Analyzing the COVID-19 as Rhetorical Agency in Selected South African Social News

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Abstract

This paper examines the representations of the COVID-19 in selected social news, posted in South African online platforms in March and April 2021. Employing close-reading strategy with the theoretical lens of health humanities and new materialisms, it investigates how human knowledge(s) give voice to the COVID-19 in South Africa where both the COVID-19 and poverty have been considered as crucial issues in online media platforms and how the COVID-19 as an actor of narration shapes rhetorical modes, becoming a rhetorical agent in the social news to encourage the desire for systematic global changes from South Africa. Moreover, this paper explores how the selected social news as a platform and a literary genre are transformed during the pandemic in South Africa. By doing so, it can contribute to the field of health humanities, aiming to illustrate that reading literary genres with the recognition of inanimate agencies can help us understand what can be proceeded in order to transform our actions as preparations and responses to any global emergencies to come.

Keywords: Representations of COVID-19; South Africa; Rhetorical Agency; Health humanities; Social News

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Introduction

With the technological advancements, improvements in medical treatments and human health have been tremendous. In October 2020, Cleveland Clinic, the U.S. non-profit academic medical center, announced ten medical innovations that could transform the medical advancements to the new levels. Among them were gene therapy for hemoglobinopathies which were genetic disorders affecting the production of hemoglobin molecule. The new gene therapy here could reduce the presence of sickled blood cells in order to prevent complications caused by it. Smartphone-Connected Pacemaker Devices also became more popular and considered as one of the innovative medical advancements since the devices could be used to correct arrhythmias, the conditions in which heartbeats were uneven, either too fast or too slow. These were a few examples of how the human medical advancements had reached its peak where humans had abilities to control and manipulate bodies. This was indeed a memorable achievement that could increase survival rate for patients suffering these severe health conditions.

Yet, with the emergence of a novel coronavirus since the late 2019, it had imposed new challenges to human-controlled bodies. Shortly after its first appearance, on January 30, 2020, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of World Health Organization (WHO) announced it, renamed as COVID-19, as a global pandemic due to the uncontrolled spread of this disease[2]. Reported on March 11, 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak, caused by the novel coronavirus has spread to more than 120,000 people across 114 nations, and it has continued to spread fast and widely in the global scale. On April 29, 2021, there have been 149,216,984 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 3,144,028 deaths reported globally[3]. Such situations had caused massive fear across the globe, regardless of the distributions of COVID-19 vaccine doses that had been distributed since January 2021.

The massive fear was even more immense when it was combined with other existing social problems, such as poverty and class and racial segregations to name a few. This was reflected, for instance, in forms of the access to COVID-19 vaccines for many developing countries that were very limited. Reported on April 26, 2021, WHO admitted that seven countries in the Africa continent, which were Rwanda, Senegal, Ghana, Togo, Tunisia, eSwatini and Botswana, had already been exhausted the vaccines they obtained from the UN-backed Covax scheme and had to wait until mid-June 2021 for more. Some countries had not been able to use AstraZeneca vaccines before their advertised expiry date, partially because of questionable effectiveness of the vaccines against the different variants of COVID-19[4]. These situations added to the deadly COVID-19 pandemic had intensified the global fear, especially across several online platforms. Online news, Facebook, Twisters among others have been employed as discussion platforms to express both individual and public views on the global impacts of COVID-19 and the ineffectiveness of the vaccine distributions that have been connected to inequality that has been sustained by social segregations based on races, classes and genders. CBS News, for example, broadcasted via its online channel on April 12, 2021 that a number of South Africans have been frustrated with the systematic inequality of

[2] "WHO calls COVID-19 a global pandemic" March 11, 2020.
https://www.sciencenewsforstudents.org/article/who-calls-covid-19-a-global-pandemic. accessed on April 16, 2021.
[3] "WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard" April 29, 2021.
https://covid19.who.int. accessed on April 29, 2021.
[4] "Covid-19 Africa: What is happening with vaccines?" April 23, 2021.
https://www.bbc.com/news/56100076. accessed Feb 15, 2024.

the vaccine distribution by the wealthy countries, the situation that they called, "shocking imbalance and moral failure that have been shining to the history that we should not forget"[5].

