

**JOURNEYING BEYOND EMBO:  
THE CONSTRUCTION OF EXILE,  
PLACE AND IDENTITY  
IN THE WRITINGS OF LEWIS NKOSI**

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## **Declaration**

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declare that the dissertation :

**Journeying beyond Embo: the construction of exile, place and  
identity in the writings of Lewis Nkosi**

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, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

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SIGNED

JANUARY 2007

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## Abstract

A boundary is not that at which something stops, but...is that from which something begins its presencing.  
(Bhabha 1994:1)

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For the purpose of this thesis, the above statement will be central, because implicit in it is a particular awareness of what constitutes exile and the exilic experience, both variously defined boundaries within which to view the historicity of the exiled subject. Bhabha's statement prompts one to reflect on the multi-faceted marginalised situation faced by the exiled subject.

It can be argued that Lewis Nkosi, a black exiled South African writer, has remained a largely under-researched writer, particularly in South Africa. His works have not been as widely researched possibly as those of his contemporaries, despite his local and international profile and reputation as an astute scholar and writer, for various reasons which this thesis will explore. His writings and extensive commentaries on African and world literature certainly merit research, particularly in respect of his construction of place and identity. He has been influential in South African letters and frequently cited - however, his years outside the country have led to his neglect within South Africa. This thesis hopes to go some way towards recovering Lewis Nkosi as writer and scholar, particularly in terms of his construction of identity, both within South Africa and as exile.

This thesis will examine representative texts by this writer, using perspectives of theorists such as Fanon (1986), Bhabha (1994), Said (1983) and Quayson (2002) among other writers who particularly discuss notions of space and place from a post colonial perspective. Reference to Nkosi's own history as well as his non-fictional writing will be seen as relevant in defining what 'home' and 'exile' have meant to Nkosi and how a construction of 'place' enhances the sense of identity. The question to be considered is: how, through his writing - both non-fiction and fiction - does Nkosi construct identity through place, how, in other words, has he pushed back boundaries as an exile writer? Here the impact that place has on our understanding of who we are will be explored.

This thesis will investigate then the development, perception and experience of place and identity in the works of this writer. Nkosi's somewhat nomadic lifestyle in exile makes him an interesting case: the exposure to American and European culture he enjoyed as a writer in exile has not been

the norm for most black South African writers. Nkosi's concept of place and identity will be analysed as they developed first in his early journalism days of *Ilanga lase Natal* and *Drum*, and subsequently in his primary works of critical essays and later fiction. Nkosi's act of writing is also the place where identity and memory meet, and this study will refer to early literary essays contained in his literary works *Home and Exile* (1965), *The Transplanted Heart* (1975) and *Tasks and Masks* (1981). A reading of these works together with his many earlier articles and reviews as well as his latest novels and dramas, will show the ways in which this writer self-consciously participates in the construction of place and identity, how he explores, through his writing, his sense of place and his identity as a South African exile, and how his perceptions may have changed during his long career as writer. As Nkosi affirms: "all of those are *strands* of memory about place and it automatically gets into your writing, because I think, it is both the terrain of consciousness and the orientation to reality" (Lombardozi 2003:331).

This dissertation will focus then, on the construction of home, identity and exile in Nkosi's discourse, written over nearly five decades of South Africa's turbulent history, a period during which all these terms were contested sites. Theories of place and identity are inevitably made more complex by the condition of exile, as place and identity are immutably concatenated, so that what is said about place must also include the construction of identity. In this regard theorists on exile such as Grant (1979), Gurr (1981), Seidel (1986), Robinson (1994) and Whitehouse (2000) will be examined, and theorists such as Carney (1969), Fanon (1986), Owomoyela (1996) and Walter (2003) on the issue of identity will be considered.

The thesis will therefore position Nkosi in terms of his generation of exile writers, and how this has impacted on his construction of identity, and will to this end, explore interconnected issues surrounding home, identity and exile.

## Introduction

I am an African...

I am the grandchild of the warrior men and women who entered Sekukuneland, patriots that Cetswayo and Mphepu took to battle, the soldiers Moshoeshoe and Ngungunyane taught never to dishonour the cause of freedom ... I am the child of Nongqawuse ... and being part of all these people, and in the knowledge that none dares contest that assertion

I shall claim that I am an African

Today

It feels good to be an African. (part of the inaugural speech given by President Thabo Mbeki 1999)

South Africa's colonial history has been the subject of much ongoing debate and analysis by many scholars and critics alike. In this country the colonial reality was a nexus for monopolised power which, particularly for the black African, all too often resulted in hollow promises and broken dreams. The 60s and 70s were periods of deep racial antagonism, a time marked with intense anger and frustration, the struggle against the menace of apartheid dominating almost every aspect of black (and white) existence. Almost certainly there was no more compelling cause of racial antagonism between black and white than the manner in which largely unjust laws were inflicted on the black communities, and in the manner in which black identity and culture was trampled on by the white hegemony. The narrow interests of apartheid prevailed over social, political and demographical dynamics, with scant regard given to the common history, language and culture of the black South African citizen, resulting in the exile of many South Africans across the colour spectrum.

It was essentially these tensions and conflicts between black and white which contributed much raw material for the emergence of a powerful body of African literature, notably by exiled writers who sought through their writing, to mobilise against the harsh indignities of colonial oppression beginning to manifest through treason trials, banning and gagging orders and enforced removals. These writers, despite attempts at their repression, actively and purposefully used literature to represent the political revolution, albeit in fictional terms. As far as black voices were concerned, much had already gone underground in an attempt to evade and survive apartheid's determined onslaught on black creativity, as writing was the only vehicle through which the African intelligentsia could attempt to make sense of their past, survive the present and so draw a map for

the literary and political journey ahead. Their birthright to identify themselves and be accepted as South Africans having been denied them, they adopted an identity which was in essence dialogic; protest literature and protest actions became the focal point of resistance against the repression of apartheid. In South African literature, themes of exile and displacement began to replicate the South African realities.

Lewis Nkosi, like many of his contemporaries, was alienated from his country of birth at an early age by the apartheid rule, and his often cynical voice may perhaps be attributed to his experiences of apartheid and its concomitant extreme social and cultural deprivation. His exile in many ways can be regarded as the catalyst for redefining himself and the purpose of his art, and thus his early writing functioned as a sounding board to examine the complexities of black lives in South Africa. His writing fiercely opposed the ideology of division and distrust, to this end introducing many different frames of reference to African literature as art form. Nkosi was resolute in his quest to promote and encourage African literature and raise renewed awareness for all things African throughout his peripatetic writing career:

The brutal emptiness from whence issue our works of art is only partially filled by novels written in other countries, by plays created out of other people's lives, and by love songs fashioned out in Europe and America. We live on a substitute culture borrowed from other lands. (Nkosi 1983:126)

Finding his own voice in writing liberated Nkosi from the fetters of his marginalised history, providing him with an understanding of his world as process and transformation.

Against this background the sounding elements of this thesis, these being identity, home and exile, are explored in the main through the considerable varied *oeuvre* of this exiled writer, a South African writer native to KwaZulu-Natal, a black writer who has remained unafraid and unparochial throughout, and who, in many extraordinary ways, has remained atypical of his generation of exile writers, both in South Africa and abroad. The perception of place, identity and exile as manifested in his writings, viewed from both a postcolonial perspective, and the ambiguous ways in which this writer expresses and explores the loss of his country and his pride and longing of his South African identity as supported by his writing, are relevant to this study.

Nkosi's literary peregrinations across Africa and abroad are informed throughout by the landscapes of his imagination and memory, encapsulating the sum total of his experiences rooted primarily in a racially and politically divided South Africa, and secondly in the countries of his exile. Nkosi

departed dramatically from South Africa as a young journalist and aspiring writer to emerge marked but undaunted as a mature and erudite writer. Nkosi continues to define his experiences of exile, place and identity through his writing. In particular his fiction is clearly underpinned and shaped by experiences of displacement and loss.

Nkosi's critical reviews and literary contributions reflect not only a personal engagement with division and loss, but engage with the complexities common to all troubled societies living a life under segregation. His polemics seek to expose the politics of literature through argument and debate and in doing so, his writing creates new ways of seeing. His often acerbic, dissonant yet principled voice has enriched the *nous* of black literature, both locally and internationally, with his sharp creativity and skilled craftsmanship with words:

In all his critical writing, judicious and far sighted as it mainly is, Nkosi remains a unique and candid personality - never adopting the grey cloak of academic objectivity. He is always open, if often controversial and sometimes pugnacious ... he speaks with the authority of both great knowledge of and full commitment to his subject - he *involves* his reader, demanding (always) a thoughtful response, whether one agrees or disagrees with the point/s he articulates.

(Gagiano in Stiebel and Gunner 2005:5)

His voice reaches into the future and attempts throughout to guide other African writers in a time of transition and transformation, through the relevance of his thoughts and his inspired advice on black writing. His range as writer and critic is broad, perhaps sometimes even disparate, but ultimately forms a cohesive vision centring on intellectual emancipation. Nkosi's experiences as an exiled writer speak for all marginalised Africans and in his writing he encourages black writers to reconnect with their roots through an understanding of their literature: "What we clearly need in South Africa is a vocabulary which bears witness to our variousness as a people, but which may also do more, securing us as an individuality, a sense of repose in our completeness as a nation" (Nkosi 1983:127).

Exile in many ways enabled Nkosi to realise his potential as a writer, a creative energy which perhaps would have been lost to the literary world had he remained here to become just another apartheid casualty in South Africa. There are other South African exiled writers, irrespective of race, such as Breyten Breytenbach, Es'kia Mphahlele and Perseus Adams, who speak for the exiled writer when they attest to their exile experiences as not being altogether a punishment, but rather, experienced it as a spiritual boon. Adams, much like Nkosi, reflects in retrospect that:

the experience [of exile] was giving me a deeper insight into the suffering of black and brown people in South Africa ... it also added to my understanding, my appreciation of what other exiles were going through ... besides, loneliness and isolation were not new to me. In South Africa - where your skin is your uniform - I often felt more of an exile, more of an outsider, than I do here. (Adams 1984: 265)

Cope, in a discussion on writers and literature, however, warns against exile being “overestimated as a crucial factor. Writers, like anyone else, take with them, wherever they go or stay put, their own impedimenta of talents, gifts, faults and defects” (Cope 1984:270). Hence, although the imposition of exile is not without negative implications, and although environmental and social influences are often the impelling forces which motivate writing, exile *per se* need not altogether indicate or imply negativity in the psyche of the writer. Indeed, a condition of loss and deprivation can conversely liberate the creative spirit which in turn often contributes to profound perceptions which might never otherwise have come to the fore. Nkosi’s exile is testimony to this, as his experiences, local and abroad, have ultimately manifested as a creative literary testimony of the universal human condition, particularly evinced through his novels and plays. Despite having lived his life in a highly politicised space, his writing has never had as its primary intention political sloganeering. Rather, he has carefully nurtured language and writing into an artistic social expression, believing that “language must be inhabited, it must be enlarged by usage”(Nkosi 1983:126).

For no other reason than being a black person, Nkosi was denied a cultural space during his formative years in the broader South African community. ‘Home’ to Nkosi was the townships, which he asserts, were created particularly for people like himself; townships were places created not for those who did not have to *live* there, but for those who were *displaced* there. Space as home-place, particularly for Nkosi is conceptualised in the imagination, and exists alongside time and culture, necessitating a historical process and a historical subject to give it shape. Despite being a perceptual product of an abstract notion, to Nkosi place and space is always more than just the material or the tangible. During a recent discussion Nkosi explained that he perceived the notion ‘place’ as defining a cultural area, created initially by a community through oral traditions and songs *about* that particular space or environment, so that place does not exist until then. For example, Sophiatown, according to Nkosi, only came into existence as imaginative place “when the inhabitants began to write and compose about this place” (Lombardozzi in conversation with Lewis Nkosi 2004). Hence place and space are cardinal to Nkosi’s fiction as the setting dictates the narrative and provides the characters with a place and a history. Underpinning the geography of place in Nkosi’s fiction are also the symbolic exploratory journeys of exile and a search for identity

and belonging, concerns irrevocably linked to place and uppermost in the consciousness of the displaced exile.

Although sharing a parallel background with some of his exiled contemporaries, Nkosi has steadfastly remained the 'outsider' and is unlike his generation of writers in many respects. Like most African people living in South Africa during the apartheid years, Nkosi was forced into a separatist racial divide filled with the mediocrities and squalor of slum life. He was astute in recognising the encroaching and restrictive apartheid system as a serious impediment to conscious recognition and acceptance. Thus armed with little else other than ambition and clinging stubbornly to the belief of the possibilities of an alternative and improved lifestyle, he embraced his life of exile much like the intrepid adventurers of the English classics he so avidly read as a young boy, more broadly discussed in Chapter Two.

In the act of taking refuge in the realms of the printed word and intellectual pursuits, Nkosi's exile enabled him, to a certain extent, to escape the many violations of human freedom he had become accustomed to under apartheid. Literature provided Nkosi with an on-going education in the English language, the fluent acquisition thereof which was to provide him with a celebrated academic and literary career. Writing also enabled Nkosi more easily to assimilate various influences; his 'home' in letters furnished him with a secure and privileged space within which he was afforded the freedom to create a broad range of literary disciplines, ranging from critical essays to partly biographical fiction. His writing is never insular nor parochial, even if undertaken from an international stage. Nkosi is a writer who has, throughout his writing career, constantly urged other writers to strive to define and respond to societal challenges through literature in support of a continent critically engaged in reclaiming its African identity:

Rather than censor our thoughts as writers, we should consider creating undaunted, believing that the future generations are going to be the true judges ... because literature records, replays and inspires an on-going process. As an act of language that renews and revitalises, it is a vehicle of thought and feeling that should increase by reliving experiences; literature is forever stirring us up. It is its own revolution. (Mphahlele 1999:133)

Still writing today, Nkosi exercises, "potentially what Bakhtin calls an 'exotopy', a vision from the outside through which he or she can see what those on the inside (at home) cannot" (Weiss 1992:12). Exile has provided Nkosi with both significant creative opportunities and an individual clarity of voice, and as the ensuing chapters of this thesis will show, he has certainly progressed



immensely since the days of being, according to Casey Motsisi, the “angriest Angry Young Man, who, refused a passport, but being a great lover of knowledge, decided to leave us to struggle on for good” (Motsisi 1963:14).

Drawing on the above generally summarised points, the thesis will proceed with Chapter One which has as its central concerns the condition of exile and the various theories which underpin the construction of home and identity in the writing of Nkosi. Chapter One will also look at the way exile has problematised Nkosi’s sense of home and emplacement, as it is important to recognise that a particular sense of place may also negatively affect the filiation and affiliation process. The character and differences of both authentic and fictionalised place and space, significant as they are linked to personal feelings and experience, will be discussed in terms of Nkosi’s sense of belonging and his construction of identity. Issues of identity and place are complex, therefore this chapter will draw on a range of theoretical debates, creating a theoretical framework which will serve to support the examination of the various issues in the subsequent chapters. Identity in this chapter will be considered as primarily the conceptualisation of the self, a complex notion at best since the self, a unique *Gestalt* greatly influenced by societal expectations, can be defined in many different ways. Theorists who discuss the notions of exile, place and identity, for example Lapping (1969), Noyes (1981), Robinson (1994), Urry (1995) and Morley (1995) and writers who contribute to this research are relevant. The applicability of postcolonial theory in terms of the exploration of issues surrounding colonisation, exile and identity is also relevant to this research.

Chapter Two situates Nkosi in terms of South African politics and also sets out the multitude of biographical details of this writer, positioning Nkosi and his writing in a particular historical context from which to consider the construction of place and identity in his writing. This detailed biographical sketch serves as a useful historical reference and provides an extensive background to the contents of the thesis as a whole. A time line is also provided tracing his trajectory across the globe since his exile, from South Africa to the USA, London, Zambia, Warsaw, USA and returning to his current ‘home’, Basel in Switzerland.

Chapter Three investigates Nkosi’s non-fiction writing as an academic and critic. This chapter provides a discursive debate on his collection of essays, literary criticism and other non-fiction writing, as well as his role and position, viewed from a postcolonial perspective. This chapter considers how Nkosi has situated himself in terms of other South African black writers and how this impacts on his construction of identity. His non-fiction writing, an admixture of political and aesthetic persuasion, is the product of a sustained research on literary discourse and his work is

characterised by attempts to deconstruct the myths of black writing and to achieve an African world view which is holistic.

Chapter Four focuses on Nkosi's novels and short stories in terms of his fictionalised landscapes, the use of symbolism and the influences of modernist writers in his construction of home and identity. This chapter will consider how Nkosi in particular, relates to South Africa - his construction of place will be illustrated through an analysis of his fictional writings. One cannot hope to understand Nkosi without a consideration of his novels, as memories of home play a cardinal role in the novels of this writer. His characters not only reflect his own history, but also the institutions of the Zulu people as a nation. Significantly, and despite being a long-term expatriate, the focus of his novels remains on historical apartheid themes. They are exclusively set in a South African milieu, although they were all written abroad. Despite his globalised exile - having been exposed to a diversity of other countries, literatures, cultures and languages - his novels strongly suggest that he has to a great degree retained his South African social and cultural characteristics, despite his desire to be cosmopolitan in his early years, finding catharsis in aggressive intellectual and literary pursuits and confrontations.

Chapter Five addresses aspects of his plays and his small poetic oeuvre, and what these reveal of the writer's sense of place and identity. It is interesting to note that Nkosi's plays *The Black Psychiatrist* and "Flying Home", incongruously and perversely, are set in London, whilst most of his other works have all had their contents rooted in a South African context. The inclusion of his poetry portrays a dimension of Nkosi not previously widely known. These poems were recently published collectively in *Still Beating the Drum* (2005), a book of critical perspectives on Nkosi.

Chapter Six concludes this thesis with a discussion of Nkosi's current work and the future direction he is likely to take now that the political dispensation in South Africa has changed the face of this country. Given the fact that he has received little recognition in South Africa as a native son and writer, perhaps this thesis will also to some extent serve to illustrate the relevance and importance of Nkosi as a *South African* writer. Nkosi is arguably one of the most versatile black South African writers whose opus encompasses several literary genres including the novel as fictionalised autobiography, the short story, the essay, drama, academic literary criticism, film and radio texts, journal articles and poetry. Always writing from double borders created by the spaces between continents and straddling two worlds, that of the dispossessed exile and the lettered world of academia, Nkosi has nevertheless shown a deep concern for South African literature and South African writers, whom he firmly believes "must continue to be the unsilenced voice ... a great deal

of my function, both as living embodiment of my culture and as creative artist abroad, must be to preserve for the world the memory of those I left behind in South Africa” (Nkosi 1983:95). Lewis Nkosi, as a writer and as an individual, remains enigmatic at best, but what will become unmistakably clear through this thesis is that:

his is a voice that has been critical and criticised; it has not always been an easy one to listen to, but the fact that it has endured and continues to speak gives the literary critic ample scope for a timely consideration of what he has had to say to us collectively. (Stiebel and Gunner 2005:Preface)

## Chapter 1

### Theorising exile, home and identity

You can't know somebody ... until you've followed him home.

