

**THE OUTSIDER FIGURE IN LEWIS NKOSI'S *MATING BIRDS* AND
*UNDERGROUND PEOPLE***

By

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **MASTER OF ARTS** in South African Literature, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, January 2005.

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DECLARATION

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is the result of my own investigation and research and that it has not been
submitted in part or in full for any other degree or to any other University.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the kind and generous assistance of a few people. They are:

- My supervisor, Professor Lindy Stiebel for her time, knowledge and direction
- My family for their patience and support
- Friends and colleagues
- The National Research Foundation for their financial assistance towards this research. Opinions expressed in this thesis and conclusions thereof are not necessarily to be attributed to the National Research Foundation but solely to the author
- Lewis Nkosi for my inspiration
- The library staff of the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal

ABSTRACT

The Outsider Figure in Lewis Nkosi's novels, *Mating Birds* (1986) and *Underground People* (2002).

This thesis will examine the trope of the outsider figure in Lewis Nkosi's two novels, *Mating Birds* (1986) and *Underground People* (2002). Since both novels are set in South Africa and are informed by the political context of this country at particular junctures, the thesis will focus on the effects of apartheid on the two black protagonists - central characters yet 'outsider figures' - in these novels.

This thesis will argue that Lewis Nkosi's own position as an 'outsider figure' in South African letters plays an important function in his writing. In support of this point, I will therefore also refer to his non fictional books, *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (1965) and *Tasks and Masks: themes and styles of African Literature* (1981). These books are particularly important because they document Nkosi's comments on South African literature and his position as the 'outsider' acerbic critic. Nkosi can be seen as an outsider figure being a young, black South African living in an apartheid South Africa, and also, later, as a writer in exile.

I have chosen *Mating Birds* and *Underground People* to illustrate my argument because they are not simply 'protest' novels, (in the sense Nkosi argued in *Home and Exile* and *Tasks and Masks* that so much black South African literature of a certain era was), but rather they examine the complex effects of exclusion, with regard to race and politics, on the individual. As the 'outsider' figure found full expression in French existentialist writing, I will also look at constructions of the outsider figure from an existentialist perspective. In his preface to the 2002 edition of *Mating Birds*, Nkosi reveals that the novel was to a large extent influenced by Albert Camus' *The Outsider* (1942). In writing *The Outsider*, Camus explores questions raised by the philosophy of existentialism. Similarly, Nkosi looks at black existence in a hostile apartheid environment, the absurdity of Sibiya's predicament and how he came to be there. He also explores the harshness of the physical environment which is a literal representation of Sibiya's anguish. Postcolonial analysis of 'othering', a logical extension of existentialism's 'outsider' figure will be used to support my argument.

Mating Birds (1986), among other accolades, won the prestigious Macmillan International Pen Prize. Set between the 1950's and 1960's, it explores the divisions and prejudices that were experienced between white and black in a country steeped in racism and division. It deals primarily with the obsession an educated, young, black man, Ndi Sibiya, has for a white woman, Veronica Slater. Their illicit sexual relationship results in Sibiya being tried and convicted, by a white court, for rape. *Underground People* (2002), Nkosi's second novel, set in

the late 1980's and early 1990's, takes the reader into the world of politics and underground resistance during the apartheid regime in South Africa. It narrates the adventures of Cornelius Molapo, an awkward member of the "National Liberation Movement", the fictional name of the African National Congress.

Chapter One of this mini-dissertation will focus on a definition and exploration of the outsider figure in selected literary and theoretical works. Chapter Two will focus on the life and works of Lewis Nkosi in an effort to link the trope of the outsider figure to Nkosi's own life experience. His books, *Tasks and Masks* and *Home and Exile*, both collections of essays, help the reader to develop a picture of Nkosi, not only as a writer but also as a literary critic whose writing developed while in exile.

Chapter Three and Four will provide a literary analysis of *Mating Birds* and *Underground People*, respectively. The analysis will deal with the outsider figure as a prominent feature of both these novels. Post-colonial analyses such as forwarded by Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha will be used to advance the thesis.

The conclusion (Chapter Five) will refer briefly to Nkosi's current writing projects and situate them in the post-apartheid South African context. An assessment of the on-going potential for the 'outsider' figure in Nkosi's contemporary work will be made.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This thesis will argue that the outsider figure is an important construct in the work of Lewis Nkosi, particularly for his novels *Mating Birds* (1986) and *Underground People* (2002).

The outsider figure is pertinent to these two novels because it is a reflection of Nkosi's own position as an outsider figure in South African literary life. Nkosi was born in Durban, South Africa, in 1936. His writing career began when he started writing for the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* shaping his thoughts on the African colonial dilemma. In the 1950's he started writing for *Drum* magazine. The short time that he spent writing for *Drum* "represents a time of intense production, and a flowering of a truly local black urban culture" (Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 5).

When Nkosi accepted a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard, he was forced to take a one way exit out of South Africa. He chose to be in exile but never allowed himself to forget that he was native to South Africa. His fiction and his essays were about the South African condition. He also chose not to be affiliated with any one political party or doctrine. In his earlier essays on South African fiction, he was highly critical of South African writers who wrote just another 'protest' novel. He suggested that most South African writers were more concerned with

reporting on apartheid simplistically rather than working on how they told their stories drawn from apartheid experience. In *Home and Exile*, Nkosi remarks:

What we do get from South Africa therefore - and what we get most frequently - is the journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature. We find here a type of fiction which exploits the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning, without any attempt to transcend or transmute these given 'social facts' into artistically persuasive works of fiction. (1983: 132)

Nkosi's argument was that instead of taking plots and themes 'raw' from the political realities of the time, this writing was limited and ultimately lacking in originality. He believed that South African writers needed to inject more imagination into their writing. His opinion of South African writers gave other South African writers and critics reason to believe that he did not support them in their 'struggle' writing. Commenting on Nkosi's criticism of South African writing, Gagiano says:

It is easy to see how annoying and 'disloyal' many would have considered this astonishingly forthright admission, or accusation, for providing grist to the mill of those already all too inclined to denigrate the achievements of black South Africans coming (incontrovertibly) from the pen of a prominent black South African writer and cultural critic. (Gagiano in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 19)

For this reason, he has been an outsider figure amongst his peers. According to Stiebel and Gunner, Nkosi's "critical opinions of South African literary creativity, has perhaps been the reason for the imbalance between his critical recognition in the country as opposed to outside the country's borders, including the rest of the continent" (2005: 3). Perhaps his controversial comments on South African writing, had led his own work as a writer to be poorly received or even snubbed by other South African writers and critics. Oliphant asserts that Nkosi was frequently misunderstood. He therefore comments: "This critical position is frequently misread as a summary rejection of social or political themes in fiction. It is actually concerned with the aesthetic properties of fiction" (Oliphant in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 153).

In order to understand the modern construction and relevance of the outsider figure, I will briefly examine the theoretical arguments of existentialism, colonialism and modern post colonialism that provide a theoretical basis for this construct. Elements of these theories parallel the life of Lewis Nkosi, and give support to the role of the outsider figure in Nkosi's writing, symbolic of the main characters in the novels *Mating Birds* and *Underground People*.

Although Nkosi was born before the formal apartheid era, racism was clearly evident by this time. As a young man in his early twenties, he lived briefly in an apartheid South Africa. Therefore much of his life was determined by a discriminatory government until his exile. Nkosi remarks: "for a black man to live

in South Africa in the second half of the twentieth century and at the same time preserve his sanity, he requires an enormous sense of humour and a surrealistic kind of brutal wit...the total effect of the apartheid laws in South Africa is to make it almost illegal to live" (1983: 25). Nkosi has discussed becoming aware of his 'Africanness' when he realised that he was an outsider in his own country because he was 'non-white': "I discovered my Africanness the day I learned that I was not only black but non-white... I saw the entire burden and consequence of European colonialism; its assault on the African personality; the very arrogance of its assumptions" (1983: 31-32). One could therefore say that his status as an outsider figure when in exile was a consequence of his 'otherness' as a black man in his own country. The desire, though mixed, to leave South Africa was one that was shared by many black South Africans but was thwarted by the government. Nkosi comments on "the sick, mindless cruelty of those who forced this step upon me because, as it seems to me now, everything else which happened in my life since leaving South Africa has followed from that hasty, almost unthinking departure" (1983: viii). This is an indication that he felt forced into exile, that he had no choice, but for Nkosi "exile is not all pain" (1983: viii). Although even an outsider figure in exile, by virtue of being South African in America, the opportunities afforded to him by living abroad were undeniable. Stiebel and Gunner sum up his position as an outsider figure quite succinctly: "Exile has then been a double-edged sword for Nkosi: though cut off physically from South Africa, he has had to make himself 'at home' in exile, make movement and displacement his friends – even sources of inspiration. Without

this he might not have been the prolific writer he has proved to be" (Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 7). This has undoubtedly been true as all his published work has, in effect, been achieved in exile, though perhaps at personal cost.

Nkosi's position as an outsider figure in many areas of his life was a consequence of his personal choice. After leaving South Africa, where he had very little power or control over his life, he was now politically free to make his own choices. To what extent might existentialism find expression in his writing? Existentialism emphasises the importance of concrete individual existence and individual freedom and choice. The best position for an individual is to find his or her own direction or calling in life. A person must find his or her own truth by which they lead their lives, and in doing so they must act by their own convictions. Existentialists argue that personal experiences will allow a person to decide on morality and truth. Therefore in order to arrive at a truth, one needs to have the freedom to choose. Choice is the most important factor in human existence, because with choice comes commitment and responsibility. Danish philosopher Kierkegaard suggested that in terms of existentialism, for a person happiness lies in choosing what is ultimately good for him/herself. Weston comments on Kierkegaard's existentialism and the importance of choice for an individual:

My [the individual] overriding interest lies in *my own* satisfaction, in identifying, amongst activities available to me, those which I shall take as fulfilling *myself*. My happiness lies in pursuing these

activities, not necessarily successfully in terms of some standard lying outside of me, but to my *own* satisfaction, to limits which I myself determine. Not only which pursuits are ultimately good is determined by my choice, but also the degree to which they are to be pursued, and the way in which their success or lack of it is to be regarded. What is ultimately good for me is, in this way, something which I determine, for what is at issue is what is required to satisfy *me*, which may well be quite different and quite deficient when looked at from someone else's point of view. What will satisfy me is something on which I am ultimately the authority. (Weston 1994: 59)

Therefore the individual's response to this situation must be to live a totally committed life, and this commitment can only be understood by the individual who made has made it. The individual must always be prepared to defy the norms of society for the sake of the higher authority of a personally valid way of life. Nkosi's early choices in this sense were existential. He had a choice to stay in South Africa and be stifled or he could leave and have a chance to grow as a writer, to lead a life that was not polluted by blatant discrimination and enforced domination. He chose to leave and therefore had to be committed to this choice and take responsibility for it.

Nkosi's writing was not only influenced by the choices he had to make in life but also by the absurdity of living as an outsider in one's birth country. In his book

Home and Exile he writes about the absurdity of South African life during the state of apartheid:

No newspaper report about a shooting in Sharpeville could ever convey significantly the deep sense of entrapment that the black people experience under apartheid rule. It is difficult to imagine a mode of expression that would adequately describe this sense of malaise. (1983: 25)

One, therefore, has to make choices and in order to do this one has to defy the norms of society to be true to one's convictions. This was represented by the character Ndi Sibiya in *Mating Birds*, a young man on Death Row, who could have defended himself and possibly have prevented his conviction of death by hanging. But he chose not to because of the absurdity of his situation – he was tried by a white court who had found him guilty even before he was tried. This will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three. In his Preface to the 2002 edition of *Mating Birds*, Nkosi reveals that his idea for the story of *Mating Birds* was influenced by Albert Camus' *The Outsider* (1942). Camus, a major French existentialist, born in Algeria in 1913, explored the ideas raised by existentialism and the absurd, questioning life which exists in a hostile environment - Algeria for Camus and South Africa for Nkosi. *The Outsider* addresses what happens to an individual when he tries to break free from conformity forced upon him by society, by staying true to himself. He does this by being absolutely sincere and truthful in every action. He does so knowing the ultimate price is a condition from which there is no escape. Nkosi writes about Camus' *The Outsider*.

I wanted to write the story of an obsession in which the sea, the sun and bodies on the beach combine to form an image. Ever since reading Albert Camus' *The Outsider*, then Thomas Mann's *Death In Venice*, I had become obsessed with the idea of a faithful obsession in which even the weather plays its part; how for example a ray of sunlight striking the eye's retina can produce unforeseen results: provoke a murder, cause a suicide, set loose unbounded passions. (2002: 5)

Absurdity of the human condition was therefore an important theme in *Mating Birds*. In his essay "Apartheid: A Daily Exercise In The Absurd", Nkosi makes reference to his own experiences in South Africa which highlights the absurdity of life for a black person in an apartheid environment; for example, the laws that prevented black people from being out in the streets after eleven o' clock and that African people had to carry 'passes' to prove that they do live and work in a particular place. He comments:

...in South Africa any over-zealous policeman can arrest an African and take him down to the station-house without the vaguest idea what charges to prefer against him. If he is diligent enough, he can later find something with which to charge him. There are a hundred and one laws in the country controlling the lives of black people, and at any particular time there is a fat chance that one of them is being broken. (1983: 26)

Contributing further to the construction of the 'outsider' figure, colonialism can be seen as 'othering' indigenous people, outsiders in relation to the metropolitan colonisers. The perpetuation of colonial values by colonial discourse inculcated a sense that people who were not European were backward and inferior. JanMohamed called this the Manichean Allegory, where people are divided and classified according to their race. The people of colour are seen and are made to see themselves as inferior to white people. JanMohamed writes:

The manichean organization of colonial society has reached its apogee in the 'Republic' of South Africa, where the perpetuation and elaboration of 'apartheid', the policy of racial segregation and exploitation, have become the major concern of government and where the abusive term for African, 'kaffir' literally means infidel.