Reflecting through these situations, COVID-19 is no longer a simple virus limited to the field of medical and health studies. Its existence has been extended to the field of humanities, especially when its agency has highlighted power constellation, questions of morality and ethics, and most of all, inseparable relationship between nature and culture, the haves and the have nots. Relying on these as the points of departure, this paper examines the representations of the COVID-19 in selected social news, posted in South African online platforms as well as other online media about South Africa. It attempts to investigate how human knowledge(s) give voice to COVID-19 in South Africa and how the COVID-19 as an actor of narration shapes rhetorical modes, becoming a rhetorical agent in social news in order to encourage the desire for systematic global changes from South Africa. By using close reading via the theoretical lens of health humanities and new materialisms as the research methodology, this paper explores how the social news is transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. By doing so, it aims to illustrate that reading literary genres with the recognition of inanimate agencies can help us understand what can be proceeded to transform our actions as preparations and responses to any global emergencies to come.

Research Objectives

To analyze representations of the COVID-19 in selected social news, posted in South African online platforms, as an attempt to investigate how human knowledge(s) in forms of language(s) give voice to the COVID-19 in South Africa and how the COVID-19 as an actor of narration shapes rhetorical modes, becoming a rhetorical agent in the selected social news to encourage the desire for systematic global changes from South Africa.

Scope of Study

The primary sources of this paper are selected from social news, published by accredited news agencies within South Africa. A number of social news are selected among the following websites: *news24* (https://www.news24.com*), MFS-SA Association* (https://www.msf.org.za) and *Oxfam South Africa* (https://oxfam.medium.com), from South Africa. The criteria of the selection rely on credibility and subscription of the news agencies and online platforms to ensure that the primary texts have been screened before being published online. As a result, the selected social news articles are:

1) "COVID-19 in South Africa: The intersections of race and inequality", published on March 16, 2021 by *Oxfam South Africa*
2) "Coronavirus: President Ramaphosa announces a 21-day lockdown", published on March 24, 2021 by *news24*
3) "Social media users in Kenya and South Africa trust science, but still share COVID-19 hoaxes", published on April 7, 2021 by *news24*
4) "Social media users in Kenya and South Africa trust science, but still share COVID-19 hoaxes", published on April 7, 2021 by *MFS-SA Association*
5) "South Africa: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, a concern during COVID-19 Lockdown", published on April 7, 2020 by *MFS-SA Association*

[5] "Protests over 'shocking imbalance' of COVID vaccine distribution in South Africa" April 12, 2021. https://www.cbsnews.com/video/protests-over-shocking-imbalance-of-covid-vaccine-distribution-in-south-africa/#x. accessed Feb 15, 2024.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology:

1. Emergence of Health Humanities in Literature

The mentioned inquiries are positioned and theoretically framed within the field of health humanities. Health humanities as the theoretical concept and academic field was introduced by Crawford in his edited book, *The Routledge Companion to Health Humanities* published in 2020. There, he defines health humanities as "a fast-growing field of research, education, and practice that has generated a more inclusive, democratizing and applied approach to arts and humanities in health care, health, and well-being" (2020, p. 3). According to Crawford, it was derived from the traditions of medical humanities, seeking to bring together arts, health, expressive therapies, community arts and social prescribing in order to advance creative public health (2020, pp. 1-7). Medical humanities, according to Cole, Carlin and Carson, provides scholarly attentions to "explore contexts, experiences, and critical and conceptual issues in medicine and health care, while supporting professional identity formation […] Medical humanities draw from many disciplines to examine issues related to the development and practice of medicine and health care" (2014, p. 7).

