

“Things Fall Apart”: Introduction to the Special Issue on the Theme of the 2017 SASGLS/SAVAL General Conference

Reinhardt Fourie, Richard Alan Northover and Neil van Heerden

On 17 and 18 August 2017, the South African Society for General Literary Studies/Suid-Afrikaanse Vereniging vir Algemene Literatuurwetenskap (SASGLS/SAVAL) hosted its biennial conference on the Sunnyside Campus of the University of South Africa (UNISA), Pretoria.

The theme of the conference, which followed on SASGLS/SAVAL’s “Stranger in a Strange Land” colloquium hosted in 2016, was taken from W.B. Yeats’s apocalyptic poem “The Second Coming” (1919), famously used by Chinua Achebe as the title of his influential postcolonial novel. The line from Yeats’s poem suggests crisis, both as a key term in traditional poetics and as a much broader theme, in the sense of flux – or even disintegration and collapse. It problematises the idea of literary representations of chaos or the collapse of order. However, it also presents opportunities for renewal or the imagining of possible worlds, as the collapse of old structures makes way for a new order. The theme is not intended to focus only on political imagination or critique, whether pessimistic or optimistic, utopian or dystopian, but can also be applied to literature on an individual, psychological level or on an abstract, theoretical one. Thus, the theme invokes not just postcolonialism and decoloniality, but also poststructuralism and deconstruction, and many other fields of research besides.

In total, 39 papers were presented at the conference by scholars from South Africa, Canada, Turkey, and the United States, which meant that it had been the largest biennial conference of SASGLS/SAVAL hosted in the last decade. The conference was attended not only by established academics, but also by younger scholars currently completing their postgraduate studies. This special issue of *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap (JLS/TLW)* on the conference theme appears in two parts. The articles therein are expanded and revised versions of papers delivered at the conference, and they have passed through the rigorous double-blind peer-review process of *JLS/TLW*.

The first issue, volume 34(2) June 2018, opens with an article by Rosemary Gray, wherein she analyses Ben Okri’s *stoku* “The Standeruppers” (2017). Gray reads this *stoku*, a “new, cross-generic literary mode – an amalgam of

JLS/TLW 34(3), Sep./Sept. 2018
ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387
© *JLS/TLW*
DOI: 10.1080/02564718.2018.11691



short story and *haiku*”, within the context of Okri’s oeuvre, arguing that it “awakens in the individual sympathies for all fellow creatures on planet earth, nurturing a sense of natural community”. Within this “green philosophy” that Okri reveals, he “tempers the frightening irony of the Anthropocene or Holocene era in Yeats’s aphorism that ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold’, by pointing to our *aminus/anima* urges or the destructive/constructive dichotomy of human nature”.

Adebola Fawole in her article focuses on the themes of power and corruption in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). She offers a novel approach to these works, by utilising as a lens Geert Hofstede’s notion of cultural dimensions. Fawole explores how Achebe depicts “how social disintegration has caused and fuelled the abuse of power and corruption”, ultimately arguing against the stereotypical notion that African countries are bound to fall apart due to African cultures being inherently corrupt, urging for reconsideration of the devastating and continuing impact of colonial oppression on the continent.

Dimensions of violence in Festus Iyayi’s *Heroes* (1986) and Eddie Iroh’s *Toads of War* (1979) are central to Stephen David’s article. By considering “the multiplicity of voices” offered by literary texts, David makes a case for careful scepticism towards narratives of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). He considers how notions of genocide during this conflict become part of a complicated discourse that, in the analysed texts, at least, “highlights that the victims on both sides [of the conflict] are led to believe that their existence is tied to a destruction of the enemy”; a discourse that can have a problematic impact even into the present.

Naomi Nkealah’s article rethinks women’s empowerment through an analysis of the work of Cameroonian playwright Anne Tanyi-Tang. Nkealah argues that Tanyi-Tang’s work “collapses the binary between empowerment and disempowerment, as opposed to dominant thinking which posits the two as mutually exclusive”. Within what she considers to be reformist feminist texts, Nkealah considers how two of Tanyi-Tang’s plays “project women who seek to reform gender relationships within the limits allowed them by patriarchy”, showing how their agency in this context can be read as instructive, since the playwright suggests “not simple solutions to complex issues, but possible ways of dealing with them which can ultimately extend the elasticity of patriarchy’s control of women”.

Focusing on Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* (2004) and Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* (2000), Özlem Ögüt Yazıcıoğlu considers how the Chippewa people of North Dakota, America, and the Xhosa people of the Eastern Cape, South Africa, attempt to navigate “the devastating effects of colonial invasion and exploitation of their lands and culture, and to maintain a sense of bioregional history and identity”, while, at the same time, “a future of fruitful interaction with global society” is anticipated. In the analysis, a strong focus is placed on the shamanic nature of certain characters. The article consciously sets out to

INTRODUCTION

explore within the context of a globalised world the connections between shamanism and environmental consciousness, attempting to “avoid homogenizing shamanism into a conceptual category or flattening its contextuality”.

In the final article in the first issue, Andy Carolin reflects on how two short stories – Emil Rorke’s “Poisoned grief” (2013) and an untitled story by Richard de Nooy, from his 2011 volume, *The Big Stick* – represent same-sex desire through “offering different intertextual appropriations or reworkings” of the style of Herman Charles Bosman, a doyen of the South African short story genre. Rather than attempting to gauge whether the short stories under discussion represent successful pastiches of Bosman’s style, Carolin makes the reader aware of the possible conversation between these two stories, as well as how they may be read to converse with elements of Bosman’s work. It is argued that “though De Nooy’s provocative and humorous story contrasts Rorke’s subtle and poignant depiction of same-sex love and intimacy, both stories privilege desire over sexual identity, and offer us different ways of thinking about same-sex sexualities”.

