

## Language and silence in Lewis Nkosi's novel *Mating Birds*

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### Abstract

The present paper proposes an examination of instances from Lewis Nkosi's novel *Mating Birds* (1983), in order to show how the text exposes racism under apartheid through the balanced use of language and silences. Firstly, there is an exploration of issues concerning the relationship between society and apartheid from a historical perspective – this is crucial to understand how space becomes relevant in the configuration of the narrative. Secondly, the analysis focuses on two questions: a) how the English language created a hybrid protagonist whose lack of belonging is the ultimate consequence of apartheid; and, b) how meaningful silence is for the interpretation of the novel. In the interaction that takes place among the uses of language and silence, social space and apartheid policies the author revives features of the South African oral tradition in a narrative that combines future, present and past in “an ever-unfolding now” (Edwards, 2008, p. 41).

**Keywords:** Mating Birds; Lewis Nkosi; apartheid literature; language and silence; orality.

### Resumen

El presente trabajo examina instancias de la novela de Lewis Nkosi *Mating Birds* (1983), para mostrar cómo ésta expone el tema del racismo durante el período de *apartheid* a través del uso del lenguaje y los silencios. Primeramente, se exploran cuestiones relativas a la relación existente entre sociedad y apartheid desde una perspectiva histórica – esto es crucial para comprender cómo el espacio adquiere relevancia en la configuración de la narrativa. Luego, el análisis apunta a responder dos preguntas: a) cómo la lengua inglesa permitió la creación de un protagonista híbrido cuya falta de pertenencia es la consecuencia final del apartheid; y, b) qué significativo resulta el silencio para interpretar la novela. En la interacción que tiene lugar entre los usos del lenguaje y del silencio, el espacio social y las políticas del apartheid, el autor revive las características de la tradición oral sudafricana en una narrativa que combina futuro, presente y pasado en “un ahora permanente” (Edwards, 2008, p. 41).

**Palabras clave:** Mating Birds; Lewis Nkosi; literatura del apartheid; lenguaje y silencio; oralidad.

A SOURCE THAT allows for an insight into the production of South African author Lewis Nkosi is the interview by Janice Harris published in *Weber Journal* in 1992. On this occasion, Nkosi stated, regarding the key issues of his work, that “*Mating Birds* is partly about narrating”. This narrative takes place in the South Africa of the 1950s and 1960s under apartheid, a fact which acquires significance considering the author’s life and the moment when the novel was published.

This paper discusses how the consequences of this brutal system pervade the characters’ actions and shape a narrative which is loaded with meaningful silences; the unsaid becomes as important as that which is said. This special treatment of language and silence allows the author to discuss racism, one of the most important themes in the novel, and it encourages reflection on orality, a characteristic feature of South African literature. The interaction between what is said and what is silenced creates a balance that shows a profound concern with the oral nature of the human word.

This paper explores instances in the text that unveil deep meanings in the use of language and silences, especially considering the fictional setting and the time of production, showing that both the said and the unsaid have a huge potential of interpretation. Thus, literature becomes a contesting place to reflect upon the system of apartheid and its consequences.

### ***Apartheid and Mating Birds***

Reading *Mating Birds* from a post-apartheid perspective calls for a retrospective review so as to understand key points of the novel. In the preface to the 2004 publication, the author makes reference to the fact that *Mating Birds* was “about the racial divide in the 1950s and the 1960s” and the time of publication inserted this work “into the politics of the 1980s in South Africa” (Nkosi, 2004, p. 8). It is also remarkable to notice how some biographical elements regarding the author’s life add further significance to the question of time and place in this work.

Born in 1936 in Durban, South Africa, Lewis Nkosi was part of the intellectual group that wrote with a style of their own about the realities of apartheid and its aftermath. As Shostak (2005) argues, Nkosi was granted a scholarship to study at Harvard University in 1960 and in order to leave his country—the government would not allow him to go otherwise—he had to agree never to come back. His work in exile added a special perspective to his view of South Africa and it left a mark in his prose. This might explain why the author chose such fictional setting considering that the politics of apartheid lasted for nearly forty years considering the period 1948-1994.

