

9th Africa Century International African Writers Conference (ACIAWC) 2021

Date: 7 November 2021 Venue:

SALA Virtual Conference Centre

Time: 10H00 - 13H00

Theme:

***Decolonised Literary Arts, Culture, Heritage and Expression in Times of Pandemic Crises:
Celebrating the International Year of Creative Economy and Sustainable Development.***

The conference will be preceded the **9th International African writers Day Lecture**, under the same theme, delivered by **Prof. Puleng LenkaBula**, Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of South Africa (UNISA)

In 2020 the major theme of the Africa Century International African Writers Conference (ACIAWC) was *Decolonising Africa's Literacy Heritage: Debunking Myths*. This year 2021 we continue from that theme as we explore the challenges presented by coronavirus (COVID-19) to communities of the world especially Africa. The pandemic seeks to change our literary heritage as it presents new myths. The gauntlet is thrown to the writers and artists who have to define our humanity despite the struggles presented by the pandemic.

The advent of COVID-19 has brought with it complications in our society. In South Africa and many parts of the world life came to a standstill as from March 2020. Yet many have examined the role of literature and ways in which it can enrich the people's lives as many sat inactive behind closed doors. Communities have looked for answers from various art forms such as literature, music, painting as they searched for moments that might help humanity better understand the feelings we are going through today (Public Affairs, 2020). Mark Danner from Berkeley was quoted as saying that much can be gained from art in times of crises:

During a crisis, “the normal structures of our life which we take to be determined, and necessities, suddenly fall away,” he said. “You find you can live life artistically, you can create a different way to live, you can create yourself. Your life is not path-dependent, the way you thought it was.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic, “we see there are other ways to live,” he added. “We understand that communality is a necessity. We can hope that this ability to reshape life will be something that is taken away from this crisis. ... We will see new ways of relating to one another that won’t be determined by the crisis, but will be a result of the creativity we can see that is possible in our (new) ways of living.”

Indeed, COVID -19 pandemic disrupted many activities in communities around the world. Experts have written on how various societies have been reacting to the virus. Roy (2020) points out that it is not the presence of viruses that makes the pandemics common but the human response which tends to follow the same patterns. Literary works demonstrate that there are three ways that humans respond to pandemics (i) sense of denial (ii) slow response and (iii) authorities providing false numbers about the infected cases and deaths (Roy, 2020). Again literature plays a pertinent role here. And Roy adds: As we are confined within the four walls of our homes under lockdown in the wake of Covid-19, literature helps break the barriers, connecting us across different historical periods and time zones with others who have experienced similar tragedies. More importantly, literature shows us that we have a lot in common with others who are from distant lands and different times, encouraging us to appreciate the fact that we are not the only ones who are dealing with the worldwide devastation wrought by the pandemic.

Common to much literature on pandemics is the fact that many have resorted to the written word to inspire themselves in times of grief and despondency. Yet some authors have highlighted how the 1918 Spanish Influenza (sometimes referred to as a forgotten pandemic) tended to be overlooked by writers. The flu killed over fifty million people in one year and the war was responsible for eight million of these deaths (Hovanec, 2009). Yet there are few books that document the Spanish Flu across the world. If that happens today Coronavirus will be trivialised in literary history hence writers have a mammoth task to document this pandemic. There are a few writers (and in Africa almost non-existent) who recorded their experiences in pandemic literature especially on the 1918 Spanish Influenza:

Katherine Porter - Pale Horse

William Maxwell- They Came like Swallows

William B. Yeats – The Second Coming

TS Eliot's – The Waste Land

This paucity cannot be repeated hence artists need to set everyone free from the bondage of Coronavirus. In a time when everyone speaks of the third and even deadly wave of coronavirus we need to value the arts even more. Poetry, novels and various forms of literary genre will enable humanity to fight the challenges presented by the pandemic. We cannot live in frustration of not understanding our world. Artists will make us continue being expressive as we define our humanity. As the pandemic continues debilitating our lives we need to continue defining our customs, cultures and experiences for the current and future generations. It is for these reasons that our conference this year will focus on the role of literature in redeeming us from the struggles of life. During apartheid we know the role of literature in defining our struggle and giving us strength. Finally, one of the conference's main objectives is to for people to see how through literature we can connect with the global and see the what art can do in interpreting the universal human experience.

The Africa Century International African Writers Conference 2021 requires us to examine the relevance of literature during times of pandemics. It demands of us to search deep for the roles that writers should play as they write about the pandemic today. The following are some of the topics (although not limited to these) that presenters can select from in preparation of their papers. Each presenter is expected to speak for 15 minutes and this would be followed by discussion which entails comments and questions.

References

Hovanec, C. 2009. *The 1918 Influenza Pandemic in Literature and Memory*. Unpublished Masters Thesis. Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University.

Public Affairs. 2020. *Literature and the Arts in Times of Crisis*. [Online] Available <https://news.berkeley.edu/2020/04/29/literature-and-the-arts-in-times-of-crisis/>

Roy, A. 2020. *Literature and Pandemics*. [Online] Available <https://www.thestatesman.com/opinion/literature-and-pandemics-1502912723.html>

About the Conference:

The Africa Century International African Writers Conference, inaugurated in 2012, is a legacy programme of the South African Literary Awards, established in 2005.

It is a well-documented fact that, through the ages of colonial oppression, resistance and revolutions in Africa and elsewhere, intellectuals, especially of a literary bent, had been at the forefront of articulating the masses' efforts and aspirations for political liberation and social emancipation. These literary intellectuals were so multi-faceted, deep and broad as they selflessly employed their skills in both fiction and non-fiction writing, often leading from the front establishing actual programmes and projects that broke down boundaries and hitherto stereotypes borne of centuries-old colonialist oppression and capitalist exploitation. They established and successfully ran newspapers and other outlets through which the people's voices could be heard and agitation for resistance and liberation (could be) espoused and acted out.

Equally important is the celebration of the literary icons from South Africa, our Continent and the African Diaspora, both past and present, in a manner that reflects and engenders literary appreciation, literary advances, literary excellence and the dialectical or symbiotic relationship with the political developments. This document provides an outline of some of the strategic programmatic activities for the realisation of the Africa Century International African Writers Conference.

The Conference seeks to become both a major source of celebration and critical appraisal of our finest in literature and history. It seeks to become a formidable platform for literature by both seasoned and aspirant writers.

We aim to have the Conference to become a Mecca of who is who of the African literati, the Diaspora and the entire globe where the celebrations of African letters occupy centre stage.

The pinnacle of the programme is the International African Writers Day Lecture, which was inaugurated in 2012. The previous speakers who delivered the lectures are:

2020 : Prof Mongane Wally Serote, South Africa's National Poet Laureate

2019 : Prof Mandla Makhanya, VC & Principal, UNISA

2018 : Prof Kwesi kwa Prah

2017 : Prof Zodwa Motsa

2016 : Mr Nathi Mthethwa, Minister of Arts and Culture

2015 : Prof Micere Mugo

2014 : Ms Samia Nkrumah

2013 : Dr Sadiki Kaloko

2012 : Pres Thabo Mbeki