(1988: 4)

In South Africa, indigenous people were denied legal political rights and economic power and were subject to pass laws. Nadine Gordimer comments on Dr Verwoerd's (Minister of Native Affairs in South Africa in 1983) Nationalist Education Policy: "The implication of this policy is fairly clear: the African is not allowed to participate in 'civilized' white society because he is considered an inferior savage, and his education is designed by his civilized superiors to ensure that he will continue to remain an inferior" (Gordimer in JanMohamed 1988: 81). Verwoerd's National Education policy is a classic example of racial stereotyping that is common in colonialism and it is how the outsider figure is created. Nkosi

was part of a system that perpetuated the outsider figure: apartheid 'othered' the black person, always on the periphery looking in at the white centre.

Fanon (1925 - 1961) asserts that colonialism, in its disregard for indigenous culture, even tries to erode and marginalise this older history: "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (Fanon in Ashcroft et al 1995: 154). So the oppressed is not just reigned over by the oppressor, but history before colonialism is twisted out of shape and misrepresented. Here again the outsider figure is created and is made to look as if s/he had no history or culture before colonialism and that only the history of the colonialists is significant. In his essay on national culture, Fanon comments on the position of the Algerian native intellectual, who at first produced works that were read only by the oppressor, and later began addressing his own people, in what Fanon called "a literature of combat" (Fanon in Ashcroft et al 1995: 155). This literature called on people to fight for their existence as a nation. "It is a literature of combat, because it moulds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat because it assumes responsibility and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space" (Fanon in Ashcroft et al 1995: 155). In Algeria, the oral traditions of storytelling in which people were incited to bring about conflicts and were spurred on to struggle for freedom, resulted in the

systematic arrest of these storytellers from 1955. When the colonialist state sees an emergence of an enlightened oppressed, it uses the law to ensure suppression, as was the case in South Africa when, in the 1950's through to the 1960's, there was an emergence of dynamic writers like those of the *Drum* decade, who empowered readers through uncovering stories of racism and discrimination, encouraging them to resist the reigning government. An oppressed people that rises up to fight for what rightfully belongs to them further illuminates the figure of the outsider in a colonised society, now seen as a collective 'outsider' force - when combined, by definition, no longer lone outsider figures.

Camus (1913 - 1960), Jean Paul Sartre (1905 - 1980) and Fanon (1925 - 1961) were all outsider figures who were linked to the philosophy of existentialism. Nkosi's own life paralleled that of Camus' in many ways. Camus also found himself in exile from Algeria in 1940. Although Camus considered himself French, he did not support the struggle for independence of French Algeria because he could not see Algeria as being separate from France. The invasion of France by the German army during World War 2 left Camus feeling isolated from what he felt was his country. Camus did not subscribe to the notion that life was hopeless but rather that it was absurd and irrational. Elements of Nkosi's writing can also be read as existentialist as is evident in the plot of *Mating Birds*. The absurdity of a black man being tried by a completely white court in an apartheid state is evidence of this, as referred to earlier. Camus became isolated

from the intellectual elite when he wrote *The Rebel* which angered his other French intellectual colleagues. Similarly, Lewis Nkosi was also isolated from his South African peers when he criticized South African writers for their 'protest' fiction as mentioned earlier. Jean-Paul Sartre was generally perceived as the person who brought existentialism to intellectual attention. For Sartre, the philosophy of existentialism is essentially that human beings make themselves into what they become. Priest remarks that according to Sartre:

...there is no predetermined human essence and there is no human nature fixed in advance of human existence. Human beings first of all exist and subsequently make themselves what they are by their own actions. When we are born we have no essence as human beings. Only the totality of choices we make in life makes us the people who we are. In this sense, we are profoundly free. (Priest 2001: 25)

In this sense, in *Mating Birds*, Nkosi reveals his support of existentialism. The protagonist, Ndi Sibiya, although waiting for execution on Death Row, is according to existentialist philosophy a free man, because he had made his own choices in his relationship with Veronica Slater, regardless of being aware of the consequences.

Frantz Fanon was a revolutionary writer who was influenced by Sartre's existentialism. In his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), he analysed the degrading influence colonialism had on indigenous people. He analysed how colonialism distorted the histories and cultures of black people in France. His

writing finds echoes in the life of Lewis Nkosi and his writing. In *Black Skin White Masks* Fanon writes:

Sartre has shown that in the life of an unauthentic position, the past 'takes' in quantity and when solidly constructed, *informs* the individual. He is a past in a changed value. But, I too, can recapture my past, validate it, or condemn it through my successive choices.

(Fanon 1967: 228)

Fanon frequently called for, or supported, an armed struggle against colonisation. He believed that violence would free the colonised from his position of inferiority and make him a warrior, and in doing so he would regain his self-respect. His radical thinking on achieving independence was brought about in his youth which, like Nkosi's, was infused with racism and the crippling effects of colonialism. Therefore, at an early age, he saw himself as an outsider. Similarly, Nkosi's youth was dominated by political turmoil during the resistance of the native people against the apartheid government. The Sharpeville massacre fuelled the determination of the resistance to defy the government. In *Home and Exile* (1983) Nkosi writes:

Sharpeville and the brutal massacre of unarmed Africans marching to a local police station brought us bang into 1960 and into a difficult era altogether. Henceforth the times will be troubled indeed! There will be violence, murder and suffering such as is difficult to imagine unless we are saved by an unusually timed miracle. (1983: 6)

Camus, Fanon and Nkosi, although different in their experiences of colonisation and oppression, share comparable experiences of exploitation under different colonial rules, experiences which construct the exploited as the 'other' or the outsider.

A contemporary discussion of 'othering' is conducted in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which focuses on how the West traditionally perceives the east or orient. It is a seminal work which "helped begin what has become a long process of demystifying the exotic other" (Walder 2004:12). According to Said, the Orient is constructed in an exotic, othering way by the West and is an image of what is perceived by the West as finally inferior and foreign. Said says that an Orientalist is "anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient...either in its specific or its general aspects" (Said 1995: 2). Therefore, for Orientalists, anyone who was not western was the 'other' or the outsider. The 'other' is perceived of as exotic, and, because of this, finally to be dominated and thereby oppressed. Said writes:

Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense *creates* the Orient, the Oriental, and his world....the oriental is depicted as something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studies and depicts (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison), something one illustrates (as in a zoological manual). The point is that in each of these cases the

Oriental is *contained* and *represented* by dominating frameworks.

(1995: 40)

The west, according to Said creates the 'other'. Said argues that Orientalism is evident in the way in which the western world depicts 'Arab' cultures – untrustworthy, irrational, dishonest and dangerous. This parallels Camus' depiction of the Arab figures in *The Outsider*. The protagonist, Meursault, is wary and suspicious of the Arabs. Later he kills an Arab person for reasons he could not comprehend and is sent to prison for execution. Said's theory of Orientalism can also, therefore, be used to discuss Camus' as well as Nkosi's fiction. Just as Orientalism creates the outsider figure, in the same way too, colonisation has created the 'outsider' figure in the black person as is evident in the life of Lewis Nkosi. Said on the West's perception of the east comments:

Theses of Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the west most easily associated themselves early in the nineteenth century with ideas about the biological bases of racial inequality...Thus the whole question of imperialism, as it was debated in the late nineteenth century by pro-imperialists and anti-imperialists alike, carried forward the binary typology of advanced and backward (or subject) races, cultures, and societies. (1995: 206)

Hence one could argue that if a person did not fit the West's notion of what is advanced and progressive, that is, if one is not western, then the West assumes that one is naturally from a 'backward' culture, that being black, from the east or if one's country was colonised.

Gayatri Spivak insists that the native is still controlled by the effects of imperialism and because of this, s/he has no identity. Independence from colonialism does not automatically convert the native from the 'Other' into the 'Self' (Spivak in Ashcroft et al 1995: 24). The native still has no voice because colonialism has taken away his/her identity. Now s/he is confused, torn between cultural heritage and colonial heritage. There is no distinctive 'flavour' to this identity: "No perspective critical of imperialism can turn the other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self" (Spivak in Ashcroft et al 1995: 38).

Homi Bhabha on the other hand observes that colonial discourse becomes distorted in a post colonial society because it "is constructed within a disabling master discourse of colonization which specifies a degenerate native population to justify its conquest and subsequent rule" (Bhabha in Ashcroft et al 1989: 178). When a colonialist text is interpreted by the native, it changes its meaning. Bhabha's argument is that attempts to interpret the English text hybridises its meaning. What is important is to uncover is the ambivalence of colonial texts wherein the voice of the native can be heard. Nkosi's texts under consideration in this thesis can be seen as examples of Bhabha's hybridity where the voice of the 'other', the 'native' is recovered.

These critical comments on post colonial literature were echoed by Nkosi in the 1990 Oxford Conference, entitled 'Literature in Another South Africa', on South African literature which "provoked an outraged reaction determined to defend at all costs the existence of at least *something* " (Nkosi 2002b: 246). In his essay "The Republic of Letters after the Mandela Republic" in 2002, Nkosi comments on the state of literary development after South Africa gained independence. He states that South African literature has failed to develop in South Africa into a unified nation because its writers are still reeling from the blows of apartheid. He says: "South African literature has operated under the sign of a division so profound that only a complete overhaul of the social infrastructure could clear the ground for the emergence of a truly national literature" (Nkosi 2002b: 246). Even after the democratic era began in South Africa in 1994, Nkosi remains an outsider figure in his own local circles. Stiebel and Gunner comment on Nkosi's position as an outsider figure from an earlier time, when he published his thoughts on African literature in *Tasks and Masks: themes and styles of African Literature* in 1981, which carries over to today: "Nkosi's early comments were long remembered as being in some way disloyal to the black cause...He does not bow to the contingent, neither is he unmindful of the challenges to the world of letters posed by the apartheid state" (Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 2). Through the years of apartheid and exile, Nkosi never changed his views on South African literature so that he could be accepted by the majority of his peers. Rather, he chooses to remain an outsider figure and be able to speak from 'without' rather than 'within'.

This thesis has chosen to focus on *Mating Birds* and *Underground People* because the protagonists in both these novels were 'outsider figures' but portrayed in different ways and set within different historical timeframes. *Mating Birds* is about the apartheid state in South Africa during the 1950's and 1960's and raises the political issues of that time. Races were divided, and sexual interrelations were forbidden and punishable by law. It is set in an oppressive era when every aspect of life was regulated along racial lines. This feeling of oppressiveness is symbolised by the main character Ndi Sibiya's state of mind which is portrayed as tense and unsettled. The oppressive time parallels that of Camus', *The Outsider*, which was set in Algeria in the 1940's and 1950's amidst political turmoil when the Algerians were resisting colonial French rule.

Underground People is set in the 1980's through to 2002. It was first published in Dutch in the early 1990's and was only published in English in 2002. Set in the transitional apartheid era, the action takes place primarily in Johannesburg and rural South Africa during the States of Emergency. It is a story about a society in turmoil. One must bear in mind that both novels were written (if we consider the long gestation period of *Underground People*) during Nkosi's exile from South Africa (which continues incidentally, as absence rather than exile today, as Nkosi chooses to remain outside South Africa). His novels are created from the standpoint of a writer as an 'outsider' looking in. One could therefore ask these questions as Minh-ha poses, of Nkosi as being the 'other':

In the context of this Inappropriate Other, questions like 'How loyal a representative of his/her people is s/he?' or how authentic is his/her representation of the culture observed?' are of little relevance... even if s/he is an insider, is no more authentic and has no more authority on the subject matter than the subject whom the questions concerns. (Minh-ha in Ashcroft et al 1995: 218)

In this thesis, I will attempt to show the outsider figure as being relevant to Lewis Nkosi's writing, particularly in *Mating Birds* and *Underground People*. Parallels in Lewis Nkosi's own life as an outsider figure and how this position has strongly influenced his writing will also be discussed as mentioned. To this end, the next Chapter will present a short biography of Lewis Nkosi and show how the theories discussed in this chapter are pertinent to his life and how they are echoed in his writing of *Mating Birds* and *Underground People*. Reference will also be made to his critical essays published in *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature* (1981) and *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (1965).

