

## LEWIS NKOSI'S *MATING BIRDS*: AN INVECTIVE AGAINST APARTHEID

**Dr. Somanchi Sai Kumar**  
Lecturer in English  
Govt. Degree & PG College  
Tekkali 532201,  
Srikakulam District  
Andhra Pradesh, India

### Abstract

South African white minority rulers implemented racial discrimination on the basis of colour also known as apartheid. Lewis Nkosi was a South African Black who fought against apartheid through writings. He was a critic, essayist, and novelist.

His first novel *Mating Birds* is the story of an educated Black youth's narration of his life. Ndi Sibiyi, the narrator is awaiting death for the alleged rape of a white girl with whom he claims to have a muted love affair across the segregated beach. The narration is an attack on apartheid, the political system and judiciary. Nkosi uses existentialist and postmodernist techniques to present the story. This paper attempts to examine *Mating Birds* as an invective against apartheid.

**Keywords:** Apartheid, Lewis Nkosi, *Mating Birds*, Postmodernist literary techniques.

South Africa has unique identity and a distinct character. The colonizers in South Africa, strengthened with the passage of time and introduced apartheid, otherwise known as racial segregation. In 1652, the Dutch established a post at Cape, which later came to be called Cape Town. The people who worked as sailors for the post, majority of them were Dutch belonged to the Calvinist Reformed Church of the Netherlands, and there were others too-Germans and Scandinavians. Later many slaves were imported from Madagascar and Indonesia. The settlers married these slaves, and the mixed descendants came to be called as Cape Coloureds.

The settlers expanded and engaged themselves in clashes with the natives. The settlers drove the natives from their traditional lands defeating them in several wars, using modern weapons and tactics. The resistance by the natives, and clashes between the natives and the settlers continued sporadically into the 19th Century.

Britain, during wars with Napoleon took control of Cape Town, with the Dutch declining as a military power. The British encouraged large number of their citizens to settle in South Africa. Boers resented the presence of many new comers from Britain. New comers had a different language, different religion and different ideas about the treatment of native population. This resulted in several clashes among the Boers, the English and the Zulus the natives.

As the rulers were British, the presence of many of its citizens increased, and three distinct groups emerged, the Boers of Dutch origin, the English and the natives, apart from the Coloured. The English were highly urbanized people, engaging in trade; politics, mining and

finance, and the Boers were restricted to farming with their own life style. Boers believed in the God-given order of the races, and thought themselves superior to the natives.

The dissatisfaction of Boers with the British continued, and established two independent republics, the South African Republic and the Orange Free State and ran them independently. The Boers preferred to be called Afrikaners. After the Boer wars, the union of South Africa was formed, by joining the other British ruled areas with the newly captured Boer republics. Britain tried to bring the Boers into its fold, and the defeated Boer General Louis Botha was made Prime Minister. Both General Botha and his deputy General Jan Christian Smuts were in favor of healing the wounds with the English-speaking community. Nevertheless, the third Boer General Hertzog represented the discontented Boers or Afrikaners.

Prime Minister Botha and Smuts along with liberal minded Afrikaners, and English-speaking South Africans represented, the United Party. They disgruntled Afrikaners, found space in the Nationalist party headed by General Hertzog. United Party ruled the union of South Africa until 1948. Though the United Party wanted to spread industrialization, bring social reforms, gradual or partial equalization of races in South Africa, the Nationalist Party opposed equality of races and wanted to control immigration. The victory of Nationalist Party brought everything upside down.

With the Nationalist Party assuming power in 1948, it began implementing racial segregation or apartheid as a state policy. It passed many laws, clearly demarcating society on racial lines. The Public Amenities Act segregated beaches and parks. Numerous laws like Mixed Marriages Act, which prohibits marriages between various racial groups, were passed. According to this law, the marriage between persons belonging to various racial groups was not valid; those who violated this law were tried and sentenced to imprisonment. Immorality Act was passed to prevent persons from having love and sexual relations, with people belonging to other races, thus declaring it a crime in South Africa.

Sex and love became subjects of the state with severe restrictions on the personal life of the people. The South African government with its perverse race laws seems to have created some charm, blacks for whites and vice-versa. In fact, “it must accentuate the fear and wish for contact, and it should excite an even stronger impulse to appease this secret wish by toughening one’s attitude race” (Nkosi Home: 38). The desire for what is forbidden by the law was a dominant theme in the literature of South Africa. Examination of South African fiction shows that, usually Black males coveting the body of a white woman, and white woman having a hidden desire for the black male body is a recurrent theme in literature. Nkosi writes “the dream of sexual fulfillment in the arms of the woman of another race which has always been a dark and half-forbidden theme of South African literature” (Nkosi: 38). The themes were based on inter-racial love affairs, sexual relations, the violence in these relations, and it is also tragedy in the lives of the people, who suffered under the law.

The colour bar affected all the writers, blacks and whites alike. The writers were not free from the inter-racial relations, right from Sarah Gertude Milin’s *God’s Stepchildren*, which decries miscegenation, to the present day writers who witnessed the end of apartheid. Alan Paton and Nadine Gordimer presented inter-racial relations, with moral overtones. When it comes to black writers like Alex La Gama and Ezekiel Mphahlele, their characters, who were victims of racial oppression, they were not heroic characters fighting the oppressors and apartheid, but their endurance of suffering makes them heroic.

Many in their portrayal of fight against apartheid depicted inter racial relations; became either too vehement or monotonous. Nkosi calls such literature a ‘journalistic’ feat. Many novels

written by South African novelists describe inter-racial relations in a tired and repetitive manner. Lewis Nkosi admits this and says that he would hate stock characters. The term used to describe such novels is ‘township novel’ and in his ‘Preface’ to *Mating Birds* Nkosi remarks that he does not wish to write another ‘township novel’, because it is not capable of supporting the growth of a rich literature. Nkosi for over four decades tried every genre criticism, poetry, short story, drama, cinema production, except novels. Probably for this reason, Nkosi did not attempt writing fiction until 1980s. He published his first novel in 1983.

