

Pandemic Literatures and Being Human in Times of Mass Infection and Catastrophe: Some African Perspectives

Irikidzayi Manase

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7720-4464>

University of the Free State,

South Africa

ManaseI@ufs.ac.za

Thabisani Ndlovu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5592-7522>

Walter Sisulu University,

South Africa

tndlovu@wsu.ac.za

The idea to have a special issue on literary representations of pandemics past and present emanated from a bigger project that four colleagues—Thabisani Ndlovu, Irikidzayi Manase, Cheryl Stobie, and Robert Muponde—were working on at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS) in November 2020. The title of the project, “Text, Human Rights and Pandemics: Being Human in Times of Contagion,” and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, signalled our search for a conceptual space to consider the role of cultural representations of pandemics over time and what these have to say about text, contagion, ideas and performances of being human. Texts in that broader project included but were not limited to personal narratives, newspaper articles, literary texts, WhatsApp chats, blogs, and communication on other electronic platforms such as Twitter. The multiplicity of sources reflected the virality of pandemic texts, particularly that they are “as much about the powerful circulation of ideas, emotions, or affects as about disease agents” (Nixon and Servitje 2016, vi). This special issue, however, confines itself to texts of a literary nature, but it too, like the bigger project, has a broad view of contagion or pandemics as both literal and figurative. As Cooke (2009, 1) points out, “contagion is not only literal” but has “a textual and metaphoric construction,” which means that there are apparent and “hidden” pandemics.

In this special issue, we have focalised contagion not because it is a new theme in literary studies. On the contrary, it is an enduring one that poses challenging questions about being human in crisis moments where widespread and rapid infection of bodies turns into a pandemic of fear, anxiety, and loss, prompting a proliferation of texts that attempt to comprehend human interconnectedness and the desire to deny, suspend or end it. Such texts point in many directions and communicate at multiple levels concerning the human subject under consistent exposure to longer-than-expected precarity. The



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academic engagements of the STIAS project and this special issue happened when the authors were witnesses to and living through Covid-19. There was, simultaneously, recordation of the crisis as it unfolded, as well as physical and emotional exertions to survive. During the writing and compilation of articles for this special issue, human fragility and resilience were not just theoretical matters but lived reality as some authors suffered from Covid-19 themselves and survived, while others dealt with nursing sick family members and grief due to Covid-19 deaths. In that way, writing emerges as witness to trauma and a tool for meaning-making, as reflected in some of the articles here. Although exposed to protracted peril and fear, we managed to finish this project and this attests to the triumph of the human spirit over adversity, as indicated also in the content of some of the articles in this special issue.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought with it severe socio-economic disruptions as governments all over the world attempt to control mass infection, disease and death. Some social conventions have been altered, modified or lost. All this has led to various changes to valuations of the self, the way people live and relate with each other, and how they perceive themselves in relation to their environments. Thus, Covid-19 “is not only a medical emergency but also a cultural challenge” (Pfaller 2020, 822). As expected, there has been a torrent of content—literary and of different kinds, responding to Covid-19. This is a “coincidence of virology and virality” (Depoux et al. 2020, 1), a crisis in which the rapid spread of a virus from person to person is outstripped by the rapid spread of texts that focalise Covid-19. The resultant “infodemic” (Ball and Maxmen 2020, 372) on various electronic and other platforms attempts to make sense of human precarity and what has clearly become a traumatic situation for most. People have written or performed Covid-related content to make meaning of the pandemic, to escape the tedium and stagnation induced by lockdowns, to virtually connect or reconnect with others, and as an antidote to fear. There is a growing corpus of pandemic novels, poems, essays, short stories, diaries and so on, with some of these, usually associated with physical book form, migrating to electronic platforms as e-books or social media content. Some articles in this special issue are based on such new content. Yet others are based on pre-Covid short stories, novels and poems that resonate with pandemics and can be classified as pandemic writing for the strong literary topos of contagion in them. The prefix “pandemic” has graduated from being a descriptor to a marker of genre, which includes the reclassification of texts that had been categorised differently pre-Covid (Slugan 2021).

The contributors to this special issue analyse works whose theme is pandemics or mass infection in both overt and covert ways. In terms of form, the articles are based on personal essays (Ndlovu; Barure and Tivenga), a Twitter diary (Musanga), online performance poetry (Musiyiwa), the novel (Stobie), short stories (Manase; Nabutanyi) and poetry (Nkealah; Tembo). The geographical settings of these works are extensive, covering South Africa, Cameroon, Malawi, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. There are similarities in some of the observations such as various strains of affect emanating from disrupted routines and livelihoods as well as compromised human dignity. Be that as it

may, there are nuanced differences depending on the socio-political settings of these countries, with each having particular and different emphases on hardships wrought by Covid-19.