CHAPTER 2

A Short Biography of Lewis Nkosi

This chapter will supply an introduction to Lewis Nkosi's life in order to illustrate how his life history has shaped his fictional as well as his critical writing. To do this appropriately, I will look at his early career as a writer in South Africa, the political climate of that time, as well as his critical writing. It is not possible to read Nkosi's novels without having an understanding of his literary criticism. Oliphant observes:

Nkosi's fiction, then, with its emphasis on writing explicitly activates a self-reflexive process which runs from the fiction back to his ideas on writing and thus to his critical work. His literary criticism, while fully engaged with the writing of others, serves to prepare the ground which his own fiction will seek to occupy. In the light of this, readings which move from the fiction back to the critical writing, seem inevitable and necessary. (Oliphant in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 152)

I will argue that the protagonists of his novels *Mating Birds* and *Underground People* are strongly linked to his own position as an outsider figure. Therefore, in order to show that the historical context of his life is reflected in his writing, I will refer to his critical essays in his books *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (1983) and *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature* (1981), where he has written much about South Africa and his life in South Africa.

Lewis Nkosi was born in 1936 in Chesterville, Durban, South Africa. He attended the Zulu Lutheran High School run by Christian missionaries in Eshowe, Natal. The protagonist of *Mating Birds* in many ways reflects the life of Lewis Nkosi's own life as a youngster in South Africa. Ndi Sibiya grew up in a rural African community that was to a certain degree sheltered from the influences of apartheid. Nkosi writes in the voice of Ndi Sibiya: "When I was growing up, life at Mzimba was slow and easy-going. As children we were protected from the knowledge of the larger cruelties that were visited upon black people in the rest of the country" (2004: 40). As with Ndi Sibiya, it was only during very early childhood that Nkosi may have felt like he belonged within his community. Being educated in a Christian school unlike many other children from his community may to a large extent have created in him early feelings of an outsider figure. Ndi has similar experiences, as he writes in his memoirs:

Thus it happened that instead of stimulating great joy within me, the trip to Mzimba and the rest of the preparations that followed stirred up a deep sense of gloom and foreboding as though going to school was the first signal of some known disaster, a tragedy that was now only beginning, slowly to unfold...the path on which I was now launched would mean at some future date a complete break with the family, with the clan and with all that had sustained my spirit up to now. (2004: 71-72)

In 1955 Nkosi joined the newspaper, *Ilanga lase Natal*, as an apprentice journalist on a part-time basis and became a full-time staff member in 1956. In this same year he resigned from the *Ilanga lase Natal* and left Durban for Johannesburg where he joined *Drum* magazine and the *Golden City Post*. Most magazines which published short stories in this period catered more for a white literary readership than a black working class readership. They did not appeal, nor did they reflect, the life of the everyday person. Chapman writes of these short stories:

The novel against apartheid has received more critical attention than have similar protests in the short story. This notwithstanding, the 1950's and 1960's witnessed various and exciting developments in short fiction and confirmed the short story as the most popular and prolific form of imaginative writing in South Africa...They tend to be stories, however, about silence and loneliness and, at a level perhaps not fully grasped even by the authors, the stories say something about a denial in white English-speaking South Africans of any popular attachments to a community of voices. (Chapman 1996: 237)

Drum, on the other hand, with its "stories that resonate with sound, with the bustle of people" (Chapman 1996: 237), appealed to the 'man on the street'. The black writers who wrote for *Drum* combined journalism with fiction to produce a literature which impacted on readers' imaginations and emotions. They used fiction to inform readers about the political sickness of the country and subtly

motivated them towards resistance and mass action. Chapman writes: “Although the stories did not usually confront politics directly, the language captured the theatrical style of a decade that dramatised black politics in large-scale campaigns, including the defiance against unjust laws” (Chapman 1996: 241). *Drum* also allowed for many black writers to have their writing published. In *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, Nkosi describes the experiences he acquired while working with other writers such as Can Themba, Casey Motsisi, Anthony Sampson and Bloke Modisane to name but a few. He says of these writers: “In their work they were alive, go-getting, full of nervous energy, very wry, ironic and they brought to South African journalism a new vitality which none of the white writers seemed capable of achieving” (1983: 8). Within the pages of *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, Nkosi also records his experiences with police brutality, segregation and the relationship he had with white and black people during apartheid. He also recalls how black writers were frequently in trouble with the police.

Many of these experiences which Nkosi describes in *Home and Exile and Other Selections* occurred in the black township of Sophiatown in Johannesburg. Nkosi lived in the township of Sophiatown in the period of 1956-1958 which he describes as a “Harlem-like ghetto” (1983: 28). He speaks fondly of Sophiatown:

Most of the young writers on *Drum* lived in Sophiatown. It was our town and we loved it. Some of us had even celebrated it in our literature. Sophiatown was a symbol of the black man’s capacity to

endure the worst; it was also a symbol of his arrogance, resilience and scorn for the white suburb from which he was excluded. The life of the black people of Sophiatown was based on the premise that if you were black you had to live outside the law. (1983:28)

Sophiatown was given a romanticised image by many black writers but in reality it was infested by crime and many of the people who lived there were poverty-stricken. The birth of Sophiatown was the result of the government limiting non-whites from so-called 'white' areas to their own 'group-areas'. It was set apart from the affluent areas occupied mostly by white people. So, although people living in Sophiatown felt accepted and part of a community, it was still a symbol of segregation within the apartheid system. By forcing people to live in areas designated for particular race groups, the government automatically turned people who were non-white into outsiders. Therefore, Nkosi and all other people who were non-white were subjected to an outsider status because they were forced to live where the government stipulated.

The continuously hardening laws of the apartheid system meant that black writers were being increasingly tied down and restricted in their writing. For Nkosi, the 1950's yielded no black South African literary heroes. In *Home and Exile and Other Selections* he says: "...as a generation we longed desperately for literary heroes we could respect and with whom we could identify" (1983:6). There were white writers such as Alan Paton and Nadine Gordimer who wrote about African experiences which Nkosi believed could not be true to the real

African experience or identity. He also comments that because of apartheid, South Africa did not produce an elite bourgeoisie of black writers. Various discriminatory laws prevented an emergence of any class of black writers worthy of note with whom upcoming writers could identify. The end of the 1950's was the beginning of the turmoil of apartheid and the laws that entrenched it. This is significant for Nkosi because it was the beginning of his career as a writer. Shortly thereafter he found himself in exile when he took a one-way voluntary exit out of South Africa after he accepted a Nieman Fellowship at Harvard, thereby escaping the crippling effects that apartheid had had on other black South African writers. His decision to go into exile will be discussed after a brief summary of the hardening of the apartheid system which directly led to Nkosi's exile.

One of the most hated laws of the apartheid era was what was known as the "Pass Laws" which controlled the movements of black people by forcing them to carry identification at all times. It was a criminal offence to not be able to produce identification, which could be demanded at any time by the police. In March 1960, Nkosi gave a lecture at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. In his lecture he predicted that a crisis will occur because of the campaign which the Pan Africanist Congress was undertaking, to challenge the South African government against the pass laws. As predicted by Nkosi, this peaceful protest by unarmed citizens resulted in many people being killed when the police opened fire on them in what was to become known as the 'Sharpeville Massacre'. The

Sharpeville massacre was the beginning of an era of very troubled times in South Africa. As a black writer for *Drum* magazine, Nkosi was exposed to first-hand experiences of police torture, victimisation, township riots and the implementation of harsh apartheid laws against black South Africans. It was a cruel, inhumane environment of intense suffering by the oppressed people. Nkosi notes that while the apartheid government was setting up more stringent laws to further oppress black people, at the same time resistance movements were also growing: "while it seemed that the White Nationalist Party Government was growing from strength to strength the opposition camp was also gathering in a bumper harvest of new recruits to the cause of racial justice and intellectual freedom" (1983:16). These writers, of whom Nkosi was a part, were also instrumental in starting the revolution against apartheid. Their writing resulted in mass demonstrations against segregation policies such as the Separate Amenities Act and the Group Areas Act which was designed to restrict people who were non-white to their own residential areas. The best residential areas were allocated to whites only. The Act controlled the purchase or occupation of land. Separate areas were allocated to different race groups. The Separate Amenities Act allocated separate and unequal facilities such as beaches, universities, parks, hospitals, schools etc. for non-whites. All public areas were segregated by law.

Nkosi remarks that the Fifties was a time when people of non-white races came together to protest against these laws and, although many were arrested, it "frightened the government out of its wits" (1983:16). He also said that the

1950's, although a difficult time for blacks, were not quite as bleak as the 1960's. In order to control and instill fear into the resistance movements, the government created even more stringent laws against non-whites. One of these was the 90-day Detention Law which allowed for people to be detained for up to 90 days without trial for interrogation purposes. This was later increased to 180 days and finally to an indefinite period. During this time many black people disappeared, many of whom were leaders of resistance movements. Nkosi said that the 1950's was a time in which it was still possible to show defiance against the government, unlike the 1960's which "though the penalty was high even then [the 1950's], there was nothing as vicious as the 90-day Detention law; no torture on the scale which it now assumes in the government's deliberate programme of suppressing all effective opposition" (1983:6).

Another discriminatory law which dehumanised people was the Immorality Act of 1950 which prohibited any interracial relationships. Related to this act was the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act which prohibited marriages between people of different races. In *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, Nkosi cites real-life cases of the dehumanising effects these laws had on people. He comments on these laws and on the climate of South Africa during this time: "It is a country where black and white are like islands in the middle of some vast ocean, where between these islands billowing tides of confused sexual feelings often arise and threaten to overflow the barriers of legal sanction and Calvinist restraint, only to be beaten back by the fury of even more strident guilt-ridden law" (1983:37).

Nkosi remarks that people who fell in love across the colour line were made to feel guilty about something that was not a crime anywhere else in the world but was a criminal offence by South African law. The apartheid government thus aimed to instill racism into its people. This polarisation was further fuelled by The Population Registration Act which led to the creation of a national register in which every person's race was recorded. A Race Classification Board took the final decision on what a person's race was in disputed cases. Nkosi states that this law "sometimes ended in awful breakup of families" (1983:42). He states: "The Race Classificatory System maintained by the South African government is potentially immoral, inhuman, a threat to family life and the right of the majority of its citizens to obtain a fair deal economically, politically and socially; as such it is a clear infringement of the United Nations Charter on Human Rights" (1983:43). As a writer in exile Nkosi was able to express his contempt for these laws without fear of being imprisoned, as writers living in South Africa were: "What is shocking in South Africa is that people who have committed no crime are turned into criminals, forced to apologise and plead before the law for what in a normal country no one would dare take them to court" (1983:41). Nkosi confronts these issues in *Mating Birds*, where the main theme is an interracial sexual relationship. The protagonist, Ndi Sibiyi is on Death Row for the alleged rape of a white woman. What is suggested by the author is that the woman, Veronica Slater, accuses Ndi of rape because if she were caught having a sexual relationship with a black man, she herself could have been arrested. Therefore, in order to protect herself, she accuses Ndi of rape. This theme in *Mating Birds* is

a reflection of Nkosi's thoughts on the prohibitive laws of South Africa during the 1950's and 1960's. What was permissive in other countries, was a criminal offence in South Africa and punishable by law.

In 1960 Nkosi was awarded a Nieman Fellowship from Harvard University but was refused a passport by the South African government. Nkosi was not surprised by this because he knew that the government believed that those blacks who left the country would not be able to fit in when they returned. But an obscure law which was found in the Departure from South Africa Act by a left-wing political activist, lawyer and friend of Nkosi, Harold Wolpe, allowed for him to leave the country but he would not be able to return. In his book *Home and Exile*, Nkosi writes:

If I remember rightly, one of the most important provisions of this law was to the effect that the South African Government was not empowered to prevent a South African citizen from leaving the country provided he signed a declaration that he was leaving permanently, and provided he had no business assets in the country.

(1983: vii)

Nkosi therefore chose to take a voluntary exit from South Africa even though it meant he would lose his citizenship. In a 2002 interview with South African writer Andries Oliphant when asked what the likelihood of never returning to South Africa meant to him at that time, his answer was:

I couldn't care about the prospect of not returning. My sense of what was wrong in South Africa at the time remained. But leaving helped me come to terms with the fact that we do not own injustice. I began to see the larger world from a perspective not limited by race. To be frank, I was relieved to be rid of the constraints placed on me. (Oliphant 2002: 2)

Since his voluntary exile to the USA, he has travelled, worked and taught in many countries. In order to show that Nkosi had many more opportunities available to him since his exile, a brief history of his movements and achievements will be discussed below. While in exile, Nkosi wrote many short stories, plays and poems. Nkosi arrived in New York in January 1961. He studied at Harvard University, Cambridge from 1961 to 1962. During this time he wrote the play *The Rhythm of Violence*. He returned to London in 1962 and in this year attended the seminal "African Writers of English-speaking Africa" conference in Makerere, Uganda. From 1962 to 1965 he produced the BBC radio series "Africa Abroad". He was also the moderator and interviewer for the NET radio series "African Writers Today USA". Nkosi was also the literary editor of the *New African* in London from 1962 to 1968. In 1963 he visited Paris with South African born writer Breyten Breytenbach and in this year also returned to Africa to interview several African writers. In September 1965 he attended the Conference on Race and Colour in Copenhagen. His book *Home and Exile: Critical Essays* was also published in 1965. In 1966 he received the Dakar World Festival of

Negro Arts Prize. He was granted British citizenship in 1967 and also visited Nigeria in this year. In 1971 he was appointed Visiting Regents Professor for African Literature at the University of California. He obtained a diploma in English Literature from the University of London in 1975 and in 1977 was awarded a Masters Degree from the University of Sussex. It was also the year he began writing *Underground People*. He returned to Africa in 1979 as a senior lecturer at the University of Zambia and resided in Lusaka. His book *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature* was published in 1981. In 1984 he was appointed Associate Professor of Literature at the University of Zambia. His book *Mating Birds* was published in 1986 and it received the Macmillan Silver Pen Award in 1987. He moved to Warsaw, Poland, in 1987, where he lectured at the University of Warsaw and also attended the Third Conference on "South African Literature and Resistance" in Bad Boll, Germany. 1987 was also the year that he was appointed to the UNICEF Dakar Planning Committee. From 1991 to 1999 Nkosi was the tenured professor in the English Department of the University of Wyoming, USA. In 1991, Nkosi returned to South Africa for the first time since his exile when he attended the New Nation Writer's Conference which was held in Johannesburg. In 1995 he taught for a semester at Brandeis University, Boston. In 1996 he was a visiting professor at Marshall University, West Virginia and also at St. Mary's University of London. He was also a professor at Westfield College, London in that year. In 2000, he moved to Basel, Switzerland. In 2001 he visited South Africa as a visiting professor where he taught a course in African Modernism at the University of Cape Town. He visited South Africa in 2002

where he was a visiting professor at the University of Durban-Westville. His novel *Underground People* was published in 2002. In 2003 he visited South Africa as a visiting professor at the University of Natal and was a speaker at the "Time of the Writer Festival". In 2004 he visited South Africa for the reunion of *Drum* 'survivors'; this was also the year his novel *Mating Birds* was reissued. He is currently working on his new novel *Mandela's Ego* due to be published in 2005 and resides in Basel, Switzerland.