Aligning closely to the Southern African focus established in the final section of the first conference issue, this second issue (volume 34(3) September 2018) opens with an article by Idette Noomé, wherein she considers the importance of existing and possible future translations of a biography of a notable leader of the Nkuna people (a Xitsonga-speaking group). Muhlaba I (circa 1864-1944) led his people through national and global unrest during the first half of the 20th century, introducing “radical changes which shaped the fate of his people” into the present. Noomé’s article argues for new translations of the historically important biography of King Muhlaba, which was originally published in Xitsonga shortly after his death and translated into Afrikaans thirteen years later. The study engages with questions relating to “possible ethical ways to engage in this process in the complex and imperfect post-colonial South African translation context,” while also considering “strategies [that could] create rich translations that will honour the past and open up the text and its translation(s) as artefacts to future scrutiny, allowing new ways to re-member and reconstruct history.”

The following article, by Jordan Stier, is an analysis of Ken Barris’s *What Kind of Child* (2006) and Justin Cartwright’s *White Lightning* (2002). Stier interrogates the different approaches taken in these novels to decentring whiteness and whiteness. His analysis is an addition to debates surrounding the position of whiteness in critical considerations of literature and literary cultures in South Africa after apartheid. The respective approaches featured in these novels, Stier posits, ultimately return to “an ingrained white centrality”. However, the researcher foregrounds the complexity of whiteness in critical conversations, including in his own article, as he acknowledges that the very act of discussing whiteness in an attempt to decentre it contributes to yet again centring it. In response to this, Stier does not support silence by

white authors as an answer to this paradox, but rather, he calls for a “careful self-reflexivity” on the part of authors, critics and researchers.

Silindiwe Sibanda also focuses on questions of race in her article on NoViolet Bulawayo’s debut novel, *We Need New Names* (2013). Considering the stereotypical depiction of black lived experiences in postcolonial Africa, Sibanda argues that despite Bulawayo’s novel reflecting “the impact of the failed [African] state on its inhabitants through the life traumas” experienced by the protagonist and her friends, the novel is “a pastiche of bygone cynical portrayals of the failings of the postcolony” in which the depicted “black suffering is reminiscent of certain white constructs of the black other”. Through her analysis of the novel, Sibanda finds that while it still creates the opportunity for “contrasting readings of blackness” that are made possible through an intricate representation of a black reality, it nevertheless reveals an “internalisation of white constructions of blackness”, thus becoming “a subconscious imbroglio between a colonial and postcolonial subjectivity that is in conflict with itself as it searches for a contemporary African urbanity”.

Introducing what was another dominant theme at the conference, science fiction, is the contribution by Nicole Best on Sheri S. Tepper’s novel *The Gate to Women’s Country* (1988). The novel is considered in terms of how it writes back to three plays by ancient Greek tragedian Euripides, unsettling current-day patriarchal worldviews that are founded in a classical past and perpetuated into the present through the continuing strong presence of the classics in modern literature and culture. Best’s article shows how Tepper’s novel “questions the universality of the classical canon by demonstrating the distinctly problematic patriarchal ideologies inherent in examples from this canon”. It thus calls for consistent reconsiderations of a canon that still perpetuates problematic ideas of universality through its adapted presence in contemporary cultural artefacts.

David Mitchell’s award-winning *Ghostwritten* (1999) is the focus of Dalene Labuschagne’s article, in which she investigates the Subject in the episodic structure of the novel. She argues that in the text there is the “continual displacement of the narrating ‘I’ from one chapter to the next”. This process of recycling the individual subject “works to deny the formation of the subject’s personalized identity, so to ratify the postmodern anxiety about the so-called end of individuality”. This is simultaneously what “affords the decentred subject a chance at individuality”, as it illustrates how identity can repeatedly be renewed.

The final article to be included in this special issue is Gemma Field’s study on Frank Herbert’s classic science fiction novel, *Dune* (1965). Allegorically reading the fictional substance “melange” in Herbert’s novel, Field draws parallels between the fictional world of the novel and our own. The highly valued fictional substance of melange can be read, she argues, as “a discursive platform for oil and the ideological, social and political formations that are inextricable from reliance on black gold, while its deleterious aspects are

INTRODUCTION

disavowed or deferred". Through her reading, Field places Herbert's work squarely within the arena of environmental concerns, offering an interesting ecocritical reading of this text that illustrates how the problems explored therein can be read as relevant to the very pressing ecological concerns of our time. *Dune* presents a warning to a world addicted to fossil fuels: "a political/energy hegemony based on neo-imperial force and monopolistic, exponential expansion will run into the problems of scarcity and limit".

After more than three decades, SASGLS/SAVAL has undergone an important change to its identity. While remaining committed to the promotion of literary theory and comparative literary studies in South Africa, the organisation's members voted at its biennial general meeting at the conference in 2017 to update its name and focus. The two special issues of *JLS/TLW* dedicated to the SASGLS/SAVAL conference therefore represent the final publication output of the organisation under the banner of its old identity. As of 2018, the organisation operates under the name LASA – the Literature Association of South Africa/Letterkundeassosiasie van Suid-Afrika. This change, a kind of conscious unstitching and restitching, does not represent disintegration or collapse, but rather a renewal. The organisation's activities continue unabatedly, and so it is with great hope that we look forward to the LASA Biennial Conference that is to be held in 2019.

Reinhardt Fourie

University of South Africa
fourir@unisa.ac.za

Richard Alan Northover

University of South Africa
northra@unisa.ac.za

Neil van Heerden

University of South Africa
vheern@unisa.ac.za