All the authors read their sources as aestheticised trauma in which survival, remembering and forgetting are key elements in the drama of a pandemic. The “dramaturgic form” of pandemics reminds us of their episodic nature; they “start at a moment in time, proceed on a stage limited in space and duration, following a plot line of increasing and revelatory tension, move to a crisis of individual and collective character, then drift toward closure” (Rosenberg 1992, 279). The authors in this special issue were aware of the centrality of this idea and went on to reflect on how certain ideas of humanness had either been entrenched or reconfigured in both humane and inhumane ways.

Thabisani Ndlovu’s article focuses on inequality and violence as depicted in a collection of essays, *The Lockdown Collection* (2020), edited by Melinda Ferguson. Ndlovu identifies the personal essay as a fit genre for meaning-making in a moment of crisis and argues that while Covid-19 restrictions, fears and deaths suggest unity in crisis for South Africans, some of the essays in this collection reveal the various divisions or “apartheids” that already existed and were both deepened and illuminated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The article explores how the authors put South Africanness under scrutiny.

Walter Barure and Doreen Tivenga focus on three personal essays in the e-book *Lockdown Extended: Corona Chronicles* (2020), a sequel to the bigger hard copy version, *Lockdown Collection* (2020), on which Ndlovu’s article is based. Barure and Tivenga explore the vulnerability, crisis and rapid change wrought by Covid-19 in the lives of the three essayists they study and how their individual narratives are imbricated in the collective. The authors focus on specific personal details of dealing with Covid-19 that official media do not.

Nick Tembo reads the anthology *Walking the Battlefield: An Anthology of Malawian Poetry on the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Juwa, Mpina, and Galafa 2020) to explore how selected Malawian poets in this compilation express emotional states and attitudes as reactions to Covid-19. He argues that overall, the poems capture the resilience of the human spirit in moments of crisis. Tembo also evaluates the Covid-19 poems in comparison to others on earlier pandemics such as HIV/AIDS.

Terrence Musanga analyses the Twitter diary of a popular Zimbabwean figure, Lumumba William Gerald Mutumanje, documenting his experiences with Covid-19 infection. Musanga draws on concepts from life narratives and cultural studies to examine Mutumanje’s Twitter diary, one of the novel electronic texts that have risen to narrate personal experiences of Covid-19. Musanga identifies Mutumanje’s diary as a

key platform for health communication during this time of mass infection, particularly in communicating a message of resilience.

Mickias Musiyiwa examines poems by a young author, Flight Rufaro Mlambo, published in both ChiNdau (a dialect of Shona) and English, which focus on the citizens' struggles against the novel coronavirus contagion in Zimbabwe. Musiyiwa reads Mlambo's poetic performances, available online on the nation's news broadcaster's website and social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, as digital literature that captures diverse human conditions under Covid-19. Musiyiwa also considers how Mlambo's poetry opens opportunities for the production of new forms of literature.

Irikidzayi Manase examines a fictional South African society's experiences during a climate crisis and drug pandemic as depicted in selected speculative stories from Mohale Mashigo's anthology, *Intruders: Short Stories* (2018). Manase locates the study within the genre of science fiction in general and African science fiction in particular, and considers matrices and patterns of virality as tropes of contagion based on the Bakhtinian chronotope and the Foucauldian notion of heterotopic juxtaposition of spaces to read characters' encounters with specific forms of disasters and epidemics. He also reads the depicted experiences in line with perspectives on the current Covid-19 and past mass infections.

Cheryl Stobie examines Lauren Beukes's *Afterland* (2020), which describes a global viral cancer pandemic marked by the death of 99% of people with prostates, from a gender and human rights angle. Stobie focuses on readers' responses to determine the author's treatment of transgender rights, other representations of gender, sexuality and race within the context of pandemic worlds. She also considers the link between catastrophes and the constitution of vulnerabilities within the marginalised and by so doing underscores the need for humanity and state institutions to protect the most vulnerable during pandemics.

Naomi Nkealah's article, which is premised on feminist humaneness, considers what it means to be human during a health catastrophe as represented in Joyce Ash's poetry. Nkealah argues for a practical brand of feminism anchored in compassion and empathy for other women in moments of disease, including pandemic moments.

Edgar Nabutanyi explores selected short fiction by Dilman Dila, written in the science fiction genre, which describes environmental crises in Uganda. Nabutanya locates the study of the selected short stories within the archive of the nation's plague and pandemic writing and in the process unpacks the causes of contagions and the way the depicted Ugandan society copes with catastrophes. The article focalises an environmental crisis, the myths that are generated and circulated as citizens attempt to understand their conditions and how to survive the catastrophe.

The insights from these articles point to a burgeoning scholarship on literary studies, pandemics and changing notions of humanness. It also suggests that pre-Covid there were already other pandemics, some of which we still live with. Daunting and frightening as mass precarity is, it does suggest that in order to survive in a humane way, some structural, group and individual arrangements should change, as suggested by some of the articles in this special issue.

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