This multifaceted career in writing is evidence of the fact that Nkosi's exile had exposed him to many influences he may not have had had he remained in South Africa. He says that "exile was not all pain" (1983: viii).

There are unexpected bonuses, not the least of which is the distance from the lunacies of South Africa; for this distance necessarily means the ability- perhaps 'opportunity' is a better word- to purchase, however temporarily and regionally, the private freedoms which are very early taken away from someone like myself in South Africa. (1983: viii)

Nkosi also remarks that his exile was his fate and although exile meant being deprived of many things such as family and friends and the opportunity to grow in one's country of birth, it also "led to new discoveries, new acquaintances and new friendships" (1983: ix). His status as an exile figure has also made him something of a wanderer. Since his exile he has always been on the move. He has lived and worked in many different countries, but has never, to this day,

settled in a place which he could call home. This could probably be attributed to the fact that he never felt like he belonged anywhere, further enhancing his position as an outsider. At the same time Nkosi never allowed himself to forget his roots - that he was born in South Africa and that South Africa will always be important to him. The evidence of this is in his writings because most of his writing, critical and fiction, is about South Africa. In an interview, when asked why all his writings are firmly rooted in South Africa, he replies:

One way of answering that question is by retelling the joke that you can take the boy out of the country but you can't take the country out of the boy – which basically means that if one is interested in 'mining' one's memories, what one remembers of the country is what comes to the forefront of your consciousness most of the time. And I have never felt close enough to the places I live in to think that I want to devote to my life to writing about these societies. (Lombardozi 2003: 328)

Although Nkosi retained his South African identity in his writing, he did not allow this identity to completely define him as a writer. Stiebel and Gunner's comment on Nkosi's position as a South African writer in exile is accurate: "...he did not allow that sense of a narrowly South African identity to prescribe his wider sense of himself as a writer and critic" (Gunner and Stiebel 2005: 7). They further comment that being in exile has helped Nkosi become a better writer than he would have been had he remained in South Africa because he was not

restrained from writing about what concerned him. In exile, he had the freedom to write what he chose: ...”though cut off physically from South Africa, he has had to make himself ‘at home’ in exile, make movement and displacement his friends-even sources of inspiration” (Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 7).

Nkosi’s period of exile situated him as an outsider figure amongst other African writers. Because of his position as a writer in exile, his writing was not mainstream. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Nkosi’s writing was clearly influenced by existentialism which theorises that human beings are in charge of defining their own lives because they have free will and because of this they have the ability to choose who they are and who they become. The influence of existentialist thinking on Nkosi is evident in his earlier decision to go into exile and later, not to return to South Africa. He chose to go into exile and he chose not to return to his birth country. He is comfortable with his decisions and seems to have no regrets as is evident in his comments when interviewed.

Nkosi was greatly influenced by the American modernist writer William Faulkner. When asked, in an interview with Zoë Molver about writers who had influenced him, Nkosi said:

So I graduated to Henry James, Conrad and of course my real ancestor, William Faulkner. And it’s obvious why William Faulkner, because William Faulkner was writing about the South, and I came from another South and so those two worlds seemed to

coincide...Even in South America, you'll find that most of the South American modernist writers will mention their "father" is William Faulkner, so he is mine. (Molver in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 179-180)

Faulkner examined universal themes of concern to all of humanity. His writing stressed humanity's power to prevail over evil and man's ability to find new values when traditional values fail. His characters sometimes show thoughts as disordered and sometimes absurd, as in the writing of the existentialist writer, Albert Camus. The influences of Camus and Faulkner shaped Nkosi as a writer, especially his position as a writer in exile. For example, in his novel *Sartoris* (1929), Faulkner created a fictional place called Yoknapatawpha which was modelled on his own county Lafayette. In the same way in *Underground People* Nkosi modelled his story on a fictional place, Tabanyane, which was actually the Northern Transvaal in South Africa. The protagonist, Cornelius Molapo was, as Nkosi says, partly inspired by the writer Can Themba, who was a member of the "National Liberation Movement" modelled on the actual African National Congress. As with Camus and Faulkner, Nkosi's novels *Mating Birds* and *Underground People* are based on the philosophy of existentialism. They question the notion of absurdity in life and raise many questions about life in an oppressed environment. These themes reflect and parallel Nkosi's own life, from living as a young black writer in an oppressed country, to being in exile in foreign countries. Nkosi's fiction is painted with alienness where the protagonists are

outsider figures like him. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapters Three and Four of this thesis.

The position of an outsider enabled Nkosi to look at South African fiction from the outside. In his non-fictional writing, Nkosi was severely critical of the fiction produced by black South African writers in the 1970's. In *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature*, he refers to the position which African writers who write about the African experience find themselves in when writing in the language of the coloniser. He states that it is "one of the bitterest ironies" (1981: 2) that writers have to write in the same language that were used to enslave them and their people. His argument is that writers who write about African experiences in the language of the coloniser, fail to give a realistic account of the African experience because it becomes distorted and therefore the African experience is falsified. He says: "...in writing in a European language the African writer is alone, operating outside the boundaries of either his own society or that of his adopted language, therefore always on the outside, looking in" (1981: 6). He also comments that some African writers have deliberately chosen to write in the language of the coloniser so that they could be accepted in the circles of the bourgeois writers. Many South African writers felt insulted and offended by Nkosi's remarks and accused him of not being in support of black South African writers. He acknowledges this in an interview:

In fact, I think that I'm known or acknowledged as a critic than as a writer of fiction, and I, for example, must say that the influences I

have had may at first seem negative, but I am not worried about that. I think that I stirred up a lot of anxieties, even anger amongst people who practiced literature in this country. (Interview with Molver in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 181)

Nkosi was therefore alienated to some degree from his class of writers further entrenching his status as an outsider figure.

Nkosi's criticism of South African writing in the apartheid years is prominent in his critical essays. His strongest point of criticism was that many South African writers of that time produced what he called 'protest literature', for him a pejorative label. He maintains that whilst most South African writers were understandably concerned with the themes of struggle and conflict pertaining to the South African political situation, this type of literature was limited to constantly reminding people of what he believes they would want to forget:

The novelists, dramatists and poets remind the public constantly what the public wishes to forget. Black writers in particular, feel an urgent sense of obligation to expose the wounds and to make the 'knowledge' public; but such an attempt by black writers only creates for the other side huge anxieties and discomfort. (1981: 77)

Nkosi argues that his criticism of South African literature was not simply because it was protest literature, but on how effective that literature was. Nkosi believes that South African literature should rather be inspirational in its mode of writing "saying something positive about black experience in South Africa" and should

encompass the “modern sensibility” (1983: 133,138) rather than showing people that they are victims of an apartheid society. In his essay “Fiction by Black South Africans”, Nkosi says that these writers do not show evidence of having read what he calls great modern fiction like the works of Dostoevsky, Kafka or Joyce. He rather harshly remarks that protest writers are “an example of a group of writers operating blindly in a vacuum” (1983: 131). He also claims that these writers are simply regurgitating journalistic fact and dressing it up as original and imaginative literature. As mentioned earlier, these criticisms had many writers feeling that Nkosi was not loyal to the cause of black African fiction and instead of standing with them, he had instead, betrayed them. It was not Nkosi’s intention to offend or belittle these writers and the validity of their writing. Oliphant says: “this critical position is frequently misread as a summary rejection of social or political themes in fiction. It is actually concerned with the aesthetic properties of fiction” (Oliphant in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 152). Nkosi had to some degree created his role as an outsider figure, especially where other South African writers are concerned. Despite this fact, Nkosi has stood firm on his criticism and did not make any apologies for what he believed in. His essay “The Republic of Letters after the Mandela Republic” in 2002, which he wrote when he was invited to examine the state of South African literature after the disintegration of apartheid, reveals that Nkosi is still brutally honest in his opinions. He says that because of apartheid, South Africa still lacks a national identity and therefore the fiction that is produced is “homeless, depending for its conception, shape and readerly sustenance on foreign powers” (2002b: 245). He further argues that

South Africa is still reeling from the aftershock of apartheid and therefore: “only a complete overhaul of the social infrastructure could clear the ground for the emergence of a truly national culture” (2002b: 246).

When asked whether his writing was a result of his bitterness and anger at being in exile, Nkosi was adamant that there is no bitterness in his writing. He replied that his fiction was not written:

to expunge or heal a wound – I tried to situate myself into the situation of someone treated in a certain way, expelled from school, and needing recognition which is denied him and so this is, if I may say so, a re-presentation rather than a kind of psychotherapy, which once you have written about it, you got it out of your system.

(Lombardozi 2003: 329)

He also made the point that although he was alienated while in exile, he has had the advantage of looking at South Africa from a different perspective. He says: “I am of the country, but already outside of the country, so I am able to see the country from a distance that is not permitted to people who have never left the country” (Lombardozi 2003: 332). In this way exile has been an advantage for him. Siedel, on the writer in exile, writes: “But the exilic mind, no matter where it projects, no matter how unknown its arts, emanates from familiar or local territory. Imaginative powers begin at the boundaries of accumulated experience” (Siedel 1986: 2). In the same way for Nkosi, exile has given him a wider

experience which has broadened his imagination as a writer and which he has used to write about familiar and local territory, which for him is South Africa.

CHAPTER 3

Mating Birds (1986)

“Human races live in obedience to two laws, one of repulsion, the other of attraction.” (Young 1995: 107)

Mating Birds, Lewis Nkosi's first novel, was published in 1986 in New York. Set in the 1950's and 1960's, it is a story narrated in the first-person by Ndi Sibiya, a young black South African man who becomes obsessed with a white woman. Writing from prison, where he is awaiting his execution, he tells the story of how he was found guilty of rape by the white South African court of justice during the time of apartheid. Prior to the publication of *Mating Birds*, Nkosi's major non-fictional books *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature* (1981) and *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (1983) were published. At the time of publication of *Mating Birds*, Nkosi was Professor of Literature at the University of Zambia. Although living in exile overseas, most of Nkosi's fictional and non-fictional writing focused on the black experience in an apartheid South Africa as discussed in Chapter Two.

Critical reactions to *Mating Birds* were divided. The reaction to the novel outside South Africa was positive: it was received with great critical acclaim by many reviewers in leading newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and *The New*

York Times. One such reviewer was the eminent black literary scholar Henry Louis Gates Jnr. who in *The New York Times* review of *Mating Birds* describes Nkosi as “a sensitive, articulate and lyrical narrator” and says that *Mating Birds* “confronts boldly and imaginatively the strange interplay of bondage, desire and torture inherent in interracial sexual relationships within the South African prison house of apartheid” (Gates 1986: 3). Similarly, other critics praised the book because it offered an insight into interracial relationships in apartheid South Africa. Graham, on the critical acclaim for *Mating Birds* by reviewers outside of South Africa, comments that: “overseas reviewers seemed to concur that the novel was a finely crafted piece of work that offered complex insights into the distortions of desire in a racist and prohibitive society” (Graham in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 123). *Mating Birds* was on *The New York Times* list of the top hundred books published in 1987. It was also praised by British newspapers and reviewers. The novel received the esteemed MacMillan Silver Pen Award in 1987.

In South Africa however, there was a mixed reaction to *Mating Birds*. Although it was praised by newspapers such as *Insig* (an Afrikaans newspaper) and *The African Communist*, it was generally looked at with condemnation by other South African reviewers and critics. Nkosi was accused by South African author André Brink of being preoccupied with interracial sex and that *Mating Birds* demoralised white South African women (this review will be discussed in more detail below). He was also criticised by feminists such as Josephine Dodd (also to be discussed in more detail below) of perpetuating the notion that women who are

raped, usually had 'asked for it'. Graham also notes that when *Mating Birds* was first published, South African universities generally kept the novel out of their curricula despite the fact that it had been honoured with the prestigious MacMillan Pen Prize. The reluctance to include *Mating Birds* in the curricula was due to the fact as Graham remarks that "most South African critics seemed determined to find fault with the novel" (Graham in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 123). Critics claimed that Nkosi's novel did not portray a realistic account of apartheid because the events which occurred were not chronologically correct; that is, it is as Nkosi remarks "about the racial divide in the 1950's and the 1960's and at its publication inserted willy-nilly into the politics of the 1980's in South Africa" (2004: 8). Graham comments that "Nkosi's novel was generally shelved by South African critics as an historical anachronism" (Graham in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 128).