(Kingsolver 2004:231)

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This chapter will serve to introduce the primary concerns of this thesis, these being the development of identity within the artificially imposed, and often provocative, definitions of exile, spatial discourse and identity, and the effects of these sounding elements on the writings of Lewis Nkosi. These issues will be positioned within a particular historical system of governance in South Africa, that of apartheid, and viewed against a discourse of postcolonial theory. A brief exegesis of postcolonial theory is provided as a frame of reference and centrally to illustrate its relevancy in terms of the concerns of this thesis. Issues of exile and identity are firmly rooted in the key concepts of colonial discourse, these being displacement and marginalisation, abject markers of authority historically challenged by the subaltern voice.

Postcolonial theory rests on four disparate European traditions of thought, namely Marxist theories, feminism, post-structuralist thinking and psychoanalysis, describing a state of being, defined by "its place in the passage of epochal history, and a critical orientation towards the reading of the past, not least of its textual traces" (Goldberg 2002:5). This theory and its many discursive frames grew out of literary studies as a discourse committed to a critique favouring a post-structuralist and cultural perspective. Postcolonial theory bases its argument primarily on literary works which have as concerns the binary relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, and for this reason is central to the discussion of exile, place and identity. As Walder correctly points out, the label 'postcolonial' is at best obfuscating, however, it is useful to this thesis, as these theories, functioning as indicators of historical and cultural change, create a deeper awareness of these changes. Viewing issues of exile, identity and home through the lens of postcolonial thinking are important to this thesis, as these theories, by their very nature, will assist in raising important questions on issues of exile and identity. Implicit in these theories is the assumption that "what we are talking about has to do with large-scale historical phenomena, phenomena involving shifting power relationships between different parts of the world as well as between people within particular territories" (Walder 1998:3).

Exile is not new to South African literature. Issues of exile and home have shaped much of the content of the literary works by many of these writers, including Lewis Nkosi, Bessie Head, Es'kia

Mphahlele, Arthur Nortje and Breyten Breytenbach amongst others. In this respect postcolonial theory, which has historically through various foci regarded exile as a mode of transition, is well suited to the analysis of the experiences and representation of the exile in transit. Postcolonial theory as a discourse predicated on difference, views the writer in exile as being disconnected from his roots, and hence draws heavily on the processes of displacement and dispossession. These various perspectives have particular relevance to this study on Lewis Nkosi, a South African exile for most of his life, a life lived in a black skin inscribed with the well-known words of Fanon, "o my body, make of me always a man who questions" (Fanon 1986:232).

Although the scope of this study cannot hope to provide a full investigation into all complexities of exile, spatial discourse and identity, it will however address the key perspectives relevant to these concepts through a brief discussion of postcolonial theorists and especially thereafter their applicability to Lewis Nkosi and his writing. These issues are set against the wider debate within postcolonial theory with marginality as the basis of identity and place politics. Postcolonial thinking in particular will be a useful hybrid discourse to examine the ways in which Lewis Nkosi self-consciously participates in the construction of place and identity and how these constructions are evident in his academic essays and works of fiction, all written from a position of exile. For the erstwhile colonised exile, the search for identity and the construction of a 'home' amounts to the same thing - typically, home is "set in the past, in the memories of childhood and home, which is the only basis for a sense of identity which the exile can maintain" (Gurr 1981:11). This observation is strongly supported by Nkosi's most recent novel, *Mandela's Ego* (2006), which is set in the past memories of Nkosi's rural childhood. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, Nkosi was born into a class defined by political marginalisation and chronic poverty; he grew up in a country where the ruling voice was white and racist; and as a young man he could enjoy the privileges of assimilation only by virtue of his position as a journalist. He was forced into exile in 1960 when he accepted the Nieman Fellowship to study at Harvard, and left South Africa the same year, having forced the Government to provide him with an exit permit by signing the required undertaking never to return. Exile provided Nkosi with a mask behind which he could undertake the rebuilding of a new life, with very little in the way of positive signposts or markers as to what 'home' should be, only that, at the heart of home lies almost "the mystical need to belong, and only you know the way" (Gready 1994:510); thus for Nkosi the concept of 'home' as discussed in Gready, becomes an ambivalent and confused space or home-place: home is most importantly a function of place. "There is no place like home: there is no home like place. Home is fixed in time ... and a time set in place, and yet it dissolves and evolves, acquires the accretions of other times and of other places" (510).

Hence it is not surprising that Nkosi sought to remake his 'home' through writing and language, a space and place in which he was free to construct 'home' to be anything he wanted it to be. Similarly, and possibly for the same reason, Miriam Makeba chose the concert stage as her home-place, because "this is the one place where I am most at home and where there is no exile" (Makeba 1988:230). Exile may wear many masks, and it is sometimes difficult to find an appropriate mask for Nkosi, as he has never indicated that he embraced exile as an identity even if he at times assumes the position of the self-alienated artist, the exile by choice, the traveller, the internal emigre, the victim of enforced expulsion, and the expatriate. Perhaps Christopher Hope's qualification of a so-called exile identity may remove the need for any mask:

of course questions arise when you come to settle in that 'elsewhere' and yet continue to look homeward in your writing ... exile is a status so brutally forced upon many who do not want it that it seems wrong to use it, and voluntary exile is a contradiction in terms ... well then, retaining as I do that early inbred passion for classification of my native land, I search until I find a name that fits: I am an escapee. I have gone over the wall, and mine is a view from the hills. (Hope 1984:285)

Whatever else exile may have provided or have meant to Nkosi, one certainty is that exile provided him with a strategic retreat; being initially ambivalent about his departure, exile conversely legitimised his decision to sever his ties with South Africa. It also conferred upon him the ability, much like a chameleon, to adapt by developing a multicultural identity by which to protect himself from other South Africans and the expected racial slurs against a black skin:

The notion of exile was not constructed in Johannesburg or Cape Town ... it was done here. London was the place ... in the early 60s ... there were those South Africans who had been involved in the liberation politics and had come here because they had nowhere else to go ... they also came here because England was a place they got jobs ... there were those who had no politics but who had come here to improve their own personal situation ... these groups meet here and it is they who meet and form a kind of little exile community who define themselves as exiles and who theorise out the conditions of exile. (Israel 1999:142)

Israel points out that not all exiles were automatically welcomed into the exile community abroad as national heroes - there were many hostilities against South African exiles by other exiled groups and dissidents: "I mean it was terrible ... it's a very incestuous thing this South African exile thing ... the word had come out amongst some people that we were deserters, we were traitors ... there were some people that did not actually talk to us ..." (Israel 1999:149). Returned exiles who would talk to me about their exile in the terms of this thesis concur wholly with many of the issues raised

by Israel and other writers on the fragmentary nature of the condition of exile. Both Parker (1993) and Israel (1999) credit Nkosi with playing an important role in 'popularising', if you will, the notion of exile in 1965, as he had created an epistemology on displacement that distinguished between the bipolar opposites, 'home' and 'exile', particularly in his essays on exile in *Home and Exile* (1983). In these early pieces Nkosi expressed his onerous position as an exile abroad, and was passionately concerned about expressing his solidarity with the oppressed in addressing the problems of South African writing through his writing. Further aspects of Nkosi's life will more fully be discussed later in this chapter, in the biographical sketch provided in Chapter Two and his non-fictional writing in Chapter Three.

Nothing is perhaps more disparate in intellectual life today than the concept of exile and its related nuances, and much has been written on the subject of exile, a primordial theme with its roots entrenched in biblical history as far back as the fourth century BC. Much of the early influential literature was composed under conditions of incarceration and involuntary exile; the Bible itself has as its origins varying themes of exile. In early Greek and Roman history exile was reserved for influential members of public importance; lesser mortals, in particular writers, were simply deprived of their pensions. In its many different forms, exile, a punishment largely imposed by society through geographical displacement and cultural marginalisation, has been a recurrent human experience, with many differing and contested definitions. As many of these experiences have been expressed in and through writing, it is then pertinent to examine the ways in which exile has been articulated and transformed in the writings of exiled writers. There is a plethora of different kinds of literary exile scattered across the pages of world history, from Plato to Dante, Neruda to Beckett and many others, including African, postcolonial and South African writers, giving rise to a body of writing which tends to support the position, that in spite of any personal or political trauma, these writers have, to a greater or lesser degree, gained imaginative sustenance from exile.

The twentieth century had more so than any other period in history, documented an enormous exodus of displaced people. Many people around the globe have fled their homelands often due to factors such as ongoing global disequilibrium, political conflicts and social disintegration, making exile and homelessness today, whether elective or imposed, a common experience. The experience of modern exile involves not only enforced dispossession, but also:

a spatial and psychological deracination of place, language, identity, tradition, ethos and world view, and resistance to these forms of (neo)colonial subalternisation. This displacement seen as an ongoing process of transnational and transcultural selective adaptation ... and destabilises the notion of clear-cut borders. (Walter 2003:23)

However, despite exile as global displacement, every exiled subject, bound to a particular place and time, or a particular memory of place and time, experiences exile as unique and idiosyncratic, exile is never a uniform experience, hence making an equitable definition of exile almost impossible. The experience of exile has innumerable variations, as it is not one but many things. For some, exile is "an identity, an honourable status; for others it is a censure, representing disloyalty; it may also be a classification, a bureaucratic means of handling people which may have any number of anticipated and unanticipated consequences" (Israel 1999:7). What is abundantly clear, particularly in terms of Nkosi's exile, is that exile is a condition of absence that cannot be filled:

either by returning home or to a former identity, manner of perception or ways of thinking ... there can be no true return for the colonial in the metropolis ... the colonial is a product of revolution, and this revolution takes place in the mind. For the exile a similar revolution of the mind must take place to unify the self and construct a sense of society and home. This involves a new way of seeing. (Weiss 1992:91)

Exile as a multifaceted concept hence requires a radical redefinition, re-interpretation and modification as a term for dislocation, as it has moved away from a strictly political definition to include a wider cultural and economically driven displacement. Exile is not only a division between the self and others, but is also a manner of perception from the margins of another world. As Nkosi also observes, modern exile is not exclusively confined to "the massive displacement of peoples from their homelands, but can also be located in the specific forms of silencing opposition without expulsion" (Nkosi 1994e :5). Nkosi is referring here to a form of exile that was imposed through the gagging orders under the Suppression of Communism Act in South Africa, hence exile as a history of spatial displacement is often driven and enforced by political forms of power. Defining the term 'exile' in terms of postcolonial concerns has remained a complex and important intellectual debate for theorists, particularly due to the multiple and variegated evolution of this ambivalent term, as no two writers or intellectuals think of exile in the same way. Perhaps Stephen Slemon's modalities of the terms 'colonial' and 'postcolonialism' in his essay 'The Scramble for Post-Colonialism' (1995) can serve to refine the term 'exile' and the exilic experience in describing exile as:



a name for a condition of nativist longing in post dependence national groupings, as a cultural marker of non-residency for a third world intellectual cadre, as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power, as an oppositional form of reading practice and ... as the name for a category of literary activity. (Slemon 1994: 158)

Generally, theories often tend to oversimplify exile and sometimes succeed in portraying the defining characteristics as unproblematised and idealised elements, but the emotional condition of exile underpinned by physical and symbolic violence and despair, can never be adequately addressed by theories. Postcolonial theories often fail adequately to include the cruel realities which inscribe the concept of exile and the rhetoric of exit, displacement and return - the many expressions of this state of being encapsulated in attenuated labelling: separation, expatriation, banishment, deportation, eviction, disruption, acculturation, integration and estrangement being a few. Suleiman cogently summarises exile as: "in its narrow sense a political banishment, exile in its broad sense designates every kind of estrangement, from the physical and the geographical to the spiritual" (Suleiman 1998: 3).

The ultimate purpose of exile is to prevent any further vitiation of the dominant regime; the subordinate is disarticulated from all that constitutes home and is hence deemed suitably chastised. Implicit in this dislocation is also the preclusion of any future re-connection with the familiar. Ironically and conversely, Lewis Nkosi's 'exile' almost did not happen, as the government of the day "refused to give me a passport ... and I became quite reconciled with the idea that I was not going to leave" (Lombardozi 2003:325). Nkosi was in fact refused a passport to leave the country by the government, because "my sin apparently was only to write against the government, but I was not a political activist in the sense that I recognised that term" (Nkosi 1994:5). It was mostly due to the efforts of his friend, activist lawyer Harold Wolpe, that he succeeded in actually leaving the country, by invoking the Departure From The Union of South Africa Regulatory Act of 1955. Nkosi explains that:

it would have taken the Government changing the law by introducing a bill in Parliament - you know - for just one person who was not even an activist - except *writing* against apartheid - so in the end they decided that it was not worth it - give him the papers, but let him fuck off. And what you do is sign this piece of paper saying you agree you are not going to come back ... ever. (Lombardozi 2003: 325)

However, exile as the ultimate condition of loss, despite its disadvantages, curiously also often forges a new self-awareness and a new political consciousness. "The solidarity wrested from

strategic separatism often leads to political activism and challenges social attitudes" (Goldberg 2002:245). This realisation lies at the heart of Nkosi's work, which he uses as a lens retrospectively and almost exclusively focused on his continent of memory, the alienated home culture. The act of writing is for Nkosi a critical process; a cathartic experience in which he is able to confront his South African realities and through his literature, seeks to re-generate the self through reinventing and recreating a sense of a place called 'home.' Nkosi, as exile, discovered through his writing that a place existed which:

is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing. If there is a somewhere that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where it writes itself, where it dreams, where it invents new worlds. (Goldberg 2002:184)

Thus Nkosi has not only remained in touch with his former society through his writing, but he has realised that in order to maintain a sharp focus on matters closest to his interest, he also needed to maintain the necessary distance from his homeland and other exiles. This is primarily because of the often neglected aspect of exile mentioned earlier in this chapter, that exile communities in their own right "can be savagely self-destructive environments, unstable, riven with insecurity, suspicion, guilt, bitter rivalries and impotent anger, thus rendering the concept of home a fragile and precious resource, fought over all the more fiercely for being so" (Gready 1994:511).

Collapsing a memory of space and time into particular structures of being, Berman suggests that the condition of exile is also a condition of modernity, reaching out across all human categories of place, belief systems and race. Modern man, as suggested by this idea of modernity, is in a perpetual state of transit, and it can be said that writers in exile produce a hybrid form of 'travel' writing. (Berman 1988:94). To this end Steven Clark believes that this form of writing projects a particular world view, and it is "the ethics of inhabiting that alternative domains" that are primarily at stake. It would seem that postcolonial studies have drawn on this particular hybrid form of documentation and uphold it as a form of "an exemplary record of cross-cultural encounters" (Clark 1999:3) between the modern writer and the global community. To this view Urry adds his belief that "modern systems generate quite novel forms of experience ... rapid forms of mobility have radical effects on how people actually *experience* the modern world, indeed on the very production of subjectivity" (Urry 1995:144). Urry also argues that the key aspect of mobility is that it aids the acculturation process, in that people are able through their visual consumption of place, a vision loaded with complicated memories and meanings, to evaluate their environment, both in historic and geographic terms, which in turn sharpens their awareness of their social conditions of existence.

This awareness is more than evident in Nkosi's novels, where the characters are deeply receptive to their cultural, social and historical rootedness in their environment, and the effect this appropriation exerts on the formation of their social identities.

Edward Said maintains that to be displaced always implies "being a consciousness set apart from and unequal with its surroundings" (Said 1989:157). This is an interesting observation also in terms of Nkosi's mobile intellect as a critical process, evident in his writing, in that he maintains a peculiar detachment from his immediate surroundings, mostly assuming the role of the observer rather than the resident, as his fiction is never about his immediate geopolitics, but largely draws upon the archives and memories of the home culture. Memory and recollection are in themselves interactive social acts, and together with the impulse of creating a new identity, may have therapeutic connotations. Nkosi seldom responds to the harsher and more abrasive aspects of his personal experience of exile, electing to eschew these in favour of displacing these sentiments onto some of his fictional characters. See for instance Nkosi's novel *Underground People* (2002), in which one of the main characters, Anthony Ferguson, gives voice to similar sentiments Nkosi himself has stated during interviews on his return to South Africa. At the same time though, his writing draws on and remains reliant upon imagery instilled through colonial influence, inscribing this ideology onto the formation of his identity through enforced exile. This is possibly explained using Lacan's notion that the displaced subject can never realise the dream of possession, as exile is always a disempowering state of being-in-the-world, most often fraught with poverty, limitations and obstructive pressures. Andrew Gurr offers an extensive polemic on the degrees of exile and the nature of the exiled identity. What is noteworthy about his discourse are not the similarities with other exile literature, but that his discussion clearly shows what an exiled writer such as Nkosi does *not* have in common with his South African contemporaries. Although Nkosi, when compared to other South African exiles, was not the norm, he does however share many commonalities and attributes with exiles such as V.S. Naipaul, James Joyce, Chinua Achebe, Nuruddin Farah and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who were all similarly displaced from their home environments, and who all have in common a particular identity: that of the writer. These writers all began their exiled lives as young adults, and created a sense of their own identity by making their 'home' in their literature and fiction. Gurr develops this notion further, which is also a notion valid for Nkosi:

the creative exiles, those born in the *Gemeinschaft* [close-knit communities] and educated for the *Gesellschaft* [large individualistic societies] are a distinctive type of modern writer, who tend to write realistic prose fiction ... his concerns tend to be primarily social and only secondarily philosophical and cultural ... the sense of elite art ... and producing a body of work which essentially belongs, not to the metropolis, but to the country he was exiled from. (Gurr 1981:8)

Gurr's conclusion is evidenced in the writing of *Nkosi*, where the theme of exile not only touches on the personal and the cultural, but also on the process of artistic creation. His writing is hence not intrinsically preoccupied with cross-cultural narratives of encounter or simply about the exile who speaks through the texts detailing relations of domination and marginalisation. Although the *leitmotif* in his fiction is displacement, and the society he creates imaginatively in his fiction is a re-enactment of the values and conditions that were in place in the original order from which he was exiled, the purpose of his critical essays or fiction is much more than the sum of its colonial import. Clark expands on this more broadly, when he explains that certain writing genres overlap with numerous other discourses of colonialism. He mentions discourses such as bureaucratic instruction and journalistic propaganda, amongst others, but more importantly states that a journey itself will "encode inevitable ideological aspects, and is often a self-reflective pilgrimage, resonating with the writer's own culture. Narratives of exile do not preclude the experiences of curiosity and even pleasure, in the new circumstances" (Clark 1999:3). It is also possible that, even though the exiled writer may construct a journey in order to uncover or rediscover the self, it also can "suspend or even repudiate" the authority of home (Clark 1999:5). *Nkosi*, writing from an exiled position, provides one of the main archives for investigating the colonising processes, as it "reveals transactions of cultural and political power, a power supposedly always purchased at the expense of those imagined others who constitute the zone called elsewhere" (Clark 1999:33). Pursuing this argument, Brian Musgrove observes that movement represents a critical moment for the identity of the mobile subject, and their writing always "supplements the insufficient act of witnessing with epistemological reflection; a process which exposes fundamental morbidities in the ideologies of 'movement' and 'settlement'" (Clark 1999:31). Said maintains that:

the double perspective of the exile who sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, is preferable to positing an interminable reiteration of the archive ... you are always going to be marginal, and that what you do as an intellectual has to be made up because you cannot follow a prescribed path. If you can experience that fate not as a deprivation ... but as a sort of freedom, a process of discovery in which you do things according to your own dictates: that is a unique pleasure. (Said 1994: 46)

What has been omitted by Said here, is that the writing of displaced persons inevitably depict situations in which the stability of the self is often challenged. Theirs is an often ambivalent and disorientating world, because they are confronted with having to integrate new experiences set in extreme geographical and cultural differences. Exile creates a double perspective in that the exile is the outsider in the new home culture yet must live intimately with it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example *Nkosi*'s arrival in, and experiencing of, New York in *Home and Exile* (1983:53-79).

