

Mating Birds: A Case of Subversion of an Authoritative Language

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Born in Natal, South Africa in 1936, Lewis Nkosi is considered one of Africa's most celebrated contemporary literary and cultural critics. As an intellectual member of Sophiatown Renaissance and New African Movement, Nkosi joined other black writers critiquing the harsh reality of apartheid in South Africa. Nkosi's first novel, *Mating Birds* (1986), reflects the author's life-long struggle against the barbarity of postcolonial condition under apartheid. As McClintock notes, the postcolonial discourse, just as with colonial discourse, should not be treated "as a matter of textuality alone, but with the notion of alternative forms of authority, knowledge, and power"(McClintock, 1995: 16). In postcolonial situation, language functions as a primary means of controlling interpersonal communication. It is another way of regulating and repressing the colonized. This paper examines how Nkosi's first novel narrativizes the conflict between the colonized subject and both the verbal and nonverbal media of language ultimately controlled and regulated by the State.

In *Mating Birds*, the silence of communication and the political realities of South Africa are linked to the problem of language and authority, or power. In the opening chapter of the novel Ndi Sibiya, the first person narrator, awaits his execution in jail for the attempted rape of a white girl. In the cell, he reflects on his past relationship with the white girl, Veronica. The cell where Sibiya awaits the execution is a metaphor of the limitation of his communication, writing, and physical movement under postcolonial situation. Outside the cell, "the birds mating up in freedom in open space"(2) contrast Sibiya's situation. Sibiya, a son of the youngest wife of a Zulu chief, is sent to a white missionary school by his ambitious mother in spite of his father's warnings against white women. Behind her desire to send her son to the white school is her aspiration for "the powers of the occult, an almost miraculous ability to manipulate the universe at will"(85) by acquiring the knowledge and power of the white world. Sibiya's desire to enter the white world by acquiring the knowledge of the pen, nevertheless, is frustrated by his involvement in a "protest strike against segregated classes"(100) and his aspiration is ultimately unsuccessful.

The controlling means of communication in nonverbal communication by the State is shown in a signpost on the beach – a color bar – which can be interpreted as a strong act of speech. The warning on the signpost which reads "BATHING AREA-FOR WHITES ONLY" reveals the idea that colored people should not approach the white. Related to this is the idea that whoever trespasses on the area will be legally punished. This sign creates the power and blocks the way of communication between black and white. Thus, Sibiya's "feverish, almost uncontrollable desire for the {white} girl" is frustrated with "something more, something vaster, sadder, more profound than simple desire"(7).

This feeling of "anger" is caused by a dominant issue of color, "a festering sore contaminating the air with its odor of racial conspiracy"(29). Sibiya's anger at the sight of the signpost derives from the fact that he has lived "on the fringes of a white world"(101) that tries to exclude him. The "inevitable notice board," BATHING AREA-FOR WHITES ONLY"(6) controls his speech by the Immorality Act prohibiting conversation between black and white. The small stream of the racial barrier dividing Sibiya and Veronica is a nonverbal region from which tension arises. From such tension, both psychic and political, "a strategy of subversion emerges"(Bhabha 62). In tension, Sibiya and Veronica "feast eyes on each other's bodies"(127) by gazing each other. They, however, use "primitive language of looks and gestures"(112). As Bhabha claims, "the desire of colonial mimicry—an interdictory desire—may not have an object, but it has strategic objectives"(Bhabha 89) which itself is based on the metonymic logic of presence.

Sibiya's desire for the forbidden, white world goes back to the memory of Sibiya's childhood when he first faced the authority of white people. For Sibiya, the first "encounter" with a white girl at a Zulu market gives him the impression of the "White Authority with the aid of so many laws and legal penalties"(6). The awareness of the hierarchical structure of "white" over "black" recognized by a young black boy has sprouted from the old battlefield of his ancestor. Therefore, his father's warning not to "lust after a white woman"(52) is based on the identity and belief as a Zulu because "White people are as smooth as eels" but in fact they are dangerous like "sharks" (6, 5). His father's objection against miscegenation of black men and white women reflects the psyche of the colonized, of a prohibition imposed by the colonizers"(Graham, 2005: 160).

For Sibiya and Veronica, the "law of the father" does not work because they defeat apartheid by fulfilling their desire only by "sex without contact" (149). They both subvert the apartheid with their bodies by "utilizing empty space through the sexual airwaves"(150). As Ashcroft points out, "only by denying the authority of the color bar line and taking control of the means of communication, the post-colonial text can overcome this silence"(Ashcroft et. al, 1989: 87). Despite all the risks, Sibiya wants to be like the colonizer by taking a white woman's body and he wants to reject the racial difference between them. Such a conscious in Sibiya is revealed through his dream.