One of the most significant critical reviews of *Mating Birds* was by South African author André Brink. In his review, "An Ornithology of Sexual Politics: Lewis Nkosi's *Mating Birds*" (1992), Brink is scathingly critical calling the novel "sexist" with "clichés of cheap soft-porn magazines" (1992: 6, 8). Brink argues that by denying Veronica Slater, the white woman main character, a voice, Nkosi, through Ndi Sibiya, reveals that he is not concerned for her but "only with the establishment of his own (arrogant, male) identity" (1992: 12). He therefore finds that the novel is sexist and lacking in sensitivity and is only able to assert his power and identity by degrading the girl who is white. Nkosi turns Veronica

Slater's body into a territory to be colonised: "...in every possible respect she has to be degraded, turned into Object and (despicable, hence accessible) Other, dehumanised, in order to validate the imperial conquest of her body as locus, as (colonial) territory" (Brink 1992: 6). He also argues that Nkosi and other *Drum* writers were preoccupied with interracial relationships and were "notorious among their contemporaries for their pursuit of white women" (Brink 1992: 2) because they were of an intellectual elite who, because of their education, could no longer identify with the black masses. He remarks that *Mating Birds* is not the first time that Nkosi has revealed his preoccupation with interracial sexual relationships in his writing. In his short stories "As for Living" (1966) and "Holiday Song" (1968) also dwells on interracial sexual relationships. Therefore Nkosi has "a persistent fascination with the subject" (Brink 1992: 1).

Another South African critic who was disapproving and condemnatory of *Mating Birds* was feminist academic Josephine Dodd. She comments that *Mating Birds* is a text that was written to satisfy the writer's fantasy for interracial sexual relationships and in doing so he sacrifices the role of the woman by making it look as if she wanted to be raped and that she had found enjoyment in it. Dodd asks: "what does it mean to women that the said critic and reader promote a version of South African literature which panders to the prurient expectations of a First-World audience, supplying details of terrorist rape and interracial sexual excitement?" (Dodd 1990: 118) Her argument is that *Mating Birds* is a text written to satisfy First-World readers and therefore Nkosi is not really concerned with the

issues of inequality between races arising out of the apartheid state in South Africa. She further argues that Nkosi uses the rape of a white woman to lash out against white supremacy and prejudice and in doing so subjects all women to chauvinist prejudice. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's analysis that *Mating Birds* is about "a conflict between the literate white and oral black cultures" (quoted in Dodd 1990: 125), Dodd argues suggests that the need to rape is the same as the need to be literate. The notion that to equate the violation of another human being with the desire for literacy is impossible and dangerous, according to Dodd. She remarks: "For me it reeks strongly of sweaty old male fantasy masquerading as literary sophistication" (Dodd 1990: 125 - 126). Despite Brink's, Dodd's and several other critics' condemnatory observations about *Mating Birds*, there were however some South African critics who praised it. Among them was Nadine Gordimer who said that *Mating Birds* represented "the human devastation wrought by racist laws in South Africa" (quoted by Graham in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 128). A reviewer for *The African Communist* praised Nkosi for his precise representation of the South African political situation and his portrayal of African village life and township life (Graham in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 129).

The release of *Mating Birds* in South Africa was embargoed by the Directorate of Publications and was also received with condemnation by many South African critics who "seemed determined to find fault with the novel" (Graham in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 123). The embargo was subsequently lifted on appeal. Writing a book that was initially cold shouldered by South Africa further reinforces

Nkosi's position as an outsider figure as a writer in South African literature, as discussed in Chapter Two. Perhaps the book was not well received because it was misread as realism, whereas it was far more of a modernist, symbolic text like the works of Conrad, Faulkner or Camus – writers who had great influence on Nkosi's writing. However in the late 1980's the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and the Immorality Act were abolished and *Mating Birds* was released for circulation to the public. Graham comments that the fact that *Mating Birds* was well received overseas was considered by the Directorate of Publications: "an indicator of its literary merit, one of the main criteria for allowing otherwise contentious works to be released for circulation" (Graham in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 127). In other words *Mating Birds* would not have been released in South Africa, the embargo lifted, had it not received the MacMillan Pen Prize overseas.

In fact, in the Preface to the 2004 edition of *Mating Birds*, Nkosi remarks that the plot for this book was realised when he was researching the fiction of Joseph Conrad at the University of Sussex. As mentioned above, the story of *Mating Birds* was influenced by the works of various writers among whom were Joseph Conrad, Henry James and Albert Camus. The brilliant sunlight and heat and the idea of fateful obsession, a common thread in these writers' novels, reminded Nkosi of Durban, his place of birth and hence the setting for *Mating Birds*. In Camus', *The Outsider*, the novel is set in Algeria, in oppressive heat and a generally hostile environment, just as Durban was to Ndi in *Mating Birds*.

Ndi Sibiya tells the story of his obsession with a white girl on the racially divided Durban beachfront – he lying on the ‘non-white’ side and she on the border of the “Whites Only” and the ‘non-white’ side. Although the laws of apartheid prevent them from having a sexual relationship with each other, they begin a wordless flirtation across the invisible barrier of segregation. Soon Ndi, of his own admission, becomes obsessed with the girl:

..the seeds of my own destruction were planted the very first day I laid eyes on the girl lying on the sands of the Durban beach, for what happened later was surely the final ripening of those seeds and the harvesting of the grain of lustful ambition that had grown in a matter of weeks until it had matured like a powerful weed to consume my life. (2004: 13 - 14)

It is this obsession which eventually leads to his conviction and sentencing to death for her alleged rape. While recounting the events that lead to his awaiting execution, Ndi also relates his life history. He tells of his rural life as a child in Zululand where he attended a Lutheran Missionary School. When his father dies shortly thereafter, he moves with his mother to the city where their lives change drastically, initially for the worse when they become squatters in Cato Manor. He attends the University of Natal from which he is expelled after arranging student protests against segregated classes.

The following section will concentrate on an analysis of *Mating Birds*, looking specifically at the protagonist, Ndi Sibiya, as an outsider figure. The outsider

figure of Ndi Sibiyi is a central key to understanding this modernist reading; therefore I will now turn to him. Minh-ha describes how “The moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa). She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside” (1991: 217). This quotation may aptly describe the position Ndi Sibiyi found himself in as an educated black man in a country plagued by racism and inequality (for although *Mating Birds* is set in the 1950’s and 1960’s, when the wheels of apartheid was being set in motion, its politics is set during the full blown stages of apartheid in the 1980’s). As a young child, living in a rural African community, he was to some extent sheltered from apartheid. He did not think of himself as different, nor did he have the desire to be accepted by another culture other than his own. It was only later, when his parents decided to send him to a Christian missionary school to receive a ‘white’ education that he began to feel like an outsider.

Writing his memoirs from a prison cell, Sibiyi reflects on his life and the events which eventually led to him being on death row. Told in the first-person narrative, his story is revealed to the reader while being interviewed by the European criminologist, Doctor Dufre. As a young child, Ndi had a happy childhood. His village, the fictional Mzimba near Zululand, was situated in a typical rural community. Ndi describes an idyllic landscape and a traditional community where life was “slow and easy-going” (2004: 40). He grew up in an extended household, cherished and loved by all his family members. His parents loved and respected

each other. His father was a typical Zulu patriarch, and his much younger mother was devoted to his father. He describes his parents as follows:

While the old man represented all that was conservative and unyielding in the Zulu temper, Nonkanyezi was a restless and adventurous spirit, shrewd and energetic, fiercely determined that I should make something of my life far beyond what was expected of a Zulu boy. (2004: 44)

Wanting more for her son, she convinces Ndi's father that he should be sent to a missionary school so that he could have opportunities which other children from his community did not have, that is: "to acquire knowledge that the white man alone possessed" (2004: 45). Ndi's life as a child in Mzimba was one of quiet contentment until Ndi's parents decided to send him to a Christian school run by whites and also when his community was displaced to make way for a white settlement. It was at this point that Ndi's life was affected by apartheid which left him with a sense of not belonging - either to his traditional Zulu background, or to his newly adopted Christian religion and culture which was, as Ndi says, "a price" (2004: 45) paid in order to join the Lutheran seminary. These early, but significant, events in Ndi's life had paved the way for Ndi as an outsider figure.

Even before starting at his new school, Ndi felt uncomfortable and demoralised when he heard people on the bus talking about how Black people change when they receive a Christian education. He says:

This kind of talk was demoralising. It awakened all the latent fears my father's warning had already bred in me.... a deep sense of gloom and foreboding as though going to school was the first signal of some unknown disaster that was now only beginning, slowly, to unfold. (2004: 71, 72)

At this point, Ndi had begun to feel that the path his life was now taking would alienate him from his home, his family, his culture and his identity. He writes:

In a confused sort of way, I sensed, too, with very little experience to guide me, that the path on which I was now launched would mean at some future date a complete break with the family, with the clan and with all that had sustained my spirit up to now. Henceforth I would remain one of the Sibiya's only in name, but in every way that mattered I would become a 'white man'. (2004: 72)

Ndi further observes that his foreboding at attending a Christian school and embracing a culture that was not his own was not unfounded because once he is educated in white ways he is unsatisfied with the black man's lot ultimately leading to his ruin:

Today I sit in this death cell, awaiting execution, because having gone to school I was no longer content with what I was. My hungers, my frustrations, my pride and ambition led me into thorny paths and finally into the noose. (2004: 72)

Receiving a Christian education, the religion of the coloniser, instilled in him a sense of not belonging. He belonged neither to his own culture, nor to the culture of the white man. He says: "The truth of the matter is, 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" (2004: 43). On this point Stiebel observes: "He feels neither native to the traditional Zulu world or to the white urban world - he is the black intellectual in limbo" (Stiebel in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 143).

In his last year at the Lutheran school, Ndi's father dies two weeks after their village was forcibly removed to make way for a white settlement. This can be seen as a symbolic passing away of the old order. He regarded the death of his father as the final split-up of his once close-knit family as everybody went their separate ways. Ndi and his mother moved to the city of Durban. His father's death was a result of his grief at being moved from his village. Colonisation had eventually found its way into their village and it had affected his entire family. Referring to the death of his father, Ndi remarks: "It was as if the thread that had held us together like a bunch of straw had simply been unravelled. At a stroke, everything fell apart" (2004: 54).

In their move to Durban, Ndi and his mother found themselves in "the sprawling, fetid black slum" (2004: 73) of Cator Manor just outside of the city of Durban. It was here that Ndi saw his mother change from a beautiful rural girl to an urban

shebeen queen. She was no longer the self-respecting Zulu widow and had started to dress like urbanised women, had discarded her faith in her traditional religion and had begun to follow the faith of the Church of Zion, an africanised Christianity. Ndi says: "The city was soon to change everything. It had changed many before her. It was soon to change my mother, too. It had changed me certainly" (2004: 76). Ndi is without any emotional family support; a condition which contributes to his alienated status.

Life at university became "both larger and narrower" (2004: 82) for Ndi. Larger, because he was exposed to a wider world of people and of academia, and narrower, because classes were segregated. He became aware that the colour of his skin had exposed him to fewer opportunities than he would have had, had he been born white. Black students and students of other nationalities had separate classes from the white students. When on the odd occasion they were allowed to sit in with the white students, they were referred to as "visitors" (2004: 82) by the racist professor Van Niekerk who also, to the wry amusement of the 'visiting' students, commented that Africa had no history before the white man came along. After three years at University, Ndi was expelled for leading student protests against segregated classes. He had a succession of jobs but was never content with his life. His education had made him restless because he did not know where he belonged. In Verwoerdian nightmare terms he had educated himself out of his class and race. The statement: "And I have lived, always, resentfully, on the fringes of a white world that tried to keep me out" (2004: 81),

reveals that he wanted to be accepted into the white culture however, even though he had a 'white' education, he was never fully accepted because he was black. Thus his Christian education, instead of allowing him: "respect, a life of ease and influence" (2004: 44), left him with an awareness of not belonging anywhere. It had cemented his isolation from any institution or culture, including his own.