This line of thought will be further pursued in the next chapter which will look at Nkosi's experience as exile more closely. It is noticeable that most often, although the circumstances and ways in which individuals devolve into exiles may differ widely, the problems of displacement and challenges are often the same.

Although there is little intimation of victimhood in his writings, Nkosi's presentation of exile in his works lends itself to a postcolonial critique. Exile in Nkosi's writing can be read as a refusal of the coloniser, but at the same time reflecting a sense of melancholy. This sense of nostalgia both stems from the separation from home in the pursuit of personal freedom, and being faced with an unfamiliar culture. Viewed from a postcolonial stance, the site of the exiled subject is a rite of passage; the condition of exile is a discourse configured primarily around distress and a disintegration of value and sense, the writing being a particular configuration of this knowledge and experience. This distress and bewilderment is expressed through the character of Anthony Ferguson in *Underground People* (2002) on his return to South Africa after a lengthy absence. "He had the strangest sensation of floating in a pool of darkness, of being stranded like a fish out of water ... attacked by an uncomfortable feeling of complete displacement ..." (Nkosi 2002:118). The act of displacement, the act of crossing over, represents a critical moment for the *Dasein* of the exiled subject, as movement away from the known is underscored by an anxious sense, that to be in exile, is to be elsewhere and nowhere at the same time. This sentiment is confirmed by Bhabha, who writes that "the movement across spatial boundaries challenges the stability of the subjective identity - it is always in relation to the place of the Other, that colonial desire is articulated" (Bhabha 1994:186). What this implies is that the experience of forging a new cultural identity inclusive of the personal, the national, the ideological and the historical, is wholly dependent on the individual's understanding and interpretation of his/her new cultural context. Bhabha, it would seem, advocates a move away from markers such as race, class and gender as primary conceptual categories, promoting rather the in-between spaces which are produced in the articulation of new strategies of selfhood as an alternative. Exile represents a subject that, according to Phillips:

belongs to no dialectic, that eludes the logic of identity. It is a subject for whom the origin (or home) is from the beginning a displacement and thus cannot be fixed ... neither the identity nor the destination of the postcolonial traveller exists in advance of the diverse narratives of displacement, disorientation and alienation that emerge ... for postcolonialism, the very notion of home is undefinable, at best an opening to an uncertain future. (Phillips in Clark 1999:68)

Thus it would seem that postcolonial theory suggests that the geographical displacement and

experiences of the exiled subject, in fact the collective conditions of existence for the exile are almost always situated within the context of confrontation and difference. Enigmatically so, Nkosi does not subscribe to the generic profile of Said's or Clark's postcolonial exiled subject, as the 'pleasure of discovery' is not evident in his works, as his fiction is almost exclusively focused on his South African past; nor is his situation one of perpetual confrontation, as despite the freedom to return to his country of birth, he has not articulated the wish to return. His ambivalence remains, which is clearly evinced in his introduction to *Home and Exile* (1983), when he states that there are no final answers, that his essays "represent questions proposed to me by exile from my homeland ... and during some not entirely sorrowful wanderings in foreign countries" (Nkosi 1965: vi). Although Nkosi shares many of the historical actualities of exile with other displaced persons, he remains a writer who defies easy classification and critical placing. Nkosi's departure from South Africa was centrally motivated by the desire to be "free from the lunacies of South Africa, ... to acquire private freedom" (Nkosi 1965: viii). In attaining freedom, he could affirm to himself that he was no longer to be viewed "first as a native and then as a servant" (Nkosi 2002:250) but finally as a human being with a purpose.

Unlike the generic postcolonial exile writer, Nkosi, despite his isolation and the discontinuity of a South African self in the early stages of his exile, has firmly asserted his new self from the outset, providing his writing, whether factual or fictional, with a strong narrative voice steeped in sometimes acerbic wit, sometimes having an irascible ambience, sometimes reflecting a reserved humour, but finally a voice made possible through the interacting with other presences, languages, education and cultures. There is no obvious sense of Nkosi regarding himself as the 'Other' in his works, despite his stance as detached spectator at times. Rather, he has succeeded through his non-fiction writing in the main, to defy the stereotypical exile figure created by postcolonial thinking, and has, through eschewing ethnic authenticities, provided himself with a fluid cosmopolitan identity, perhaps not only for himself, but potentially also for other Africans in the world.

For Nkosi, judging from his prolific writing, exile has been a source of creativity. He has clearly thrived on intermingled cultural and historical influences, a position which empowered him to claim victory over a malignant political system; his exile culminating in some ways in a celebration of the passing of a particular oppressive era in his life. He has transcended the state of exile to become the observer, acknowledging irreconcilable distance from what he can see, but no longer wants to possess. Nkosi's lack of involvement in remapping his immediate surroundings is perhaps explained by Clark's views on exile when he insists that the very fact of isolation paradoxically accentuates the exile's exemplary status as a representative social entity: "it seems difficult to

reconcile with the prescribed path of expulsion by an occupying power, and the forthright individualism of this account of exile fails to consider the collectivity of displacement" (Clark 1999:12).

Despite the many viewpoints subscribed to by the various theorists, the term 'exile' as mentioned earlier remains a problematic concept at best, as these labels tend to define perhaps too simplistically a social condition and a situation fraught with complex psychological implications, particularly because of the inescapable link to personhood and homeland, and the elusiveness of a return. The entities of home, homeland and identity are three major interlocking concepts intimately intertwined with exile which often add complexity to attempts at definition.

The concept of exile is thus, much like the exiled subject, a dynamic organism thriving on the interstices of the social and the political, and continuously re-interpreted and modified by the exiled subject. The term '*black exile*' is avoided in this thesis as it implies an imposed racial and political marker, which is problematic and ambiguous in the sense that it presumes a unified conception of a homeland, of a group of people and shared values, whereas in fact this is not always so:

I seem to recall instances when Africans met one another in Europe - and one thing that has to be said about this mutual discovery, is that it is both an ecstasy if you like, but it is also a partly tremendous irritation, irritation because some of your fellow Africans are not behaving exactly as the people you knew at home. (Nkosi in Stiebel and Gunner 2005:232)

The term 'exile' in this thesis is viewed in terms of the individual rather than the collective, Nkosi himself being an example of individualism and nonconformity in many respects. Clearly no two displaced people experience exile equally or uniformly as mentioned earlier, giving rise to the numerous and multifaceted interpretations of this notion. Nkosi has himself offered numerous and often conflicting perspectives on exile. He has variously defined his exile as a "shocking spectacle" (Nkosi n.d :3), "a complex fate," "a strange fate," "a cruel joke," a "hard thing" and "not all pain" (Nkosi 1965: ix; 1976:1, 1983:93) a condition which he ultimately acknowledged as a challenging exodus rather than a punishment, leading to new discoveries, relationships and experiences, and not all of these necessarily bad. In 1992 Nkosi attended the Africa Research and Information Bureau (ARIB) Conference in London, where the theme was African writers in exile and notions of the 'Homeland'. During this conference Nkosi argued that exile was indeed a painful reality, a physical as well as a spiritual condition, yet the writer in exile, unlike a refugee from a war or famine, was *never given to loneliness* [my emphasis]. This position was immediately challenged

by those present, citing the testimonies of other exiles, such as David Diop and Arthur Nortje, and justly so, as Nkosi's own writing, particularly his essays and fiction, often contradicts this statement. Nkosi further argued that the nature of exile changed with each passing epoch, and that postcoloniality with its air of arrested hope was ultimately a condition of homelessness. It was "the imminent loss of nation and purpose, which left the exile in permanent wandering and ambivalent anxiety" (in *ALA Bulletin* 1992:27). This inherent ambivalence is also challenged by White, who comments that:

a common feature of many exiles...is ambivalence. Ambivalence towards the past and the present; as to whether things were better 'then' or 'now'. Ambivalence towards the future, whether to retain a myth of return or to design a new project ... Ambivalence towards the host society; feeling of respect, dislike or uncertainty ... whether to cling to the old or to discard it, whether to compromise ... and since these situations change on a variety of temporal scales, so the identities expressed through attitude, behaviour and artifacts also change and may be marked by ambiguity. (in King 1995:4)

White thus argues that an imposed state of exile, as in the case of Nkosi, often results in a consciousness torn between a sense of not belonging and a desire to belong to systems of interaction, these being the exile's community and linguistic group; this ambivalence hence "forms the basis of the exilic consciousness, which can either choose to internalise exile as a rewarding adventure or a melancholy trauma of moral and spiritual abandonment" (Nkosi 1994:5). Nkosi admits that exile is an ambivalent space; he has: "a split mind about the notion of exile. I reject it because there is the immediate tendency to self-dramatise or to self-pity. It's a very sterile category to be fitted into ... and for writers, artists and academics severance and displacement from home are not always without self-serving moments" (5). Said, as seen earlier, also refutes the belief held by some that exile is a condition of loss and comments that:

if true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching motif of modern culture ... modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, emigres, refugees ... exile has its pleasures, not the least which is the particular sense of achievement one derives from acting as if one were at home wherever one happens to be. (Said 1994:137,148)

This astute observation is pertinently relevant to Nkosi.

Even though many exiles might regard their leaving as a temporary condition rather than a



permanent solution, as was the case with many of the black South African exiles who left as a consequence of political persecutions at the time, repatriation is never the natural outcome of displacement. Unlike most exiles, Nkosi's own departure from South Africa is not followed by the inevitable wished for return; he has never 'returned', except on recent brief visits, to his native soil. This is a factor which sets displaced individuals apart, as their desire to return often depends on the degree of their cultural and social transformation and their status in the new non-home community. Nkosi freely admits that, with hindsight his own experience of exile: "in spite of great deprivation, has never been one of relentless, unmitigated suffering," as, having survived apartheid, "I was already an exile before I knew it" (Nkosi 1994:5).

The above is critical to this discussion in terms of Nkosi's own enforced displacement and dislocation. In his own words, "exile is not all pain ... and in the end brought me face to face with a self whose emergence would have been inconceivable had I stayed in South Africa" (Nkosi 1965: viii). In my view, Nkosi's statement transforms the negative nuances of the term 'exile' into a more affirmative notion, a notion which has as one of its many connotations, the archaic Latin root *ex* (out) and *salire*, which means 'to leap'. It is perhaps this archaic sense which appeals to Nkosi's subconscious thinking; revealed in his writing is the sense that exile for him meant propelling himself beyond the boundaries set by colonial and postcolonial alterity, literally springing into a new life. His homeland is no longer seen as a negative space but is itself transformed into a platform from which he can launch himself into a life of renewed possibility. His leaving, although initially intimidating, was perhaps not to begin a sentence of expulsion, but rather to initiate a lifelong odyssey, a liberation which has taken him beyond the invisible boundaries of possession and belonging, to acquire a new understanding of what constitutes home and exile for himself. As he was later to admit in defence of the vagaries of exile, "new spaces are also an arena for forging new identities" (Nkosi in Stiebel and Gurner 2005:242). In order to make sense of his exile, Nkosi chose to view his enforced state of in-betweenness and transition as a place of possibilities, where change and empowerment could be attained. This delineation of his temporal space has empowered him to take possession of a new world of knowing that operates within ideas of memory, where his horizon has not been limited by the spirit of arrival nor the spectre of departure. It is thus possible to leave on a one-way exit permit and *prefer* not to return home. Perhaps it is possible to return for a visit after a period of absence of thirty years, as Nkosi did, only to find that home is not all that one had hoped for, that home is no longer the structure that memory conceived: "All those are new things they have put up there which are horrific ... and all the smells, and seeing how parts of Durban, that were out of bounds for people like myself when I was growing up - suddenly seeing how they are being occupied by a new army" (242).

Nkosi has, since leaving South Africa, elected to remain 'homeless.' Although he now holds both a British and a South African passport, he has been a temporary sojourner wherever he has happened to be. He has not expressed a clear desire to return to his country of birth, now this is possible. Perhaps he knows from personal experience that it is possible to return, and yet never fully arrive. In Nkosi's case, he is able to return but chooses not to arrive, preferring rather to dream of, and imagine a glorious return enacted through his characters. However, Nkosi has found this 'glorious' return to be elusive, a truth which he freely admits to and is illustrated vividly in his works of fiction and in interviews: "I had dreamed of course, of some final return in the future ... I had even prefigured and imaginatively staged that final return ... but it was an anti-climax ... we had left as South Africans, and we were now returning as foreigners" (Nkosi n.d: 4). The inherent ambivalence which almost negates any possibility of a return for Nkosi is embodied in his character Anthony Ferguson, for whom "the drama of departure was yielding at last to the miserable prospect of another drama of arrival" (Nkosi 2002:24). Thus for Nkosi as exile, home is neither here nor there, but any place, temporary and movable, carried in the memory and by acts of imagination. Nkosi locates himself both synesthetically and synecdochially: township music or the sight of a verdant mountain valley he will acknowledge feed his memories of the past and his narratives of the imagination, yet he denies having any notions of *heimatism* (Lombardozzi in conversation with Lewis Nkosi 2003). He is able to transit back and forth on brief visits, electing to be the perennial nomad, simultaneously in exile everywhere and yet nowhere, the globalised traveller, his personal diaspora now devoid of alienation and difference, possibly because he may have had a well-developed inner sense of identity, leaving South Africa as a motivated and educated young man, albeit partly apprehensive of the future. This point will be fully explored in Chapter Two.

Returning to one's country of origin is not always a desirable solution, as re-establishment and effective reintegration are often as traumatising as leaving the homeland as an exile. This thought resonates throughout Nkosi's novel *Underground People* (2002) and is clearly discernable in the inner turmoil of Ferguson's thoughts who is about to return to his homeland after an absence of fifteen years. His thoughts are dissembled into a "feeling of anxiety and suppressed irritation, very odd for him ... he felt no desire to return to the country of his birth" (Nkosi 2002:13, 19). The once known homeland can become estranged for the returning exile, alienated through various factors such as self-alienation, a new identity, absence and antagonism, an emotional trap Nkosi envisions through his character in *Underground People*: "... but somehow I have never felt so unsure of myself as I do at this moment ... a man walking a tightrope of self-definition without any clear idea what words were proper to use (13, 23). Experience has taught Nkosi that it depends on the individual's resilience to adapt on both a social and personal level, as some of Nkosi's

contemporaries such as Nat Nakasa, Bloke Modisane and Can Themba never recovered, remained alienated; Nat Nakasa eventually committed suicide abroad. Unlike Nkosi, who was able to experience exile relatively free from nostalgia, black intellectuals like Modisane felt that "everything I had known, loved and hated was behind me ... leaving South Africa was no victory or solution, the compulsive agony was still with me, the problem was still with me, only its immediacy was removed ... (Modisane 1986:311). Nkosi commented recently that his lack of nostalgia has partly to do with his having been an orphan very early in life :

So, when I was cut off from South Africa, it wasn't a new thing. My attitude was that wherever you go, you find families there ... nostalgia doesn't exist for me in the sense I take that to be ... because, for me, the present is very important. What matters is how you use the past to infiltrate the present to enable you to negotiate the future. (Akubuiro 2006:4)

Nkosi has likened himself to a kind of Ulysses in transit, not pre-empting the difficulties he may encounter on his journeys, but looking forward to a new freedom, one devoid of apartheid labelling, an escape from things that had inhibited his life, even if at that point he could not know "what that self was going to be or what it should be" (Nkosi in Stiebel and Gunner 2005:231). The reference to Homer's *Odyssey* is not as arbitrary for Nkosi, a great admirer of James Joyce. Similarly to Joyce's Homer, for Nkosi the exodus from his country as an exile became a cultural intervention which was to last a lifetime and which enabled him to create in the very act of looking back. Nkosi admits that exile, with its propensity for producing compensatory fantasies and longings, has conversely also provided him with a much needed freedom of spirit, a "complex fate" (Nkosi 1983: vi) which sent him on a personal odyssey, enabling him to discover many things that he had missed out on during his years under the apartheid dispensation, and had failed to reflect on - it has equipped him with an extra sense of the importance, the value and the meaning of one's native/natal place. Exile has provided Nkosi with an insight generated by distance, a perspective which has allowed him to see more clearly and remember more acutely his home and homeland. (Nkosi 1983: viii). Writing is Nkosi's ultimate weapon against exile, an act which protects his identity from erasure. The words of novelist Sam Selvon inform finally, my own perception of Nkosi as exile and conclude this discussion on exile:

I have never thought of myself as an exile ... I carried my little island with me and far from assimilating another culture or manner I delved deeper into an understanding of my roots and myself. Immigrating did that for me, and provided the nourishment I could not find [in South Africa] to foster my creativity ... I am in a sense, still visiting abroad. But home is where you start from. And should end from. (Selvon in Parker 1993:65)

Postcolonial theories are pertinent to a discussion of the literary production of home and space. Postcolonial assumptions, sensitised to historical specificity, continue to draw together new concerns in terms of space and place, tropes of difference which can never be neutral as they continue to resonate with human traditions, events, memories and imagining. Hence these terms, which function as mechanisms of spatial control, also influence social control, and are continual reminders of "colonial ambivalence, of the separation yet continual mixing of the coloniser and the colonised" (Ashcroft et al 1998:179). The discourse of place and displacement has always been an integral part of postcolonial society, and is hence also a concern common to all postcolonial literature in English. Increasingly, new research carried out by academics on space and spatial identities suggests that the notions of place, space, home and landscape are central to understanding colonial experience. Place does not merely imply 'landscape.' Ashcroft points out that:

the idea of landscape is predicted upon a particular philosophical tradition in which the objective world is separated from the viewing subject ... place in postcolonial societies is a complex interaction of language, history and environment. It is characterised firstly by a sense of displacement in those who have moved ... and secondly, by a sense of the immense investment in culture in the construction of place. (Ashcroft 1995:391)

Place is a fundamental experience of being, because being in a place implies presence, interactive participation and intimacy, and conversely also loss. A sense of place, whether personal or social, is vital as it enables one to function within the human community. Said distinguishes between two types of affinity in terms of the notions of place - the filiative ties, which are links the individual inherits through birth. These ties are juxtaposed against the affiliative ties, links which are forged within one's "society, communities and social institutions, and within which the filiative ultimately consolidates itself. Affiliation hence becomes a form of literal re-presentation, representing the filiative processes" (Said 1983:16-27). Hence Nkosi remakes the South African landscape he has lost through exile by looking at this landscape anew or in retrospect, through the eyes of his characters, thus recreating a new social and historical enterprise out of the old: "for a brief spell he stood as though arrested by a force stronger than his will, gazing with the thrill of a first encounter

with the landscape of his childhood ... much had changed, but also much had stayed the same” (Nkosi 2002:139).