As Conçaves (1998) claims, 1948 is the year when apartheid was “implanted” with the victory of the National Party. It “became something more than mere social segregation. It was a system that moulded South Africa at all levels” (p. 353). It ceased

to be a collection of racist practices to acquire legal status; specific laws were passed to separate the different social groups always in detriment of the black majority. Conçaves (1998) speaks of the laws that ruled the working conditions of black people and the restrictions imposed on them regarding their free mobility within the boundaries of the country:

After 1960, the government launched the policy of the *bantulands*: a group of micro-states was created, spreading along 13% of the territory, and the black population was deprived of their South African citizenship; from that moment onwards they would only be citizens of those micro-states, although they could be allowed to reside and work in white South Africa (1998, p. 353).

In this way, the blacks were considered non-citizens outside their *bantulands* and could not have any claim to make to the government. *Bantulands* citizens were considered temporal population when they left their homes to work or visit white South African territories, being forced to carry their passports and queue up for verification every single day. The protagonist in *Mating Birds* gives the reader a powerful image of how the simple routine of going to the beach could become a tortuous process:

When the bus finally pulled up at the Durban station, there was the usual squad of iron-faced police waiting to check the identity documents of alighting passengers—passengers whose passes were not in order, passengers whose permits to live in the city had expired, those without any visible means of employment. In short, myself and thousands of others like myself, who lived a life of enforced idleness and criminality.” (Nkosi, 2004, p. 97)

Chapter 10 in the novel also explores the issue of forced mobility from the protagonist’s perspective as a former member of the Zulu community, the major ethnic group, according to Conçaves (1998), who stresses the fight of the Zulus in “risk zones” (p. 369) and describes their struggle to remain an autonomous force. Sibiya speaks of the white soldiers who came with bulldozers to carry out the “remorseless destruction of their ancient village” (Nkosi, 2004, p. 53). The image of the native lands, inherited through generations, now in hands of white groups with economic and urban projects which did not include the Zulu, and the concern of Sibiya’s father to keep the family together by moving to another village is undoubtedly a very strong representation of how the lost space acquires a new value. Space in this specific context is all important to understand

one of the key metaphors in the novel which is that of the mating birds. The feeling of not belonging, the loss of the native lands, segregation and the final trespassing of legal borders are presented as antagonistic images in contrast to that of the birds outside the protagonist's cell, free in the sky, flying and mating as they wish. Edwards (2008) speaks of a "double consciousness" (p. 139) in this process of hybridisation and brings back the image of the African voice that is "poisoned by the blood of both [African and European] and caught between cultures" (p. 139) in a recalling of Derek Walcott's poem *A far cry from Africa*.

### **What is Said: Deep Meanings in the Use of Language**

In this section, the focus is on the use of language: what is said and how, its implications and connotations. In agreement with Phillipson's view, who speaks of a need for "scrutiny of how language contributes to unequal access to societal power and how linguistic hierarchies operate and are legitimated" (1997, p. 239), it is possible to argue that in the novel, the language imposed by the whites disseminates the policies of apartheid by making explicit the laws of segregation. In this way, language constitutes a means for the perpetuation of difference and racism, and it becomes the vehicle for the narrator to pinpoint the existing differences between the groups.

The novel offers different instances for the reader to experience the power of the word, especially the power of the word uttered by the whites in their relationship to the native population. The most striking example in connection to the use of language to materialise laws may be the use of signs to divide areas on the beach. The narrator speaks of "the inevitable notice-board bearing the legendary warning: BATHING AREA—FOR WHITES ONLY!" (Nkosi, 2004, p.14). In an interpretation of the relationships between space and the characters in the novel Cole (2008) speaks of how spatial metaphors are used to reinforce the impossibility of interracial contact. He argues that ultimately the beach represents apartheid in the sense that it perpetuates segregation and racial division. "With visible signposts that constitute the line of demarcation" (Cole, 2008: 94) apartheid laws are made clear to everyone. Words are not only said, but also printed on boards and displayed in public spaces so that the policies which sustain apartheid become part of the landscape and thus, they are always present in the collective consciousness.

In regard to the use of language for the representation of laws and how they are perceived by the protagonist, it is worth noticing how the author highlights the power of the white dominant group by means of capitalisation. When Sibiya describes his first sight of Veronica he recalls: "...when I came across the English girl, I saw only what White Authority, with the aid of so many laws and legal penalties, had forbidden me to see. Another human being" (Nkosi, 2004, p. 14). This excerpt proves the satirical tone

of the capitalisation of White Authority at the same time it breaks down all possible barriers in regard to the human question. The narrator clearly states that in spite of all laws, possible penalties and legal issues, what happened that day on the beach is that he saw a woman he felt attracted to.