However, this is a ‘brave cross over’ (Lindy Steibel and Gunner Liz: *Still Beating the Drum*: Johannesburg: 2006 Pre. xiii). His aim is not write stereotype novels but to create works, which are artistically satisfying and contribute to the people’s movements in their struggle against oppressive regimes. Prior to Nkosi, many writers treated the theme of inter-racial relations in their works, repeating the same; he put the theme in a novel way. The Act of Immorality and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act continued, till 1980s and the transgressions continued, along with it. Against this background, the story of *Mating Birds*, takes place.

In his ‘Preface’ to *Mating Birds*, Nkosi refers to Camus’s *The Outsiders*, Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* and Edward Fitzgerald’s *The Greatgatsby*, as drawing parallels from them, this ‘Intertextuality’ is an essential feature of post modernism. He uses Alan Paton’s *Too Late the Phalarope* as an inspiration and wants to write the illicit passion from the Other side of the fence, i.e. from the Black side of the story. Gordimer’s story “A Bit of a Young Life” suggested him the life in Durban beach, to recreate it in *Mating Birds*. Nkosi also states in his ‘Preface’ that, he wants to write about the pleasures and risks of looking at and being looked at under the influence of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*.

New York Times, selected *Mating Birds*, as one of the top 100 books published in 1986. It was translated into ten languages, and received critical attention in Europe and America. The novel was awarded Macmillan Silver Pen Prize in 1986. Lynne Hanley compares the two novels *Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing, and *Mating Birds* by Lewis Nkosi, and shows some similarities in theme and plot.

Lynne Hanley suggests the influence of Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is singing*, on Nkosi. Lynne Hanley, writing on Apartheid and the state, identifies:

To sustain and reproduce its white ruling class, the apartheid state must impose and enforce a ban on sexual intercourse between white women and black men... Since apartheid cannot survive the erosion of its rigorous control of sexuality and procreativity of the white women, her body becomes both the property of the state and a terrain of resistance to the state. Defilement of a white woman by black man becomes for the black man, an act of revolution, while for the white man, it is a crime against the state. Only for the woman is it a crime, above all, against her own person. (Halley 495-506)

However, one thing is certain; Lewis Nkosi takes a decisive break from the tradition of writing novel on apartheid. Lucy Graham finds the *Mating Birds* as:

an interloper in the historically ‘whites only’ territories of literary avant-gardism and erotic writing. In a doubly transgressive gesture, the novel not only presents an account of desire that subverts the perversion or peculiar *pere-version* of apartheid, but it also performs a deconstruction of the mythology that has sought to retain and naturalize racism (Graham: *Still Beating the Drum*: 149).

Peter Nazareth likened *Mating Birds* with Fanon’s classic *Black Skins, White Masks*

(Peter Nazareth: 672) About the novel, Litzi Lombardozi writes, “(Mating Birds) is a bitter piece of writing, in which he explores a segment of history through the eyes of the black man, crucially capturing the consequences of being black and living in the apartheid hegemony (Litzi Lombardozi ).

Nkosi narrates the story through a character named Ndi Sibiya, a native in South Africa. The entire novel is the mediation of the narrator about his life, which he writes as a story, before his execution. The story takes place in the first person narration, or conscious narration. ‘Song-froid’ can be used for Nkosi’s narration, and it can be described as ‘Bildungsroman’, as it narrates his story from birth to execution.

The novel has a dramatic beginning. The narrator declares that he is going to be executed for the rape of a white girl, and then recollects his childhood, youth and the events that led to the alleged crime. This entire story is narrated to a psychologist, who comes to interview him. The psychologist Doctor Emile Dufre has come from Europe to unravel the mystery of the unconsciousness of a black male towards a white woman. He repeatedly asks same questions. Sibiya narrates the story to psychologist Doctor Dufre. While awaiting execution in the prison, he narrates and writes his life story. Sibiya’s narration from the prison cell, is fragmented with its digressions and breaks, becomes questionable, and suggests the influence of post modernism. The protagonist indulges in digressions which throw light on the socio-political conditions in South Africa.

Sibiya is conscious in his narration, and makes the reader realize the flaws, artificiality, thereby making the chance of ‘suspension of disbelief’ an impossibility. His foregrounding of the story allows for multiple interpretations of the text. This metafiction used by Nkosi, gives the impression the novel, as a post-modernist one. The prison, from which Sibiya narrates his story and awaits execution, is a metaphor of the limitation of his communication, writing and physical movement under post-colonial situation.

Ndi Sibiya, the narrator and protagonist, is born and brought up in a Zulu village called Mzimba. The Village is a quiet one with steep hills, and deep valleys and dotted by Zulu mud-huts. He is the favourite son of the large Zulu household, and his mother is the youngest and favourite of his father’s many wives. When Sibiya is young, life at Mzimba is slow and easy-going. The land is fertile they have cattle; they grow enough to eat and to spare. His father is a powerful headman, and has control over the entire household. He is a conservative man and believes in the power of ancestral spirits. Although his mother Nonkanyazi revers her husband, she is of a restless and adventurous spirit, shrewd and energetic. Despite her husband’s reservations, she is determined to send her son Sibiya, to Whiteman’s school. With his father’s permission Sibiya enters the Lutheran Seminary at Mzimba. Here Lewis Nkosi humorously adds that entering Whiteman’s school means embracing Christianity, “for the white missionaries extracted a price for imparting knowledge to the children of the pagan race.” (Nkosi *Mating Birds*: 45)

Before completing his last year at the Lutheran Seminary, there are rumours that, the whole village of Manzimhlophe is to be moved into interior lands for the expansion of white town of Mzimba,. However, they become true. The villages, where their ancestors spilled blood, and were buried, are forcibly removed. Their huts are bulldozed, and those who obstructed are beaten and arrested. Fearing this Sibiya’s father shifts them earlier, to his brother’s village, where he dies suddenly. Nonkanyazi, weeps that grief, not old age that has killed him. With his death, the family splits up. Nkosi description that ‘at a stroke everything fell apart’ (Nkosi: 54) is an example of Intertextuality.

