

Introduction

Exploring the Dynamics of Time in Literary Texts

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The Department of English Studies at the University of South Africa held their Third International Biennial Conference in 2016 on the concept of Time. Time is such a broad concept that it simultaneously provides researchers with myriad possibilities for investigation and handicaps them due to its immensity. In various disciplines, the physical sciences in particular, time has been a topic that has been scrutinised and studied for as long as there are records of study. The rhythmic occurrences of time linked to the planet earth's journey around the sun is captured in physical manifestations as the ticking of a clock or the passing of days marked on a calendar in our everyday lives. Humans are believed to be the only animals on earth who do not live in the continual present, who have an awareness of past, present, and future, and who have been preoccupied with understanding the concept of time from various perspectives. Scientists across research areas, from quantum physics in the natural sciences to literature in the human sciences, have found the subject of time dynamic, multi-layered, complex, and pertinently subjective.

In the humanities, the concept of time is often studied from a philosophical or metaphorical point of view. Philosophers and scholars of religion debate whether time is continuous, objective, endless, or even “real”, while psychologists and sociologists question our perceptions, expectations, and illusions regarding time, how time both empowers and entraps us. Time may also be viewed differently through the lens of various societies, as people value timekeeping and the role of time in life in diverse ways.

In literature, time can be explored in extraordinary ways, because literature can incorporate ideas set out by physical and natural sciences and move beyond these ideas by means of the imaginative. In studies of language, exploring time not only includes studying structural elements that govern a language but also understanding social aspects of humanity and how these are embedded in language. In other words, language studies of time explore how time, through language, governs our very existence.

This special issue of the *Journal of Literary Studies* sets out to explore, as was presented at the biennial conference in 2016, some of the many

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representations and manifestations of the concept of time. The authors who have contributed articles to this special issue have each approached time from a different perspective, but at the same time there are resonances of ideas emerging in each other's work. In highlighting the critical argumentations of each article, we have decided to discuss them as falling under three main subthemes: women's time, human time, and historical time.

Research into women's time has gained increasing recognition in studies of time as it has come to underscore the ways in which gender is implicated in constructions of time. Gender and feminist scholars investigating women's time prominently argue that dominant constructions of time as linear do not take into consideration the unique and diverse ways in which women understand time and conversely how time regulates women's lives, both biologically and socially, in ways that can be seen as oppressive. For women generally, time is the very epitome of their lives since biological processes such as menstruation, reproduction and menopause are conditioned by time. Social practices such as marriage and childbirth are also largely enforced in response to the dictates of time. For example, in many patriarchal cultures, girls are expected to be married by a certain age and naturally women who want to have children must do so before a certain age. These constraints enforced by time on women's lives cannot be said to apply in the same way to men's lives which are largely less constrained biologically and socially. Thus, it is important for scholars to explore the ways in which women understand time, how time impacts on their lives, and how we can conceptualise time from a *female* perspective. The three articles which explore the dynamics of women's time in this special issue are those by Stephanie de Villiers, Naomi Nkealah and Albert Olatunde Oloruntoba.

In her article, de Villiers examines the intertextual and temporal relationship between two English novels, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. As she points out in the article, the latter text was published over a century after the former one, but what is fascinating about *Wide Sargasso Sea* is that it moves back in time, in terms of setting, and places the protagonist at a time before the events that happen in *Jane Eyre*. The significance of this disruption of time in narrative is that it gives Rhys an opportunity, narratively, to allow Antoinette, named Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, to tell her own story of why she is locked up in the attic and why she is mad in the first place. Rhys subverts the dominant conceptualisation of time as linear by creating a text through whose intertextuality with an earlier text we get to see time as non-linear and unfixed. Applying various theoretical understandings of time in her analysis, de Villiers projects the feminist edge of Rhys's fiction which is evident in the fact that Rhys writes back to *Jane Eyre* but also writes forward in showing that Bertha/Antoinette's madness is not the result of inherited schizophrenia but rather the psychological consequence of perpetual subjection to the unkindness of her husband, the coldness of her marriage and the inhospitality of a new country. De Villiers's article makes a

strong argument about time, namely, that through the intertextual *writing back* at the canonical *Jane Eyre*, Rhys rejects orthodox notions of time as linear and always looking to the future and, in so doing, transforms the representation of the madwoman in the attic.