Ndi's obsession with Veronica Slater begins when he sees her lying on the periphery of the 'Whites Only' deserted stretch of beach. "Her flesh was surrendered, as it were, to the hungry gaze of African youths who combed the beach everyday for lost or discarded articles" (2004: 12). To see a white body lying on the beach that was forbidden to black people made the young, black boys angry. It was almost as if the body lying there was taunting, a reminder of what they could never have. But their rage was "mutinous" (2004: 2), for fear of being arrested for speaking out against the law. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin comment on the silencing of the oppressed in post-colonial societies using apartheid South Africa as an example:

...the truth of post-colonial societies, like that of the other oppressed, or repressed, or silenced communities is ideologically determined. It stems from a construction of the self as subject in relation to the other....in post-colonial societies the participants are frozen into a hierarchical relationship in which the oppressed is locked into position by the assumed moral superiority of the dominant group, a superiority which is

reinforced by the use of physical force. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989: 172)

The comment: “a young body lying spent and motionless on the warm white sands to be gazed at by us, the silent forbidden crowds of non-white boys in a black, mutinous rage” (2004: 12), is an indication of how these young black boys experienced being on the outside of privilege. Much of *Mating Birds* is structured on Nkosi's own experiences as a young black man in South Africa. This is evident when in *Home and Exile* he writes of how the discriminatory signs which separated black people from white people affected him:

Everywhere I went in public places notices shouted at me: ‘*Non-Whites Only*’ and every time I read the message it vividly brought to mind the crude fact that in the eyes of the world my life represented something negative, something *non!*.....For here were three million whites living in the midst of twelve million blacks, and instead of describing themselves as *non-blacks* they were happily calling us *non-whites*. (1983: 32)

This is indeed an example of how colonisation fed through the system of apartheid, displaced the identity of indigenous people with the ‘insider’ (indigenous people) becoming the ‘outsider’ (the colonised) and the ‘outsider’ (the coloniser) becoming the ‘insider’. Although the signboards on the Durban beachfront fill Ndi with rage, he never crosses the invisible barrier that separates him from Veronica. Stiebel comments on this and also on the reality of the Durban beachfront during apartheid:

Sibiya to begin with does not transgress physical or racial boundaries. In Durban's history, one of the most contested spaces was the beachfront with the choicest central beaches labelled 'white' and those to the north assigned for 'black' use. To the eye, no visible boundary existed but to all intents and purposes an impenetrable wall, such as the Berlin Wall, segregated the swimmers from one beach from those of another. (Stiebel in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 139)

The relationship between Ndi and Veronica is conducted almost entirely in silence, through the medium of the gaze. The only time they briefly speak is when they bump into each other outside a local shop. Ndi's attraction for Veronica lay in the fact that, by looking at him, she acknowledged him as another human being. She did not treat him as if he was invisible. On her comments on the 'native' as 'interloper' in an apartheid South Africa, Stiebel says that Nkosi identifies two required characteristics of the 'native', "one to be mute and the other be invisible" (Stiebel in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 138). Ndi's obsession with Veronica could be interpreted as his longing for her identity. Just as Nkosi refused to become a 'native', defined as subservient indigene, similarly Ndi longed for the power of Veronica's white identity, and so escape the 'native' identity he was given by an apartheid South Africa. The fact that Veronica did not have anything to say to Ndi asserts the notion that she considered him a 'native',

further instilling the outsider figure into the consciousness of Ndi. However, her gaze undoes some of the negativity her silence conveys.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin see the relationship between Ndi and Veronica as a metaphor for “the relation between the literate white and oral black societies” (1989: 86). The signs and silence which constitute their relationship are an indication of the barriers between the two cultures. Where the two cultures meet there is silence - even though Ndi and Veronica reach simultaneous orgasm without touching, and Ndi remarks that they had “defeated apartheid” (2004: 115), Ashcroft et al say that “it is merely the illusion of communication, as Ndi discovers to his cost. Silence has deceived him” (Ashcroft et al 1989: 87). In a country governed by segregation and oppression, the two different cultures could never legitimately assimilate. The black person is always an outsider, as Ndi had discovered. In the same way Camus, although born in Algeria, found himself feeling isolated and estranged from France which he considered his country. Being a black man in a country stricken by war, his presence in France was always suspect, as is Ndi’s, or for that matter, Nkosi’s, in the then apartheid South Africa.

Ashcroft et al argue that Ndi’s obsession with Veronica is evidence of his desire to become a part of Veronica’s world and in doing so achieve the power of the literate world:

The interrelation between the desire to enter the literate world and the rape of the woman is significant. Both the phallus and the pen are instruments of domination. Sexual union with the tantalizing but unattainable woman is the metaphoric equivalent of the Black child's attempt to enter the world of white society (and therefore of power) through the wielding of the pen. (1989: 87)

Considering this, it would then be true to assume that Ndi rebelled against being an outsider figure and wanted to be accepted in the white world. Although Ndi had the illusion of power (his 'white' education and English language), he still was powerless because a larger power (the apartheid government) had control over his movements. In the same way that Ndi needed to possess Veronica's identity so that he could identify with the 'white' culture, Ndi also says that Veronica displaying her forbidden body to him is her way of affirming her power over him. Loomba, on post-colonial identities, observes that: "blackness confirms the white self, but whiteness empties the black subject" (Loomba 1998: 144). Veronica's whiteness is an indication of the power she, the coloniser, has over Ndi, the colonised. At the same time, although Ndi seems to be disempowered because of the colour of his skin, he also displays himself to the reader as having some power in his relationship with Doctor Dufre. In Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying* (1930), the plot unfolds through the thoughts and emotions of the different characters. The inner psychological voices of the characters reveal the themes of the novel. In the same way Nkosi reveals Ndi's power when Ndi exercises his power when he tells Doctor Dufre what he chooses to tell but at the same time

does not reveal everything about his life. Also, Ndi's written account of events with which he is busy whilst in prison can be seen as a small exercise in empowerment: his version differs from the court's version and again from Veronica's version. Once again, this exercise in modernism is reminiscent of Faulkner's influence on Nkosi as in a text like *As I lay Dying*.

Ndi makes several references to 'whiteness'. He is constantly referring to the whiteness of Veronica's skin and when he entered her bungalow for the first time, he was taken aback by the whiteness of her room. When he looked at himself in Veronica's mirror, he claims that he almost didn't recognise himself. This could be symbolic of two things. Firstly, that as a black person, he did not fit into a white man's world, despite his white education. Secondly, that his white education had changed him and therefore he could not recognise himself. Also, on the fateful day when he followed Veronica back to her bungalow, he describes Veronica's room as being bathed in "a macabre ghostly white light" (Nkosi 2004: 130), as if its malevolence was a warning to Ndi to keep away from Veronica because she represents everything that is white and being black, he did not belong there and if caught would have to face the consequences. Ndi also describes being affected by the light that entered the courthouse: "the white, searing light which filtered through a side window of the courtroom, a light strong enough to dazzle the eyes....seemed suddenly menacing, powdery white in an unnatural way" (127/ 128). This light can be read as symbolic of Ndi being tried by a white court. As in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), whiteness is deathly,

sterile – in a reversal of the usual symbolism, he – the black ‘outsider’ is being sucked into a sterile, white vortex. There is no hope for him. In the courtroom too as in every other aspect of his life, he is an outsider. Kakmekaar, the prosecutor argues that Ndi should be found guilty so that it could be an example to other natives who may look at Ndi as a hero and who “dared to defy the laws of this country” (33). The irony of his name belies the nonsense that he speaks. ‘Kak’, meaning that he talks ‘shit’, but also ‘mekaar’, showing that he has unity in numbers. Van Rooyen, the prison warder who was capitalising on the infamy of Ndi’s case, commented in an interview in a newspaper that ‘natives’ who receive a white education, start to think of themselves as equal to whites and that this is when they turn bad. In other words ‘white’ educated blacks do not know their place because they want to identify with the white man who is far superior. To Van Rooyen, this supposition is preposterous because: “we were dealing not with normal men but creatures who were little above animals” (69). This attitude towards a black man could be used to illustrate Fanon’s assertion that white men have latent fears of insecurity and inferiority where a black man is concerned: “The white man is convinced that the Negro is a beast; if it is not the length of the penis, then it is the sexual potency that impresses him. Face to face with this man who is ‘different from himself’, he needs to defend himself. In other words, to personify The Other. The Other will become the mainstay of his preoccupations and his desires” (1967: 170). Ndi is seen as a beast by Van Rooyen, firstly because he is black and secondly because he is perceived as having raped a white woman.

During his trial Ndi's family come to see him but they do not recognise him. He has become someone they cannot identify with - he is unlike them. He has changed. His speech and his voice are unlike theirs: "I do not speak like them. In my voice, in the quick rhythms of my speech, there is something alien..." (Nkosi 2004: 24). His language has changed. He does not speak like them anymore, therefore they do not trust him. He says: "In reality I have become a stranger, a shadow with whom they have nothing in common. So once again I am alone..." (25). Fanon's comments on the plight of the educated black man are fitting of Ndi's own position: "And the fact that the newly returned Negro adopts a language different from that of the group into which he was born is evidence of a dislocation, a separation" (Fanon 1967: 25). Ndi's family is a reminder of his father and his distrust of white people and their Christian education. A traditional Zulu who "clung stubbornly to custom and tradition" and "who prayed endlessly for guidance" (Nkosi 2004: 43), Ndi cynically remarks that this was an effort in futility as it did nothing to prevent his son from finding himself on death row to be hung for raping a white woman. His father's words of warning regarding white people and their culture had more truth to it than Ndi could have imagined:

Never lust after a white woman, my child ...with her painted lips and soft shining skin, a white woman is a bait put there to destroy our men. Our ways are not the ways of white people, their speech is not ours. White people are as smooth as eels, but they devour us like sharks. (46)

Doctor Emile Dufre is a Swiss criminologist who has been sent to assess the mind of a black man who has been convicted of raping a white girl. Ndi evades some of Dufre's questions and does not reveal as much to him as he does to the reader. He exercises power in the one area where he has control. He cannot be forced to reveal to Dufre details of his life that he does not want to. In this way he resists European interference. For example, he does not tell Dufre about his first encounter with a white girl when he was still a young boy and the profound impact it had on him. He does not see how a European would be able to understand the mind of a black South African child experiencing an encounter with a white person for the first time. They have nothing in common because they come from different worlds. In his own world Ndi is an outsider. How then would Dufre understand his psyche when Ndi himself could not understand it? Despite Dufre's speciality being the 'outsiders' of society, he is of limited understanding in Ndi's case. A comment by Said that Freud's understanding of postcolonialist societies was limited, holds true for the reading of *Mating Birds* and the character of the psychiatrist Dufre:

...one is very struck by the fact that beyond the confines of Europe, Freud's awareness of other cultures is inflected, and, indeed shaped by his education in the Judaeo-Christian tradition...This is something that doesn't so much limit Freud in an uninteresting way as identify him as belonging to a place and time that were still not tremendously bothered by what today, in the current postmodern, post-structuralist,

postcolonialist jargon, we call the problems of the Other. (Said 2003: 13-14)

To summarise then, *Mating Birds* is a story of a young, black South African man who struggles to find an identity for himself. As a black man with a 'white' education, his family comes to think of him as a stranger because he is not like them - his language, his speech and his aspirations are different. He is not accepted by the white community because he is a black man living in a country divided by segregation and discrimination. His obsession with a white woman who allows him to gaze at her, and who returns his gaze, gives him a sense of power over her and therefore, he mistakenly imagines her white culture. Nkosi's comment in *Home and Exile* on the black man's desire for white culture is appropriate to the story of *Mating Birds*: "It seems to me that the greatest problem of our time - perhaps of all times - is the reconciliation between instinct and restraint, or to put it more provokingly, how to abolish restraint or live with restraint without abolishing freedom" (1983: 35). Ndi's obsession for Veronica and her white culture turns to tragedy when he gives in to his obsession thereby delivering himself up to apartheid punishment. Through his writing, Ndi has the freedom to express himself via the integration of language and thus reveal his version of events – the opportunity that was not afforded to him whilst he was being tried in court. He insists in his writing that his sexual encounter with Veronica was consensual but he is also aware that no white court would believe that a white woman would want to have a sexual relationship with a black man.

Being conscious of his outsider status, even as a young man he knew that he was condemned: "That trip to Mzimba was itself the beginning of a process of initiation in which I saw myself as a young man setting out on a long and tortuous journey, beset by dangers and uncertainty" (2004: 72) His early Christian education began the process of what was to be his fate - facing a death sentence for the rape of a white woman: "...the end has not been a happy one; not life but death, not wisdom but foolishness" (2004: 72). His sexual obsession is symbolic of his desire to be liberated from discrimination and oppression by the laws of apartheid in South Africa. Without liberation, he will always remain the outsider figure. The protagonist of Nkosi's next novel, *Underground People*, takes the liberation struggle – and the position of the outsider figure within this – one step further as the next chapter will show.

CHAPTER FOUR

Underground People (2002)

Underground People, Lewis Nkosi's second novel, was first published in Dutch in 1993. Nkosi had started writing *Underground People* before *Mating Birds* but he could not complete a full length novel because of the pressures of studying for his degree in English literature. The complexity of the political content and themes of *Underground People* required his full attention. So Nkosi started working on what he thought would be a short story instead: the result was *Mating Birds* which was published in 1986. *Underground People* was eventually published in English by Kwela Books in 2002 after problems concerning copyright were settled. Thus *Underground People* had a total gestation period of more than twenty years.