Comparative literature and its literary analysis as a contribution to health humanities has been spotlighted after Thornber, with her book *Global Healing* published in 2020, insists on abilities of literature and scholarship on literature to become key parts of the medical contributions to enrich communications between healthcare providers and patients (2020, p. 16). There, she further defines health humanities as the field, broadening from:

> "[H]ealthcare setting and physician-patient relationships to connections among patients, family care partners, health professionals of all ranks, society and even the planet […] The health humanities are devoted to appreciating better complexities and nuances of clinical and other encounters among patients, caregivers/care partners, and communities; the needs of both patients and health providers; and the interests and responsibilities of individuals and societies. In so doing, the health humanities have deepened understandings of the diverse lived experiences of suffering across time and space, from multiple standpoints […] and humanity writ large" (Thornber, 2020, pp. 20-21).

This implies that the scopes of health humanities are not only limited to healthcare systems, but it also covers a variety of socio-cultural-environmental issues in which literary studies can contribute. Literature, similar to other forms of arts, offers everything from detachment from reality, entertainment and possibility of social and cultural encounters. Therefore, it is convincing that literature can easily find itself a spot to fit into this field. Thornber (2020) further supports her points by bringing forth the discussions in Medical and Health Humanities Conferences (MHH) which had been taken place since 2013 in Africa. MHH engaged largely with social (in)justice and inclusion/exclusion in health sciences and thus the needs for humanizing and decolonizing the field must be realized. The relationships between literature and medical studies, as Thornber insists, can be explicitly seen in Emmanuel Babatunde Omobowale's course on "Special Topics in Literature" in 1995 where students discussed the work of Nigerian physician writers in terms of comparative perspectives, surfacing how medical students could use literature to humanize medical practices in Nigeria (Thornber, 2020, pp. 21-22).

Using this vision as the analytical lens, Thornber engages in the literary production and national fear for HIV/AIDS epidemic which is one of the ongoing medical problems in

South Africa. HIV/AIDS epidemic is proved to be the issue beyond the medical healthcare. It has become a tool for gender, class and racial segregations. As she demonstrates, many forms of literature, "from oral to written poetry and drama to the novel and short story to memoir and other life writing, literary nonfiction, and investigative journalism among other genres-has exposed and decried the stigmas both against HIV/AIDS and against people most vulnerable to contract the disease […] resulting social discrimination as increasing the physical and psychological suffering of individuals, communities, nations, and ultimately humanity writ large" (Thornber, 2020, p. 113).

Building on this point of view, she depicts how a number of writers connect HIV/AIDS with the national fear, representing on their complex relationships that result in either challenging or submitting to the systematic social discriminations. For instance, "[b]efore AIDS was a 'black' disease, it had been a 'gay' disease, and the deep-rooted homophobia of the apartheid regime had stymied all efforts to acknowledge and address the disease during the critical period of the late eighties and early nineties" (Thornber, 2020, p. 106). At the same time, she also points out how the absence of HIV/AIDS can also be considered as an oppression tool by presenting Donadio's quote of Zakes Mda's statements. "Why didn't [Norman Rush] ask [J.M] Coetzee [1940-] why he didn't write about AIDS…In *Disgrace* [Coetzee's 1999 novel on post-apartheid uncertainty] there's not even a mention of AIDS. Nobody takes issue with him because he's white. But because I'm black it's my issue" (Thornber, 2020, p. 111).

Thornber's arguments and findings truly reflect the inseparable between social complexities as contents, stories as forms and HIV/AIDS as one of the key actors. Even in its absence, HIV/AIDS has power to lead the directions of narrations and interpretations. Therefore, it deems necessary to highlight the agency of HIV/AIDS and its power of narrativity that has been absent in the discussion. This is an intersection in which new materialisms with its particular focus on the power of material agency can contribute.

2. New Materialisms: Rhetorical Agency in Literature

New materialisms provide frameworks through which the embeddedness of humans and nonhumans is considered through material-discursive dimensions in which materiality and discourse are mutually negotiating and interfering. Coole and Frost (2010), for instance, treat new materialisms as a new movement in which things can be agents along with humans. This movement aims to contest the privileging of individual human's subject-identity as the recourse to their own agency. This is to say, they believe that the human-centralization is very much problematic, as it not only disregards the existence of nature-related entities, but it is also a root cause of the segregation of gender, race, age and ethnicity to name a few that have been sustained by the complexities of constructed relationships tied to agents' subjective stances, creating stereotypical images that prevent agents' transformation and performativity. It is the same way as when nature-culture, human-nonhuman are divided into two opposite categories in which culture and human are more superior than nature and nonhuman entities.