In the dream, at first, he tries to restrain himself desperately when the Zulu King's daughter, the Princess symbolizing a white woman seduces him "like a well-trained stripper doing the Dance of the Seven Veils,"(120) he perceives it lethal not to endure the test. Sibiya, yet, wants to break the prohibition on white female against his father's voice of 'law of the father.' Sibiya's desire to marry a white woman can be interpreted as a "crucial transfer point of power, tangled with racial exclusions in complicated ways"(Fanon, 1967: 63). As Sibiya's father warns Sibiya to beware of white women, Sibiya's dream on Zulu Monarch's daughter, likewise, alludes to a warning for a forbidden desire. However, only by transgressing the space of the color bar between Sibiya and Veronica, he subverts the submission to white authority of the

white world and achieves the real freedom and relief "only by penetrating into the forbidden portals of that royal hearth"(121) as in his dream. As in Hegel's word, "Freedom is obtained only by risking life"(Hegel, 1949: 233), Sibiyi desires to obtain freedom from the repression of communication through risking life.

Under the postcolonial situation, the language of an individual is controlled by the authority and power of the State. The individual feels the necessity to follow the ideology of the State. Accordingly, the individual is forced to use the language permitted by the State. In *Mating Birds*, Nkosi's narrative style is related to his thematic context. His trope in the postcolonial context can be well illuminated in Sibiyi's trial scene of the courtroom. The hypocrisy, corruption, and deceit of the State are concealed in Veronica's testimony. It is the State that intervenes in Veronica's language and speech when Veronica's statement in the courtroom seems to function unfavorably against the State's criminalizing view on the blocks. Kakmekaar, the prosecutor in the mask of the State intervenes in her speech. He, in advance, regulates Sibiyi's and Veronica's statement when they take an unexpected turn in the courtroom. Kakmekaar's intervention in the court proceedings works favorably for Veronica. For instance, he listens to her eager explanation of the physical details of the rape situation. Kakmekaar, the prosecutor wants to present her to the court and public as the perfect symbol of a "stainless purity, modest, virtuous, bashful"(121) as images of the empire.

Power plays an infinite influence on the colonized subject. Realizing that Veronica encouraged Sibiyi's rape attempt, Kakmekaar averts the topic to protect her. Grasping her situation, Veronica senses the power of the state. Power, in this sense, functions beyond the control and comprehension of the individual who participates within this social milieu(Punday, 2002: 512). When Veronica during the cross-examination in the courtroom glosses over the fact that she encouraged Sibiyi to rape her, it is Kakmekaar with the power of the State who intervenes persistently in the trial. Unlike Veronica, Sibiyi is influenced negatively by the State. His language is controlled in the public sphere of the courtroom. The judges and prosecutor with authority are in politically "elaborate primitive game"(32) of conspiracy of the State. With this conspiracy of the State in motion, Sibiyi's language becomes powerless because he is in a socially, psychologically, and politically weak situation of the accused. In some political situation or some institutional setting, power is more effective in group. In this sense, Hannah Arendt's interpretation of power takes the characteristics of complicity. According to Arendt, "power belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together"(Arendt, 1970: 44). Accordingly, the foul game must be played consistently until the end.

In the witness box, as Dufre, an eminent Swiss criminologist compiling a dossier of Sibiyi's case, displays "carefully phrased English"(39), and "flawless accuracy of a diligently acquired language"(40), Veronica uses the standardized English of logical, linguistic syntax. Her English

displays a decorum suitable for a public space. Her display of accurate, syntactic and lexical forms of language is not the gesture of body as shown when she entices Sibiya on the beach. Her language is persuasive to the audience in the courtroom and her lies in the witness box reflect the hypocrisy, corruption, and "the memory of empty ritual"(165). Unlike Veronica's language, Sibiya shows an uncertain attitude by using English and his homeland Zulu language. Under the oppressive atmosphere of the court, his inconsistent, disconnected use of those two languages, English and Zulu language causes the confusion and incredibility to his interpreter and judges. His language is neither orderly nor syntactic. Therefore, he becomes illogical and this leads to a negative verdict for him. His shift of language from English to Zulu language means he is under pressure as the accused often become illogical under power. As Adler points out, Sibiya's language is "a language anchored in both his own world and the white man's world and which he wants to transcend"(Adler, 2005:98). While " (Veronica's) work of a diseased fabulist imagination"(169) of lying is more believable to the judges with prejudices, Sibiya's two languages are a "a mode of contradictory utterance that ambivalently reinscribes, across differential power relations, both colonizer and colonized"(Bhabha, 1994:96). His illogical response and ambiguous attitude are caused by Veronica's "magnificent performance"(157) of weaving "a web of fiction so completely divorced from the truth"(169). In addition, the overwhelming, authoritative atmosphere of the court controlled by the State makes Sibiya himself confused. Sibiya's uncertain attitude is shown in his self interrogation. His question, "had I raped the girl or not?"(168) suggests Sibiya's incapability to speak up for himself. Therefore, the colonized subject becomes a victim of the colonizer.

In conclusion Nkosi shows, by focusing on the power-language relationship, the social and political realities underlying "a sex crime" against apartheid. Especially the relation between language and power is evidently shown in courtroom in *Mating Birds* because "courtrooms are organized on the basis of verbal exchange, and that linguistic negotiation is essential to court procedure"(Harris, 1999:137). Although Nkosi focuses on the private realm of the sexual instead of political issues, apartheid still remains a political, racial background in this narrative. Nkosi's intention throughout *Mating Birds* is to reveal that the individual becomes voiceless under the power of the State in South Africa.

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