A second example to illustrate the use of language comes with the introduction of Dr Dufré, who embodies the western tradition of science. He tries to explain the logic behind the crime that has brought Sibiya to jail. Paradoxically, Dr Dufré becomes one of the most important presences during Sibiya's confinement and his participation in the narrative is on many occasions connected with the power of the word to name and explain. In this regard, it can be argued that the author transforms his text in a place of contestation since the protagonist will fight this white power keeping some memories to himself and choosing to play around with others so as to keep his listener interested: "I said nothing about the white girl at the Mzimba shopping centre. I suppressed the incident altogether. Why? I suggest that an answer to that question would open for Emile Dufré new and interesting areas for investigation" (Nkosi, 2004, p. 52).

It is also true that Dufré represents an antagonistic viewpoint when compared to the natives who come to see Sibiya in jail. When describing Dufré's speech, the narrator states that "his phrasing is measured but pleasureless. It is efficient but devoid of human poetry" (Nkosi, 2004, p. 37). In what is clearly a critique of the effects of the English language as a means for colonisation, the author allows his narrator for an incredible reflection on this matter: "Doctor Dufré's English [...] is without a doubt the language of police inquisition and torture. It has none of the felicity of verbal play, none of the sexual brevity of human speech" (Nkosi, 2004, p. 37). The English spoken by the doctor has inevitably transformed Sibiya too, as a result of the many years of education within a system imposed by the Europeans. At this point, the protagonist clearly notices a difference between his own speech and that of the natives and understands that such difference has ostracized him. He belongs neither to one group, nor to the other: it is the realisation of his true alienation based on the use of the English and Zulu languages. He has been hybridized and now he does not belong to any group:

"... these people listen not to the words I speak but to something behind the voice [...] I do not speak like them. [...] And from this style alone, because of centuries of practice in forming judgment of human character on the basis of human speech, by the time I leave, my visitors seem to have concluded that I am not to be trusted; my ways are no longer their ways." (Nkosi, 2004, p. 24)

### **What is Silenced: The Unsaid and its Implications**

A crucial element that communicates in silence is that of the gaze. In the preface to the novel, the author expresses his wish to write about the gaze as a means for exploring deep feelings that cannot be materialized into words, especially those of the protagonist towards Veronica. It is also possible to speak of the gaze and the other in relation to the point made in the previous section. The moment Sibiya realises that his use of the language makes him different from his native folk is when he notices how they look at him in silence:

“my African visitors say nothing [...] Above all, they observe. I can see them watching me when they think I am not looking [...] the message is as clear as if they had spoken. I am not to be trusted. Even if I am to die for them I no longer exist” (Nkosi, 2004, p. 24).

The Zulu communicate in silence but their message is perfectly understood: Sibiya feels the weight of such a gaze and understands his fate. The author establishes a contrast between the Zulu and the English by referring to the way the latter speak and the former see. This is interesting especially if analysed from the perspective of authors such as Boehmer (1995), Edwards (2008) and Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989) who discuss the relationship between Europeans and colonised peoples in the context of postcolonial literatures: the whites have the power to name and dominate and what is left for the natives is to watch in silence and see the transformation. The final product will be a person they will not be able to identify with any longer: “...my ways are no longer their ways. They have come to the view that I am now as foreign to them as the white girl!” (Nkosi, 2004, p.25).

In regard to how silence becomes a mechanism to deal with racism, Guignery states that silence “is a language of its own which also has psychological, emotional, ethical and political implications.” (2009, p.1) and that in twentieth century literature silence can be considered a device to show distance from the horrors brought about by events such as the world wars, the holocaust and colonisation. In *Mating Birds* Nkosi seems to employ silence with a similar intention. Disillusion with the white man and betrayal are too powerful for the Zulu to speak about; interracial love and free sex are taboo in a society that lives under apartheid: Sibiya reflects on the fact that “the real point of this trial was not the rape of a girl but the colour of the alleged rapist as much as that of the victim” (Nkosi, 2004, p. 29). Distance is necessary to alleviate the burden of these issues and so the author makes use of silence as a strategy for the communication of that which cannot be uttered. At the same time, silence is used to reinforce an idea the protagonist introduces in chapter 5 when he speaks of the “racial undertones” (Nkosi,

2004, p. 27) of his case. Segregation and racism end up being notoriously heavy to deal with and consequently the character decides “not to labour that point” (Nkosi, 2004, p.27). The racial undertones of the case make people at court uncomfortable, and though Sibiya stands in that room as the victimiser for the crime of rape, at the same time, he becomes the victim of the collective crime of racism.