Such narratives are rejected by the beliefs of new materialisms. Instead, new materialisms, especially those derived from Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), sustain the vision that activities occur via the process of "intra-action" within which all actors establish their own agency. The relationships with one agency and those of others are entangled in the spatial-temporal dimension or "spacetimemattering phenomena" (Barad, 2007). As a result, it originates what Barad calls "*agential realism*", or the realm of agents. As she insists, no agency emerges outside the process of "intra-acting" encounter (Barad, 2007).

Narrations can also be considered as series of intra-actions, becoming multi-entities scapes that exist as spacetimemattering phenomena that entangle the world. It contains and carries transformations and narratives from the world and about the world. Being societal textures, narrations construct different forms of texts, including fictional texts, nonfictional texts, sounds, visual languages, sets of images, codes and/or numbers that rely on and feed into discursive epistemologies. Such narrations allow agencies of nonhuman entities, such as inanimate matter, and their power of narrativity to be recognized and performed. As seen in the case of AIDS in South Africa, as Thornber implies, AIDS has gone beyond the simple category of diseases in the medical field. Its agencies have been used as tools to sustain social discriminations and segregations in South Africa. However, what Thornber did not mention there is that HIV, as an agent, also takes part in those social constructions. HIV with its own story as the deadly virus/thing entangles with human's discourses of discriminations and end up providing conditions for validating one-side beliefs, solidified by the superiority of human self-proclamation. Such situations keep happening because humans have silenced the narration of HIV as an entity with its own story that has an ability to become a rhetorical agency alongside human actors.

Rhetorical agency, according to Cooper (2011), refers to a byproduct of the process through which individual entities establish meanings through "acting into the world and changing their [discursive] structures in response to the perceived consequences of their actions" (p. 420). By doing so, agency is not considered as a fixed possession to any particular kinds of actors. Rather, agency is performative that enables writers to recognize and implement their rhetorical acts, "as an act that make them who they are, that affect others, and that can contribute to the common good" (Cooper, 2011, p. 420). Even if the scope of Cooper only covers selected groups of students, the turning away from the modernist notions of subject and how she declares the position of subject as "death" totally open a path for redefining the supposed object and otherness in all contexts, including nonhuman entities, such as HIV/AIDS and the COVID-19.

HIV can create AIDS in anyone regardless of gender, class and racial categories. As a number of scientific evidence points out, even if HIV is not considered as a living thing, it possesses an ability to act according to its own will and beyond human's predictability. That is why no scientist can completely map the patterns of AIDS since the symptoms are adaptive from case to case. Anthropocentric knowledges about HIV are still limited in the same way as nobody is able to fully map out the landing patterns of atoms. Images of HIV/AIDS and its symptoms are series of act to the world. As a result, it creates its own meanings and stories that shapes and are shaped by its own agency. Therefore, it is undeniably that HIV/AIDS is a rhetorical agent instead of being a non-dynamic thing and a fixed object, acting according to anthropocentric and racialized discourses.

This is also the case of the emerging and mutating COVID-19 in 2021. The performativity of agency provides a platform within which the COVID-19 becomes another rhetorical agent, widening possibilities of meaning making and global changes. This paper utilizes this insight as a starting point in recognizing the COVID-19 as an actor and rhetorical agent who takes part in formulating and narrating selected social news in and about South Africa published between March 2021 and June 2021.