Moving from English literature to South African literature, Nkealah looks at the novel *This Book Betrays my Brother* by Kagiso Lesego Molepe also from a feminist perspective which conceptualises women's time as non-linear and subject to disruption. As she points out in her article, the novel she examines is set in the present but then moves back in time to capture a rape incident which the protagonist, Naledi, witnessed in her pre-teen years, as a way of explaining her current phobia for men and relationships and most of all her ongoing emotional trauma, and then returns to the present. The in-depth textual analysis deploys time as a framework through which male sexual violence can be understood. In navigating the different temporalities of the novel and of the rape incident itself, Nkealah argues that male sexual violence against women, and particularly black lesbian and bisexual women, is the result of masculine territorialisation of women's bodies, an indication of heterosexual men's *failure* to accommodate alternative sexualities, and an externalisation of the black man's desire for revenge against racial denigration. Her analysis is guided by theorisations of women's time by prominent scholars such as Ivana Milojević, Judith Butler, Jessica Murray from whom she draws insights to counter "the linearity of patriarchal time by showing how in women's experiences of trauma the past intrudes into the present and even becomes the present".

The third article which looks at time from a feminist perspective is that by Oloruntoba on gender and time in the drama of Nigerian playwright, Ahmed Yerima. Zooming directly on Yerima's play *Aetu*, Oloruntoba argues that Yerima's drama re-writes gender in Nigerian literature by representing strong, resilient, and dynamic women whose actions seek to transform the cultural landscape of Yoruba society. He reads this play through the African feminist lens of nego-feminism which emphasises the notion of negotiating freedoms for women (i.e. freedoms from oppressive cultural practices) through dialogue involving women and men as equal stakeholders. The practice of wife inheritance in Yoruba culture is frankly condemned in this play, as Oloruntoba demonstrates. The play suggests in the end that a sustainable approach to ending the practice is for men to be involved in the orchestration and execution of its abolition, since they are the beneficiaries of it. In analysing the experiences of the play's protagonist as she moves from girlhood into adulthood and then to old age, Oloruntoba explores the different temporalities of *Aetu*'s life as they are intertwined. In these different temporalities, *Aetu* embodies a feminist re-definition of women's time. Oloruntoba ultimately argues that "by employing a non-linear chronology – a restless movement between different linked experiences – the play promotes the idea of women's time as complex and entangled".

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Besides their focus on women's time as non-linear and fluid, the three contributions by Oloruntoba, Nkealah and de Villiers highlighted above are also linked by their interrogations of masculinity in their selected literary texts. These interrogations, to borrow the words of Jennifer Thorington Springer and Obioma Nnaemeka (2016: xix) in the introduction to their book, should not be seen as a return to earlier models of reading masculinity which merely offered a "feminist backlash". Rather, the interrogations presented in these three articles function "as a feminist intervention that goes beyond a challenge" to embody a call "for a particular level of accountability where the intersection of masculinist predilections and practices, racial underpinnings in everyday experiences, and class privileges are taken to task" (Springer and Nnaemeka 2016: xix). The authors have provoked our critical consciousness so that we may be moved to constantly question perceptions of masculinity in our time.

The next two articles to be discussed fall under the subtheme of human time. The notion of human time here encapsulates ideas around time's effects on the human body, human consciousness of the passage of time, as well as human relations to time in contexts where time seems to be stationary. We are interested here in how humans *experience* time and what meanings we can make of these experiences within their specific contexts. Speaking about the multiple levels of human temporality, Jens Brockmeier (1995: 106) argues that such "temporality is embedded in all material structures; thus it needs to be explored from various ontological and epistemological vantage points". Exploring human time from various ontological and epistemological perspectives is what Isaac Ndlovu and Thabisani Ndlovu have done in their two articles included in this special issue. Incidentally, both articles explore this concept in Zimbabwean literature which is rich in its diversity, offering multiple voices – male and female, black and white, young and old.

Isaac Ndlovu's article looks at the construction of human time in Petina Gappah's *The Book of Memory* which presents a protagonist for whom albinism is a source of multiple oppressions. We journey with Ndlovu through the pages of this novel as Memory moves from childhood to adulthood, and we experience life in a Zimbabwean prison as Memory recounts her incarceration and reflects on the memory of her life outside of prison. Ndlovu argues that the social ostracism Memory experiences as a child growing up in a Shona society where albinism is treated with both disdain and mystical awe influences Memory's perception of human temporality as "she resorts to the internal resources of memory of the past and future triggered by imprisonment to reflect on the abuse and indignities that she has suffered". Concomitant with Ndlovu's analysis of the novel is his exploration of its non-linearity which reads as a narratological strategy of Gappah's to disrupt the protagonist's feelings of being bound within the contingencies of linear human time. Like the texts examined under women's time, Gappah's novel evinces a non-progressive, non-chronological narrative model where the past, the

present and the future are interlocking, suggesting the complexity of time as a category of human experience.

