

AY2025-2026 HL3024 Contemporary Women's Writing Course Outline and Schedule

Thursdays 9.30am-12.20pm, HSS Seminar Room 8

Tutor: Dr. Ng Soo Nee (soonee.ng@ntu.edu.sg)

“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.”

“I write for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We've been taught that silence would save us, but it won't.”

“What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?”

— Audre Lorde

Course Description

This course aims to critically read and examine the literary and generic elements and features of women's writing in the late 20th and 21st century. How are women's lived experience in contemporary societies depicted, explored, (re)imagined, and problematised? What are the factors that contribute to the construction and mediation of female identity – with its associated aspects of body, voice, space, and relations – in recent years? Is there still a necessity to carve out a space to read women's writing in this new millennium?

This course will engage with texts authored by women, covering a variety of contexts as well as characters that illuminate gender tensions within postfeminist and post-postmodern milieux. Reading across literary genres comprising short stories, the novel, and the autobiography, students will gain an in-depth and critical appreciation of the primary preoccupations of women's writing in our contemporary societies. This course deliberately adopts a wider selection of texts beyond mainstream sources as far as possible, to offer students the opportunity to read works that deviate from canonical authors and hegemonic issues.

Students signing up for this course should:

- Be ready to critically appreciate literary texts centering on female experiences across a range of cultural, racial, and national spaces;
- Be familiar with literary critique and elements of major contemporary literary genres;
- Be committed to complete reading their primary texts, as well as some of the recommended secondary readings, for each seminar week;
- Be open to challenging debates, and having their beliefs interrogated in class discussions.

Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this course, students will

- Identify the key features of major literary-critical ideas relevant to the period of late 20th and early 21st centuries, namely postmodernism, postcolonialism, (post)feminism, posthumanism, and intersectionality.
- Describe the principles and perspectives of women's literature, and how female characters are represented by their writers to be interpellated by societies, communities, families and institutions.
- Identify and describe literary elements such as -- but not limited to -- the following: characterisation, setting, plot trajectory, type of narrator, motif, symbol, metaphor, theme, and imagery.
- Critique how various literary genres – and their associated generic techniques – studied in the course contribute to meaningful reading of female concerns and issues.
- Compare and evaluate the primary texts for insights into shared themes and issues, and divergences that reflect the intersectional identities of femininity.
- Raise critically-informed questions (in class discussions and research essay).

Primary Texts:

The Autobiography of My Mother, Jamaica Kincaid (1996)

The Vegetarian, Han Kang (2000)

Milkman, Anna Burns (2018)

Her Bodies and Other Parties, Carmen Maria Machado (2018)

The Tower, Thea Lenarduzzi (2025)

Carrión Crow, Heather Parry (2025)

Secondary Texts

Critical Foundation Texts:

1. *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949).
2. *On Violence*, Hannah Arendt (1970).
3. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Laura Mulvey (1975)
4. “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Helene Cixous (1976).
5. *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag (1978).
6. *The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979).
7. *Women, Race and Class*, Angela Davis (1981).

Critical Contemporary Texts:

1. “Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection”, Julia Kristeva (1982)
2. “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity,” (1993) Susan Bordo
3. *Sisters Outsiders*, Audre Lorde (2007).
4. “What is a Woman? And Other Essays”, (1999) and “I Am Not a Woman Writer” (2008), Toril Moi.
5. “Men Explained Things to Me,” (2014) Rebecca Solnit
6. *Women and Power: A Manifesto*, Mary Beard (2017).
7. *Gender Trouble* (1990), and *Who’s Afraid of Gender* (2024), Judith Butler.
8. “I Am My Own Heroine: How Marie Bashkirtseff Rewrote the Route to Fame” (2017), Sonia Wilson

Secondary Literary Texts:

1. “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1890), Charlotte Perkins Gilman.
2. *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf (1929)
3. *A Very Easy Death*, Simone de Beauvoir (1964)
4. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, Angela Carter (1979)

It is not mandatory to read all the critical essays and texts. Most of these readings are in the course schedule, and students should select 1 of them to run with the literary texts each week.

Assessment:

10% - Class Presentation and Participation

40% - Final Research Essay (argumentative essay of 3000-3500 words, including citations on a subject agreed with tutor)

50% - Final Exam (testing a broad range of literary-critical skills, across a range of materials drawn from the primary texts in the course, and relevant theories.)

Seminar Schedule

Seminar 1 Week 1 15 Jan

Introduction to Contemporary Women's Writing: contemporary literary and cultural theories (feminism, postmodernism, postcolonialism)

Overview of Course; Excerpts from primary and secondary texts.

Critical Reading:

- Pearson and Hope, "Toward a Typology of Female Portraits in Literature";
- Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" and Liedeke Plate, "Gynocriticism";
- Andrea O'Reilly, "Towards a Literary Theory and Criticism of Matricritics".

Seminar 2 Week 2 22 Jan

Topics: Race & Gender, Resistance & Power, Language & Writing, the Other/Alien, Mother-Daughter relationship.

Genre: Fiction/Autobiography

Text: Jamaica Kincaid, *The Autobiography of my Mother*

Critical Reading:

- Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa".
- Audre Lorde, *Sisters Outsiders*: "The Master's Tools...", "The Uses of Anger", and "Age, Race, Class and Sex".