A final example in regard to the question of the unsaid is the previously mentioned metaphor of the birds mating outside the protagonist’s cell:

The mating birds caw, they whirl and whirl outside my window and the smell of fresh spring sharpens the air with its lush, acrid promise. All the same, it is mostly the birds pairing in the open sky that remind me with a vivid poignancy I rarely feel these days why I’m locked up in this tiny cell, awaiting death by execution. (Nkosi, 2004, p.11)

The fact that this metaphor is introduced at the very beginning of the novel and is then referred to again at the end after the narrator has told his life story is highly significant and it even stands out to give the novel its title. This circularity is reminiscent of the oral tradition in South Africa and it may be understood in Edwards’ words when he states that:

In oral cultures, information is connected with immediacy and relies on ritualized practices of memory [...] past and present are not separated from each other. This is because history lives on (it is restored) in every utterance. Since memory does not work like lineal time or a chronology, the past seems forever preserved in the present utterance. The language use of oral cultures appears to compress time in an ever-unfolding now (2008, p. 41).

The birds mating outside Sibiya’s cell represent freedom: freedom to fly, to love, to mate regardless of the complications of human political systems. The metaphor becomes the lenses through which Sibiya can see his present and analyse his past. The metaphor of the mating birds seems to speak much more than what the protagonist can actually express. What is said is not enough to express the implications behind the use of this metaphor. The birds are not only the birds, they are also himself, they are Veronica in his arms, they are the political prisoners that inhabit the same facility that has been his home for the last weeks. Ultimately, the birds are a metaphor for the repressed desire for freedom that black South African people cannot voice out under apartheid.

The question of the mating birds and the unsaid takes us to the realisation that there are moments in the novel when silence predominates. For instance, it may be argued

that a significant moment of silence revolves around the events concerning the affair between the protagonist and the white woman. The narrator claims to have met Veronica for the first time during the “silent, torpid hour of noon” (p. 11) when people go for lunch or seek refuge out of the hot weather. This silence seems to foreshadow a key feature of this relationship. It is silently that the protagonist’s obsession begins and in the same way his lust grows until he consummates the encounter. Silence anticipates prohibition and censorship. All the instances that build up the steps to the alleged crime seem to be hidden behind a wall of secrecy. However, the subsequent events associated with the arrest, trial and conviction of Sibiya, as well as the media coverage (Nkosi, 2008, pp.19, 27, 34,136) acquire a contrastive resonance, producing a unique narrative effect.

Exposing racism continues to be the most significant consequence for the use of silence as a literary device. Sibiya cannot escape his fate and so he is to die in a cell for a crime whose real evidence remains far from the reader. The opening of the last chapter is an overwhelming declaration against racism at large:

Death, at any rate, for the unpardonable crime of having been born black in a world where White Is Right and White Is Might. [...] I’ll die a victim not of this white woman’s lunatic lies and my own worthless passion [...] No, I’ll die of a vaster, deeper, more cruel conspiracy by the rulers of my country who have made certain knowledge between persons of different races not only impossible to achieve but positively dangerous even to attempt to acquire. (Nkosi, 2004, p.137)

### **Conclusions and Further Discussion**

*Mating Birds* is an opportunity for readers to examine the period of apartheid from a different angle. The use of language to discriminate against people and to make legal certain actions together with the use of silence to expose racism produce an unforgettable effect. Covertly, the author seems to aim at a more profound objective: to make his audience realise the devastating consequences of this brutal system and how a minority with sufficient power to impose their voice could bring the native majority to their knees as they were silenced and forced to watch.

There are many more instances that support this idea and it is also possible to analyse the novel making focus on different approaches to literature. It would be certainly interesting to attempt a study in which gender relations are questioned. A gender-based perspective would find points of entry in certain moments of the novel to establish how the relationship between Sibiya and Veronica was doomed from the start and the alleged rape becomes a metaphor in itself. A psychoanalytical approach would most probably focus on the reasons for Sibiya to lure after a white woman and how the same system

that prohibits such encounters is the one that encourages them. A Marxist reading would delve into the question of white power and how the main character tries to grasp some of it by having sex with a white woman. Barry (2002) contributes with a didactic method to use these theories approaching the literary work from angles that could enhance a deeper reading. These are all possibilities for further research that would help shed light on the main themes presented in the novel.

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