MEMORY IN LIMBO: THE RECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN *MATING BIRDS* (1986) BY LEWIS NKOSI

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ABSTRACT

Lewis Nkosi's novel, *Mating birds* (1986) offers a significant intervention in a history as dispersed and fragmented as South Africa's, by focusing on those specific and critical episodes of South Africa's past. This much-colonised country has had an extended history of perennial violence under colonialism and apartheid. Some fiction by Black writers on this phenomenon may be seen to be reactive, what Njabulo Ndebele (South African writer) terms 'Protest Literature'-and seeks to show black people as victims (Ndebele 1994). Nkosi's novels, *Mating birds* (1986) in particular reverse this order through the narratives of different characters, illustrating that black people were not the passive victims of apartheid but played an active role towards its opposition and eradication. This is achieved through a complex portrayal of the first-person narrative technique and interstices of memory and recall. This article explores how identity as a porous and fluid, and fragmented and fractured concept that could be used to describe the individual or communal traits of some characters, and space (prison) are portrayed in Lewis Nkosi's *Mating birds* (1986).

Keywords: identity, memory, self-fashioning, narrative, representation and Apartheid

1. INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to investigate the influences of memory on identity by examining the role it plays in the self-fashioning of the protagonist in Lewis Nkosi's *Mating birds* (1986), Ndi Sibiya. It is important here to give a brief background on the author, Lewis Nkosi. Lewis Nkosi first burst onto the literary scene with a collection of essays in

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Home and exile (1965). This collection contains, among many other essays, a seminal essay entitled '*Fiction by Black South African Writers*', in which Nkosi laments the poor use of literary form and style, as well as the continued portrayal of black people as victims, in fiction written by black writers. Nkosi laments:

> With the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both the vigour of the imagination and sufficient technical resources, to the problems posed by conditions in South Africa [...]. To put it more bluntly nothing stands behind the fiction of black South Africans – no tradition, whether indigenous, such as energises The Palm Wine Drinkard or alien, such as is most significantly at work in the latest fiction by Camara Laye ... black South Africans write, of course, as though Dostoevsky, Kafka or Joyce had never lived. (Nkosi 1965 in Stiebel and Gunner 2006 XVI)

He suggests that fiction by these writers perpetuates the very stereotypes levelled at black people. For Nkosi, form, style and the use of imagination are very much central components of the literary work and he argues that fiction by black South Africans lacks a tradition. As the title of his collection of essays *Home and exile* (1965 and 1983) denotes, Nkosi wrote and published most of his works in exile after he had accepted a one-year, one-way exit scholarship. This meant he could not return to South Africa (a country of his birth and origin), to study at Oxford University in 1960. His has always been the resounding voice of an émigré, decrying the efforts of those South African writers of fiction who ignore the examples set by more established Western writers such as Kafka, Joyce and Dostoevsky. Yet, in European literature, these writers were the experimenters and trend-setters; Dostoevsky helped to create a psychological realism, Kafka and Joyce were modernists (in different ways). Njabulo Ndebele (1990 and 2006), South African fiction writer, as he anticipates Nkosi, advances this argument and concern about South African writers of fiction on what he calls 'protest literature'. He (Ndebele) calls for the kind of literature, which responds adequately to the social demands of South Africa. It is important to acknowledge South Africa's extended history of perennial violence, but we should not be fixated on violence and the kind of protest literature that seeks to show black people as victims. Hence, for Nkosi, it is crucial to reverse this stereotyping of black people by illustrating that these people were not silent and passive victims of apartheid but played an active role in opposing and eradicating it. Therefore, Nkosi uses memory to claim the protagonist, Ndi Sibiya's identity from within the Apartheid discourse that seeks to eradicate and deny the individuality of the African people. This is accomplished through, recall, story-telling through the First-person narrative technique and general communication with different authorities in prison.