Nonkanyezi heads for Durban, to try her fortunes. Upon arrival in Durban, Sibiya and his mother take shelter in a shack in Cato Manor, a slum five miles away from Durban. There are innumerable shacks, without any sanitation and water. Here too they face the threat of evacuation. In Cato Manor, the main livelihood for African women is brewing illicit liquor called 'skokiaan'. Black workers, who were oppressed racially and economically, greedily consume this dangerous drink, to forget their misery. Drinking continues till late nights, and brawls ensue and result in fights and deaths. African women often surrender themselves to their drinking customers, to meet the family needs.

When Sibiya's mother Nonkanyezi is advised by an elderly woman to start brewing illicit beer, she is taken aback, because she knows brewing beer in their house hold, only to serve the visitors, but not for sale and money. Instead of brewing beer, she starts washing white men's clothing. Sibiya remarks that city life of Durban has a devastating effect and can change everyone. It changes his mother too. She used to wear traditional beads, but discards them on arrival in Durban and starts wearing cheap Indian prints and high heels. The great upheaval follows soon.

Though Nonkanyazi has brought with her a code of living from the village, she could not withstand the malevolent forces of the city. An itinerant preacher, who is handsome and bearded along with his disciples visits Cato Manor on Sundays. Lewis Nkosi has scant respect for the religion of the Whites, he says: "they were under injunction not to shave until Christ's second coming" (Nkosi: 77).

Sibiya notices a change in his mother, who is earlier a resolved self-respecting Zulu widow, men around her used to see her from a distance. To Sibiya, this distance appears feeble. Nonkanyazi seems to respond to their gestures. To Sibiya's suspicion, this is a transformation done by Gabela, on a feverish day, by laying his hands on her shoulders. In order to pay for his schooling, and for better income, she surrenders to the temptation of running a 'Shebeen,' an illicit liquor brewing shop, and stops washing. One of the hungry visitors to the Shebeen is Big Joe from Nyasaland; he is a leader on the docks, and leads strikes for more pay. Many fear and envy him. Much to the bewilderment of Sibiya, he watches his mother surrendering to Big Joe.

Owing to the continued efforts of his mother Sibiya goes to school, college and the university. At the university, there is a racist Professor named Van Niekerk who believes in the purity of races. Sometimes he addresses the combined classes of all races, much to the resentment of white students. He speaks about the history and civilization of African continent:

.... before the whiteman came there was no African history to speak of in this darkest of the Dark Continents. Whether we like it or not, African history commences with the arrival on African soil of the first white man. The history of Africa is the history not of black Africans but of whiteman in a foreign environment" (Nkosi: 83-84).

Lewis Nkosi highlights how the seats of higher learning are racially prejudiced against blacks and Indians.

Ndi Sibiya recollects from his prison cell, how he is drawn into the strikes and demonstrations, in the university. There is a campaign in the university against racial discrimination, involving few white students and professors of liberal and leftist ideology. On one such occasion, Sibiya speaks and that is the beginning, though he shuns limelight and popularity, he is drawn and caught in the politics. He is elected to various committees, and sent as a delegate to the authorities. His views are covered in the newspapers. The senate warns him of expulsion, though he does not take it seriously. One of the demonstrations demanding removal

of Professor Van Niekerk, turns unruly and ends in the expulsion of Sibiya from the University of Natal.

Sibiya tries many jobs quite unsuccessfully, a timekeeper for a firm of building contractors, as a clerk for the Bantu Administration, and as an assistant in a city bookshop. Sibiya says that he is different from his father, who always tries to stay away from whites, their education their religion and their ways of living. Sibiya says of himself "...I have lived, always, resentfully, on the fringes of a white world that tried to keep me out." (Nkosi: 81)

On such aimless wanderings, Sibiya visits Durban segregated beach, which is divided by a fence into two distinct areas one for whites, another for blacks. One day he finds a White girl on white side of the beach, laying flat on her stomach, wearing a bikini with her unclasped braw. He stops in the way. Her soft skin is glowing in the sun. She is not bothered to conceal anything, when she shifts her body on the sand; Sibiya is able to see her bosom. Behind her white body he reads the sign board: BATHING AREA-FOR WHITES ONLY. ( Nkosi: 14 ) He feels raged. He sees her for ten minutes, isolated exposed, alone - he is mesmerized, not courageous enough to make his presence known, he feels an uncontrollable desire for the girl. Race laws being against his desire, he feels another emotion: anger. (Nkosi: 15) He suddenly becomes conscious of his limitation, his race.

The White girl opens her eyes and looks around. She sees Sibiya. She is neither surprised nor feels uneasy. She stares into his eyes. Her eyes are neither smiling nor scornful. Sibiya feels provoked. Her nudeness, he feels is like a familiarity in the presence of a lover. He does not act like a 'native'. He does not take away his eyes. He keeps looking at her. He lacks the nerve to look elsewhere. He feels that she has acknowledged his presence. Then she hooks up her braw. It is too late. He sees what is not meant for his eyes. Sibiya adds humourously: "I became marked forever with the sign of Cain" (Nkosi: 16). Feeling dizzy, and headache he leaves that place, walks and suddenly turns back, the White girl is watching his departure, with more than casual interest.

This scene is repeated many times. Sibiya strongly believes that she is aware of his presence across the fence and her exposure of body to Sun is meant for him. When she looks at him, he feels an acknowledgement of his presence from her. Though they do not exchange any communication, he feels, there is an understanding on both sides. Sibiya says "...we could say nothing to each other to express what felt. Words were dangerous; once spoken, they could never be unspoken." (Nkosi: 99) Sibiya feels it like a game, played by both sides, with decorum. The race laws, discovery, and imprisonment enforce the game's unstated rules. He feels that they are prevented from mutual exchanges, a chat, and a laugh heartily, by the racist state. Sibiya expresses his frustration and despair:

We could not indulge in an exchange of names or even enjoy the light hearted banter of a budding friendship. We could not part with a few well-chosen compliments or make an odd suggestive remark about clothes, looks feelings, emotions hungers and longings. We could trade no complements, which in the normal course of events, make up the unchanging ritual of courtship. ( Nkosi: 89)

After this exercise daily, they leave the beach in their respective routes.