Thabisani Ndlovu's article extends the discussion on the marginalisation of certain groups of people through social exclusionary practices by focusing on the mistreatment of aged, white Zimbabweans as represented in John Eppel's fiction. He situates his discussion within a very specific timeframe, which is the time of the *Chimurenga* – war of liberation – which in itself is multi-layered as embedded within it are different *chimurengas* of varied magnitudes. He explores the so-called crisis period in Zimbabwe (1998-2009) which saw the proliferation of human rights abuses. Using a human rights approach, therefore, he reads Eppel's fiction in terms of how it deploys the concept of the literary chronotope postulated by Mikhail Bakhtin to project elderly whites' experience of human time, arguing that Eppel writes against the *Chimurenga* chronotope by offering two alternative chronotopes – the chronotope of ageing and the chronotope of reversal. The chronotope of ageing, Ndlovu argues, "is a linear temporal process that inexorably moves forward with the expected key characteristics of physical debilitation, loneliness and death". This, he also refers to as "the chronotope of the everyday". The chronotope of reversal comes to the fore in Eppel's fiction when it portrays "ageing as heavily punctuated by loss of socio-economic power for whites, in the form of farm seizures, loss of family due to economic migrancy of the young, and loss of pensions to hyper-inflation". As Ndlovu explains, the reversal here is in the understanding that elderly whites now experience the kind of abject poverty which blacks experienced under the colonial regime. Ndlovu's article complements Oloruntoba's in its extensive reading of time as cyclical.

The last subtheme for this special issue is historical time. We need to reiterate that these thematic delineations do not suggest strict differentiation between the subthemes. Rather, they have been done merely for the purpose of giving this introduction a sense of thematic structuring. The focus on historical time is one taken up by Ben Robertson and Ekaterina Kobeleva in their article on time in a selection of Russian letters and by Christopher Babatunde Ogunyemi in his evaluation of gender in Nigerian literature through time and space. The different approaches to historical time evident in these two letters give credibility to the following argument made by Brockmeier:

There is no single, universally, genetically endowed framework for viewing the world and, as we may add, the *times* of the world. Particularly, the investigation of concepts such as time, nature and culture (and their manifold semantic overlapping) from the point of view of comparative cultural linguistics ... confirms the assumption that different languages offer different perceptions and conceptual constructions of reality.

(1995: 109-110)

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The article by Robertson and Kobeleva, located within Russian culture and a historical time of drastic change, confirms the view that there is no universal time of the world, while that by Ogunyemi, which focalises Nigerian literary history, projects the idea that time influences our perceptions about realities in both positive and negative ways.

Robertson and Kobeleva's article examines the travel letters of Nikolai Gretsch as he crisscrossed the world of 19th century Europe, moving from his home in Russia to other parts of Europe which did not follow the same time system as Russia. Applying the notions of timelessness and fluidity, Robertson and Kobeleva read Gretsch's letters as cultural products of a particular time and space, as Gretsch navigated the Julian calendar of Russia that he was familiar with and the Gregorian calendar of Germany, France and England that he was encountering in his travels. How Gretsch made sense of both calendars is fascinating to read in Robertson and Kobeleva's work. Their central argument is that "the simultaneous use of the Gregorian and Julian calendars in Russia and Western Europe brought Gretsch a special awareness of the passage of time, and Gretsch's experiences visiting historic places metaphorically brought the present and the past into parallel existence". Thus, they conclude that Gretsch's travel letters profoundly demonstrate the notion of the *historical present* where the past and the present converge to create an immediacy of experience.

Ogunyemi's article takes us from Russia to Nigeria where, like Oloruntoba's, we encounter a tapestry of gender problems. Ogunyemi traces the historical evolution of gender representation in Nigerian literature from the early 1960s to contemporary times, arguing that writers' perceptions of women and women's position in Nigerian society has been largely influenced by the particular times in which they wrote. His exemplification of this argument using a variety of texts authored by men and women gestures towards the notion that history is both unchangeable and changeable, for on the one hand writers attempt to produce literature that is a 'true' reflection of a historical time but on the other hand they recreate the history through imaginative writing that has the capacity to alter the historical reality. Ogunyemi applies theories of time by Julia Kristeva, Russell West-Pavlov, Giles Deleuze and Hayden White to assess the temporalities of Nigerian literature as it configures gender from the 1960s to now. He shows clearly by the end of his essay that the thinking of Nigerian writers around gender, particularly male writers, has emancipated through time as we now have a body of work in which history has been imagined differently by women to foreground "their own interpretations of what colonialism *did* and *did not do* to African women". His position that third-generation Nigerian feminist writers underscore social transformation in their writing resonates with Chielozona Eze's argument that "third-generation African women writers are less occupied with concepts of the nation as a space" and "are more interested in the woman's body as a violated entity" (Eze 2016: 3).

In such a volume, it is very hard to cover every relevant theme. Time is a broad subject, and therefore we have included in this special issue mainly articles that we felt were scholarly sound enough to add to the existing body of knowledge by drawing their primary data largely from literatures that are not often studied as mainstream in South Africa. We have here a meeting point where Nigerian literature interacts with English literature, where South African literature mingles with Russian literature, and where Zimbabwean literature initiates new conversations. It is a banquet of time delicacies and we hope you will take the time to savour every one of them

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