The long gestation period of *Underground People* also meant that the ending of *Underground People* had to be changed because the political situation in South Africa had changed dramatically since its Dutch publication in 1993. In an interview with Janice Harris in 1994, Nkosi remarked:

...the unfolding events in South Africa had a direct effect on how my novel was progressing toward its conclusion. My original ending was dependant on the fact that Mandela was still going to be in jail when

the book came out....Well, I had to change that ending after Mandela's release; it didn't make any sense anymore. (1994: 9)

The dynamics of South African politics therefore had a direct influence on Nkosi's writing of *Underground People*. Although the themes addressed in *Underground People* were of a "complicated and delicate" (Vancini in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 161) nature for Nkosi, the book nevertheless has a distinctly lighter tone than that of *Mating Birds*. "*Underground People* has, despite its dark undercurrents and potential cynicism, a lighter, more ironic and playful touch than was evident, or possible, in *Mating Birds*" (Stiebel 2002:12). Unlike *Mating Birds*, which is set in a dark apartheid era when the hardening of racist laws (discussed in Chapter Two) was becoming more evident, and black people were feeling the strain of apartheid, *Underground People* is set in a period when the government was beginning to feel the subversive force of resistance movements, and people began to see that the road to change was inevitable and fast approaching. The future is not bleak as in *Mating Birds*. The lighter tone in *Underground People* is evident in the sometimes wry and ironic humour within its pages. Oliphant describes Nkosi's fiction as reflecting his "droll" attitude to history: "With a mélange of irony, satire and ribald humour, the novel, set in the 1980's, narrates the loony adventures of Cornelius Molapo" (Oliphant 2002: 1-2).

In writing *Underground People*, Nkosi demonstrates that a story about apartheid South Africa does not necessarily have to be only about a reaction to white

people. As Nkosi stated in his earlier critical essays on South African letters, writing does not have to be: “as though everything the blacks did in the country was a reaction to white oppression” (1983: 133). His point is that people of the same race can also clash and betray the struggle, as he shows in the corrupt character of Joe Bulane, an important member of the underground resistance movement, known as the National Liberation Movement (NLM) in the novel. Vancini comments: “Actually in *Underground People*, black people react not only to whites but also to the NLM which, instead of helping them, in some ways betrays comrades of the same race” (Vancini in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 167). It is therefore evident that Nkosi’s critical writing informs his fictional writing. Although *Underground People* is a novel about politics and power within the resistance movements and the government, it does not take on the form of a ‘protest’ novel. Vancini observes that Nkosi does not allow his personal feelings prejudice his writing:

The author does not in any way show prejudice towards his more negative characters even if he uses them to express his personal point of view. This is consistent with Nkosi, the man and the critic, as his essential aim has always been to write a work that would finally give as close as possible an objective image of the events. (Vancini 2005: 174)

As with *Mating Birds*, the critical reception to *Underground People* was mixed. While some critics received *Underground People* positively (see Oliphant’s “Underground Irony”, for example), others, like Griswold, commented that some

characters and the amount of detail dedicated to their lives in the novel was unnecessary: "While Ferguson may be an interesting character, and important to the conclusion, too much space is dedicated to his life and foibles" (Griswold 2003: 1). Vancini on the other hand, responds to this criticism by arguing that Nkosi gives the reader a personal insight into the lives of the characters "by privileging the interior motives of his characters more than lingering on explicit accusations of the terrible state of the law in force and ...help[s] the reader to understand the actions that they [the characters] commit and the decisions that they take" (Vancini 2005: 163,167). Isaacson comments that Nkosi's earlier critical comments on South African fiction are reflected in his own fiction. She refers specifically to Nkosi's comments on predictability in Achebe's novels which she finds absent in Nkosi: "Nkosi finds Achebe predictable in this regard but certainly he is himself free of predictability" (Isaacson 2002: 18). One can therefore see that there is a correlation between Nkosi's non-fictional and critical writing, and his fictional writing. He does not fall into the trap of writing in the same limited manner of which he accuses certain other South African writers of a particular period as shown in Chapter Two. Jane Rosenthal also comments that Nkosi's literary criticism falls into place with his fictional writing. She observes: "in a review of a recent biography of Chinua Achebe, Lewis comments that Achebe considers his role is 'to defend African culture' (against Western cultural imperialism). There is no sense of this in *Underground People*; he has written about many strands of South African culture as if existing within them, not from the outside" (Rosenthal 2002: 2). In a newspaper review of *Underground People*

Stiebel comments that: "As a writer, Nkosi is a shrewd outsider by choice, observing the wry twists of South African life at a particularly dark moment" (Stiebel 2002: 12). Despite being an 'outsider' because of his status as an exile figure of old, Nkosi's insight into South African politics and resistance movements in this novel is accurate and portrayed in a manner which is free from "grudges and revenge" (Vancini 2005: 174).

How then does Nkosi use the role of the outsider figure in *Underground People*? The plot centers on two men from different backgrounds but whose lives are inadvertently linked to each other. Although the novel is set in South Africa in the late 1980's and early 1990's, it encompasses ongoing political and racial attitudes of South African life evident in the 1960's, as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis. The plot is a double narrative which parallels the interconnectivity of the lives of Cornelius Molapo and Anthony Ferguson, both South Africans. The story is about a staged disappearance of Cornelius Molapo, the main character in the novel and a member of an underground resistance movement, the NLM. His disappearance is made to look by the movement as if he was being held in detention without trial by the South African police. During the State of Emergency (1980's), holding people who were members of the resistance in detention without trial was a common practice of the South African police. The ninety-day detention law ensured that this practice was legal. But Molapo had gone underground on a mission of government resistance for the National Liberation Movement (a thinly disguised African National Congress) and in order to protect

his whereabouts, the National Liberation Movement made it look as if he was being held by the government. In an interview Nkosi comments:

The Liberation Movement protects the secrets of his [Molapo's] whereabouts by letting everyone think he is in detention. Since the South African government was always doing things like that, it was a nice way of putting the government on the spot. (Harris 1994: 3)

Anthony Ferguson, an employee of Human Rights International (modelled on the London based Amnesty International), becomes connected with Molapo when he is sent by the organisation to investigate Molapo's disappearance. The double narrative thus also relates Ferguson's journey from London, the headquarters of the Human Rights International and where Ferguson has been based for fifteen years, to South Africa, his birth country. He is reunited with his mother and sister. This plot runs parallel to Molapo's underground mission in a place called Tabanyane, which is also Molapo's place of birth. Nkosi comments that the idea for a double narrative was, in an earlier version of *Underground People*, born out of the Faulkner novel *Wild Palms*: "Structurally it was intended to be two novels in one and in the earlier versions you can see the resemblance to *Wild Palms* by Faulkner. Two plots move in parallel lines but keep touching at certain nodal points" (Harris 1994: 3). Another Faulknerian influence for the plot of *Underground People* was Faulkner's novel *Sartoris* (1929), in which Faulkner created a fictional Yoknapatawpha which was modelled on Lafayette, his home country. In the same way, Nkosi models the fictional Tabanyane on the Northern Transvaal. Nkosi also uses Faulkner as a character in *Underground People* in

the form of the gardener, Willie Faulkner, who is reading *The Sound and the Fury*, the celebrated novel by his namesake. Although dealing with serious issues in *Underground People*, Nkosi finds place for humour in the novel. Isaacson, with regard to this joke in the novel says: "These are jokes the novel permits" (2002: 18). Nkosi's writing is to a large degree influenced by the writing of Faulkner as mentioned in Chapter Two. In an interview with Zoë Molver he remarks of this influence: "William Faulkner was writing of the South, and I came from another South and so those two worlds seemed to coincide...he became one of the greatest influences" (Molver in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 180). The 'in jokes' around Faulkner are, therefore, illustrative of *Underground People* as a whole: a novel with modernist echoes and levels of symbolism.

Cornelius Molapo and Anthony Ferguson are characters who are in many respects 'outsider' figures. Molapo the protagonist is a graduate of Wits University and the chairman of the local National Liberation Movement. He is a teacher by profession, a poet, and reads the philosophy of Hegel. He is described as "an incompetent teacher of languages and a dabbler in poetry and politics, Molapo himself was not cast in a particularly heroic mould" (Nkosi 2002a: 9). As a member of an underground resistance movement, he does not fit into the category of a typical freedom fighter. Vancini comments on the way Nkosi has created this character:

Nkosi builds up an image of Molapo purposely inclined towards idealism, a man that thinks of himself as a great poet, who declaims

his romantic version of the growing political crisis and the necessity to arm for the fight... In this way he comes across from the very first instance as a non-subversive, harmless character easily manipulated by the National Liberation Movement, the banned organisation to which he belongs. (Vancini in Stiebel and Gunner 2005: 163)

Nkosi has deliberately created Molapo as an outsider figure. In order to understand this, one needs to look at Nkosi's earlier criticism on 'protest' literature. By showing his main character as an outsider figure who was manipulated by the very movement he supports, Nkosi escapes his own criticism of the stereotype of 'protest' literature which uses:

...journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature. We find here a type of fiction which exploits the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning, without any attempt to transcend or transmute these given 'social facts' into artistically persuasive works of fiction. (1983: 132)

In *Underground People*, Nkosi examines the personal lives of his characters and shows that beneath the commotion of oppression and resistance, lies human tragedy compounded by betrayal. In Cornelius Molapo, Nkosi explores this tragedy. He does this by showing the events in Molapo's life which help to create the 'outsider' figure.

In the prologue to *Underground People*, Nkosi describes the usual consternation and anguish that followed when people went missing in the apartheid state of South Africa. In Molapo's case however, it was different. There was no concern or sympathy that Molapo had disappeared. Of his disappearance, Nkosi writes:

What happened to Cornelius Molapo early one October morning was not so remarkably different from the fate of many others in similar circumstances in Africa, South America, Asia and the Middle East, except perhaps in a few unimportant details. Nevertheless, small and unimportant as these differences may seem, they tended to deprive Molapo's own disappearance of the necessary pathos and drama often mentioned in respect of such cases, such as the unequal struggle against heavy odds, the drama of attempted escape, pistols being fired, crowds gathering in the street, mourning relatives. (Nkosi 2002a: 8)

In actual fact, nobody had even noticed that he was missing until the principal from his school where he taught decided to visit Molapo and then found him missing, his room in a state of disarray and chaos. Molapo had lived in isolation as his wife Maureen, unhappy with Molapo's involvement with politics and his constant consumption of alcohol, had left him: "Molapo lived in splendid isolation, without a wife, without parents or relatives in the neighbourhood" (8-9). This isolation and the fact that he was not missed by anybody, bears witness to the fact that even within his community he was an 'outsider'. The outsider figure

emerges in his ordinariness as compared to the usual prominent way in which members of resistance movements are depicted.

This deliberate portrayal of the outsider figure in Molapo is a tool which Nkosi uses to show how an ordinary figure such as Molapo is used and manipulated by corrupt officials within the very resistance movement of which he is a member. Joe Bulane is one such corrupt official. He is portrayed as a false hypocrite who will do anything to further the needs of the movement, including fabricating stories to harden a person's resolve. One such example is when Bulane lied to Molapo that he had had an affair with Maureen, Molapo's wife. His justification was that there is no place for personal problems in the lives of members of the resistance. Bulane says: "Corny, boy, we must never permit ourselves to forget that in comparison with the exploitation and suffering of our people, personal problems are of no consequence" (50). What is ironic is that Bulane is himself exploiting Molapo. Bulane is also a hypocrite because he pretends to admire Molapo when in reality he cannot stand him. When speaking to Ferguson about Molapo, he says: "A man of exceptional intelligence and political courage. What's more a great poet of the masses." But to himself he thinks: "*Just a windbag! A tin! A talkative vessel making a lot of useless noise...A bad poet, in love with words but incapable of linking his poetry to historical process*" (131). Nkosi uses Bulane to depict corruption within the National Liberation Movement; the exploitation of Molapo by Bulane further emphasising Molapo as an outsider figure. Cornelius Molapo and Ndi Sibiya can be compared to Camus' character

Meursault in *The Outsider*. Molapo, as with Meursault, chooses his destiny despite the consequences, and even at the possible cost of his life. They both remain true to themselves. Ndi on the other hand is not overtly political as Molapo is, but he is politicised in that he is a victim of apartheid and is to be executed for something he did not do, but the absurdity of a black man being tried by a white court in a country ridden with discrimination, prevents him from telling the court what really happened.

Unlike the darker period in which *Mating Birds* is set which begins and ends with Ndi Sibiyi facing the death sentence in prison; Molapo is able to turn the tables on the NLM, and make his own choices about his future. When he realises that the NLM had deserted him, he decides to ignore their instructions to stop the revolt against the government and goes ahead with the planned attacks on the police station and the factory of the racist farmer, Jordaan. By making his own choice, he takes control of his life even if the decision could mean death. This turn that the plot takes shows evidence of Nkosi's use of existentialist beliefs where one of the main tenets is that individuals have to make choices regarding their lives and have to take responsibility for their lives no matter what the outcome. One must make a personal decision that is unique to oneself and that which cannot be influenced by any other person. Each person has to take responsibility for the decisions s/he takes (as discussed in Chapter One). In the same way that Ndi Sibiyi of *Mating Birds* made the decision not to tell the court that the sexual relationship he had with Veronica Slater was consensual because

the white court would not believe him anyway, Molapo chooses to go against the instructions of the NLM because he was truly committed to the cause of revolution and subsequent liberation. So the 'outsider' figure is not necessarily a disempowered figure. It can be very powerful and vindicating as proven in the character of Molapo in *Underground People*.