On an evening, after leaving the beach, both Sibiya and the English girl accidentally meet, at the local tobacco shop. Sibiya purchases some cigarettes and walks towards the door to exit, the very moment the white girl enters and is in changed clothes, then dashes him and falls upon him, which he calls an accidental embrace.

He feels that meetings on the beach, muted exchanges of looks, and this episode as part

of love affair, which could not be made public because of the race laws in South Africa. Sibiya feels her physical touch, he believes that she is no longer distant, a remote dream, a phantom, a ghost and a mirage, but a reality. (Nkosi: 92)

Sibiya goes to the city and the beach to see the White girl. For Nonkanyezi, her son Sibiya is going to the city for employment. But she is not aware that his heart longs for the glimpse of the girl. To catch a glimpse of his queen Sibiya does not care for anything ‘the long anguished hours of waiting, the moist heat and the poisoned and sulphurous air’ on the beach. Only to see her, Sibiya decides to undergo the ordeal of traveling in uncomfortable bus journey, and dangerous enterprise of entering Durban without passes.

Sibiya vigilantly looks for the police until he reaches the beach. He throws himself at once on the sand, and starts waiting for the White girl. While lying in the sand, many times Veronica saunters past him, he has seen her fine shaved legs, and even could sense the perfume from her. After reaching her part of the beach, she lays her back on the sand, and the ritual of silent flirtation begins. Sibiya reflects on the relation between the two: “we could feast our eyes upon each other’s bodies but we could say nothing to each other to express what we felt.” (Nkosi: 99) On many occasions, she reads cheap novels, smokes lazily, and looks at him questioningly. Sibiya feels that, when she changes her towel casually, she intentionally allows him to have a view of her bosom, which he compares it with ore in a gold mine.

One day, waiting for the white girl, Sibiya rests and waits on the beach. However, she does not turn up. He becomes restless. A feeling of loneliness and despair engulfs him. With the slightest movement of weed, and palm trees he feels her arrival, but hopeless. He dozes and wakes up. When it strikes three, he realizes that she would not come that day. He is anguished and defeated not knowing what to do. He starts towards a green bungalow among the trees.

When Sibiya reaches the bungalow he finds the white girl with a fat man. On seeing him, she comes down, and there is a cry of surprise from her. The fat man also comes down suspiciously looking at Sibiya. He asks the girl whether she knows him, and she replies in negative. Probably, they are going somewhere, with the doors locked. The fat man warns Sibiya to go away, or else police would be called, the white girl takes him away saying that the native (Sibiya) has not broken any law.

After their departure, Sibiya considers the presence of a man with the girl as a shock, as if someone interfered in his love affair. He decides to search the bungalow. At this stage, Doctor Dufre who is listening, calls Sibiya mad, because the love affair perceived by Sibiya is not only one sided without any tangible reciprocal, this daring house break would land him in the gallows. Inside the house, Sibiya does not find any proof that they have made love. He searches everything, a bed, a chest of drawers, a wardrobe, and a wooden chest, out of curiosity for the girl. Finally, he enters the bathroom, the most private area of her private life. When he is inside the house there are loud noises in the front yard, he becomes tense but the noise subsides, and he leaves.

After reaching home, Sibiya thinks about it. His obsession with the girl seems to threaten his mental stability. He decides to discard, the psychological dependence on watching the girl. He does not go to the beach for three days. He tries to read some books. However, he fails to concentrate. He spends sleepless nights. He is reminded by the girl’s look and physique. He roams the township’s streets.

After three days, Sibiya realizes that his fast is useless. The company of the girl gives him energy. Next morning, he starts for the beach. He reaches and lays on the beach. He silently watches the sea waves, pebbles and the constant sound of the sea boats in the distance, and dimly

the noise of the traffic. After some time, the girl comes walking. She spreads the towel in the sand, removes her dress and goes to take bath in bikini.

She returns in wet bikini, exposing her limbs, much to eye feast and shock of Sibiya. She comes and sits on the towel. Sibiya tries to attract her attention by performing somersaults and various aquatics. He compares himself to a performing animal in a circus. Then suddenly something happens, which he has not expected. She rounds her lips and begins to writhe as if she was in sexual embrace. Though her message shocks him, Sibiya responds. Similarly, she keeps up relating her body, feigning sexual copulation and ends it with the cry of a strangled animal. Sibiya has his part played well in the acting; Sibiya feels that the white girl and he have copulated sexually without any contact, physically defying apartheid and law. He says:

*Apartheid?* We had defeated apartheid. We had finally perfected a method of making love, without even making contact, utilizing empty space like two telepathic mediums exchanging telegraphic messages through the sexual airwaves. (Nkosi: 115)

This incident provides good evidence of Sibiya's claim about having an affair with the English girl. In the final act of alleged rape, it is difficult to deny her complicity. The mock copulation enacted by him, leads him to attempt the original one.