2. MEMORY AND IDENTITY

Nkosi and his protagonist in *Mating birds* (1986), Ndi Sibiya, both write from exile: Nkosi accepted a one-year and one-way exit scholarship to study at Oxford University in 1960, while Ndi operates from prison. Imprisoned for the alleged rape of a white

woman, Veronica Slater, Ndi undertakes to write the story of his life and relies on his memory to do so. This allows him to reflect and fashion himself anew and he achieves this by relating the events that led to his imprisonment. Ndi's interlocutor, a German-Swiss criminal psychologist, Dr Emile Dufré, facilitates this process by asking him questions about his life – his youth, his parents and family, his community and his education. Two things are at play in this exchange. Firstly, the narrator does not have control over the location (prison) in which this communication takes place and, secondly, Dr Dufré is in control of the questions and of the answers and Ndi, therefore, is told what he should remember. This mode of questioning and pre-determined answers becomes critical for the narrator as he becomes aware of his role in the self-justification of the system that seeks to deny him his identity. As it appears, Ndi is determined to assert his identity with every experience he recalls, with the words he uses and in the way he uses them. He appeals both to modern psychiatry and to the system that has trapped him to understand him as an individual person not as a representative of his race, class and gender.

It might be argued from this reasoning that identity is reconstructed from what one (Ndi, in this case) remembers and what is asked (here by Dr Dufré) and that identity, consequently, is very much formed through acts of memory as it involves the processes of recall, selection and imagination. This is not to say that memory maybe reduced to recall, selection and imagination only, but it is to argue that these three processes are aspects of the dynamic of memory, which may help us to understand Ndi's argument. The self-fashioning which Ndi engages in, although involving a form of rebellion against the harsh laws of apartheid, subsequently allows him to form opinions on other characters and on himself.

3. IDENTITY, MEMORY AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Nkosi, in *Mating birds*, uses specific narrative techniques to highlight the themes of the novel. Among these is the use of the first person narrative to highlight the role of memory in writing the self. The technique of first person narration, as used in the text, highlights several other important aspects. Firstly, it shows the narrator as the main voice of the story in which every action is subjected to his point of view, and secondly it identifies the narrator as the subject of his own story. These characteristics of the first-person narrator highlight the tools used to take the reader to the experiences and specific spaces that the narrator has inhabited and perceived and they ultimately show the reader how he conceives of them. All this is done through memory.

In *Mating birds* Ndi Sibiya, the narrator who is also the protagonist of the novel, begins his narrative with the following phrase: 'In a few days I am to die.' (Sibiya 1986, 01). This is to warn the reader early on in the narrative that Ndi is the first-person narrator who tells his story in a controlled and policed space-prison, and that this narrative is his effort to put together the fragments that make up his life. He tells this story just a few days before he is hanged for the alleged rape of Veronica Slater. This is an interesting way of beginning a story and it represents an effort by the narrator to

draw the reader into the story. The reader will be curious to know why the narrator is to die. This, then, is a platform for the narrator to recount the experiences that led to his incarceration, and an effort to make sense of them, as he says: '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 am locked-up in this tiny cell, awaiting death by execution' (01–02). He draws attention to his concern with the situation of human beings like himself who are denied the opportunity to express themselves freely without the interference of the state. This also highlights the fact that, compared to the birds that 'mate freely in the open sky'; the sexual practices of certain human beings in his country are policed and controlled. This further shows that although the narrative centres around the life of the narrator, there are powerful intruding voices and narratives that seem to steer and pull his story in different directions. This technique again undermines the more usual ordered story-telling techniques where there is a beginning and end. On the one hand, there is the voice of domination and power; this voice seeks to assert the authority of whiteness assisted by the legal system. On the other hand is the voice of the weak and the powerless. Although Ndi uses English comfortably, the discomfort shown by his African visitors highlights the fragmented nature of his identity which language fails to appropriate.

Nkosi uses these intruding voices to emphasise the competing worldviews and other cultural practices. For instance, Ndi notices that his white visitors insult and judge him openly while his African visitors just come and 'sit in the visitors' room talking of matters far removed from sexual crimes. They talk of the weather, of the drought, and of the ruined countryside after last year's spring rains have carried the soil off into the ocean. After that they stop and let me talk while they listen' (19). The intruding voices may also fill in the gaps in the story of the narrator, by highlighting the intersection between his individual narrative and the general plight of Africans, as Maya Socolovsky (2003, 190) maintains: '[f]urthermore, articulating narrative memory serves to connect personal family history with national history and to show how they interrelate.' This may not actually be only Ndi's story but their story as he suggests: 'to begin with, I try to describe to him [Dufré] the impulse that drew me to the English girl in a country where even to look at a white woman is to court daylight beatings and worse'(25). His situation mirrors the general struggle of Black people against apartheid, and his story marks some form of relief.