As in the case of the notion of exile and displacement in terms of post colonial theory, place and space is another crucial feature, as ideas of landscape, home and place underpin much of this thesis. Space is transformed through language into place as language inscribes space with a particular meaning - until then it remains an empty space. Space, according to Tilley, is constituted by “differential densities of human experiences, attachments and involvement. It is above all contextually constituted, providing particular settings for involvement, and the creation of meaning” (Tilley in Bender 2001:213). Space, place and landscape thus can be seen as various *processes* by which social and subjective identities are formed, and as such becomes a medium of expression of both value and meaning. These processes are evident in a postcolonial reading of a text such as Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) where landscape as externalised by the character Kurtz, becomes an “object of nostalgia, reflecting a time when metropolitan cultures could imagine their destiny in an unbounded prospect of endless appropriation and conquest” (Mitchell 1994:21). This view is in binary opposition to Conrad’s character Marlow, who internalises this same space and views it through the eyes of colonial romanticism, where the passion for the Africa landscape begins with “blank spaces” where nothing had been inscribed. Foucault develops this notion further and defines internal space as a space “imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well ... the space of our primary perception, the space of our dreams ...”. External space is a place which “claws and gnaws at us”, a place which “draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our histories and our time occurs” (Foucault 1986:23). Thus space is a heterogeneous space which is never empty space. In his seminal work on spatiality Noyes concurs with the notion that space is never only about the romantic visual attributes of nature, but becomes a space populated with human values because it is humans and their ways of seeing who finally give space its meaningful place:

Colonial landscape is not found by the coloniser as a neutral and empty space, no matter how often he assures us that this is so .... as the colonial landscape is produced as a possible level of spatiality onto which desire may be mapped in the service of social production. (Noyes 1988:10)

For this reason, fiction demarcates its own boundaries of operation and is always about place, people and belonging, as well as place and people and alienation, as place is constantly re-imagined by the writer through the characters. In as much as writing is an act of spatial expression, it follows that writing is also about the journeys undertaken by the writer in a landscape of the imagination through

language and metaphor. As Nkosi states: "For thirty-one years I had carried the country inside my head ..." (Nkosi 1994:5). Fiction hence organises place through the displacement it describes.

What turns space into places in Nkosi's fiction is his rootedness in the past and his ability to link his past and present in his narrative. Early debates by Western critics such as Roscoe and Larson on landscape in black literature held that generally, descriptions of the natural environment and familiar places were not important features of cultural expression in African literature in English. The naive colonial perception of the African was that of "a people not more advanced than hunter gatherers with no imaginative claims on the landscape" ... whereas, in fact, for centuries the African landscape told "a tale of large and small kingdoms, wars, conquests and coups, traitors and treaties, much like Shakespeare's plays" (Ranger 1994:7). This perception has been amply contested by writers such as Chinweizu and Loflin, who point out that although African literature does not subscribe to the westernised vision of isolated and romanticised 'dreamscapes', African writers describe an environment which is often "extremely varied and insists on the inclusion of the human community within the natural world" (Loflin 1998:3). Novels by South African writers are dominated by the changes wrought to the political landscape by apartheid, a system of governance which forced black people into townships and homelands. This fractured sense of landscape and place is supported by Nkosi's fiction, in which he not only has mastered the western representation of landscape but also integrates the sensitive issue of land ownership. Nkosi's description of landscape includes his concerns about land issues and ownership. His descriptions of the South African fictional landscape provide not only a clear geographic, political, cultural and social history of South Africa, but also a space within which the fiction will signify. The descriptions of landscape in all three his novels, *Mating Birds*, *Underground People* and in particular *Mandela's Ego* not only reflect his abiding love for his childhood places, but also create a space within which his characters are carefully situated within their postcolonial historical context. In *Underground People*, the geography of the novel often extends beyond local boundaries, connecting with the larger world of the international metropole through its political and international background. For black South African writers under apartheid there is a particular commitment to make visible the South African landscape to their readers, by describing the country from their own perspective, from which to make known the intolerable conditions of their lives. For the African writer it is perhaps not so much the descriptions of a landscape, as it is the *events* inscribed on this landscape, which is important. Nkosi's descriptions of the African landscape in his fiction function therefore not merely as aesthetic window dressing, but as an "intervention in an historical dialogue about the meaning and significance of Africa, the African people and African land" (Loflin 1998:5). Nkosi's fiction and the function of landscape in terms of the thesis statement will be discussed in full in Chapters Four

and Five of this thesis.

Current debates over the definition of home as an ideal as opposed to home as a material space only serve to emphasise the multitude of ways in which the term 'home' may be defined. The identity of place is a product of social actions and reflect the ways in which the individual constructs an own representation of a particular place. For Nkosi, to whom home is potentially everywhere and nowhere at once, place becomes a space of infinite possibilities. His fascination with airports and flying may be used to clarify this notion of space, as airports and aircraft are possibly the archetypes of non-places, landscapes on the move and landscapes moved through, a transitory space reserved for the circular process of dislocation and relocation, of arrivals and departures, devoid of any sense of homecoming. 'Home' is a site constantly affected by changes wrought by time and space and is hence a notional space demanding constant redefinition and renegotiation.

Space and place are important concepts to the understanding of displacement and exile, and I would like to offer as a possible definition the notion held by Yi-Fu Tuan, who argues that space and place, whilst denoting human experience, connote different meanings:

Space is associated with movement, openness and freedom, whilst place suggests security, a pause in movement, a location based on cultural values. Not only do human beings require space in order to establish or reach a place, but often the boundedness of place effects a longing for the exposure of space ... and the ever increasing mobility of modern times prevents human beings from putting down roots and feeling at home in a place. (Yi-Fu Tuan 1977:183-184)

This distinction is important also in its application to Nkosi as exile, as his daily life in exile has been a continual recreation of a place and space he could call home. This is particularly valid as he has remained rootless for most of his life, and has never consciously claimed any one place as his personal space, other than his 'home' in literature. Perhaps this is not surprising when one considers that the most remarkable thing about South Africa:

is the multiplicity of boundaries that define it, divide it and thereby give it shape. Apartheid, the political system (as opposed to apartheid as concept) under which it lived for more than four decades, is synonymous with the meticulous making and marking of difference, especially that difference known as race, but also space. (Werbner 1996:143)

The oppressive boundedness of the South African landscape is uppermost in the mind of Nkosi as

exile when he expresses this startling *lack* of space to accommodate the Other through his character Ntongela in *Mandela's Ego*: "There are borders surrounding this country. Everything inside those borders, including the open air, belongs to the Government" (Nkosi 2006:59). He strategically juxtaposes a majestic landscape of "mountains, trees, hills and homesteads" against a "black fiendish hell of noiseless blankness" (Nkosi 2006:35), the description of landscape here echoing his sense of erasure. This sense of displacement is evident in the newly exiled Nkosi's setting for his short story "The Hotel Room", the "grey monotony" of the confines of a hotel room (Nkosi 1963:55) and the desolate beach of the island are effectively used to "sharpen the impression of colourless days ... standing jaggedly in his memory forever" (Nkosi 1963:56). The sense of confinement, the result of a life under apartheid, is also continued in his later radio short story "The Trial" and his plays, *The Black Psychiatrist* and "Flying Home", where the preferred settings are the enclosed spaces of rooms and airport lounges. Laclau expands on the vicissitudes of apartheid, which also underscores Nkosi's early South African reality, a "fiendish hell of noiseless blankness":

Apartheid : by itself the word occupies the terrain like a concentration camp. Systems of partition, barbed wire, crowds of mapped out solitudes. The word concentrates on separation. It institutes, declares, writes, inscribes ... a system of marks, it outlines in space in order to assign residence or closes off borders. It does not discern, it discriminates. (Laclau 1994:118)

Having endured this system for more than two decades, Nkosi, once freed from these boundaries which sought to imprison and limit him, never returned, choosing to return only through the memories of place. It is perhaps this memory of place which essentially prevents Nkosi from being homesick, because he carries deep within himself an own sense of definition; it is to the memory of place that he always returns to find the clearest meaning and identity of himself, as evinced through his writing. In the same vein, Joan Didion's observation that "place belongs forever to whomever claims it the hardest, remembers it the most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it" (Didion 1994:79) can equally be applied to the fiction of Nkosi, where place is the definitive criterion which shapes the content, the thoughts and the actions of the characters, and nowhere more evident than in his latest novel, *Mandela's Ego*. In this novel he surrenders himself to his long nurtured memories of his South African rural childhood landscapes.

Perhaps it would be more meaningful to assess place in terms of those aspects of life which are central to identity, rather than search for a single dominant relationship between place and identity. Nkosi admits to the link between place and memory and the influence this exerts on his writing -



particularly as much of his fiction is set in the South African milieu - when he says that: "you suppress memories of what really shapes your conscience, but it always comes through in your writing which is always linked to early experience - in fact whole worlds of experiences that mediate your writing" (Lombardozi in conversation with Lewis Nkosi 2004). Nkosi's obvious emplacement as a South African exile also denotes a sense of loyalty to that place, and this loyalty is expressed through his sentiments of longing in his fiction.

Yet the concept 'home' for the exile as an idea is flexible and amorphous, shaped by shifting memories of place and incessantly being reconstructed as attempts are made to make sense of experiences in a new ground distant from the homeland. Nkosi as a black man exiled from his home country, and forced to make his new home in a predominantly European culture, wrote about his homeland in order to maintain his identity as an African and to nurture his memories of Africa. This is evident in his novels *Mating Birds*, *Underground People* and *Mandela's Ego*, his plays and in his early poems, as shall be discussed in Chapters Four and Five more fully. Marangoly George writes that :

the (re)-writing of home reveals the ideological struggles that are staged every day in the construction of subjects and their understanding of home. The search for the location in which the self is at 'home' is one of the primary projects of twentieth century fiction in English. This project may get obscured or transcended as the narrative unfolds but is never completely abandoned. It is in this context that I read all fiction in terms of homesickness. (Marangoly George 1996:3)

All of the above clearly applies to much of Nkosi's writing, and are perceptions which also underpin this thesis. Although Nkosi has known South Africa as his home, he has lived his life mostly through displacement and exile, albeit in recent years by deliberate choice.

A sense of place is necessarily also a sense of orientation and identity, of where and who one is in the world. Place as a political reality in the definition of home reminds us where we are and where we are going to, and thus place becomes a structure of power. As a young child, Nkosi spent some time with his grandmother in Embo, a small rural village nestling in the folds and gorges of the Valley of a Thousand Hills on the outskirts of Durban. This undulating landscape of Nkosi's early childhood may be "all about rolling hills, valleys, gorges, forests, rivers and rock pools, where rural Africa links arms gently with urban living ..." (Draper 2000:37), but is more aptly described through indigenous eyes as *Kwadedangendlale*, a place where "I may spread out my blankets" (Draper 2000:37). Embo as a primary site had inscribed Nkosi's life at a very young age; at that

time Embo had been his familial social place and during his formative years this place informed his first sense of belonging *somewhere* after the loss of his mother: ... "everybody misses their roots, their childhood sights - that why I come to visit here and thinking, ah, this is where I grew up ..." (Lombardozi 2003:326). Belonging is a most basic human desire and frequently expressed in contemporary literature: for example, Codi says in *Animal Dreams* "I have led such an adventurous life, geographically speaking, that people mistook me for an adventurer. They have no idea. I'd sell my soul and all my travelling shoes just to *belong* some place" (Kingsolver 2004:30). Nkosi describes this area of KwaZulu-Natal in minute detail, as only a native to the soil can, and in the most evocative prose from a memory undimmed by absence, as seen through the eyes of his character Sibiya in his first novel *Mating Birds*. To Nkosi it brings back memories of a place:

of puce coloured landscape, of steep hills and deep valleys dotted by the thatched Zulu huts. On a clear day you could see the white plumes of smoke rising for miles around in a shimmer of brilliant sunshine ... the broken furrows of red earth marking the dongas where the rain had bitten deeply into the earth ... a place where there was ample space, the air is pure, and there is even freedom of a kind. (Nkosi 1987:42)

Nkosi describes this very same landscape in his libretto "The Chameleon and the Lizard", and in his novel *Mandela's Ego*, written two decades later, he yet again and in even greater detail, mines his memories of boyhood, in which he unarguably depicts a deep nostalgia for his rural African landscape: "Far into the night men ... could be heard singing songs of nostalgia for a Zululand that was no more ... a song of nostalgia, bittersweet, crooned by someone homesick for Zulu country after voyaging in foreign parts, but pretending otherwise" (Nkosi 2006:75).

Belonging, according to Lovell, is a way of "remembering and of constructing a collective memory of place, but ... this construction is always contestable" (Lovell 1998:xi). Nkosi's commitment to familiar places in his literature are part of what makes him human, and his memories, whether good or bad, of the many places he has known have all contributed into defining his identity as an individual. The character Mziwakhe in his novel *Mandela's Ego* perhaps describes the author when he comments on the identity of his son: "no wonder that boy has turned out to be a dappled bird, a piebald thing of many colours, neither this nor that" (Nkosi 2006:93). Atwood's analysis of literature as a primary component in the construction of a collective identity, also applies to Nkosi's construction of his writerly spaces: "what a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so that he can see where he is in relation to everything else. Literature is not only a mirror, it is also a map, a geography of the mind" (Atwood 1972:18).

This thesis will argue that Nkosi's writing draws extensively on his awareness of loss of place, and that this loss forms the nexus of his fiction, within which he creates a place of utopian belonging and memory. This notion of an utopian belonging and memory of home is manifested in his latest novel, *Mandela's Ego* (2006) in which Nkosi's construction of a rural home is deceptively devoid of the realities of such a setting; it is presented as an aseptic world cleansed and devoid of poverty, disease or crime, and where love and romance is the primary emotion which keeps this universe spinning. William Maxwell explains that:

what we refer to confidently as a memory - meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion - is really a form of story telling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the story telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life to ever be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to this end. (1998:1)

For Nkosi, clearly place is where the imagination and the memory meet: "... all of those are *strands* of memory about place and it automatically gets into your writing" (Lombardozzi 2003:331). A reading of the textual theories of Roland Barthes is useful here, as he argues that by its very nature, the printed text and the social space it occupies in the world cannot exist independently from each other, as texts draw attention to themselves by placing themselves in the consciousness of the community who reads them: "Text occurs when a literary text is transported into our daily life ... and applying fragments of the text to our experience" (Barthes 1977:161). Barthes' theory is applicable here in the sense that Nkosi's writing should be viewed as an extension of his own experiences, a precarious place where 'otherness' is not permitted to obfuscate the immanence of his new consciousness. Writers must all write from somewhere but the stability of that place is often illusory. Home as a starting point and a returning haven for Nkosi is his writing, but his 'home' in literature has not always been a comfortable place, as writing is at best an unstable and reconstitutive territory constantly under the threat of being destabilised through contradiction, contestation and political interventions. Nkosi's home in literature has hence a dual function; it not only provides Nkosi with a space within which he can redefine and empower himself, but his writing also creates a literary space where his audience is invited to enter and participate, thus making his home in literature a contested space that paradoxically becomes both a private and a public domain. It is a space within which he is able to locate himself whilst also affiliating with other writers who have made writing their home, such as Chinua Achebe, Nuruddin Farah and Wole Soyinka.

Postcolonial theory has problematised what constitutes the body of African writing, by emphasising

how important it is to recognise that writing exists in a stratified space within which it is raced, classed and gendered. As an African writer Nkosi continually reconstructs his own culture, race and class whilst existing in a culture and society different from his own. The concept of space is central to Nkosi's experience of an apartheid South Africa, where spatial extremes were measured in terms of race and gender. These spatial structures which are more than mere places of representation layered within a political context, are evident in Nkosi's works - all his boundaries are haunted by the physical spaces created by the historical apartheid narrative. "Indirectly, this is what I tried to bring out ... a fragment of my experiences ... I tried to state as precisely as possible what it feels like to be a black South African writer in exile" (Nkosi 1965: viii). Nkosi acknowledged that his exile began long before he even left his native soil as his life was dictated to by the many restrictions the apartheid laws had placed on his freedom of movement. His inability to participate in mainstream activities as a black South African excluded him from a large slice of cultural experience. He comments that: "these barriers were not only dangerous because they perpetuated a certain cultural poverty in which the black writer had to live, but they also opened up dangerous avenues of escape from his literary responsibilities ... although a writer is supposed to work in loneliness, there is no deeper problem for him than lonely living" (Nkosi 1959:6). Writer Ze Manel speaks for exiles like Nkosi when he reflects on the stability of a home- place: "home is where I have peace ... I was born and raised in Africa. But in Africa I cannot have peace of mind to write. So how can I call that home?" (Bryson 2007:6).

Much of Nkosi's distancing irony and often brutal wit evident in his work and in his interviews might be read as a mask behind which he attempts, despite vociferous denials, to conceal a very real nostalgia for his homeland, for the old haunts; places he eagerly returns to whenever he visits South Africa: "I'm thrilled to be back in Durban ... for me it's not simply a question of sharing this experience at the Festival with you - it is also drifting about in the Durban streets and looking at some of those broken down colonial houses" (Nkosi in Stiebel and Gunner 2005:242). Following from the above, Stiebel suggests that the issue of locating home: "both in a personal and literary sense...cuts across different literatures, across gender, across class and race though the particular historical circumstances of the homesickness will inevitably define the shape *heimweh* assumes and the revisions it is forced to undergo" (1997:145). Nkosi emphatically insists that he has never been homesick because he has always been able to find places which quickly become home to him. He claims that he has no sentimentalist notions about the soil of his birth, and has never suffered from the desire to want to kiss his native earth (Stiebel and Gunner 2005:227). He feels that homesickness is just that, a sickness, and he does not consider himself as a sick individual. However, his being "thrilled" to be back in Durban (as above) belies his denials. As Marangoly George earlier quoted

comments: "if roots are a conservative myth, then all homesickness is fiction" (1996:199).