After this mock copulation, the English girl exhausts and falls into a sleep. It is getting late. She gets up, and goes towards the green bungalow and goes inside. Sibiya slowly in a state of dizziness follows her. Then she turns back and sees him at the gate. She goes into kitchen, brings a fruit, and begins eating greedily. She licks the cozying juice on her hands. Then she removes pins in her hair; all her movements are provoking. Now and then, she pauses and looks at Sibiya to confirm his presence. She faces the door, begins undressing, slowly removes her bra and undergarments, and stands in the middle of the room. Sibiya sees an invitation in her posture:

In that small bungalow, surrounded by dense trees, a naked white woman stood in the middle of her room in a mindless careless pose wrapped up in a shawl of light. She was like a burning flame, something of the devil placed there to lure me to my perdition. (Nkosi: 132-133)

Sibiya's blood is running fast and heart is beating louder, his lust drives him to the inside of the room. The English girl slowly climbs the bed like a panther. When he enters the room, the girl raises half from the bed, uttering a cry of surprise. The observation of Sibiya was:

..... uttering a small cry of surprise as befits a solitary woman who finds herself suddenly confronted with a strange man in her room; ... Yet the girl's cry was not really one of alarm. (Nkosi: 133)

Except uttering a cry, she does not move and intend to do so. Instead, she lays on her back and sees into his eyes. He finds in her eyes a curiosity with lust. He kneels down and seizes her. There is a look of fear and perverse excitement, in her eyes. She moans softly. He begins kissing her. The images of Desdemona and Othello and their tragedy come to his memory. She seizes him by hair and takes him into her arms willingly. He gets excited. His body is hot and blood is curling. His eyes are closed. They roll and roll together. He is determined to reach his climax. He thinks this is the end of his longing, his infernal need, and devilish dreams. Far away he hears noises and footsteps. They are nearing and now at the door. He is seized by the neck. A fist and a boot hit him. He falls into sweet unconsciousness. The neighbors and police drag him out.

He is accused of raping a White girl and presented before a court headed by White

judges. The trail begins. Lewis Nkosi, with his crafted style describes the court scene with a touch of comic satire. Throughout the trail Sibiya, instead of defending himself, loses interest watches, and participates in the proceedings of the court like an observer. The comments and observations by Sibiya on the South African state, judiciary, apartheid and the racist state are an indictment and raises questions about neutrality and fairness of the trail. Right from the beginning, the trail seems to be pursuing a pre-determined judgment.

The trail is fair only on surface. There is uneasiness in the court, because of racial overtones:

the real point of this trail was not the rape of a girl but the colour of the alleged rapist as much as that of the victim. (Nkosi: 29)

Sibiya upon entering the court presumes that the judges are going to hang him. The entire court proceedings evoke laughter: the Judge in a tone full of heavy public concern for the rights of citizen asks “can this Court be assured that everything is being done to enable him to get a good night’s sleep ? (Nkosi: 30) Sibiya wonders: “such solicitude for the comforts of a Blackman, is frankly unheard in our country. But I am no fool” (Nkosi: 30). Ndi Sibiya sees in his trail, a determined effort by the apartheid state and its organs, the court magistrates, police and prison to punish him:

.... I’ll die of a vaster, deeper, more cruel conspiracy by the rulers of my country who have made a certain knowledge between persons of different races not only impossible to achieve but positively dangerous even to *attempt* to acquire. (Nkosi: 137)

Every day Sibiya is taken to the court amid tight security, and brought back to the jail. After attending the court proceedings, Sibiya sits in his cell under a dim light, meditates and writes his own story. Sibiya even answers the questions of Doctor Emily Dufre, who has come to interview him. The trail in the court evokes laughter, instead of horror and contempt. The sentence of death, which looms large over the fate of Sibiya, is treated as a joke and the narrator remains emotionally detached throughout the trail. Nkosi skilfully presents the post modernist technique of ‘Black humour’, which means “some playwrights living in totalitarian regimes used absurdist techniques to register social and political protest” (Abrams: 2) in this novel.

Though Sibiya has committed a crime against a White woman, he has never participated in political activities; and the crime is a personal one. However, the apartheid state sees it as a crime against itself. Michiko Kakutani observes in New York Times:

Ironically enough, the act responsible for his death sentence is not a political one; but, as Mr. Nkosi makes clear, every aspect of daily life in South Africa-including love and sexuality-is infected with ideology. (Kakutani: 1986)

The public prosecutor Kakmekaar, makes an eloquent and emotional speech asking for supreme punishment of death, otherwise educated natives like Sibiya, who has recently been expelled from the university recently, would endanger the safety of white women in the streets. But the judge appears embarrassed by the eagerness of the prosecutor for death penalty. The efforts of the judges are to create an impression of a fair and convincing trail, and ultimately to award death, as a penalty.

Max Siegfried Muller Q.C, the defense counsel for Sibiya objects to harshness on the part of public prosecutor. The proceedings in the court, the arguments by the prosecutor and the defense lawyer remind the readers *The Trail* written by Frantz Kafka which has apparently influenced Lewis Nkosi.

When her turn comes to depose her statement, Veronica lies. Sibiya is shocked. She

walks into the witness box gracefully like a swan. Her eyes are blank and she is trembling. She speaks about the weather, how it is responsible for her to feel the extreme heat. After taking bath in the sea she has returned to the lonely bungalow, unaware of any one's presence after her. She tells the court that after her return she has begun to undress to get relief from the heat, without knowing what she is doing, and she has slept on the bed. When she has been rocked and woke up, suddenly she has found a native holding a knife, forcibly trying to occupy her, and told her not to make a sound, and would be killed if does so. Then he has violated her. She stops and weeps. Many whites in the galleries raise, showing their fists, and shout in Afrikaans language to hang him.

The entire story by Veronica does not contain a single grain of truth. The prosecutor who is a White identifies himself with the race of the girl seems moved at the treatment meted out to a white girl. He wipes sweat on his brow. He asks Veronica, whether she knows the native Sibiya and her conduct is responsible for the rape. She shouts and vehemently denies. When she says this she does not falter even for a moment. She even says that she has not the habit of studying every native's face, who crosses her path. At her decisive outburst, Sibiya is amazed:

Her lying, which was done with such a marvelously cool audacity, had the same fascination for me that the most brazen display of evil and corruption can sometimes exert on even the most confirmed saint and believer. (Nkosi: *Mating Birds*: 121-122)

With the testimony of Veronica, Sibiya's belief and a general notion, that white women are opposed to apartheid, and not part of the oppressive establishment vanishes. Sometimes White woman is seen as belonging to a disadvantaged group, but this is a special privilege, apartheid conferred upon her.

When the prosecutor asks her about her willful participation in the sexual act, she denies. Prosecutor Kakmekaar comes to her rescue and defends, that it is nothing but character assassination. The entire court scene tops news lines the next day.

