

English W3935x

Multiculturalism and Narrative Form

Thurs 4:10-6 pm

408 Hamilton Hall

Prof. Wen Jin

Department of English and Comparative Literature

Email: wj2130@columbia.edu

Extension: 4-2623

Office: Philosophy Hall 306

Office Hours: W 4-5:30, Th: 3-4 & 6:10-6:40; & by appointment

Course Introduction

This course uses multiculturalism as an umbrella term for a range of policies adopted to promote or protect the political, cultural, and economic rights of many different types of ethnocultural groups, including “immigrants,” “minorities,” “national” groups, and “indigenous people.” More generally, multiculturalism is one of many terms that is often invoked to describe ideas and practices modern nation-states (whether “liberal democracies” or not) adopt to reconcile the principle of formal equality entailed in universal citizenship and the particular needs of certain minorities for protection and accommodation, either to rectify historical inequalities or to maintain interethnic or interracial peace. In this course, we will read a group of narrative texts (mostly fiction) that comment on the specific form of multiculturalism, or conceptions of ethnic/racial difference, in a particular national context. We will connect the core of all versions of multiculturalism—drawing racial/ethnic “fragments” together under the rubric of national unity—with the question of narrative form. How do narrative strategies and tactics mimic or embody the relationship between national unity and ethnic/racial difference—arguably one of the most important cultural and political conundrums characterizing the post-Cold War era? In addition, how do they draw parallels between different forms of multiculturalism without equating them? How does the aesthetics of fragmentation that characterizes these narratives interact with various formal mechanisms that suggest unity, including analogy, juxtaposition, and translation? Sampling some of the most interesting authors who have been active in recent years, this course provides insights into an important part of literary postmodernism as well as comparative multiculturalisms.

Texts

The following texts are available at the Columbia University Bookstore (Broadway and 115th).

- Rabih Alameddine, *Koolhaas: The Art of War* (1999, ISBN: 0312206585)
- Michal Govrin, *Snapshots* (2007, ISBN: 1594489599)
- Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (1994, ISBN: 0679727833)
- Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (1995, ISBN: 0679757945)
- Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion* (1997, ISBN: 0679772669)
- J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (1998, ISBN: 0140275657)
- J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (2005, ISBN: 0143036378)
- Alex Kuo, *Panda Diaries* (2006, ISBN: 088093865X)
- James Welsh, *Fools Crow* (1987, ISBN: 0140089373)

The required course pack is available at the Village Copier (Amsterdam and 118th). Readings with an asterisk can be found in the course pack.

Syllabus

- 4 September Salman Rushdie's story "The Shelter of the World" (circulated electronically prior to class)
Web link:
http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2008/02/25/080225fi_fiction_rushdie?currentPage=8
- 11 September Alameddine, *Koolaid*s
- 18 September Govrin, *Snapshots*
- 25 September Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*
- 2 October *Brian McHale, *Linda Hutcheon, *Gerald Prince
- 9 October Phillips, *Crossing the River*
- 16 October Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*
- 23 October Coetzee, *Age of Iron*
Midterm essays due in class
- 30 October Coetzee, *Disgrace*
- 6 November *Coetzee, *Midgley, *Tapper, *Lippit
- 13 November Welsh, *Fools Crow*
- 20 November Kuo, *Panda Diaries*
- 27 November *Thanksgiving, no class*
- 4 December *Buell, *Whatmore, wrap-up

Monday 15 December: Final essays due in the English Office (602 Philosophy Hall)

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

Course grade breakdown:

- Midterm essay (6-8 pages): 40%
- Final essay (12-15 pages): 50%
- Participation: 10%

Midterm essay (6-8 pages): The objective of the midterm essay is to familiarize you with reading techniques often applied to analyzing narratives. Choose a novel from the first part of the syllabus and analyze how certain formal elements of the narrative function to shape and comment on the imaginary world(s) in it. How, for example, does the fragmentation of the narrative voice in Alameddine's *Koolaid*s embody the irreconcilable conflict between the modern nation's promise of inclusion and its drive for a unified culture? Formulate your own topic and argument.

Final essay (12-15 pages): This assignment gives you an opportunity to construct a conceptual framework in which to analyze two different contemporary novels (either by the same author or two different authors) in a comparative manner. Through this comparative reading, you should advance an argument about how these novels, in their own ways, comment on a certain aspect of how multiethnic nations or empires function. One of the novels has to come from the second half of the semester. You can, but do not have to, choose the other one from the rest of the syllabus. You can compare and contrast the ways in which ethnic or racial relations are imagined in the novels, but you can also choose an entirely different topic that is nevertheless related to the operation of race, ethnicity, and culture in the texts. You can draw on the critical essays read in class, but you must incorporate at least three or four sources (books or articles) you locate through your own research.

Office hours: You are welcome to take advantage of my office hours for any questions, concerns, or suggestions you have about any aspects of the course. I would also love to talk with you about your essay ideas throughout the semester.

Academic dishonesty: Plagiarism and cheating are unacceptable at any academic level. In a case of academic dishonesty, the student will be required to rewrite the essay or take a make-up exam, which will then be automatically downgraded by two full letter grades as a consequence.

Plagiarism involves copying or closely paraphrasing another text in part or in its entirety without citing it. If you have any questions about what is and what is not considered plagiarism, please contact me before handing in your assignments. You can also go to <http://www.college.columbia.edu/bulletin/universitypolicies.php#plagiarism> to review the university policy on plagiarism.