Results and Discussion

1. South African Social News and its Transformation during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Social news is an emerging literary genre and a byproduct of human's transforming social interactions, relying on technological advancement and its online networks. According

to Hurcombe et. al., social news is "a 'born-digital' form of journalism which is both symptomatic of and a pragmatic response to the logics of social media." (2021, p. 378). This is to say, social news departs from traditional journalistic conventions by challenging its objectivity and its representation of balance as a form of neutrality[6]. Instead, it moves to the realm of "post-truth era" (Hurcombe et al., 2021, p. 395) by reforming the supposed objectivity into a matter of positionality, and in so doing, it can "avoid unhelpful binaries between objectivity and bias […] it alludes to the overt positioning that these outlets use to address particular audiences" (Hurcombe et al., 2021, p. 395). These characteristics of social news suppresses "power of truth" and its domination, claimed to be equipped in news, and replaces it with more opened possibilities for challenging, reforming, redefining socially constructed values. Such nature allows readers to perceive information posted there as subjective, and sometimes persuasive fact. It becomes a space where involving actors negotiate and interact. As a result, it gives ways for interpretating possibilities in the same way as other literary genres do.

In South Africa, internationalization and digitalization have been forcing changes and transformations in societal and economic scales. As April et al. claims, such "transformation changed the way in which the South African society views itself, its interaction with democracy and its economic interaction as consumers and business markets […] All industries are affected by transformation, with the media industry being no exception" (2019, p. 2). This is to say, while the transformation has completely affected economic and business landscape of South Africa, it has also a certain impact on how social news as a medium of communication are adapted and reformed. For instance, according to Napoli (2010), South African modern media audiences have unprecedented choices between different platforms and devices for their consumption of news contents. This is because many digital innovations emerge and in turn influence the news consumption patterns of the audiences by giving them opportunities to freely choose their choices. Such situations have forced social news to be on the move, published around the clock.

Social media, according to April et al., has influenced younger audiences to prefer different types of news stories. This is to say, they prefer "short, headline-type newsflash stories, written in simple words and phrases, rather than long reading, investigating articles" (2019, p. 9). Due to this reason, many journalists have to learn how to write news copy for social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twister and those alike. For example, *news24* of South Africa has to publish news both on their website and then summarized the news and post them with the link to the news on their Facebook page. In order to obtain higher likes and shares, they have been publishing social news on Facebook and Twister 24 hours a day. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the frequency of publications seems to be higher, as around less than 2 hours per news article on May 28, 2021.

Social news published on Facebook page have different functions from those published on the news agents' official website. Firstly, the social news published on Facebook page provide spaces for complaint and sharing social trauma, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, *news24* published on July 5, 2021 on their Facebook page the social news, entitled "COVID-19: Why may infection with Delta variant cause different symptoms? An expert explains". After the publication, there were 68 comments and 32 shares. Many of them commented about how deadly the Delta variant could be. For example, one comment by Moloko Debrah states that "Killing people to decrease the population. This is too much.". This comment got 12 likes and 1 reply within a day.

[6] According to RM Entman (1989), the balance in journalism aims for neutrality by presenting both sides in any important dispute with equal attention.

Such function can help relieve mental stress for the social news readers and at the same time it could also offer a space for collecting, contesting, and negotiating personal beliefs. On July 5, 2021, the social news, entitled "Eid gatherings may have acted as super-spreaders, fueling Covid deaths in Muslim community" was published. The news informs the readers how gathering during Ramadaan and on Eid may have triggered the increasing of COVID-19 related deaths in Muslim community. Many comments follow and one of them written by Egashnee Moodley Bhulaye states,

> "I think they are forgetting about this past weekend superspreader event too. People cannot go to controlled religious gathering, but this political event was bypassed with zero arrest. So SAPS would arrest a person who is praying by himself in a religious venue but not those in political gatherings?"

While negotiating his beliefs, Mr. Bhulaye demonstrates how the social news and its function allows the readers to interact with the journalists and other readers through commentary spaces. The status of anonymity also gives power to the readers to contest the authorities the ways they cannot do in the physical world.