The judgment day arrives. Sibiya is led into the court, but he is blank and detached as though he was watching the life of someone else. His mother and several uncles and aunts attend the trial. They are trying to comfort Sibiya's mother. Suddenly Sibiya feels ashamed, because his lust and ambition for the white girl have caused them agony and pain. His mother's plight is distressing and painful.

The courts in South Africa present a face of fairness but in fact, they are a sham. The defense counsel Mr. Muller asks Sibiya to explain what has happened, and to vindicate himself from the charges. Sibiya is doubtful that his narration would not be to the likings of the racially prejudiced judges. Not with an intention to save his life, but to expose the truth, he narrates the affair, right from the mock copulation to their first encounter on the beach to the actual encounter of sexual intercourse between Veronica and himself.

Sook writes that Nkosi has focused on the relationship of power and language in *Mating Birds* and Veronica's statement reflects her display of accurate, syntactic and lexical forms of language, her language is persuasive to the audience in the courtroom, where as Sibiya shows an uncertain attitude by using English and Zulu language. His language is neither orderly nor syntactic, and becomes illogical under power. (Hyang Sook) Nkosi's intention throughout *Mating Birds* is to reveal that the individual becomes voiceless under the power of the state in South Africa. While he narrates Veronica remains perfectly calm, steady, luminous and brilliant. Myriad writes "the book also plays on the power of memory-whose voice holds more weight in an oppressive? Whose truth is taken as the truth?" (Myriad )

Another critic Peter Nazareth sees the novel, as an expression of language:

he (Sibiya) wanted to be a writer, and now as he is to wait for death, he has to explore what happened *through language* to get at the truth including his own motivations. The South African government attempts to control reality by controlling language. The man has explored the possibilities of a new relationship though mastering the language which in a curious way related to the woman. (Nazareth: 672)

Lynne Hanely considers *Mating Birds*, as a self-conscious reply to Doris Lessing's *Grass is Singing*. She declares that the doom lies in the failure or inability to adapt to the roles prescribed by apartheid. (Hanely: 495-506) Likewise, Ndi Sibiya transgresses his role; his lust for white woman caused his execution.

Death by hanging is the judgment pronounced. Sibiya's fears about Judges, and the judgment finally come true. Sibiya thinks that death is punishment for having been born as black in a world where 'White Is Right and white Is Might. (Nkosi: *Mating Birds*: 137) Though the White women's body is lethal to both black men in *Grass is Singing* and *Mating Birds*, it is pernicious to the life of Sibiya. The code prescribed by apartheid state for White woman can rescue her, but only endangers the life of the Blackman. When required the white woman can save herself, by taking the side of white community, with apartheid state ever ready to protect her from black men.

Here Sibiya's reaction for death punishment, and his feelings for the White girl who is responsible for his fate, are curious. His reflections after the judgment are puzzling and sometimes seem to be morbid. After the death sentence, Sibiya does not fear and regret over it. The 'charge of rape' against him, and denial by Veronica of ever having an affair with Sibiya, though muted, does not create anger and hatred in him. She is not to be held responsible for his death. But the state of South Africa, with its race laws and apartheid is guilty of his death.

Further, he feels that she could be forgiven. However, Sibiya sees a conspiracy by the white racist state in South Africa. In fact, the English girl is one instrument in the hands of the state, which hinders the growth of humanity. He reflects on the situation:

... she became a convenient pretext for the state to indulge its well-documented appetite for murder and destruction; she became useful as the most seductive bait ever placed in the path of a full-blooded African. (Nkosi: 138)

When Sibiya reflects on what happened, his reason for running after girl are interesting.

After all, it was I who close to run after the girl: out of my own inclination, with no other purpose in mind than to discover the sexual reasons for the White man's singular protectiveness towards his women folk ... (Nkosi:57)

But as his execution is nearing, he admits, that he is increasingly becoming lonely. His mother visits him every Wednesday. He feels sorry for his behavior. Sibiya grieves that, he is dying not for love, but for his lust for a White woman.

The story ends as he awaits death. He feels that prison is a better place than the outside world, but the chants of political prisoners, languishing in the other cells cheer him. They sing alone, sometimes-combined and give loud and firm thundering, against apartheid, shaking the prison walls. They keep him company, Sibiya identifies himself with them. He finds no difference between the prisoners and himself, in a way he thinks that he has also fought against the state, by intruding into the property of the state, the White women. On reading *Mating Birds* two critics offer conflicting views:

Nkosi's handling of the sexual themes complicates the distribution of our

sympathies, which he means to be unequivocally with the accused man, ....For in rebutting the prevalent white South African fantasy of the black male as a sex-crazed rapist, Nikosi edges unnecessarily close to reinforcing the myth of the raped woman as someone who deep down was asking for it. (Nixon: 46)

Lynne Hanley answers the charge:

...the culture which serves the apartheid state in particular, have strong opinions about the sexual desire of the Blackman. The blackman, and most particularly the African, is presumed by the state to have an exaggeratedly potent and ungovernable sexual appetite, and the white women is presumed to have for him an irresistible allure. ... Nkosi forestalls the co-optation of his narrative into the ideology of apartheid. (Hanely: 495-506)

Nkosi presents a racially prejudiced society in the novel. It consists of the school authorities, missionaries in Mzimba and the White police who had forcibly evacuated the people for the expansion of white settlement, racist academicians like Professor Van Niekerk in the universities, and the impatient white students, who do not want to share a common class room with the students of other races. The Swiss Doctor and Psychologist Emile Dufre, who is also a White, believes from the very beginning, that Sibiya is guilty, and always mentions the word 'your possible aberration' referring to the rape of Veronica as alleged by her. The Chief Jailor Van Rooyen, who always looks down African political convicts is not only a racist, but cruel as well. The Judge De Klerk and the public prosecutor Kakmekaar have a firm, and predetermined view about the crime committed by Sibiya, because he is a non-white and a native. The court proceedings are only eyewash, and trying to give a colour of fairness and transparency. Even the general White people, who are witnessing the trial from the galleries, instantly believe the deposition of Veronica, at face value because she is a white and demand Sibiya to be hanged.