Seminar 3 Week 3 29 Jan

Topics: Consumption and Food (Carnophallagocentrism); Patriarchal Delineation of the Female Body, Silencing and Subversion, Violence and Oppression.

Genre: Novel (First-person narrative: Is there a protagonist in *The Vegetarian*?)

Text: *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang

Critical Reading:

- Interview with Jacques Derrida, "Eating Well, or The Calculation of the Subject".
- Adams, Carol J. *The Pornography of Meat*, "Man Up".
- Min Young Godley, "The Feminization of Translation"; Sun Kyoung Yoon, "Deborah Smith's Infidelity".

Seminar 4 Week 4 5 Feb

Topics: The Uncanny, The Male Gaze, Metamorphosis, Institutional patriarchy and systemic control of bodies.

Genre: Gothic

Text: *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang

Critical Reading:

- Susan Bordo, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity";
- Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny";
- Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.

Seminar 5 Week 5 12 Feb

Topics: Domesticating the Female Body; Violence; Liminal Space; Hysteria & Madness

Genre: Short Stories/ Postmodern Text

Text: *Her Body & Other Stories*, Carmen Maria Machado

Critical Reading:

- Margaret Atwood, "The Female Body";
- "What is a Woman...", Toril Moi"
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "The Coherence of Gothic Conventions".

Seminar 6 Week 6 19 Feb

Topics: (De)Construction of Feminine Appearance; Sexual violence; Capitalist Delineation of female body

Genre: Speculative Fiction / Fairy Tales & Folklores / Gothic Horror

Text: *Her Body & Other Stories*, Carmen Maria Machado

Critical Reading:

- Machado, "The Trash Heap Has Spoken";
- Angela Carter, "Notes on the Gothic Mode".
- Audre Lorde, *Sisters Outsiders*, "Uses of the Erotic".

Seminar 7 Week 7 26 Feb

Topics: The Male Gaze; Sexual predation; Gender Role and Performativity

Genre: Novel (First-person narrative voice, stream-of-consciousness)

Text: *Milkman*, Anna Burns

Critical Reading:

- Rebecca Solnit, "Men Explained Things to Me";
- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, "Docile Bodies".

Week 8 RECESS

Seminar 8 Week 9 12 Mar

Topics: Societal expectations and censure; Silencing and Reclaiming the Female Voice.

Text: *Milkman*, Anna Burns

Critical Reading:

- Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?*;
- Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema".

Submission of Essay Abstract

Seminar 9 Week 10 19 Mar

Topics: Process of (Female) Story-telling; Abuse of power.

Genre: Nonfiction fiction; Memoir.

Text: *The Tower*, Thea Lenarduzzi

Critical Reading:

- Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller"

Seminar 10 Week 11 26 Mar

Topics: Depicting and Reading the Female Body; Illness and Gender

Genre: Fairy Tales, Female Bildungsroman

Text: *The Tower*, Thea Lenarduzzi

Critical Reading:

- Susan Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor*;
- "I Am My Own Heroine," Sonia Wilson

Seminar II Week 12 3 Apr

Topics: The Female Grotesque; Madness and Incarceration

Genre: Female Bildungsroman

Text: Carrion Crow, Heather Parry

Critical Reading:

- Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, Sandra M. (chapter tbc)
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (short story)

Research Essay Due

Seminar 12 Week 13 9 Apr

Topics: Mother-daughter relationship; Angel in the House/Domestic Goddess; Consumption and Food.

Genre: Gothic narratives, Domestic Advice Manuals.

Text: Carrion Crow, Heather Parry

Secondary Reading:

- Mrs Beeton’s *The Book of Household Management* (excerpts)
- Andrea O'Reilly, “Towards a Literary Theory and Criticism of Matricritics”.

Reading Week (14) 16 Apr

IN-CLASS CONSULTATION

Course Policies:

Attendance and Participation: The success of any seminar depends on the active participation of all its members. Barring illness or emergencies, you should make it a point to attend every seminar. You must arrive on time, having done the required readings and any assigned work, and be ready to participate in the class discussion. Failure to do so will reduce your participation grade significantly. **If you need to miss a class, you must get in touch with me before that week's meeting.**

Late Work and Extensions: If your essay is late, it will be marked down by one third of a letter grade for each day that it is overdue (i.e. a paper that would have received an A will receive a A-). No work will be accepted more than three days late without prior permission. Extensions will be granted only in exceptional circumstances, including documented illness or genuine emergency.

Seeking Help Outside Class: You are encouraged to use any form of legitimate aid to help you write papers and research topics that interest you. Obvious sources of legitimate assistance include your tutors, the coaches at the LCC Communication Cube, and the subject librarians at the library. If you work on a paper with a writing coach, you are eligible for a two-day extension. Please speak to me if you would like to take advantage of this!

Generative AI: Generative AI (such as ChatGPT) is **not allowed** for this course. The reason is straightforward: **research essays heavily reliant on AI assistance often result in poor exam grades**, as such students have not fully understood the critical implications, meanings, and nuances of both texts and critical readings.

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty: Don't do it! If I find that you have misrepresented someone else's work or wording as your own you will fail the assignment and possibly the course. If you are unsure of how or when to cite a source, please ask me or refer to the university's academic integrity resources online.