Such function, however, posts a certain risk of widespread disinformation that could circulate on social media in the global scale. As Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2021) claim[7], the COVID-19 pandemic has led to circulation of false information about the virus, its origins, and possible cures for disease it causes, especially those related to China. Relying on their research findings, they illustrated how Kenyan and South African social media users were very likely to share such disinformation even if they suspected or knew it to be false. This is because they did not believe and trust the scientists. Instead, they believed in the sense of civic duty.

2. The Agency of the COVID-19 as Rhetorical Modes of Contesting Social Injustices in selected Social News from South Africa

As an attempt to limit the COVID-19 impacts in the country, President Cyrill Ramaphosa announced on March 23, 2020 to implement the Level 1 lockdown throughout South Africa for 21 days, starting from March 26, 2020 until April 16, 2020[8]. The lockdown enforced the midnight curfew and the preparations for the coming of the new deadly B.1.617 variant of the coronavirus from India. Such situations have caused the mass fear in the country as what have happened elsewhere around the globe. However, the fear for the COVID-19 expressed in social news about South Africa especially since 2020 is not limited to the explicit symptoms of the virus on human body, but also on the level of social discriminations.

The agency of COVID-19 has been used here as a rhetorical mode to insist in the need for systematic changes by being tied to social injustices, existing before the pandemic. This can be seen from the fact that several South African social news writers have portrayed how the COVID-19 fear in South Africa is not only directed to the nature of COVID-19 with symptoms that put damages on lungs, heart, brain and other long-term health problems, but the agency of the COVID-19 and its impacts in South Africa are also related to a matter of

[7] "Social media users in Kenya and South Africa trust science, but still share COVID-19 hoaxes". April 7, 2021 https://theconversation.com/social-media-users-in-kenya-and-south-africa-trust-science-but-still-share-covid-19-hoaxes-157894. Accessed Jan 20, 2024.
[8] "Coronavirus: President Ramaphosa announces a 21-day lockdown". March 24, 2021. https://www.parliament.gov.za/storage/app/media/Publications/InSession/2020-09/final.pdf. Accessed Jan 20, 2024.

racialized and gendered inequalities and violence. This is to say, when the COVID-19 is mentioned, it will always resurface social injustices, such as poverty, racism and gender inequality as forms of the apartheid legacies.

On April 7, 2020, *MFS-SA* has published an online feature article, entitled "South Africa: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, a concern during COVID-19 lockdown". Here, the COVID-19 agency has been connected to the current domestic-gender violence and has been signified as a booster of domestic violence in South Africa. As reported, "Police Minister Bheki Cele announced that at least 2,230 gender-based violence cases have been reported during the first week of the national lockdown, 30% more than for the same dates in 2019.[9]" This social news reflects on Dlamini's "Gender-based Violence, Twin Pandemic to COVID-19" published in 2021 that while the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed existing inequalities within countries and across geographies, it causes what Dlamini calls "Gender-based violence" (GBV) as another pandemic whose impacts intensify gender equality and toxic masculinity (Dlamini, 2021, p. 583).

There, she defines GBV as "psycological, physical and/or sexual violence perpetuated or condoned within the family, the general community, or by the state and its institutions. GBV occurs in all societies, social classes and cultural groups, and it is a global pandemic that affects one in three women in their lifetime" (Dlamini, 2021, p. 583). In South Africa, the GBV has been demonstrated through the confirmation of President Ramaphosa, stating that "one woman is killed every 3 hours. GBV and femicide are twin pandemics to the COVID-19 pandemic" (Dlamini, 2021, p. 588) regardless of many initiatives, such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act and the Promotion of Administrative Justice Act, the Employment Equity Act of 1998 to facilitate equity in access to formal employment for women across race, and the National Crime Prevention Strategy of 1996 that aims to eliminate violence against women and children a national priority.