Nkosi was raised in a colonised space in South Africa, and therefore a highly complex space, particularly for a black man. His fiction, as previously pointed out, is placed within a South African context, and this together with the fact that he only writes in English, supports the contention that he does this to universalise his experience as an exile and represent the world not only for himself, but to extend his writing to others thus "sharing an experience of being" (Stiebel and Gunner 2005:220). He seeks to extend this into that of a group identity because his goal is ultimately to reach a shared world, thus his writing provides him with a way to cope with living his life away from South Africa and home. Nkosi feels that perhaps he has never felt close enough to the places he has lived in, apart from South Africa, to want to devote his life writing about those societies. He found that "English society, for example, was too complicated ... [and emotionally he] "was not linked to that kind of thing" (Lombardozzi 2003:329). Nearly fifty years after having lived a successful life abroad, Nkosi somehow presents himself as still waiting to be at home, just as Spivak admits in an interview: "I am a bicultural, but my biculturality is that I am not at home in either of the places [Calcutta and the USA]" (Spivak 1990:83). Perhaps the reason for this consciousness is neatly summarised by Said when he writes that "I have never felt that I belonged exclusively to one country, nor have I been able to identify patriotically with any other than losing causes ... thinking affectionately about home is all I'll go along with" (Said in Marangoly George 1996:201). It can be argued then, that Nkosi writes about Africa to maintain a sense of interconnectedness with both his private and public spaces. He admits that he does not write to "expunge or to heal a wound", but writes centrally to situate himself (Stiebel and Gunner 2005:220). John Butler-Adam proposed in a recent conference that landscape which is "shaped on the one hand by forces of nature and given pattern by our cognitive processes ... is the landscape of our common survival ... into which we insert ourselves and onto which we impose ourselves ..." (2003:4). Whereas Eco emphasises the organic memory which focuses on the remembered physicalities of the landscape, Butler-Adam prefers the landscape that is shaped in the mind and upon which we constantly draw on to construct external memories, whether known, imagined or wished for.

I will argue that memory and writing lie at the root of Nkosi's ability to survive as an exile on foreign soil all these years. Having lived in and away from South Africa, Nkosi is acutely aware of both the loss and gain his movements have exposed him to, and expresses this awareness in his writing, particularly in his novels. His writing thus becomes a personal narrative, affording him the luxury of observation without active involvement in the different emotions that the places he finds himself in evoke. This is evident in his first novel *Mating Birds* (1986), a bitter piece of writing,

rich with anger in which Nkosi explores a segment of history and place through the eyes of the black man, dexterously exposing the consequences of being black and living in the restrictive spaces of apartheid. This novel will be explored in detail in Chapter Four. The power of landscape and place in his writing is particularly evident through the discrepancies of the landscape he describes, discrepancies which arise from a landscape refashioned on personal perceptions and memory. Nkosi often finds landscape a convenient metaphorical starting point, mixing existing and actual landscapes to recreate a textualised landscape of fact and fiction.

Landscape for Nkosi is not only a physical description of place, but reflects a subconscious longing and desire for what was once known or wished for. Descriptions of the natural environment, particularly in the fiction of Nkosi, underscore his sense of (be)longing. Belonging appears to be predicated on the memories of place for Nkosi. Landscape, after all, attains its meaning as place for the individual only by virtue of human experience. Landscape ultimately serves to shape human consciousness :

about emplacement ... and provides a reflection against which human imagery of the self, at individual and social levels, can be mapped and experienced ... nature and humans thereby become what they are because they constantly interpenetrate each other as realms of experience and participate in a mutual transfer of understanding about the relationship in which they are engaged in. (Lovell 1998:9)

This participation in place can be seen in the particular effect South Africa has had on Nkosi - he may insist that he is never homesick, but the locus of his truth resides in his writing, and more specifically, his fiction. Nkosi's writing is about his awareness of place, his discourse a re-enactment of the geography of his birth place and is a testimony to his inability to remain immune to the emotional call of his African homeland; almost all his writing centres on South Africa, even the many journal articles Nkosi has written since 1956 attest to this. He minutely defines the South African experience through challenging themes such as politics, prejudice and racism - themes in which he convincingly demonstrates his innate love of, and fascination with, his country. Paradoxically, his writings may also be read as a search for community and a desire for a sense of belonging and closeness. Nkosi bears intimate knowledge of the traditional and close-knit African community, however brief his own encounter with this may have been, and always seeks the opposite of alienation, despite his fictional distancing techniques. He may live abroad but desires to remain a member always, his volatile memories of place constantly contributing to the map of his life, as this thesis will demonstrate. Place and identity are immutably connected, so that what is said about place must also include the construction of identity. Place is always a politicised

terrain which is subject to shifting processes of transformation, a space largely receiving its *gestalt* and meaning through aspects of personal knowledge and memories of experiences. Nkosi admits to this: "when you leave your own country to live elsewhere you discover certain things about your country which you didn't know or have suppressed. Being of the country, but also already outside of the country, you are able to see the country from a distance, something that is not permitted to people who had never left the country" (Lombardozi 2003:332). At the core of much of Nkosi's writing then lie the important questions of place and identity, and it is to the issues of identity that I now turn.

The twentieth century, characterised by wars and other social ills, has seen the deterritorialising of millions of people, thereby calling any fixed association between identity, home and exile into question. One of the key themes linking the chapters of this thesis is that of identity and identification, and how these concerns apply to the writings of Lewis Nkosi.

Maryse Condé says: "Identity is not like some piece of clothing that is lost and found and then slipped on hoping it will fit" (2000:158). Nkosi, using much the same metaphor, extends this idea: "... identities are contingent ... meaning, they rear their heads when they are needed for ... they are like clothes that you wear - I mean, you don't wear the same clothes every day?" (Lombardozi 2003:327). Nkosi's nominal ethnic identity is as historically and politically charged as are his landscapes, as both have been sites of many political and cultural confrontations during his life as an exile. Nuances of many identities reside in his fiction as cultural images, wrought firstly through his experience of a life lived under apartheid, and later as an exile through his exposure to a multicultural European environment. Apartheid and its doctrine of racial differences have had a deeply formative effect on Nkosi's identity as is evident from his fiction and poetry.

In terms of postcolonial theory, it is necessary briefly to consider the concept of a colonial identity, driven as it is by Manichean philosophy, a credo which has as its focus the tendency to view the world in binary opposites. Viewed from this position, the world becomes a diverse space of oppositions and contrasts, binaries such as white and black, good and evil, subject and object, self and other: "The colonial world is a Manichean world. It is not enough for the settler to delimit physically ... the place of the native ... as if to show the totalitarian character of the colonial exploitation, the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil" (Fanon 1968:41). The colonised subject is excluded from the coloniser's privileged spaces, both physically and mentally. The subaltern is both constructed and positioned as an exclusion, an object placed outside the defining and inflexible perimeters of 'civilised' Western mores. Exclusivity, with its stringent

insistence on maintaining the rigidity of boundaries thus promotes the perpetuation of a divisive 'us' and 'them' space, the ultimate emblematic compartmentalisation of the colonial world. Nkosi's novels *Mating Birds* and *Mandela's Ego* comment on this exclusivity through his characters who discourse on what constitutes black identity in South Africa, constantly living a life "as a lost or misplaced object" (Nkosi 2006:40), a life where being black or white was "like the tracks of a railway line ... they run side by side but the twain will never meet" (Nkosi 2006:58).<sup>2</sup> For Nkosi, segregation created a destructive sense of ambivalence: in an attempt to disentangle himself from his inferior status, he adopted many Western ideas and social customs. For example, as will be discussed more broadly in Chapter Two of this thesis, Nkosi often defied the segregation laws and lived in exclusively white areas, consorting with liberals and forming romantic liaisons with white girls. In this sense, the binary opposites favoured by early postcolonial theorists proved to be more linked, permeable, than earlier suggested (see, for example, Mills 1993). Identity under apartheid was largely constituted from a position of marginality, which also gave rise to Nkosi inhabiting the spaces on the margins, thus instilling the perception of a self with no claim to a 'home' in his immediate world. It is this realisation of not belonging anywhere that informs his consciousness in terms of identity, as he is left:

... casting around, saying 'who am I' and 'who are the black people around the world' - we cannot escape the fact that we are trying to define ourselves *vis-a-vis* the white world. It's no use blaming this on an inferiority complex - it's a matter of historical heritage which we cannot deny - because of the way we have experienced the white man in our midst. (Nkosi 1963:200)

A commonly held prerequisite for both social and personal identity is the interpretation of reality, a construct based on a context of stable reference points, viewed as a conglomeration of roles resulting from the interaction with others in a social environment. Identity provides a stable niche which social beings occupy in the modern world, which, depending on the stability of this 'niche,' can be a potentially disruptive social space. Walter (2003) argues that identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being', meaning that identity is constructed by the individual within the historically articulated social spaces, places and histories he finds himself in at the time. Walter similarly argues that identity is grounded in the shifting space between the past and the future through the subject's own agency, which results from his/her positioning within and by culture. Consequently, "... human beings are capable of making sense of their experiences, of reading themselves and the world, and acting upon this knowledge, thereby developing a meaningful self when they are located in social space" (2003:27). The construction of identity can be viewed as a

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<sup>2</sup> See Fanon (1968) and JanMohamed (1983) on the social pathology of Africa.



continuous process of negotiation determined by the interplay of sociohistorical, political and economic influences. Werbner, commenting on the multicultural nature of South African society and on the South African identity in particular, asserts that:

there is no fundamental identity that any South African clings to in common with all, or even most other South Africans. South Africans have multiple identities in multiple contexts, depending on factors of expedience and mobilisation, and the company one keeps. (Werbner 1996:151)

Identities are thus never insular, but are multiple and cross-cutting in that they overlap a range of contexts, and as such they can also be seen as the principal source of conflict, particularly in the historical South African dispensation. However, Werbner further contends that South African identities have never "polarised sufficiently to permit devastating conflict, because they are either too fragmented or too solid to permit the sort of bi-polar conflict that would destroy it" (Werbner 1996:152). This perhaps holds true for Nkosi, who has never been a supporter of violence to effect change, and who has concerned himself with maintaining a stable image and identity throughout his exile. Norval in Laclau (1994) poses the question as to how the possibility of creating any identity is related to the exclusion of the other:

... if any identity is necessarily constructed with reference to another: the contradiction between the pretense to self-containedness and the fact that the self could only be constructed by the exclusion of an other lies at the heart of apartheid discourse...an identity discourse centrally concerned with a certain constitution and affirmation of social and political identities. (Laclau 1994:122)

The above viewpoints have been provided to begin an understanding of the often controversial issue of identity, a widely discussed subject fraught with complexities, particularly when linked to the thorny issue of exile. It seems that common to all these theories is the sense that identity is intimately linked to relationships constructed within a country and its social strata, and moreover, its construction forms an integral part of a perceived sense of entitlement. The construction of a self and self-understanding is particularly relevant to this study as it is an important consideration in terms of how Nkosi construes himself and how this construction is articulated in his writing. As with many writers, Nkosi in his novels creates characters which are informed by his own personal social and cultural experiences. Writing thus provides the writer with a forum in which the self can be imagined or given ontological status.

When it comes to issues of specifically African identity, it is useful to consider an assertion by

Mbembe that too much emphasis has been placed on themes of identity and difference, which has resulted in conferring on Africa "a character so particular that it is not comparable with any other region in the world." He is responding to scholarly research which has found that all too often academic discourse is concerned with stating "what Africa should be, rather than with describing what Africa actually is" (Mbembe 2001a :3) in the modern world. Others, for example Margaret Niger-Thomas, point out that the composition of new African identities is "inseparable from a certain practice of space in general and of certain ways of imagining the world in particular." (7) Sarah Nuttall (2000) emphasises the notion of 'ways of looking' and 'being looked at' in terms of nativist theories, and from this study there emerges a particular form of cosmopolitanism which seeks to reconstruct African identity in terms of a de-territorialised self. These approaches have resulted in defining African identity in terms of the historical - the history of African identities is in fact, according to Mbembe:

marked right through by an extra-ordinary power of imitation and by a gift - without parallel - of producing resemblances from different signs and different languages ... Consequently there is no African identity that is not composed, or better, stylized ... there is no African identity other than allegorical. (Mbembe 2001a :11)

This is an interesting postulation, particularly in terms of how Nkosi has determined his identity, as he has also undergone a process of transnationalisation through exile, a process which has most certainly emphasised the conflict between a "cosmopolitan and a nativist vision of identity and of African culture" (Mbembe 2001a :1), and these conflicting identities are reflected in his writing and language, which is evidence of a constructed 'deterritorialised' self to some extent. Nkosi's primary reason for leaving South Africa was to embrace and foster a writing career, thus establishing his identity as a scholar first and a citizen of his nation second. Yet, despite never having actively 'belonged' to any political party or militant opposition, and never assuming the identity of a political activist, other than in his fiction, he has not lost his political energy for the South African anti-apartheid cause. Ten years into a new dispensation of democracy in his native country, he is still writing about political and apartheid issues, perhaps because he has never taken any leading role in political protest activities against apartheid repression, other than through his literature and language, in which he continues to represent his political awareness in different ways. He prefers to use language rather than action, to draw a shared conceptual map against apartheid. Nkosi, through his personal experiences as a black man within a colonial framework, understood the true extent to which the public and social character of language stabilised and constructed meaning within different cultures. Hence as an exile abroad he chose the English language as a medium of

preference to reach a wider readership, as English was the language of successful publication and also the language of international contact within the educated elite. His exile afforded him the opportunity to reconstruct his identity within the creative space which the material dimension of language afforded, creating an identity in discourse which would function across a variety of texts and social environments.

The tendency by African writers such as Nkosi to use the English language as medium has been at the heart of ongoing and vigorous debate. Many share the belief held by critics such as Omafume Onge, that African writers who write in English align themselves with the elite and identify more closely with the Europeans than with their own people, implying a degradation of their African identity, culture and roots. Owomoyela explores a number of possibilities and constraints which dominate the above and provides a strong argument to diffuse this kind of critical censure, proposing that problematizing the language in which African writers choose to write is "elitist, pointless and redundant," and portrays an extremely narrow conception of language *per se*. What is important in African literatures is not language in its conventional sense, but language "in the sense of all avenues of cultural communication for revolutionary purposes," hence serving as a cohesive force in contemporary African nations and this thus negates the English language as "an instrument of colonisation" (Owomoyela 2001:5). Perhaps what needs to be added here is that African writers electing to write in English ultimately are confronted with the task of reclaiming an Africa which has been claimed, controlled and dominated by a discourse of power from Europe and America, a discourse which until recently excluded African voices.

The above arguments may both in a sense apply to Nkosi in South Africa as he found himself in a socially marginalised situation where language determined social status to some degree. Culturally powerless and stigmatised by virtue of his race, he aligned himself with a western discourse: "since power is associated with unmarkedness, members of the subordinate groups feel pressurised to breach the boundary between them and the in-group, for doing so constitutes their only hope for obtaining advancement and acquiring a share in power" (7). Thus writing in English has enabled him in a sense to use this discourse to deconstruct his colonial identity and reclaim resignification through his writing.<sup>3</sup> Despite the close link between language, self definition and social construction, it is doubtful that a westernised writer such as Nkosi will agree with Owomoyela, who, although referring to African Americans, ponders on "what would they [uprooted Africans] not give to have a language that might replace English - a language that would enable them to excise from

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<sup>3</sup> in this respect see Gates's discussion on the black vernacular and the "blackness of tongue" (1988:ix)

their collective memory the traumatic history that English recalls" (9).

The 1960s was a period in South African history of increasing state oppression, a time when the identification with causes was most prominent. The fact that Nkosi's identity originates from this history must be seen as important, particularly in terms of his later construction of a self in exile. His primary interest as an emergent writer was to prevent his and other black voices from being stifled and forced underground. However, Nkosi's relationship with his South African identity is a misleading intimacy at best, as he refuses to define himself solely in terms of this; he did not seek out a South African community abroad though he remained in contact with friends still based in South Africa, for example Casey Motsisi and other friends from his journalism days, who often referred to Nkosi in their later articles (see Motsisi 1963:14). Gayan Prakash perhaps elucidates this redefinition by postulating that: "the third world, far from being confined to its assigned space, has penetrated the inner sanctum of the first world, arousing, inciting and affiliating with the subordinated others in the first world. It has reached across the boundaries and barriers to connect with minority voices" (Chaturvedi 2000:182). The views held by Prakash are valid here, as although South Africa as his natal country is pivotal in his writing and fiction, Nkosi has extended his writing to include and at the same time reach beyond the South African borders, to the African continent as a whole. This is supported by his many visits to various parts of Africa and interviews with notable African literary personalities such as Rubadiri (Nkosi 1964:14), and Soyinka and Okigbo (Nkosi 1965:62) in his earlier years.

More recently, by his own admission he does not see himself returning to South Africa even after the substantial political changes. It would appear that for Nkosi, the idea of identity is more closely linked to inter-personal relationships and the social fabric of a country, rather than the geography of the country itself. New York and other cities became only meaningful to him in terms of the people with whom he became acquainted or the daily lives he became involved in through observation. For Nkosi, it is always the presence and existence of the individuals that justifies the existence of place; to him a lack of human presence and human interaction implies an empty and meaningless landscape. Of New York he says: "So for me New York was a collection of individuals whom I loved .... and these individuals and what they said bound me irrevocable to America" (Nkosi 1983:60). In his novel *Underground People*, the character Ferguson is able to resurrect his South African identity only because the real meaning of the South African landscape resides in the people he encounters in this landscape. During an interview Nkosi stated that he had no compulsion to maintain what is called an African identity. He sees himself as an African, of course, but preferably a South African. He maintains that:

Identities are very complicated things - there are times when I don't even think about whether I'm an African or not. I definitely have never thought of myself as a European, but, there are times when I don't think of my African identity - when I just think I am *me*, or when I think I am a *writer*, or when I think I am a *novelist*, but then there are times when I hear people denigrating what is supposed to be African, so they are telling lies about Africa or about my country, when suddenly *that* other identity rears up, which is a defence of my heritage, if you want to call it that. (Lombardozi 2003:327)

Joseph Asike addresses this problem of authenticity as social beings, and writes that although trained through systems dominated by European culture, the African's concern is not with an inner voyage of discovery or a self, but rather with his public role, not his private role. The African does not ask 'who am I', but rather 'who are we.' The African intellectual is mostly seen as an uncomfortable outsider, seeking to develop his culture in the directions that will ultimately provide him with a meaningful role (in Okere 1996:29). Nkosi, straddling Western and African cultures, experienced this dilemma initially, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, concerning appearances. As a young man, and through his politicised consciousness of his oppressed circumstances, he defined himself in terms of who he *appeared* to be, as this was a prelude to gaining self-control and worth. As an adult Nkosi's developed sense of identity enabled him to see his life in continuous perspective both in retrospect and prospect and so selectively reconstruct his past. What Onyeocha says about the image of the African also applies to Nkosi, who fully understood the cultural imposition of being black as a marginalised man under apartheid: "The image of the African is one desperately wanting to be heard. Trying to outdo himself to show that he actually belongs to the society of humankind, he eagerly displays his prowess in the fields of culture ... and of intellect and civilisation" (22). Thus severed from his roots and suppressing his mother tongue, an object of curiosity to others, he did not have a sure foothold in either the received culture or his embattled one. Bhabha points out that "identity is never *a priori*, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality" (1994:49). Fanon alludes to the desire to be seen as human, not black: "I looked at myself objectively, discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics. And I understand all that was being held against me: cultural backwardness, fetishism, slavery, cannibalism. I wanted to be a human being, nothing more than a human being" (1986:xviii). Nkosi in this respect was no different from many Africans living under oppression, who sought to liberate themselves of their consciousness of being black by assimilating white mores and white attributes.