Ndi dreams of becoming a truly great African writer and he is encouraged by Dufré to write the story of his life. Dufré, a great German-Swiss criminal psychologist, is dispatched to enquire, to prod and to probe his behaviour. He is eager to trace the origins of the obsession of 'a native who in order to gain a glimpse of a white paradise, of that heaven from which many blacks are excluded, tore up barriers, trampled down fences, and defied custom and convention to sleep with a lily-white 'virgin' woman' (12). This is important for Ndi because this is where he attempts to assert his identity, as someone 'who defied custom and convention' in need of acceptance and as a person defined not

by his race, class, or to a certain extent, his gender. He ignored and disregarded the false barriers and fences erected by apartheid to assert his individuality.

Dr Emile Dufré is interested in Ndi's childhood and the relationship of his parents because is looking for a flaw that can confirm his theory that Ndi did not have a good childhood and that he lusted after every white woman. If he is to relate his childhood, Ndi is aware that he is to coax his memory. As Stack-Adler (in Stiebel and Gunner 2006: 95) contests: '[t]he tales of childhood, however, can only be processed through an emotional, subjective memory.' Ndi relies on his memory in order to recall and recount the fragments of his life leading up to his incarceration. This serves to highlight that identity is only possible through memory. He has the task of dealing with two versions of himself; the one, which remembers, and the other one, appropriated through memory, which is remembered, as Byatt (xii, 2009) suggests: 'To remember is to have two selves, one in memory, one thinking about the memory, but the two are not precisely distinct, and separating them can be dizzying.' Ndi is aware of this complexity, hence he prefers to write as opposed to talking, thus questioning the practice of psychoanalysis.

By being asked to remember his childhood, his parents and community, Ndi is also asked to re-enact the past in the present, which leads to his self-fashioning. Ricoeur, using Plato's concept of the eikõn, argues that it 'speaks of the present representation of an absent thing' (2004, 7). What he calls the presence of the absent, in which case, the recall of the absent past becomes possible only in the present. This is also to argue that a recollected past loses its pastness when brought to the present, as Rose (in Harvey Wood and Byatt 2009, 65) argues: '[e]ach act of recall is itself a new experience. Reactivated memories are subtly changed each time we recall them.' It is possible that any recollected incidence of the past becomes new in the present; it is no longer of the past. A point that Huyssen expresses as well as argues: '[a]fter all, the act of remembering is always in and of the present, while its referent is of the past and thus absent. Inevitably, every act of memory carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting, and absence.' (2003, 04). In this instance, memory serves to bridge the temporal distance between the past and the present. The question that the reader grapples with as the Swiss doctor and 'a bird of gallows' engage in the psychoanalysis of the past may be 'Is memory reliable?' Huyssen (2003, 28) attempts to address this question as he suggests: 'Memory is always transitory, notoriously unreliable, and haunted by forgetting, in brief, human and social.' This tells us that memory is fallible because it is 'haunted by forgetting.' What does this then say about memory and identity, since identity is formed through memory?

It may be argued that, since it is not possible to speak of accurate memory of the past, when this memory is coloured by emotions and experiences in the present that we can never have a fixed or given identity, as Bhabha contests: 'we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past, present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.' (1994, 4). Bhabha emphasises mobility, location, race, gender and other issues as organising categories that most influence the self-definition of a modern man and woman in their understanding

of issues such as cultural difference and national affiliation. He understands identity as a problematic feature of the postcolonial being, as he suggests:

The move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions-race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself (Bhabha 2004: 2).

Bhabha does not rule out the significance of the singularities of class and gender as primary conceptual and organisational groups, but he emphasises the consequence of moving beyond them. He contests the need to recognise the subject positions from which one claims identity. He therefore suggests that identity is the result of the subject positions that one occupies, for instance: one may speak from the position of male (gender), generation, class, a particular locale, race and so forth – and this may problematise the concept of coherent identity.

Bhabha maintains that identity is not an accomplished and readily-available entity of a person or a group but that it is always in process, and this point he makes succinctly as he argues:

> […] identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product […] its representation is always spatially split- it makes present something that is absent- and temporally deferred: it is the representation of a time that is elsewhere, a repetition.' (Bhabha 2004: 72).

