pages 1-39, and “Jewish comes up in you from the roots” on pages 232-268) by Barbara Meyerhoff (CR)
July 20 (Thurs) Biography / Ethnography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selections from <i>Reading Lolita in Tehran</i> (1-77) by Azar Nafisi (CR) • Washington Post article: “Sorry, Wrong Chador” by Karl Vick (see below for link)¹
July 21 (Fri) Women & Mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selections from <i>Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith</i> (pages 5-72; and 359-376) by Gina Nahai (CR)
July 24 (Mon) Harem vs. Shtetl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selections from <i>Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood</i> (1-47) by Fatima Mernissi (CR)
July 25 (Tues) Harem vs. Shtetl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Introduction” (1-26) & “The Community” (27-66) in <i>Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers</i> by Stephanie Wellen Levine

¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A60490-2004Jul18.html>

	(CR)
July 26 (Wed) Religion of Men / Religion of Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Harem” by Leila Ahmed (93-134) in <i>A Border Passage</i> (CR)
July 27 (Thurs) Religion of Men / Religion of Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Introduction” (3-17) & “From the Female Perspective” (65-88) in <i>Women as Ritual Experts</i> by Susan Sered (CR)
July 28 (Fri) Women & Material Religion Vanessa Ochs Visits Class 11-12, speaks on material religion PAPER 1 DUE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excerpt from <i>Material Christianity</i> by Colleen McDannell - online, at: www.materialreligion.org/journal/material.html • “Other Tales: Museum Objects, Women, and Jewish Knowledges” by Paula Chaiken (73-77) in <i>Judaism Since Gender</i> (CR) • “What makes a Jewish Home Jewish?” by Vanessa Ochs, online at: www.materialreligion.org/journal/jewish.html
July 31 (Mon) Modesty & Veiling Class meets in 322B for movie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Weight of the Veil” (130-136) in <i>Women Claim Islam</i> (CR) • “In Defense of the Daughters of Israel: Observations on Niddah and Mikveh” (105-123) in <i>On Women and Judaism</i> by Blu Greenberg (CR) • “The Veil Debate—Again” by Leila Ahmed (153-170) in <i>On Shifting Ground</i> • IN-CLASS FILM: <i>Hidden Faces</i>
Aug 1 (Tues) Censor the Body, Censor the Voice Guest speaker, 11:30am: Zenia Helbig on veiling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selection (pages 239-296) from <i>The Romance Reader</i> by Pearl Abraham (CR) • Selections from <i>Women of Algiers in Their Apartment</i> by Assia Djebar (CR) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “The Woman who Weeps” (53-57) - “There is no Exile” (61-73) - “Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound” (133-151)
Aug 2 (Wed) Women and Violence PAPER 1 REWRITES DUE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Fire and Sand” by Laila Halaby (73-85) in <i>Dinarzad’s Children</i> (CR) • Selection (pages 9-48) from <i>Persian Brides</i> by Dorit Rabinyan, trans. Yael Lotan (CR)
Aug 3 (Thurs) Immigration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selections from <i>Persepolis 2</i>, by Marjane Satrapi (TBD, book in UVA bookstore) • “Children of Loneliness” by Anzia Yezierska (233-244) in <i>The Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature</i> (CR & on toolkit)
Aug 4 (Fri) In America: Assimilation & Alienation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “My Elizabeth” by Diana Abu-Jaber (295-312) in <i>Dinarzad’s Children</i> (CR) • “The Four Questions” by Allegra Goodman (1133-1148) in <i>Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature</i> (CR)
Aug 7 (Mon) In America: Stigma & Discrimination Class meets in 322B for movie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The Spiced Chicken Queen of Mickaweaquah, Iowa” by Mohja Kahf (137-154) in <i>Dinarzad’s Children</i> (CR) • IN-CLASS FILM: <i>Heir to an Execution</i>

EXAMS Aug 9 & 10 (W & Thurs) PAPER 2 DUE AUG. 9	