One prominent boundary which shaped Nkosi's multifaceted and fluid identity was obviously his South African experience under the apartheid system, which marked him as different not only by

virtue of his colour, but also defined the space he was to occupy through the policy of racial dislocation. Nkosi admits in numerous interviews that he considers himself as having a distinct South African identity, albeit an identity shaped and defined by a multiplicity of evanescent boundaries, each one contributing to different overlapping identities and perspectives. He consciously and steadfastly sought to evade a system which, by virtue of its racist strategies of exclusion, ultimately and effectively rendered him with a fragmented and ambivalent sense of identity. It was largely during his teaching and writing in the USA, and in his readings of modernist authors such as Conrad, Baldwin, Joyce and Faulkner, and interventions through black discourses that he discovered a positive black identity. This affirmation enabled him to frustrate the efforts of apartheid to render him marked and divided, and finally to establish a positive African identity through the radical solidarity of literature and language. Identity as a form of production is a process which is never complete. It is always in a state of reciprocation through strategies and personal defences, and is always constituted within its own convention. This is particularly important when confronted by new or unknown cultures. Julia Kristeva explains that the 'other' as alien cannot be avoided, as the foreigner is not only among us, but is within us, the hidden face of our identity:

What is hidden or repressed, creates in us a sense of existential unease ... what has been alienated in the construction of our identities comes back to haunt our imagination ... hence living with the foreigner other confronts us with the possibility or not of being an other - it is a matter not of accepting the other, but of *being in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself for oneself. (Kristeva 1991:20)

Questions of identity are at the heart of many recent South African works such as Zakes Mda's *Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), Andre P Brink's *The Other Side of Silence* (2002), Mongane Wally Serote's *Scatter the Ashes and Go* (2002) and Stuart Johnson's *The Native Commissioner* (2006). It would appear that contemporary South African writers are questioning the changes in South African society - the exploration of the themes of belonging and alienation, common to exile discourse, is ongoing as is also evident in Nkosi's writing, dating from 1956 to the present day. The urge to protest against prevailing political dispensation both during and after apartheid is constantly interwoven with the urge towards self-discovery, and Nkosi in particular uses his writing to embody his biographical fragments.

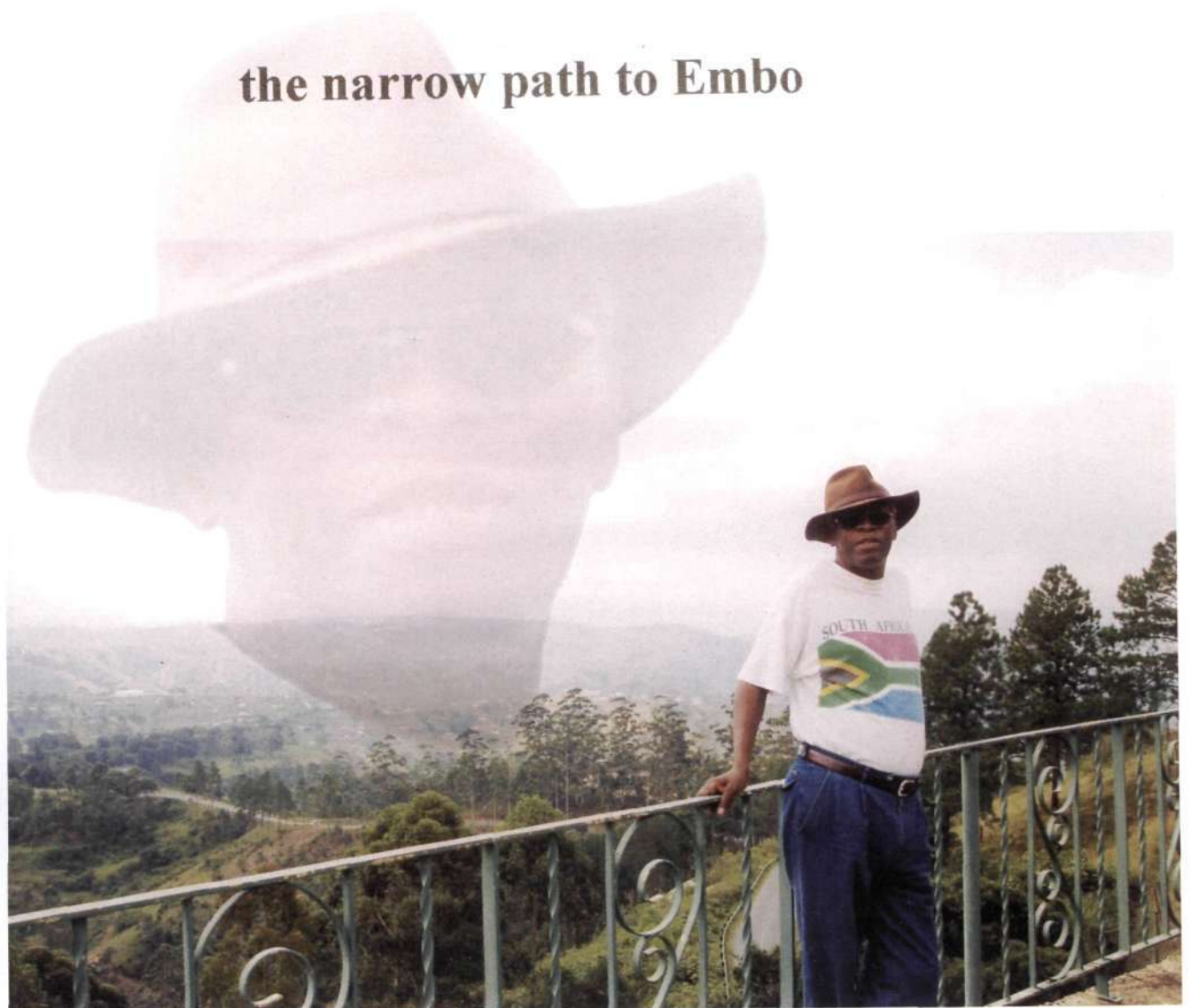
As Nkosi stated in his preface to the collection of essays *Home and Exile* (1983), his exile has taught him that to be a black South African is "to live in perpetual exile from oneself" (Gready 1994:509). However, although Nkosi continues to live and work abroad, he constantly reclaims his identity within his human community through his writing, hence becoming discursively emplaced.

He has forged himself a place in the world, not in any particular country, but in a discursive space of language and writing. Despite his ease in the global arena, it is in his writing that he finally and incontestably becomes a native to South Africa, a space and place in which he is unable to ignore the power of the South African landscape, the material basis for his artistic inspiration always. In common with Christopher Hope, it could be claimed for Nkosi: "Living abroad I find myself constantly turning and returning in spirit to the place I left behind, blinking in disbelief, and then pressing on, then wheeling back in my tracks for a more distant yet sharper view of South Africa" (Hope 1984:284). In this chapter I have attempted to outline the importance of the concepts of exile, place and identity for Lewis Nkosi and his writings, and conclude with the view that Nkosi's writing, viewed against the differing theories on exile, home and identity, is, in the words of Walder, "a testimony to what concerns us as alive and thoughtful people...linked together by forms of communication and politics which we [cannot] grasp without the present and the past - including the colonial past" (Walder 1998:5).

Chapter Two will now turn to a discussion of Nkosi's life in more detail, situating him in sharp historical context.



**the narrow path to Embo**





## Chapter 2

### Embo and beyond - a biographical sketch

my race began as the sea began  
with no nouns, and with no horizon  
with pebbles under my tongue  
with a different fix on the stars.  
(Derek Walcott in Bhabha 1994:231)

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If Heidegger's definition of place is indeed the topology of being, then it may serve to explain Nkosi's formidable and lifelong extra-territorial existence initiated by the disruptive forces of apartheid. Nkosi, cherishing the desire to be a writer from an early age, has since leaving South Africa, never again 'belonged' to any country in particular. Home to Nkosi can be defined as any place - perhaps his sense of home, as Kingsolver writes in *Animal Dreams*, is "Get to a good place, turn around three times in the grass, and you're home. Once you know how, you can always do that, and no matter what - you won't forget" (2004:235). Nkosi describes himself in "The Prisoner," one of his first short stories written in exile as a "spry, rakish figure, young, cultivated, possessed of a felicitous mind ... I was what is known to the Influx Control Department as a native of no fixed abode ... a man without any firm address, without filial ties, a man constantly on the move, a bird of passage, so to speak" (Nkosi 1975:300). To this day he is traversing continents, from New York to Moscow, from Paris to Finland, from London to Johannesburg, reconstructing home wherever he may find himself at the time, his extensive range of movement providing him with renewed perspectives, but above all, movement seems to provide him with the necessary freedom to write:

Nkosi, like his great friend Nat Nakasa, was never of fixed abode. He drifted round the township and the white suburbs, sleeping wherever someone would offer him a bed. Today, Nkosi still seems to be as nomadic as he was in his youth - 'He drifts through here from time to time - says Ben Okri, the Nigerian writer living in London ... 'he's around quite often but I don't have a permanent address for him'. (Nicol 1991:339)

This ability to thrive on a near-rootless existence may perhaps be ascribed to Nkosi's first consciousness of 'home,' a place of doubt: "I was born in a township in Durban, probably Chesterville, but I don't know" (Lombardozzi in conversation with Lewis Nkosi 2003). This absence of knowing, together with the absence of a close familial network may explain Nkosi's tempered nostalgia for South Africa. In the fiction of Nkosi, the patriarchal figure is mostly

represented as absent or as a negative force: “that” man, “was after all, an uneducated heathen, a semi-literate *iqaba*” (Nkosi 2006:38), “imprisoned forever within the implacable walls of his nightmare” (44) and represented as “all that was conservative and unyielding in the Zulu temper ... whose hard substance became harder and harder to grasp” (Nkosi 1987:49). Nkosi admits that he can recall little, if anything about his biological father, and this may have contributed to the negative representation of the genitor figure in his fiction. Nkosi was uprooted for the most part of his childhood; his family possessing no land, he was not nurtured in a traditional rural African setting, but in the confines of townships, attending state aided mission schools and moving from one township to the next, his early identity ghettoised in places of mixed races under the dominion of a white government: “First of all you have land taken away from the African people. That in itself means that they have been robbed of a site where they could construct an identity. You can’t have a culture when you are being moved from one squatter camp to another” (Goddard 1991:31).

Nkosi was later to write extensively on land issues in South Africa, “land being the mother and father of our nation,” and for as long as he could remember, “there had been trouble between the white farmers and the people, who year after year watched helplessly while their best land was grabbed by the Land Commission and re-allocated for white settlement” (Nkosi 2002:163,140). He would imaginatively write against this geographical usurping of space by recovering his remembered colonised African space through his fiction and writing, as will be discussed in Chapters Three, Four and Five of the thesis. He vividly describes an instance of government enforced removals in his novel *Mating Birds*, experienced through the consciousness of Ndi Sibiya: “after all, these were Zulu ancestral lands where generations upon generations had buried their dead, and the blood of Zulu warriors long before their final conquest by the white men, had mingled with the red soil of the valleys and the Zulu plains” (Nkosi 1987:60).

Nkosi inhabited a world largely devoid of familial stability, and apart from his mother and maternal grandmother, there were few with whom he had any immediate sense of identification, a factor which may have contributed to his later adult sense of isolation. In his novel *Underground People* Nkosi makes reference to this sense of a lost childhood: “A whole generation is growing up which has never known any childhood, which has never been young at all” (Nkosi 2002:161). Even the literature he so avidly read, such as the novels of Balzac and Hugo, was devoid of any authoritative figures which could define his life and give it meaning and a purpose. Nor were there positive African role models: “We had no literary heroes ... we had to improvise because there were no models who could serve as moral examples for us ... as a generation we longed for desperately for literary heroes we could respect and with whom we could identify” (Nkosi 1983:6). He describes

his life under apartheid with a studied detachment:

hundreds of black South Africans were banished from the cities in which they were born to the homelands ... exiled to homes they had never known or simply banished to an empty landscape ... those of us who were left behind in the urban areas were daily hounded at night under the curfew laws and expelled from the city centres to the unlit townships infested with crime ... in consequence when my time came to leave South Africa I already felt as if I were an exile; Sophiatown which had offered us some kind of identity had been destroyed; thereafter I lived everywhere, sometimes boarding illegally with white friends in the white suburbs or sleeping on chairs in the newspaper office where I worked. (Nkosi 1994:5)

It is not surprising then that Nkosi sought to root himself "in the beauty of the language" (Nkosi 1983:6), in works of literature, in his quest for stability and cultural identity. He was to discover the liberating eloquence of words in the world of literature. Even after fifty years, he remains the perennial nomad in the global landscape, truly at home only in the encompassing comfort of language and literature. Nkosi's lifelong fascination with words has provided his 'home' in language, a bastion which he comfortably inhabited from an early age, struggling through the classics with an array of dictionaries to amass a formidable and liberating vocabulary:

I was reading an incredible amount ... reading sometimes for the sheer beauty of the language ... it seemed to me incredible that there were people who didn't love words as much as I did ... or people who did not find the appearance of a new book a magical and awesomely exciting phenomenon ... I walked about the streets of the bustling noisy city with new English words clicking like coins in the pockets of my mind, I tried them out on each passing scene, relishing their power to describe and apprehend experience, I used the words to delineate faces I saw in the streets and through them evoked the luminous figures from the closed world of the imagination. (Nkosi 1957:7)

Nkosi's most stable identity has always been that of a writer, and the stability of home for him found in words and literature. This nurturing world of letters was a space created and exploited by Nkosi's imagination for his own private consumption. V.S. Naipaul speaks for all writers when he says that "words are power, not for the politician but for the writer, an essentially dangerous piece of equipment with which to forge an identity" (in Gurr 1981:91). Nkosi in his novel *Mating Birds* echoes a similar sentiment: "words were dangerous; once spoken, they could never be unspoken" (Nkosi 1987:27).

The literature he read as a young man was to form the beginnings of his literary ambition, as the

roots of his quest as a writer would lie in his prodigious craftsmanship with words. Books left a deep impression on Nkosi, as the worlds he discovered through his reading sculpted a homeplace in his memory which was to accompany him throughout his life as a writer. Nkosi writes that he “has a houseful of books...you can’t walk around here without stepping on a paradigm or cast-off theory left lying about”(Lombardozi correspondence 2007). In his novel *Underground People*, Nkosi vividly portrays both his abiding love for beautiful books and the notion of the sanctity of literature as his home; the trashing of Molapo’s books is a searing metaphor for the violation of his home in literature:

on entering the house he was obliged to step over a weather-beaten volume of a Charles Dickens novel which was lying on the floor. For some odd reason ... the sight of a book with its spine broken, its binding destroyed and the pages falling out like the hair of a victim under police torture, alarmed him far more than the discovery of bloodstains or bullet marks on the walls might have done. (Nkosi 2002:28)

Nkosi maintained that: “only writers were free to choose their own ancestors” (Hotz 1991:24); ancestors which would provide him finally with both a ‘home’ and a ‘father’. Nkosi thus names his literary father: “most of the South American modernist writers will mention their father is William Faulkner, so he is mine” (in Molver and Basckin 2005:222). Nkosi later also claimed as mentors writers such as Joyce, Kafka and Baldwin, writers whose works resonated with his own position as an outsider figure. Nkosi in a review of *Notes of a Native Son* by James Baldwin - a novel which bears striking similarities to Nkosi’s own *Mating Birds* - referred to Baldwin as:

one of my writing Fathers, I actually met Jimmy Baldwin in New York City in the turbulent 60s which he helped to make more turbulent. A great essayist and more than a good novelist... a critic once said of James Baldwin’s style that it belonged to the ideal age of great prose stylists - those finely balanced antithetical clauses remind you of 18<sup>th</sup> century writers like Samuel Johnson. Here is Jimmy Baldwin writing of the reaction of white spectators during the trial of Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s famous novel *Native Son* and wringing the last drop out of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: And they know, finally, that they do not wish to forgive him and that he does not wish to be forgiven; that he dies, hating them, scorning that appeal which they cannot make to that irrecoverable humanity of his which cannot hear it; and that he wants to die because he glories in his hatred and prefers, like Lucifer, rather to rule in hell than serve in heaven. And the humour! Baldwin remembers his religious conversion as a surrender to the powers of a charismatic woman preacher in Harlem before the streets could even claim him. When the preacher asked: ‘Whose boy are you?’ I answered at once: ‘Why, yours, of course’. (Lombardozi correspondence 2005)

Nkosi began his life in a country within which raged a three hundred year-old struggle by the disenfranchised African people to regain their identity. In 1910, after the defeat of the independent African kingdoms and the Boer republics, Britain granted the four provinces in South Africa autonomy which led to the formation of the Union of South Africa. To a certain extent, the Smuts-led government of 1943 encouraged the workers' participation, which included the black proletariat, a majority excluded from any degree of empowerment or inclusion in the South African public sphere, using the colonial practice of culture as one of its means of control. Support for Smuts was eroded by the fact that he could not satisfy the working class and this led to Malan's Nationalists winning in 1948, thus ushering in the beginning of the propagation of the apartheid programme which was to create a society based on racial differences. Perhaps the most heartless aspect of the Nationalist Party's policy of apartheid was the systematic uprooting of established African communities for no other reason than the ideological. This was already evident in the Land Act of 1913, which proclaimed eighty percent of all land to be the domain of the white man, an issue which Nkosi would passionately debate persistently through his literature. The resultant African diaspora can be perceived as a defining factor in Nkosi's life:

it is under the General Laws Amendment Act that most or all removals take place ... the people are informed by a headman that the government has proclaimed their land ... and from that date they should cease ploughing and get rid of their livestock ready for the great move ... it may take months or even years between the notification and the actual move, and by that time the people are virtually reduced to starvation ... it may come at a time when the able-bodied men are away and it devolves on women, children and the elderly to move house ... on arrival at the new area allocated by the government, they are dumped in open country with no homes erected, no water laid, no sanitary amenities provided, no schools, hospitals or clinics for miles ... there is no agricultural potential in the land nor are there jobs available. (*Sechaba* vol 5 ( 4 ) April 1971: 4)

The loss of land through expropriation together with many other racially based laws led to the foundation of the anti-apartheid organisation, the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912 in direct response to the Act of Union. The ANC was at the time a small delegation headed by Sol Plaatje and purposely formed to expose the racist character of colonial power. The delegation visited Britain to plead for intercession and to protest against prevailing discriminatory laws and practices, which Plaatje termed as "the most ruthless laws that ever disgraced the white man's rule in British South Africa" (Ndebele 1984:22). In this same year the South African Native Congress took place, a historic occasion which paved the way for African solidarity against the worsening discrimination against the African people. Despite the fact that the First World War was fought to preserve and support colonial interests, the ANC supported the Allies in the hope that it would end

the racial conflict in South Africa. To illustrate the futility of this hope, it serves to mention a notable incident in 1920, when 70 000 workers went on strike at the Witwatersrand Goldmines, but were driven back underground at bayonet point by military troops. There were many such actions during these years to improve the living standards and rights of the African, Indian and Coloured people, but these attempts were generally met with violent police and military repression.