Significantly, in remembering and recalling all the characteristics of the self, the subject always thinks in terms of origins or past and somehow incorporates these into the present, hence he recalls those experiences that are 'spatially split' and therefore eradicating the present. Bhabha's argument does not simply mean identity is fluid, but it highlights the complex nature of identity because, in defining oneself one relies on memory, which is unreliable and fragmented. As Dufré denotes in the text, 'shall we start at the beginning Mr Sibiya' (290), he assumes that identity is made up of ordered memories and that identity pre-exists the individual, ignoring the fact that it is possible only through language. Dufré has an assumption that memory is ordered and that it is readily available for recall – hence he asks Ndi to start from the beginning. This contrasts with Ndi' s idea of telling a story, as he writes: 'I write not in an orderly fashion, not even chronologically, but randomly, setting down what memory thrusts to the forefront of my diseased mind, with a hasty if confined sense of relief. Relief, if I may say so, not unlike sexual release' (24). To Ndi writing provides some 'relief', which one can also call the act of aesthetic pleasure that comes with self-inscription. The aesthetic dimension of the ordinary act of writing brings pleasure, a sense of 'relief'

(exaltation/purgation) that he compares to 'sexual release'. It is this aesthetic ability to form characters and to give them life, as well as to appreciate writing and the pleasures that come with it that sets Ndi apart from others of his race, class and gender.

Highlighting the problems that come with identity, Hall amply encapsulates the gravity of this concept, as he suggests '[i]dentity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation' (1990, 222). Hall raises an important point that helps us come close to a comprehension of the complex nature of identity as it is constituted within representation and then possibly becomes a subject and an element of discourse. Using both Bhabha and Hall's understanding of identity we also need to be careful not avoid easy associations for this term that has been much misused over time. Brubaker and Cooper (2000, 01) warn us against the overuse of the term 'identity' as they argue: 'Identity,' we argue, tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity)'. The danger is that one is likely to miss subtle, yet important dimensions to self-fashioning, especially in the context of exile and entrapment that the protagonist Ndi finds himself in.

As Ndi suggests: 'I hope to preserve these fruits of self-scrutiny for posterity on cheap, unimpressive notepaper with which I have been provided by the authorities in order, as many have urged me, to write the story of my life' (16). Writing, and to a greater extent narrating his story, allows Ndi to re-fashion himself through memory in order to relieve the burden of memory and to relive his individual experiences. As Ndi himself asserts, he is writing to 'preserve the fruits of self-scrutiny for posterity', then identity must surely crystallise into something more enduring than we are wont to admit; something that can be passed on – which takes us to the point that Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 01) make that ways of understandings may harden, congeal and crystallise, way beyond their nebulous conception as soft, fluid and unfixed. The narrator is encouraged and given the resources to write and merge the fragments of his past, a point succinctly made by Huyssen: 'The strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heteropias' (2003, 07). Ndi is then forced to recall and reflect on some of his experiences through questions asked by his constant visitor, interrogator and confessor, Dr Dufré. Dufré comes to visit Ndi in order to enquire, to prod, and to probe concerning the facts about his supposed rape of a white woman.

4. CONCLUSION

Ndi and Dufré collaborate in putting together the identity of a man accused of the sexual assault of a white lady. Each implicitly uses the other in order to attain his own ends. Dufré forces Ndi to journey through the experiences of his childhood in order to compile a scientific report on the mind and behaviour of the African rapist, while Ndi

capitalises on Dufré's questions to help him remember those specific moments of his past in order to write the story of his life. Ndi plays the role that Jahn perceives that the narrator should fulfil as he proposes: 'Normally, the narrator is the functional agent who verbalises the story's nonverbal matter, edits the verbal matter, manages the exposition, decides what is to be told in what sequence, and establishes communication with the addressee' (Jahn in Herman 2007, 95). Jahn raises several important points that may help us to understand the role of Ndi as a 'functional agent' of the story world in the text. Not only is Ndi expected by his inquisitor (Dufré) to tell his story, but also as Jahn suggests, he decides 'what is to be told in what sequence.' This further conveys to us that as much as Ndi feels he is a victim, he is in fact in control because the facts tell us otherwise, and this is a technique that Nkosi seems to master so well.

It is argued that identity and memory are inseparable and that identity is only possible through memory because, in recalling some experiences and incidents of his childhood/self, not only does Ndi bring the past into the present, but he recreates those experiences and incidents and at the same time also refashions his identity. It is also argued that the process of memory constitutes recall and selection, as well as the use of imagination to fill the gaps where one forgets

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