Nkosi's portrayal of the society and the state is not only racially prejudiced, it represents 'Ideological State Apparatus' described by Louis Althusser. He says that the organs of the state like courts, schools and churches propagate the ideology of the state and perpetuate the system. Similarly, in *Mating Birds*, the state policy of apartheid is supported and continued by courts, and the media, who extensively cover the trial from the white girl's side. The adoption of Althusserian concept is an obvious influence of post-modernism.

Sibiya till the end of the novel makes an existentialist narration, projecting himself caught in the grip of forces of fate and something alien. He describes "feverish, almost uncontrollable desire for the white girl. ...was something more, something vaster, sadder, more profound than simple desire." (Nkosi: *Mating Birds*: 15) Lewis Nkosi's presentation of the plot is so skilled and multidimensional that it gives rise to multiple interpretations. Besides post-modernism, the narration by protagonist makes a reading of existentialism. One of the important themes in existentialism in literature is 'freedom' of the protagonist in choosing the choices in his life. Ndi Sibiya in *Mating Birds* has freedom to run after the girl or not to run. If he does not exercise his choice, he is living an inauthentic life, if he does so, he would be responsible for his actions and may face death. Sibiya willingly ran after the girl, out of his own choice or freedom, there by responsible for his death. Elsewhere in the novel, he expresses that he is a captive of the situation and circumstances, and a tool in the hands of the apartheid state and there is a conspiracy against him. Sibiya sits alone in his prison cell, and thinks about meaning of human life: "... where I sit for hours under a dim light, reading, writing and reflecting on the human condition." (Nkosi: 35)

Another feature of existentialism in *Mating Birds* is *despair* or loss of hope. Sibiya feels that the apartheid state is preventing them from becoming lovers. They would have happily been

married, had they been in another country. He finds oppression and exploitation in life in South Africa: “In mood of profound despondency I was thinking, planning and dreaming of escape from South Africa, from the life of oppression and exploitation” (Nkosi: 36) Sibiya wants to be identified by Veronica Slater, a White: “a sort of acknowledgement of myself as a person inhabiting the same space as herself?” (Nkosi: 16)

Lindy Stiebel sees in Sibiya’s narration a desire to identify himself with the whiteness; to become something beyond his reach. Sibiya is always preoccupied with the life of the Whites (Lindy Stiebel: 174) Despite his clear realization of the moral corruption of whites, he also had a naive fascination, and even admiration for the whites. Here the words of Sibiya, recall the observation of Fanon:

The look that the native returns on the settler’s town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession; to sit at the table, to sleep in the settler’s bed, with his wife if possible. (Fanon: 30)

It is obvious that Lewis Nkosi, while writing *Mating Birds*, has closely followed existentialist philosophy. After repeating the story many times, Sibiya recognizes the absurdity:

The story I told to the court, to the judge, ... was essentially the same story I have been telling here off and on; the same story I later told to Emile Dufre, to my mother, to my friends and my relatives. But in telling and retelling it to the court I found in the end that the whole thing had become somewhat garbled, confused. It had lost any clear logical outline, and become a story without any apparent shape or form, like a modern novel whose plot resembles the shapelessness of emotion (Nkosi *Mating Birds*: 125)

However, he cannot accept and resigns to his fate of suppressing the desire for the girl; he cannot abandon reason, and return to God or religion. He has become urbanized and lost contact with the tribal life. At the same time, he does not believe in Whiteman’s religion:

I am lost. To be more precise, I’m doubly lost. Unlike my father, I believe in nothing, neither in Christian immortality nor in the ultimate fellowship with the ancestral spirits, I have no faith in the hereafter (Nkosi *Mating Birds*: 43)

After the publication of *Mating Birds* it has not been received well in South Africa. Both feminists and the fighters of apartheid have condemned it. The feminists attacked it, because the character of Veronica is shown as a flirt and nymphomaniac as if asking for the punishment meted out to her. They even objected to graphic descriptions of physical details, and the attitude of Sibiya, the narrator towards Veronica, a woman though a White. Nkosi attacks apartheid at the expense of women, for this reason his attack loses its edge, and appears feeble and diverted.

The people who are fighting against the apartheid condemned it because it did not help the struggle, instead concentrated on the introspection of a native black about his lust for a white woman. Andre Brink does not take kindly to the relation between native Sibiya and the White girl Veronica, and he finds *Mating Birds* as the result of Nkosi’s personal obsession for a white woman’s body and his sexism on women. To substantiate this charge, he even refers to Nkosi’s own marriage to a white British woman, after his exit from South Africa (Brink 1-20)

The above charges against *Mating Birds* and its author Nkosi need to be examined. The feminist view of literature need not be applied to every work of art. The writers need to be allowed freedom with regard to their choice of plot, theme, and characterization, for the creation and healthy growth of literature. When D.H. Lawrence published some novels in English, the then government proscribed them, and the celebrated trail that followed, in which many famous personalities such as E M Forster took part, and argued in favour of freedom of writers. Finally,

Lawrence and his works were acquitted. The same yardstick may be applied to the works of Nkosi, in deciding the merit of his works. As for others, Nkosi in the 'Preface' to *Mating Birds* clearly states that he is not writing another township novel and those who are expecting such novels would be disappointed. On many earlier occasions and in his essays, Lewis Nkosi condemns South African black writers for writing repeatedly on themes such as inter-racial love affairs, violence and murder. Precisely for this reason, he might have avoided another protest novel. Therefore, reading *Mating Birds* in a reductionist approach and treating it as another piece of protest literature is a folly.