In "COVID-19 in South Africa: The intersections of race and inequality", published by *Oxfam International South Africa* on March 16, 2021, the writer Vuyokazi Futshane recalled the COVID-19 as "'the Inequality Virus' [which] exposed, fed off and increased existing inequalities of wealth, gender and race"[10]. Here, Futshane considered the COVID-19 as the booster of systematic racism and other intersectional injustices. As she insisted,

> [T]he dangers of the systematic inequality will only grow as vaccine programs begin to roll out. It is not an accident that across the globe—from Brazil to the United States to South Africa—Black people, Afro-descendants, Indigenous Peoples and other racialized groups are more likely to contract COVID-19, and to suffer the worst consequences. From access to health care, exposure to the virus related to occupation, to socioeconomic status, non-White people have been made more vulnerable thanks to inequalities built into the very structures of [South African] society.[11]

Here, Futshane reformed a discourse of the COVID-19 as a symbol and a tool for sustaining more impoverished lives of the marginalized South Africans. In terms of racial and gendered

[9] "South Africa: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, a concern during COVID-19 Lockdown". April 7, 2020. https://www.msf.org.za/news-and-resources/latest-news/south-africa-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-concern-during-covid. Accessed Jan 20, 2024.
[10] "COVID-19 in South Africa: The intersections of race and inequality" March 16, 2021. https://oxfam.medium.com/covid-19-in-south-africa-the-intersections-of-race-and-inequality-e71696bd839c. Accessed April 30, 2021.
[11] Ibid.

hierarchy, Black women have been positioned among the most vulnerable groups. Referring to *Statstics South Africa (Stats SA)*, Futshane claimed that while average women in South Africa earn income 30 percent less than men, who are more likely to find employment and reach better positions than women are, Black South Africans receive the lowest wages, comparing to other racial groups among which White South Africans are the highest earners in all industrial sectors. Such poverty also takes effects in forms of a lack of access to housing clean water, quality education and social protection and healthcare. This illustrates how poverty in South Africa is a multi-dimensional apartheid legacy with inequal opportunities and rights.

The emergence of COVID-19 has worsened these situations even more, especially since the South African authorities implemented the state lockdown on March 26, 2020. The marginalized South Africans with many black women had lost means of generating income. This equipped the mass fear for the COVID-19 and its lung symptoms with the even more massive fear for a state of joblessness and mass anxiety of being able to afford daily basic necessities. As Futshane proclaimed,

> COVID-19 is a socio-economic pandemic as much as a health pandemic for South Africans in this segment of society, many of whom have suffered from job losses, and those who are considered essential workers who were able to keep their jobs but had to risk their health for a pay cheque. […] In April, in the Western Cape alone there were over 200 supermarket employees who tested positive for COVID-19 (the majority of whom were women cashiers who earn some of the lowest wages in the supermarket value chain). Townships, whose demographic profile is predominately Black people and people of colour who are employed in low paying jobs that increase their risk of exposure to COVID-19, have become Covid-19 hotspots […] Nearly three decades into the democratic transition, South Africa remains highly inequal, with a clear rural — urban divide still visible. [12].

This is a point where COVID-19 becomes a storied matter whose narratives have been used to contest the discourse of social injustices. The COVID-19 as an unstoppable mutating virus intensify oppressive positions of the marginalized South Africans, and by doing so, it resurfaced the impact of social inequality that are considered as common phenomena by many and contest it by bringing together the needs for social transformation, urging for significant changes in terms of both demographic, geographic and economic profiles for safer spaces in South Africa.

Conclusion

While the COVID-19 is perceived as the global fear, it can also be a dynamic entity, becoming a representative of adaptation and transformation of all who inhabit the Earth. As demonstrated, the representations of the COVID-19 in selected social news, posted in South African online platforms between March and April 2021 reveal how English language has been influenced and shaped by the power of COVID-19, and at the same time, it also offers spaces for the COVID-19 to resurface social inequalities in South Africa that have been overlooked, becoming permanent scars in the land of diversity. This vision may help South African people heal the scars and encourage an acceptance to the fact that racial/class/gender segregation and anthropocentrism are existing only in human minds and their power blinds us to see things from different sides. Optimism, pessimism, fear, mass anxiety and all other emotions, forcingly emerged by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, are in our control, but in terms of materiality, we cannot deny that it is still too far from our hands.

[12] Ibid.

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