In the year Nkosi was born, the Native Land and Trust Act of 1936 was promulgated, which was further to promote the dislocation and dispossession of black people. The Native Act of 1936 was also passed in this year, which had as its aim to drive landless black people off the land and into the labour market. Africans were required to work for a minimum of three months in a year, failing which they were penalised, either financially or with a prison term. In order to further tighten the control over the worker, the Native Laws Amendment Act was passed in 1937 which effectively restricted the movement of Africans in towns and deprived them of a right to vote. The 'native' was relegated to reserves which were mostly situated on non-productive land which was difficult to farm. The Poll Tax was added to this litany of restrictions which effectively rendered the African population destitute and dependant. These conditions began to give rise to pockets of resistance, notably the Marabastad Riots of 1943, none of which led to an equitable resolution of the growing African dilemma.

Lewis Nkosi was born into a deceptive period of quietude in what was then known as the Union of South Africa, on 5 December 1936. The Union of South Africa in 1936 had not yet become a principal arena of political conflict, as prior to 1946 or thereabouts no-one had even heard of the word 'apartheid,' a doctrine which was to be based on the myth of separate cultures, forever at variance with the essential requirements for social equilibrium. However, the South Africa Act of 1909 had by then relegated the Black, Indian, Coloured and Jewish communities essentially to second-class citizens in their own country. Most were collectively excluded from voting, the right to land, decent employment, impoverished by law and custom, and largely despised and oppressed. The insidious murmuring of discontent was even then beginning to make itself heard through a common language of protest evident amongst the non-white population, speaking out against the racial policies being constructed daily.<sup>4</sup>

Nkosi as a young man began to add his voice to the growing political discontent in an elegiac poem

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<sup>4</sup> See for example the writings of G.J.Pillay (2002), M.Dingake (1987), P.Duncan (1964) and D.Hindstone (1987) who comment extensively on the political realities of South Africa at the time.

he wrote in memory of the literary icon Herbert Dhlomo. His first poem "To Herbert Dhlomo" (1955) was a vivid exposition of an oppressed nation "mumbling in the dust" and weeping for a "ravaged Africa," in which he compels his reader to imagine the inhumane realities of the racial policies imposed by a government bent on total control. These policies, based on racially defined categories were slowly beginning to manifest as the precursor to the hypocrisy of apartheid and its legacy of resentment yet to come.

Living conditions in locations, one such being Chesterville where Nkosi and his mother lived, described as follows by the Native Laws Commission of 1948, were distressing:

The majority of such locations are a menace to the health of the inhabitants ... a disgrace ... quite unfit for human habitation ... mere shanties, often nothing more than hovels, dark and dirty and encumbered with unclean and useless rubbish ... one could hardly imagine more suitable conditions for the spread of tuberculosis. (de Kiewiet 1956:41)

In the ghettos into which our people have been herded the social conditions have deteriorated to a frightening extent. Whereas in the past such crimes as rape, murder, robbery and violence were almost unheard of in the community, today it is almost a daily occurrence in every township ... parents are forced to leave children without supervision until their return in the evening... children are getting out of hand, sniffing benzine and joining roving bands of preying gangs. (*Sechaba* vol 5 (4) April 1971:7)

In his novel *Mating Birds* Nkosi describes the township of Cato Manor through his character Mlambo: "here, when you run out of money, you will soon find that no-one cares a tuppence what happens to you. This is a cutthroat world, child of my people. Coolies! Kaffirs! *Boesmans*! ... they're all the same. Sharks who will skin you alive for the sake of a chance to put their two fingers inside your purse" (Nkosi 1987:92).

Nkosi was the only child of Samson Nkosi and Christine Margaret Makatini. He has scant recollections of his father, as mentioned earlier other than that he was a football player. His mother was a teacher, who later gave this up to take in laundry as she was forced to provide for her own mother, as well as look after her son. It is his mother Margaret whom Nkosi remembers with both deep love and bitterness, because he believes that her early death, due to medical complications, could have been avoided had those around her at the time depended less on divine intervention and more on medical assistance. Nkosi admits freely that as a young child, his mother filled his entire universe, a woman, described through his character Ndi Sibiya in *Mating Birds*, "who was fiercely determined that I should make something of my life far beyond what was expected of a Zulu boy"

(Nkosi 1987:49). He continues to reconstruct her in his fiction, perhaps as this memory of her is a tangible reminder of home, a powerful link with the past, that, *kwasukasukela*, a time existed when he once had a home and a family. Nkosi admits that the character Maureen in *Underground People* (2002) is shaped by memories of his mother, his enduring love for her expressed through the thoughts of Molapo: "... when he thought of Maureen he experienced such anguish and a sense of loss that exile from the environment which had contained them both was a kind of deliverance" (Nkosi 2002:86). Through his childhood memories Nkosi is able to measure the distance he has travelled from his past; his memories enable him to reconnect with his childhood and re-imagine home again in his writing:

but then there are other characters who keep cropping up in my writings, and one of them is my mother - who was a very beautiful slim Zulu girl - because she died young - she died in her early twenties. And Margaret keeps cropping up in my descriptions of African women. There's one in *Underground People* that I know is finally, finally traceable to my mother ... I remember once when I was a little boy, we were sleeping in the same room with my mother and my grandmother, and my mother used to hang her clothes behind a curtain cut off from our view. And a snake got inside the bedroom and had wrapped itself on the rafters just about where she would get herself dressed - and my mother was just about to get into her working clothes and she ran out of there screaming like mad - and I was a little boy - and I saw my mother trying to wrap herself to conceal her nakedness and I don't know why, but the story seems so archaic to me - the serpent and your mother - and all of it - so is that the reason why she keeps cropping up? (Nkosi 2005:238)

Novelist Camara Laye tellingly writes : "for it is to a mother to whom you turn, of whom you speak when nostalgia grips you, when distress clouds the vision of the moment ... when there is sorrow and bitterness a man finds refuge in his motherland. The mother is there to protect you. She is buried there"(in Cartey 1969:4). In the novel *Underground People*, the thoughts of Nkosi's character Ferguson turn to his mother for comfort in a moment of danger, and supports the notion held by Laye: "he felt an incredible desire to touch the limbs of his mother; to smooth the soft furrowed garments she sometimes wore at night, and to linger gently at the comfort of a mother's breast" (Nkosi 2002:262). When his mother died, Nkosi expresses his intense loss through Sibiya in his novel *Mating Birds*, that 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" (Nkosi 1987:62). In her criticism of the novel *Mating Birds* (1986), Alexander notes that although she disliked the novel, "there is a brief digression when the young man describes his mother ... this chapter lives: it glows with love. It is the only real chapter in the book" (1988:6).



digression when the young man describes his mother ... this chapter lives: it glows with love. It is the only real chapter in the book" (1988:6).

Orphaned before the age of eight, Nkosi continued to live at Embo with his maternal grandmother, Esther Makatini, who was at that time employed at a hotel in nearby Hillcrest. During a recent visit to this area Nkosi made a point of identifying the actual site where his grandmother washed white people's clothes so that she could send him to school. He recalls how as children they used to wait here on the paths for white strollers, and would smile broadly and greet them politely, which always had the desired result - the "cute little piccaninnies" would be thrown a few coins (Lombardozzi in conversation with Lewis Nkosi 2003).

Even though Nkosi had the mitigating support of an extended family group, as an introverted young child he preferred literature as an escape from a harsh society shaped by the ugly realities of poverty and hardship under the darkening shadow of apartheid. "I was an orphan, I was a lonely child, very withdrawn ... you look for a means of escape which will allow you to daydream a lot" (in Hotz 1991:24). Nkosi had at this stage not yet come across any work in English which encapsulated the experiences of the African, hence the English classics, despite the fact that they were exemplars of western culture, provided Nkosi with a sanctuary against an increasingly distorted world and an excellent literary education. English literature in the main landscaped and provided an insight into a world beyond his own stark realities, expressed through Sibiya's thoughts in *Mating Birds*: "I conclude the recollections of my childhood, a time of my life that has begun to seem, even to me, unreal, fantastical, partaking only of a false sunlit glow of legend ... it was, all the same, the happiest time of my life" (Nkosi 1987:65). This statement embodies a curious paradox when one considers the poverty and hardships of a black child growing up in a township during the apartheid years, but on reflection, as Sibiya explains: "perhaps a child does not value childhood very greatly" (Nkosi 1987:65). In an interview Nkosi was later to muse that: "if I go back to South Africa, it will be to travel around the rural areas, where my relatives are. One day I do want to write my memoirs, presumably to find out what type of child I was" (Berney 1995: <http://members.aol.com/harx1/nkosi.html>).

More importantly to the emerging young adult, literature represented a world within which he was fully in control, unlike in his daily life, which would increasingly become a quest for survival against a dictatorial hegemony through prohibitive laws. Nkosi would direct all his energy into his writing, using this as a shield against an indifferent world which sought constantly to reject him on the prejudice of skin colour. He was sensitive to the negative image of himself as an African seen

through western eyes and the western understanding of what constituted African identity. Literature would provide Nkosi with new dimensions of voice with which to express his sense of identity, in the main through his characters; for example, here is Ndi Sibiya from *Mating Birds*:

I am nothing more than...a socially malfunctioning individual ... of my actual personality, of my roots, and the meaning of my past, of the subtle and complex emotions that the merest recollection of the landscape of my childhood is still capable of evoking, Dufre is woefully ignorant. (Nkosi 1987:65)

Nkosi resented skewed perceptions based on race and commented on this in a scathing article on the African personality in his non-fictional writing as early as 1959, when as a journalist for *Golden City Post* he attended the 15<sup>th</sup> Iloerle Memorial Lecture at the Institute of Race Relations in Johannesburg: "I could not help squirming while 'The African' was being systematically and scientifically taken apart, observed, and put together again. It was as if I myself were being put under a microscope and studied as a *thing*" (Nkosi 1959:4). This resentment is revisited in his novel *Mating Birds* through the character Dufre, who studies Sibiya as an aberrant object. Black South Africans under apartheid viewed themselves as objectified and as a collective, described by Nkosi as a "thing," and by Modisane as "representative facsimiles," a featureless mass to be manipulated at will. The apartheid divide fostered little understanding of African people: "Amazingly, very few employees working for the Unions Native Affairs Department had any knowledge of a black language, or even in government departments, and natives were sent to jail because of a misunderstanding of the European officer who could not speak the language" (*The Natal Daily News* 17 Nov 1953). Often those charged with upholding the law changed these as necessary:

All Africans are required by law to carry documents bearing witness that they do live and work somewhere ... the police official flipped through our books and finding nothing amiss, seemed a bit irritated. He grabbed a telephone and called up a public prosecutor whom he had briefly informed that he had arrested some Johannesburg kaffirs ... "What can I charge them with" he casually enquired. This conversation continued for a while and our host kept nodding his head; then he slammed down the receiver and enquired dramatically "right, where are your permits to enter the city of Pretoria?" (Nkosi 1961:16)

This was the fractured space Nkosi inhabited as a youngster, an inexplicable world where any attempt to demand equal rights was considered a punishable offence. The policy of separate development impinged on all facets of daily life in South Africa, from segregated education to segregated toilets. Memmi's portrait of the colonised resonates with the above observations: "The colonised feels neither responsibility nor guilty nor sceptical ... he is in no way a subject of history any more - he

carries its burden, often more cruelly than others, but always as an object”(Memmi : 1990:158).

It was through his extensive reading of literature that Nkosi began to develop a complex consciousness of the many grave injustices of apartheid often veiled as civilizing enterprises, and the effects of these injustices on his society. He was aware of realising his life within a narrow and confining framework of racial and social policies of an exclusive nationalism, which pointedly excluded the “native” from cultural expression and knowledge. Not even the global depression of the 1930s was to affect the lives of the black people as would the Nationalist policy of segregation. Nkosi attempted to resist the artificially created confines of his world through literature:

Having discovered at an early age that I wanted to write, I began a systematic raid of the libraries during which I was continuously but graciously rebuffed by embarrassed English lady librarians, until one day in angry desperation, I cornered a mobile library for non-whites ... I grasped at the Collins classics primarily because for any slum boy, the neat leather-bound books looked invaluable posh and expensive. (Nkosi 1983:81)

Determined to escape the society around him, Nkosi constantly aspired to adapt himself to western behaviour and norms, his knowledge gleaned pertinently from its literature, education and opportunity for advancement, a trait which is dealt with more fully later in this chapter: “In those days I had two sets of reality; one was the ugly world in which I lived my trapped life and the other, more powerful one, was the world of the books I read” (Nkosi 1983:7). Nkosi, like so many of his contemporary intellectuals, was clamouring to be let into the cosmopolitan Western world, perhaps because to many Africans, the reserves were deemed “impoverished, stagnant and backward; the new Africa lay in the white men’s cities” (Sampson 2005:9). Memmi in this regard points out that when people internalise their oppression, they begin to identify with the lives of their oppressors in a conciliatory attempt to combine African and Western roots (Memmi 1990:140).<sup>5</sup>

Tribal life was deemed too ordinary, almost akin to primitivist thinking, to the emergent black middle class / intelligentsia of the Fifties. This may explain the preferred exclusive use of the English language by black intellectuals, and their love of verbosity and attention to detail to emphasise the difference in aspirations: “Tribal music! Tribal history! Chiefs! We don’t care about

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<sup>5</sup> See for example the work by Albert Memmi (1990) in particular his thoughts on the colonised subject who relegates himself to a position of ambiguity when he fails adequately to deal with a colonised self, and also works by Fanon (1986) and Said (1983) on similar issues of colonial identities.

chiefs! Give us jazz and film stars ... girls and gangsters - you can cut out this junk about kraals and folk tales and Basutos in blankets ... you're just trying to keep us backward" (Sampson 2005:7). It was against this ambivalent and unstable background that Nkosi and his grandmother moved from one black area to the next, staying with friends and family, from Embo to Hillcrest to Hammarisdale to Chesterville to Cato Manor, his grandmother constantly in search of employment to support the family. They lived for some time with their pastor's family at Embo, where Nkosi attended the local primary school. They then moved to Ladysmith and stayed with an aunt in the countryside for the next two years, a landscape which would be re-imagined in his libretto "The Chameleon and the Lizard" (1976), his first novel *Mating Birds* (1986), and which was to become the nexus of his novel *Mandela's Ego* (2006). It was during his stay here that he had the opportunity fully to learn about rural life and experience acute rural poverty; he learned how to survive on corn meal and pumpkin porridge, often supplementing this diet with flying ants and hairy tree worms. Sugar and meat were rare luxuries and whenever this was available, it was reserved for the head of the household, his uncle. However, as a herdboys, Nkosi soon overcame this paucity in protein - by mastering the catapult, he and the other boys would dispatch and roast other people's chickens "in ovens hollowed out of the giant anthills in the veld" (Nkosi 1990:32), an activity he describes in sharp detail in his novel *Mandela's Ego*. On other occasions, the family chickens were slaughtered and women ululated to the music of the drums, "and stories beginning with *kwasukasukela* [once upon a time] were told to the children by an expert storyteller" (Duerden 1966:124). His transient childhood stay with family members in the rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal stands in stark contrast to the alienating spirit of his time in urban townships with their dysfunctional and fragmented family structures and crumbling social norms. His rural experience provided Nkosi with a much needed opportunity to celebrate his African identity, as well as a brief escape from the alienating and confusing apartheid urban hostilities and its codified racial discrimination. He was extensively to draw upon the cherished memories of this temporary respite from the stultifying confines of the urban township sixty years later in his bittersweet portrayal of the innocence of a rural childhood in his novel, *Mandela's Ego*: "For country boys the bush is a great kindergarten, the open veld their primary school, a truly admirable playhouse, a theatre and a hunting ground. The other herdboys, the older brothers and cousins, are the esteemed teachers" (Nkosi 2006:12).

Thereafter, Nkosi returned to Clermont, Greater Durban, and to another 'aunt'; they lived in a shack and his grandmother found work as a domestic assistant for a doctor. They then moved to live with an uncle, the Ndokweni family, at Chesterville, having travelled a full circle back to where his life had begun. Nkosi attended schools in and around Durban, fondly remembering the excitement of having to catch a double decker bus to a primary school, then later moved to Loram High School

near Sontseu Road, Durban. He left Loram High to attend the newly built Chesterville High School, of which his family were founding members.

Nkosi admits wryly that as a child he did not play much - yet again the negative image of the patriarchal figure rises to the fore when he recalls that he mostly had to help around the homestead under the strict tutelage of a forbidding uncle. Mixing cement and sewing leather satchels were some of the chores that kept him apart from other children. He was however an avid reader and mostly read books written in English during his school years. "My sense of honour was propounded out of the romantic novels of Dumas, Kingsley and Marryat, and the love I knew best was the love of knights and ladies ... what was happening under my eye was filtered through the moral sieve they provided ..." (Nkosi 1983:8). Incapable of escaping his circumstances and repudiated by the apartheid society because of his skin colour, Nkosi sought solace from his oppression from an early age. Fanon comments on this form of escapism:

The little Negro is forced into a habit of solitude, so that his best friends are his books ... unable to assimilate, unable to pass unnoticed, he consoles himself by associating with the dead, or at least the absent ... an introvert and a sentimentalist who is always careful to contrive a way of winning out on the level of ideas and knowledge. (Fanon 1986:65)

The cosmopolitan maverick discernable in Nkosi as an adult is not unusual if one considers the wandering nature of his early years and the sharp dualities of his African life, which was constantly being disrupted and destabilised into a largely aimless existence. Cato Manor and other areas in Durban in those years comprised of a mixture of races, and Nkosi's distancing from his roots is hence understandable, as he was living in two different worlds: on the one hand an African child, removed from any traditionally ordered life and on the other hand, a child not quite adjusted to the Western principles taught in the mission schools. Lewis Nkosi's name is in itself an oxymoron, conjoining two very different codes whilst at the same time emphasising his bifurcated colonial heritage. The fact that Nkosi was only ever known by a Western forename is unusual as most Zulu children, even those whose parents were educated by missionaries, (as was Nkosi's mother) would usually give their children both English and Zulu names. Missionaries were adamant that initiates embrace the new faith without exception, and hence the priests would insist on an English name for the child.