Post-modernism is a reaction against modernism, developed after 1950s. The concept was not developed consciously by any school or movement, but finds expression in a number of works, after the Second World War, and gained prominence in 1960s. Post-modernism distrusts theories or ideologies, and rejects any ultimate meaning. It views everything as relative. Reality is no longer fixed or determined. The prominent thinkers of this philosophy and concepts are Jean-Francois Lyotard's "meta-narrative", and "little narrative", Jacques Derrida's "concept of play" and Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra". However, postmodernism is against any standard theories and definitions. Garry Smith explains it well:

In postmodernism, there is a concentration on fragmentation and discontinuity as well as ambiguity. The postmodern focuses on a de-structured, de-centered humanity. What this really means is that the idea of disorder and fragmentation, which were previously seen as negative qualities, are seen as an acceptable representation of reality by postmodernists. It is an acceptance of the chaos that encourages a play with meaning. Postmodernism also accepts the possibility of ambiguity. Things and events can have two different meanings at the same time. Postmodern thought sees simultaneous views not as contradictory but as an integral part of the complex patterning of reality. Postmodernism puts everything into question and radically interrogates philosophies, strategies and world views. It is a mood rather than a strict discipline. Postmodernism, with all its complexity and possible excesses, is an attempt to find new and more truthful versions of the world. (Garry Smith)

*Throughout story, the narration runs in such a way that defies traditional storytelling and role of the author. The recollection of the story by Sibiya, about his love affair, and relations with a white girl Veronica, and writing his memories as a book, is a post-modern technique known as Poioumenon. (Fowler **The History of English Literature** Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1989: 372) The term, used by Alastair Fowler denotes a novel that has a narrative, superficially is about writing of a book. It refers to a specific type of 'metafiction', in which the story is about the process of creation. In most cases, what the novel is really about is something else. Ndi Sibiya tells and writes his own story:*

A great discipline, writing. ...All the same, I derive a great satisfaction from writing. I write all the time. The thought of death, the horror of departing from this world before my time is served, so to speak, puts new zeal into my pen (Nkosi *Mating Birds*: 26)

The censorship Directorate of South Africa identified *Mating Birds* as an anachronism,

because inter-racial love and sex, which were depicted in the novel, were no longer punishable under law in South Africa. However, this anachronism by Nkosi, cannot be considered as an aberration, because this is a technique of post-modernism, known as ‘temporal disorder’ used for the sake of irony, willfully used by Nkosi. Lewis Barry writes that, it is used for the sake of irony. (Barry: 123) In this technique times may overlap, repeat, or bifurcate into multiple possibilities.

Ndi Sibiya, in his narration, casually describes, and observes with attachment; the proceedings in the court, and punishment of death. There is a touch of humor and irony, in the presentation, which suggest playfulness, an essential feature of post modernism. Even in the remarks against Christianity, one can see the ‘concept of Play’ by Derrida.

Another feature in the novel is that, narration is build around a series of binary oppositions. It helps to understand and differentiate the meanings in the novel: White/ Black, Man/Woman, City/Village, Justice/Injustice, Settler/Native, Love/Betrayal, Hope/Despair, Fair/Unfair. Nkosi right from the life of Sibiya in the village to his execution, disputes White racist point of view, and counters from the Other side.

Nkosi’s refusal in his preface to *Mating Birds*, not to protest apartheid, is itself a post-modernist thought, which rejects all forms of representations, and at the same time questions apartheid as white mythology.

His language with meticulously used expressions, even to describe Dufre’s postures is a metaphorical device. In his narration, he separates himself from others, and positions himself. In another sense he is seen as the subject of the state and political system, over which he has no control, and is a captive, Sibiya is only a sign against apartheid state, his life is not in his hands, but it is decided by the apartheid state. This portrayal of Sibiya, by Nkosi is a post-modernist presentation.

Post-modernism rejects nationality, and refuses to see them as a class but recognizes as persons or subjects in a group or section, this is similar to Sibiya’s identification with Blacks in the end, and is another facet of post-modernism:

“...more cheering voices can be heard from other parts of the prison; political prisoners lustily singing freedom songs. Voices individually weak and at first very tentative, but once united combine into a single powerful sound rolling and thundering, shaking the very foundations of the prison walls”  
(Nkosi *Mating Birds*: 140)

Sibiya in the novel *Mating Birds*, suffers from ‘Paranoia’, another Post-modern technique, Lewis Barry writes “The Protagonists of Post modernist fiction often suffer from ...a dread that someone else is patterning your life that there are all sorts of invisible plots a foot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action... (and)...Postmodernist writing reflected paranoid anxieties in many ways ... the conviction that society is conspiring against the individual. (Barry: 123) Similarly, Sibiya feels that the entire state machinery, the court, the judges, policemen and the prison authorities are all out to hang him. He sees in his trail, a determined effort by the apartheid state and its organs, the court magistrates, police and prison to punish him: “.... I’ll die of a vaster, deeper, more cruel conspiracy by the rulers of my country...” (Nkosi *Mating Birds*: 137)

On Nkosi’s first attempt in writing a novel, Lucy Graham makes an interesting observation:

novel engages with an avant-garde tradition and avoids reductive positioning, and Sibiya likens his non-linear narrative, with its gaps and absences to a modernist

text *Mating Birds* which to some breaks with realism and draws on the avant-grade strategies of European modernism was an outsider in the territory to which black South African writing had been relegated (Graham :152)

Lewis Nkosi's first attempt at fiction by writing *Mating Birds*, is artistically satisfying. He avoids stereotype expressions, characteristically South African like inter-racial love affairs, sexual relations and protests in a monotonous way. He chooses a setting, limited characters, and compact conversations woven around a person's life, beginning from childhood to youthful life and thereafter towards execution by hanging. He does not protest apartheid, but subjects it to close analysis.

Primarily, the novel is an invective against apartheid. Lucy Graham sums up well: "*Mating Birds* is also associated with the yearning for liberation, for a more just future in which human relationships are not distorted by oppressive laws or racial prejudice." (Graham: 163) Thorough examination of *Mating Birds* shows, that Nkosi is successful in blending modern literary techniques, such as postmodernism and existentialism in his novel and at the same time contributed to the struggle with his works. His novel presents the socio political situation from an observer's eye. The new and upcoming writers in South Africa and Africa need to emulate him in literary technique and storytelling.

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