Molapo is sent to Tabanyane to liaise between the Tabanyane Resistance Movement and the NLM. The NLM is helping the Tabanyane Resistance movement to attempt to overthrow the corrupt chief, Sekala, who is accepting bribes from the government in exchange for land which belongs to the people of Tabanyane, and the reigning local apartheid government in Tabanyane. For six months Molapo spends time in the bush in Tabanyane establishing contacts, informers and recruiting agents. During this time more and more men were coming forward to join Molapo's team of bush fighters. But Molapo is also an outsider figure within his group of guerillas. He is seen by members of the Tabanyane resistance whose loyalty lay first and foremost with the Tabanyane resistance, as someone who was just sent as a commissar by the NLM. They do not look upon him as one of them. They were encouraged in this attitude by Molapo's second in command, Sefale Phiri, who resented being placed under Molapo, whom he considered an intruder. Also, Molapo is not trained to survive the harsh conditions in the bush where they carry out their underground operations. Because of this, the other guerillas consider him weak and therefore an obstacle in their path. They also see his intellect as a factor which makes him

different to the rest of them. Instead of seeing him as their captain, they see him as they would a teacher; stereotyped as passive, soft and not resilient to the labour of armed struggle as a captain should be. Phiri considered Molapo weak because of the lightness of his skin. To Phiri, Molapo's light skin colour is a sign of Molapo's closeness to the western world. He probably saw Molapo as having mixed blood and therefore felt that Molapo is not true to the revolution. Hence, Phiri did not trust Molapo. To him, Molapo was not one of them. He was an outsider. But Molapo proves to be a worthy leader when unexpected situations present themselves and he is able to deal with them with a cunning which the other guerillas realise they would not have. A good example of this is when they find the white couple, Gert Potgieter (a married, racist farmer) and Kristina Kemp (a hotel receptionist) having sex in the cave where they were hiding their arms: the other men's instincts would have been to kill them, but Molapo decides to keep them alive as their hostages. In a twist of fate, the black man becomes the master over the white man. Molapo keeps his head and maintains his powers of reason. He proves to the other guerrillas that when an unexpected situation arises, he is able to take control and act appropriately thus making him a worthy leader. It is, therefore, evident that Nkosi is pointing to 'othering' practices even within revolutionary movements and highlights the divide between rural and urban.

A central figure of the secondary plot in the novel, Anthony Ferguson is also represented as an outsider figure. His character represents white liberals in the

novel. Returning to South Africa after fifteen years meant that he was out of touch with the dynamics of the changing country. In an interview with Nkosi, Isaacson remarks that Nkosi points to the two thematically linked returns in *Underground People*: "That of Andrew Ferguson, the prodigal son who returns to Johannesburg, and Cornelius Molapo who returns to Tabanyane township, both finding it difficult to reconcile with their roots. They come back but they will never feel at home" (Isaacson 2002: 18). Ferguson's apprehension about returning to South Africa reflects some of Nkosi's own thoughts on exile and returning to one's country after along period of time. In an interview with Litzi Lombardozi, when asked whether he had missed home or even longed for it in a nostalgic way, Nkosi remarks: "It is not even a longing to come back to live or anything like that – it is something akin to nostalgia, or memories of the past...but that I don't call homesickness" (2003: 326). In the same way Ferguson did not feel excited that he was returning to his birth country after many years. He had conflicting emotions as one can see from his thoughts when he finally lands in South Africa:

...that moment when the prodigal must finally come to terms with the conflicting emotions of a return to his home...wondering what he must do to preserve his acquired identity; how to belong without belonging, to accept his allegiance to that original experience of having been born in this place without having to submit to the demands of an unworthy commitment; that was for him now his single most important need. (Nkosi 2002a: 92-93)

One cannot help but think that this was exactly the way Nkosi felt when he first visited South Africa in 1991 after many years in exile. Nkosi remarks of his feelings about South Africa after having returned for the first time in 1991: "It is a peculiar feeling to have lived for more than half a century without living, properly speaking, within the bounds of a cultural space which may be described as a "nation"" (Nkosi 2002b: 241). Like Anthony Ferguson, his visit was not permanent. And Nkosi still chooses to live abroad, although he is now free to live in South Africa.

Ferguson, like Molapo, is also duped by the NLM. In order to protect the whereabouts of Molapo so that he could carry out their mission, they convince Human Rights International that Molapo's disappearance was the responsibility of the South African government. By misleading Ferguson and sending him on a 'wild goose chase', the NLM also creates the outsider figure in Ferguson. In Ferguson's case however, he is easily duped as the well intentioned but ironically misplaced do-gooder.

The novel ends with Molapo and his band of resistance fighters exchanging gunfire with the army and the Tabanyane local police, led by Colonel Adam De Kock. In the distance, a dove could be heard cooing in the midst of gunfire. The dove, a symbol of peace, is a sign of hope – for the liberation of South Africa from apartheid. Just as in *Mating Birds*, Nkosi uses birds to convey a positive message of hope to his readers.

Underground People, is a novel which deals with many complex issues. It examines the interface of the public and personal lives of its characters in order to show how these are interwoven. In an interview Nkosi says:

I was really attempting to deal with the private and the public within the same novel. I was conscious of the fact that, as a black South African writer we have always been so much more committed to the public sphere in stories we write that we neglect to see how certain pressures of the persons private life, can affect ways in which we perceive the political. (Harris 1994: 3)

It shows the 'outsider' figure as not exempt from the pressures of the public arena. It is also a novel that avoids the trend of showing the oppressor as the vile 'bad guys' and the resistance movement as blameless. Nkosi shows that sometimes there are people who are supposedly trustworthy and on the side of right who are corrupt. These people will manipulate anyone and any situation to get what they want, as was evidenced in Bulane's negotiations, because this is a novel in which human fallibility and guilt is not the exclusive preserve of one side only, Nkosi is sympathetic to some of the white characters in the novel. This places Nkosi in an unusual, non-aligned position typical of his own outsider position, fuelled in this instance by irony.

In the characters of Molapo and Ferguson, Nkosi also illustrates that the outsider figure is not necessarily one who is at a disadvantage. As stated earlier in this

chapter, the outsider status can be a positive experience for some individuals including Nkosi himself. In the case of Molapo, his strength of character was underestimated by the NLM, who thought that they would be able to play him like a puppet. Joe Bulane discovered just how incorrect his perception of Molapo was when Molapo had the upper hand over him by the end of the novel. When Bulane indicates that he wants to leave the forest where the fighting between the Tabanyane Resistance Movement and the local police force was taking place, Cornelius refuses to allow him to leave saying: “you stay right here with us and fight side by side with the people you helped to recruit” (Nkosi 2002a: 262). This is an indication of Molapo’s strength and power as a guerilla fighter – something that was never expected of him.

Although dealing with serious issues in *Underground People*, Nkosi manages to turn these issues into something positive. He does not do this through ‘protest’ literature but rather uses his imaginative fiction to express cautious hope. Vancini’s comments seem to hold true for Nkosi’s project in *Underground People*:

His aim is not protest...The dove, the symbol of peace announces the end of the struggle and so brings to an end the attempts of Nkosi to make one not forget what was done to his land. He does this, not through protest but by using what he knows best, literature as a form of art for which he fought all his life. (Vancini 2005: 174)

In the Conclusion which follows this chapter, I will show that Nkosi's writing has always contained these twin traits: writing as an 'outsider' or portraying characters as outsiders, yet an outsider position not devoid of positive individual choices.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

As this thesis has shown, the theme of the outsider figure in the novels, *Mating Birds* and *Underground People* reveals that the outsider character is a recurrent trope in Nkosi's writing. The protagonists in both novels, although different in their portrayal, are nevertheless well defined outsider figures. In *Mating Birds*, as shown in Chapter Three, Ndi Sibiyi is a young black South African awaiting execution in a South African prison for the rape of a white woman. Set in a time that is indicative of the days of 'dark' apartheid, the character of Sibiyi reflects the injustices and disempowerment experienced by black people living under apartheid rule which consequently creates the outsider figure in black people. It is also a time which reflects Nkosi's own period as a young black man living in a country wracked by discrimination. The character of Cornelius Molapo in *Underground People* is very different to that of Ndi Sibiyi. Set in a time when apartheid was at the end of its reign, the outsider figure in the character of Molapo is one that indicates how a person can become empowered when he is free to make his own choices. Chapter Four shows that although Molapo is duped by the very party he supports, the National Liberation Movement, he is eventually able to take control of the situation and in effect, take control of his own destiny much as the final outcome is uncertain. Both novels, therefore, support Nkosi's acknowledgement of the doctrine of existentialism which

essentially states that a person has the power to make his/her own choices in life and should live by those choices with conviction.

The theme of the outsider figure is not isolated to Nkosi's novels. The voice of the outsider figure is also evident in most of Nkosi's other works. It is in evidence in the plays *The Black Psychiatrist* (1994) and *The Rhythm of Violence* (1964). *The Black Psychiatrist* is a play about the relationship between a white female patient and a coloured South African psychiatrist, Doctor Dan Kerry, who despite being a professional, is conscious of being an outsider while interacting with his patient. *The Rhythm of Violence* highlights inter-racial sexual relationships and how people who are involved in these relationships are turned into outsiders by the state of apartheid. These themes are also discussed in Nkosi's critical and non-fictional works, *Home and Exile* (1965) and *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature* (1981). The outsider figure therefore has resonance in both Nkosi's writing, fictional and non-fictional, as well as in Nkosi's own identity.

Although in exile from his country of birth from the time of young adulthood, Nkosi has adapted to his life by making the most of his status as an exile figure. Armed with the kind of freedom which he never possessed while living in South Africa, he was able to write what he wanted about South Africa without fear of being imprisoned or having his writing banned or censored by the South African government as discussed in Chapter Two. While in exile, much of his writing

was published in other countries. Being in exile meant for Nkosi less restraint as a writer, the proof of which is in the many fictional and non-fictional works he has produced. So it may be argued that Nkosi was intellectually comfortable in his position as a writer in exile, and although exile was undoubtedly painful for him in many ways, it also had many advantages for him as a writer. In *Home and Exile* on the issue of exile Nkosi remarks:

Many things have happened to me since [his exile], many pleasures and pains have been accumulated along the way; I have been to many places around the world, have met many people, encountered many cultures whose shapes and contours shocked, delighted, and in the end brought me face to face with a self whose emergence would have been inconceivable had I stayed in South Africa.

(1983: viii)

For Nkosi, therefore, the outsider figure did not necessarily occupy a disadvantaged position. Rather, as Nkosi has shown, it can be used to one's advantage as he himself has done and as he portrayed in the character of Cornelius Molapo in *Underground People*. The title of *Underground People* suggests secrecy – of being out of the public eye and therefore not on the surface.

Nkosi's most recent novel *Mandela's Ego* is due for release in 2005 to be published by Kwela Press. The provocative title is suggestive and compels one to speculate that it may be controversial. Nkosi has never been a writer to shy

away from controversial topics. Evidence of this is in his controversial essay "Fiction by Black South Africans" where he commented that most South African writers of that time were preoccupied with writing 'protest' fiction, as discussed in Chapter One. It also leads one to the conclusion that Nkosi has not, over the years and with age, changed the way he writes though he has shifted genres and modified themes with historical context. Nkosi has also not moved away from the position of the outsider figure. He has chosen to remain 'outside' as a writer and also as a South African who was in exile.

Nkosi is now free to live permanently in South Africa, but, although he visits frequently, he chooses to remain outside his country of birth. He is currently living in Switzerland where he is writing his memoirs. The outsider figure has over the years become a part of his identity - one that he obviously finds not disempowering, but rather where he finds his strength.

Nkosi has proven to be one of the most enduring writers of his time. Unlike most other writers of the *Drum* decade who had also been under the pressure of exile, like Can Themba, Casey Motsisi, Bloke Modisane, and Nat Nakasa among others, who died prematurely, and, in some cases tragically, Nkosi is one of the few remaining *Drum* writers who has remained a productive writer. He regularly attends writers' conferences in South Africa and abroad and is also a sought after speaker. Although elements of his life parallel those of the writer and existentialist philosopher, Albert Camus, unlike Camus who also died

at an early age in a car crash when he was at the pinnacle of his career as a writer, Nkosi has flourished in his career as a writer. At the age of sixty eight he has managed to keep active, productive and pertinent in his writing. One is compelled to ask how Nkosi has managed this when other writers of his generation and circumstances seem to have failed. The answer, though inevitably complex, might seem simple enough. Being an outsider figure has given him the advantage of seeing aspects of life from a different perspective which in turn has helped him to hold his head above water even during the most difficult of times. As an outsider figure, he has had to make choices in his life and has stood by those choices. Nkosi has been steadfast in his choices even when he was severely criticised. He has not seen the need to apologise for what he believed in. Instead he has stood firm in his commitment to write well which is reflected in his writing. Nkosi's life as an outsider figure bears testament to the fact that the outsider figure when shaped by the philosophy of existentialism, is of the kind of quality that is lasting despite the hardships that one may be faced with.

As much as aspects of Nkosi's own life are reflected in Ndi Sibiya's early years, it must be remembered that Ndi is still a figment of Nkosi's imagination. Ndi's apparently doomed life could be understood as symbolic of the death of Nkosi's writing career had he remained in South Africa. In *Underground People* Cornelius Molapo's commitment to honesty even at personal cost shows how

the outsider figure can be one that is empowered, just as is reflected in Lewis Nkosi's own trajectory as a writer.

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