

English 123B, African Lit  
Fall 2015, Second Essay Topics  
Due Thursday, December 3rd

Write a short essay (about 1500 words, or six pages typed and double-spaced) on some aspect of the following topic, comparing two of the following works that we have read – Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Ngugi’s *Weep Not Child*, Mahfouz’s *Miramar*, and Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*. This is only a *suggested* topic: you are encouraged to work on one of your own devising, providing you clear it with me beforehand, it deals with at least two of those novels, and it deals with them in a way that goes beyond plot and historical background. Even as a suggested topic, the following are probably too general to be covered fully in a short essay. Therefore, focus on a limited aspect of your topic, and construct a developed thesis explaining why that aspect of it is significant; your thesis should contain a specific point to be proved, and your paragraphs should all work toward proving it. To support your readings and to make your analysis clear, you will need to quote short passages from the texts, integrated into your own prose, which relate to the central scenes or themes of your essay; this is the evidence that you must use to be clear and convincing. Please cite the page number for each quotation or group of quotations parenthetically at the end of the phrase or sentence (according to MLA style). Avoid using long, indented quotations: using shorter quotations makes it easier to establish what your reading of each is, through discussion and analysis, as well as to employ that reading in supporting the thesis of your essay. You will also want to test your ideas out and enhance them by reading peer-reviewed criticism of your selected books and topics. Such secondary sources should also be quoted in your essay where they can help you make your point, but remember that secondary sources can never replace your own analysis of your primary sources. Revise for content and to strengthen your thesis and transitions; proofread thoroughly, even if you use a spell-checker first; and follow MLA format, including a Works Cited list at the end.

Please submit your essay online at Canvas web site ([sjsu.instructure.com](http://sjsu.instructure.com)). Upload your essay as a file (don’t paste it in) in either Word (.doc or .docx) or Rich Text (.rtf) format. Please keep a copy of all work submitted, and retain all graded work until the end of the semester; English majors should save the graded copies of their essays in all department classes, since these may be required for their senior seminar portfolio. Finally, remember that I have kept a copy of your corrected first essay, and will review the technical problems of the first before looking for progress in those areas on the second. You, too, should take the time to review those errors, and improve your writing on the second essay.

1. In that telling line from Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Obierika tells Okonkwo that colonialism “has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” All four of these novels take place against the background of colonialism, but they also highlight various sorts of internecine and interpersonal disputes as well. That should not be a total surprise – no society is completely free from internal strife, even ones that are waging or have waged a difficult battle against an external enemy. The range of conflict in these novels, however, is noteworthy: from the struggle for independence in *Weep Not, Child*, and the struggles between different factions in post-independence *Miramar*, to the social and political breakdowns of civil war in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and dissolution of the state in *Life and Times of Michael K*, these novels chronicle the many ways things can fall apart—as well as the ways individuals do or do not rise above that chaos.

2. These four novels share many thematic elements. For example, they are all about love, of one sort or another; about politics; and about identity. But they are also about pure and corrupted attachments to the land, about social class and traditions, and about non-material values. Your job is to relate one or two themes such as these to the narrative form for two of the novels, arguing that the author has created that specific narrative form in order to direct the reader’s experience in a way that a more conventional narrative perhaps could not. The rotating centers of consciousness in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the rotating first-person narratives of *Miramar*, the shifting focus of the near-omniscient narrative of *Weep Not, Child*, and the split narrative of *Life and Times of Michael K*, with its perplexing first-person interruption in the second part of the novel’s otherwise third-person narration – all these have been constructed to aid the novelists in telling something significant and nuanced about the main characters, something that might have been difficult to express in any other way. Your job is to identify that something for two of these novels, and to explain how the narrative form helps to express it.