Nkosi left Durban in 1952 armed with little more than a few books and a dictionary, to attend the Zulu Lutheran High School, a boarding school run by missionaries in Eshowe, Natal. Later he would

make Ndi Sibiya in *Mating Birds* say that he “never did hear of anything good that came out of the missionary schools” (Nkosi 1987:52). In *Mandela's Ego* the question is posed: “what need have our people to learn our culture from a white priest from the Scottish Highlands?” (Nkosi 2006 :23). The death of his mother and the prevailing political conditions during his youth had put the concept ‘Christian’ in his world to the test many times, and it had failed dismally. Nkosi’s own apathy towards the church and religion is voiced unrepentantly through the character Ndi Sibiya in *Mating Birds*: “I believe in nothing, neither in Christian immortality nor in the ultimate fellowship with the ancestral spirits. I have no faith in the hereafter ... this lack of faith is my loss. It is also my strength” (Nkosi 1987:47). It was clearly difficult to be both a ‘native’ and a good ‘Christian native’ in the discriminatory South Africa of the 1950s. Nkosi’s abiding disinterest in institutionalised religion was shared by many of his contemporaries. Many were disillusioned by the shameless hypocrisy and gross insensitivity on the part of many practising Christians who acted contrary to their Christian principles in their dealings with their black neighbours: “we, the young, suspected that the priest was a cunning expression of white liberal sentiment, and nothing more” (Nkosi 1983:4). Thus Nkosi’s move to a missionary school was for no reason other than to join a fellow pupil from Chesterville High, who had shared in his love for reading and the English classics - “So this is how temporarily I became an unenthusiastic member of the Zulu Lutheran School” (Nkosi 1987:50). He was one of the last students to be educated in a missionary school before the Bantu Education Act 47 of 1953 was enacted into the statutes in April 1955. Prior to 1955, 90% of all black South African schools were state-aided mission schools. With the implementation of the Bantu Education Act, the government eliminated all financial aid to mission schools, forcing them either to sell the schools to the government or close them. State controlled schools came into being where the ‘Bantu’, an improvement on the old colonial term ‘native’ but an equally highly charged political term with derogatory connotations, was offered a curriculum designed to prepare them for menial jobs. Nkosi, however, received an excellent literary education at the mission school, becoming “a real devil with the pen” (Nkosi 1987:85) and gained a thorough knowledge of the stories told in the Christian Bible, which he regarded as no more than an extension of a favourite English classic. As he was later to write, amongst other things that shape a writer’s biography, are the stories heard and stories told:

From my Zulu childhood I remember those legends and folktales which began appropriately enough with the time-worn formula: *kwasukasukela*; once upon a time; in the beginning. The Bible was no different. A rich storehouse, spanning an entire spectrum of every type of story known to man or woman, from tragedy to comedy and anything in-between. The themes are just as numerous, love, greed, envy, murder, death and desertion. The Bible is better than TV anytime, I don't care how many channels. Press the button and out flashes the story of a miraculous birth, the plagues, adultery, Jesus Christ teaching philosophy by the Sea of Galilee or disputing with the rabbis in the synagogue or whipping the money-lenders out of the Jerusalem Stock Exchange; Mary Magdalena the Prostitute with a Golden Heart, bathing Jesus' feet with oil and drying it with her luxurious hair; Judas the Double Agent who earned his infamy by betraying Jesus; even linguistics play their part in the repertoire. On a cold miserable day, waiting for the Crucifixion, Peter is warming his hands on the fire when a young woman recognises him by his accent and reduces him to tears before the cock crows. "You are one of them" she says. When he denies it she tells him: "You talk like one of them". The stories the Bible tells, like Samson and Delilah or The Head of John the Baptist carried on a platter have themselves generated narratives in different media: painting, opera and film. Above all, the stories in the Bible are told with a formidable clarity and simplicity that would be the envy of any modern writer. That shortest sentence in all English literature: "Jesus wept". (Lombardoizzi 2005 : Correspondence)

Nkosi's desperate need for intellectual stimulation was evident even in these early years. His early education and his abiding love for literature left him dissatisfied with who he was and eager to share his thoughts with like-minded individuals. Mary Benson makes a similar observation about Nkosi: "a young journalist who used to drop in on my office at the Treason Trial Fund (aged eighteen he'd been eager for adult conversation )" (Benson 1997:3).

Nkosi returned to Durban in 1954 and enrolled for his Matric Certificate at the ML Sultan Technical College, which was a college for Indians, Africans and Coloureds who worked by day and attended diverse disciplines in the evening. This suited Nkosi, as he was at the same time working for a fertilizer company in Durban South, and later that year at a paint factory in Umbilo, living in a single-men's compound. He recalls with wry amusement that his co-workers despised him for being a reader, a reason for this provided through Nkosi's character Molapo in *Underground People*: "clearly they understood and cared nothing for what was to them a string of incomprehensible words and phrases in a foreign language" (Nkosi 2002:184). They mocked him derisively when they discovered that he had spent his entire week's wages on Peter Abrahams' *Tell Freedom*, a book he had coveted and the contents of which perhaps had assisted him to forge ahead in his determination to become a writer:

*Drum* magazine for which I would later work was serialising Peter Abrahams' memoirs. Abrahams had grown up in the fetid slum of Johannesburg called Fetas; for a few coppers he had carried shopping bags for white ladies at the Johannesburg market on Saturday mornings; at school his clothes were shabby and threadbare, and he often went without lunch. One day, one of his teachers, a kindly, young Jewish woman, was so strangled by pity she invited him to stay behind and share her lunch sandwich; while doing so she read him a story from Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, a kind of easy digest of the plays. "Please, Miss, are there many books like that one?" "Yes, Peter," replied the young woman, "there are hundreds of other books just like this one." She donated her signed copy to her pupil. "Thank you, Miss! Oh, thank you, Miss!" From that moment a writer was born. When copies of *Tell Freedom* arrived in South Africa I was just out of boarding school and finding copies at Durban's Adams' Bookstore I yielded to an impulse and spent my first weekly wage of R32, 00 on a copy before going to confront an outraged uncle who couldn't believe that instead of contributing to the household budget I had spent a whole week's wages on a book! I still remember vaguely how Abrahams concluded his memoir. "I have broken the ice. Now that I have been published any black boy or girl can also become a writer". I thought at the time: How astonishing that the famous author should have known about me: like me, a young boy who had grown up in the slums of Cato Manor and who like him now fiercely wanted to become a writer! Thank you, Peter! (Lombardozzi 2005 : Correspondence)

More likely though, the reason for the animosity by his co-workers would have been aimed at Nkosi as a perceived intellectual and therefore an enigma in the blue collar worker environment; men who were unwittingly giving heed to the Natives Regulations Act 15 of 1911 and Dr Verwoerd's Bantu Education Act of 1953, which together ensured that there was no place for the African in the European community above the level of labourer, worker and servant. Klaaste writes that this law forced teachers such as Es'kia Mphahlele, Can Themba and Casey Motsisi into journalism and other literary pursuits. There were historically "rather few black writers, but those who were operating displayed the tortured ambivalence of lifestyle and creative style forced on them by their peculiar circumstances" (Klaaste 1991:102). These denigrations, however, served only to make Nkosi more resolute to become more than just another 'native pawn in the exploitative nationalist labour market which increasingly flaunted colour as the benchmark for employment. Modisane - who refers to Nkosi as his "faithful friend - the boy I had privately and unofficially adopted as a brother" (Modisane 1986:298) - writes in similar vein to Nkosi:



everything which I read served only to resuscitate the loneliness I felt, I wanted more from life than I got back. It was easier in my teens, I could dream of a life I expected and deserved, but growing up brought expectations and hope of fulfilment. The confinement of South Africa, the endlessness, the tedium of life in the locations bloated me in the desire for change, to find something new, another way of life, to look upon another culture to satisfy the desperate hope that there must exist in this world other people different from the white South African. (168)

The death of his grandmother in June 1955 was an immense loss to Nkosi as he had enjoyed a very close relationship with her - the woman he remembers with love and gratitude, who darned his school trousers as a little boy, refusing to have his buttocks on show for all to see, and to whom his first novel *Mating Birds* (1986) is dedicated: "For my grandmother, Esther Makatini, who washed white people's clothes so that I could learn to write" (Nkosi 1987: Dedication).

Recollections of photographs of his father in football uniform which his mother had kept drove him to attend the Bushbuck football games, and he began to write short reviews about the games he attended. These early articles were to initiate a writing career which was to last a lifetime. He sent these reviews to *Ilanga lase Natal*, the first black South African newspaper based in Durban, and shortly thereafter the editor despatched a journalist to the paint factory to locate this unknown writer. It was during this period of his life that Nkosi began actively to yearn for a future other than what he had encountered thus far:

In terms of my own personal history it was always possible ... for a young Zulu, growing up within a web of interacting indigenous cultures to live happily and without a purpose up to a certain age, purpose being a state which is marked by an awareness of future possibility; possible then up to a point to live in a sort of 'tribal imaginary' before being inserted willy-nilly into a ghoulish symbolic order where true horror tales are told, where myths are encoded into legal systems and racial fictions are fashioned out to calm or exacerbate a nervous condition; but it was finally a system that could offer no support for the errant anchorless subject. (Nkosi 2003:1)

Nkosi was subsequently invited to join the staff of *Ilanga lase Natal* on a part-time basis in 1955, and, together with Geoffrey Nyasheng, wrote mostly for the English pages, which were still under the supervision of HIE Dhlomo from his sickbed in Durban. It was during this time that he penned his first poem, "To Herbert Dhlomo" referred to earlier, a vehicle in which he carefully exposed his youthful response to the many forms of African despair and lost opportunities he had witnessed in his life thus far. In this first attempt at poetry as a medium of expression, he not only emphasised the plight of his people, but also lionised "one of the most brilliant essayists of the English language

in South Africa", (Nkosi 1975:42) Herbert Dhlomo, editor of the *Ilanga lase Natal* until his death in 1955. This prominent literary figure was clearly a mentor to the youthful Nkosi, particularly as most of the political literary critiques emanated from the newspapers of the time.

Nkosi in his earliest journal articles revealed a spirit which would remain undaunted throughout his writing, embodying a lifelong insistence on the right to be heard and his voice acknowledged. Inherent in his writing was a deep yearning for an African literature and African literary icons. He hoped to locate and establish a place and a home in literature for all Africans which would reflect, promote and share black experience, attitudes and ideals, perhaps because the theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and art galleries had throughout his youth discriminated against him. He was constantly being reminded of his position in society and shared much the same fate as did Bloke Modisane:

In the company of whites, for instance, Bloke would join in the discussion of great films as if he had the chance to see them. When asked if he had in fact seen them, he would reply rather shamefacedly that he had only read about them. They were mostly films banned to Africans. (Nkosi 1959:6)

Africans, also referred to as 'non-whites', were barred from attending live performances and other places of culture in South Africa - culture and park benches alike were reserved under the bold signs of white solidarity - 'Europeans Only / *Slegs Blankes*,' as were many other public amenities, labelled and marketed under the colonial brand names of exclusivity: 'Europeans only Ladies Rest Rooms,' 'Europeans Only Dry Cleaners,' 'Taxi Rank for Whites,' 'Suburban Station for Non-Whites,' 'Railway Medical Officer - Whites Only.'

*Drum* magazine, originally called *African Drum*, a monthly publication financed by white capital but directed at "Bantu and Negro inhabitants of this continent, whom we will attempt to reach for the first time in history, with words that will express their thoughts, their impulses, their endeavours and ultimately their souls" (Lindfors 1966:51), often invited Africans to submit literary contributions in English, to which Nkosi responded with a column in which he "innocently expounded on the importance of telling the truth" (Oliphant 2002:12). He had wanted to leave *Ilanga* because he had been accused of lacking suitable deference by the then white proprietor, and in 1956 at the age of 20 he left Durban to join *Drum* as a darkroom assistant. Nkosi recalls with real humour his first impressions of the *Drum* environment when he was interviewed by photographer G.R. Naidoo: "all he really saw of the man was his feet sticking out over the desk" during his entire interview (Lombardozi in conversation with Lewis Nkosi 2004). Later that year he began to write briefly for

*Drum* and later for its sister paper, the Sunday paper *Golden City Post*, which was located in the same office as *Drum*. When Matthew Nkoana left to join the PAC, Nkosi assumed the post as chief reporter at *Golden City Post* under editor Cecil Eprile, his inclusion as a *Drum* writer being more by default.

The move to Johannesburg was profoundly to influence Nkosi's perceptions, and would set a pattern for the maverick writer he was to become, articulating a contemporary black literary discourse subversive of colonial themes: "I left for Johannesburg - I thought Durban is such a boring place I really ought to move away from here, and I was so glad to get the chance to go to Johannesburg - *life seemed to be elsewhere!*" (Nkosi 2005:231).

When Nkosi arrived in Johannesburg, he found a city like a vast mining camp, a city filled with loneliness and desolation, "which made it desperately important and frightfully necessary for its citizens to move fast, to live very intensely, to live harshly and vividly, for this was the sole reason for their being there, to make money, to spend it and to make more" (Nkosi 1983:12). Yet Nkosi grew to love this city:

I love not just the crazily swinging buildings with their high, ugly walls. Not just the feeling of being hemmed in in a waterless desert surrounded by mine dumps. Certainly not the stifled cry of civil freedom being strangled to death everyday. I love Johannesburg in spite of these things. I love its people and the business executives going their opulent way up Main Street. The African and Coloured factory girls ... the Hillbrow bohemians huddled over their coffee on the sidewalk. (Nkosi 1959:7)

Nkosi's initial response to places was a pattern which was to be repeated in cities such as New York and Paris, London and Amsterdam - it was always the human element rather than its external features and ideologies which was able to draw him into the heart of that city, never the converse. For Nkosi, place only acquired importance and a history through its inhabitants and his interaction with them. Nkosi makes this wry comment about place: "places and cities are like women : famous or notorious, nothing one is told about them can take the place of an actual encounter" (Nkosi 1975:83).

Life in the 50s was an explosive combination of increasingly risky political activism and middle-class pleasures; for an African, life itself was almost illegal. In his essay "Farm Jails" Nkosi comments on the dangers of being black under apartheid:



# POST

# KICKED OUT FROM S.A.

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## DRUM

VOL. 5, No. 7

JULY, 1956

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Lewis Nkosi, ex-Chief Reporter of POST, needs no introduction to DRUM readers. Refused a passport, he went to Harvard with an exit permit. You'll be glad to know he's going great guns in America.

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## COLOUR LAWS BREED FEAR

... FEAR ... FEAR

## MR. DRUM'S LETTER

Dear Readers,

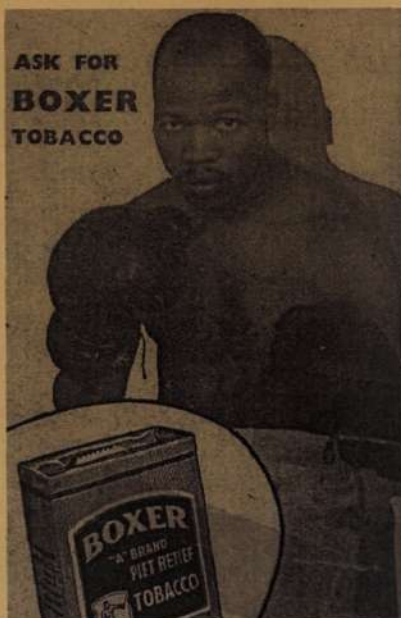
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a black skin is considered by ... members of Verwoerd's police a sufficient invitation to halt a man in the street, demand any one of a number of documents which are supposed to be attached to the living body of an African, and on his failing to produce it, to load him into the *kwela kwela* or frogmarch him to the nearest police station. (Nkosi 1963:62)

Nkosi was not only enthusiastic about his writing, but he was recklessly courageous and fiercely ambitious - "the cheeky kaffir" (Sampson 2005:42) - a journalist who would stubbornly confront the ruthlessness and arrogance of the Nationalist government, providing a much needed voice to black self-awareness. Nkosi believed that a healthy spirit of scepticism was necessary to stimulate perpetual enquiry, self-criticism and a continuous adaptation to change, a spirit which Rogosin perhaps may have discerned when he met Nkosi in 1957 at the *Golden City Post* office:

I was struck by something unusual about his face. He looked extremely young to be working on a newspaper. At the time he looked very much like a teenager, and although he was an African from Zululand originally, there was something in his appearance of an American Prep school boy, something about it in his manner also. (Rogosin 2004:30)

As a burgeoning intellectual, Nkosi plunged into his literary pursuits with vitality and fervour, writing scathing articles in which he debunked the sacred cows of the regime. Klaaste writes that:

for the black journalists of the time, men who saw their names for the first time used frequently in print, the crisis was expressed in an intoxicating mixture of discovery and defiance ... journalists were forced by their jobs and their being black, to be in the vanguard of this movement. Fired with the spirit of the times, they were grasping a private freedom outside of the law, and expressing it ... The new writers were literary guerillas, deliberately anti-social, living Bohemian lives in areas that shaped their style. (Klaaste 1991:101)

Nkosi wrote on a variety of issues, ranging from legal aid services, the Progressive Party, protestation against nuclear testing in the Sahara, trade union activities, Coloured people's issues, the Zulu embassy debacle, to name but a diverse few. To live in Johannesburg under apartheid was to live life precariously, filled with dangerous contradictions; the mere act of socialising in Johannesburg became a political statement. Nkosi voices his sense of displacement, loss and insecurity, despite the vibrance of his life in Johannesburg in his novel *Underground People*, as a sense:

drawn from some inexhaustible silence at the centre of industrial chaos, of time standing still; the illusion that nothing was changing and nothing would ever change ... a feeling of temporary disembodiment against which ... he struggled against inwardly in silence, in an effort to regain the echo and pulse of his own existence against a tide of public indifference. (Nkosi 2002:50)

Threats of violence against *Drum* reporters occurred frequently. *Drum* journalists were able to provoke the most intense fury among white upholders of the regime, their inevitable confrontation seemed to underscore the latent violence in the apartheid philosophy. In one such incident reporters tested the doctrine of Christian brotherhood and neighbourly love, by attending religious services in white churches, with the predictable result that a photographer was chased down the street by irate worshippers, and Can Themba was arrested by the Special Branch for questioning and charged with trespassing. In his novel *Underground People* Nkosi makes reference to these incidents of arrest: his "journalist friends ... all that *Drum* crew, they're always in court for the wrong reasons!" (Nkosi 2002:67). Nkosi himself was no stranger to incarceration - he was arrested in a Johannesburg street soon after his arrival because Sylvester Stein, his then editor had "forgotten to put his monthly signature on my reference book"[dompass] (Nkosi 1963:63), and he was summarily handcuffed to another man also accused of being a drifter of no abode. Incidents such as these are described in his novels, art imitating life: "What is rubbish like you doing in Johannesburg? I didn't know they allowed monkeys like you to get out of their cages and walk the streets of a big city like Johannesburg" (Nkosi 2002:89). He was refused permission to contact Stein as the police did not believe that he was a journalist for *Drum*, and in any case:

who did I think I was to demand the use of a telephone ... we were lined up against a wall by a policeman who began to inspect our papers. Every time he came across a fault ... he would hit a prisoner in the face or butt him powerfully ... there we were, fifteen of us, dripping blood over our shirt fronts, sniffing and wiping our noses, presenting generally a ... ghastly spectacle ... and then locked up for the night. (Nkosi 1963:64)

Nkosi was fortunate that he could appear in court and plead his case before a reasonable judge "in somewhat eloquent language," (64) "as others were not as fortunate and were sent to farms in the area where they were forced to work for Europeans under appalling conditions" (64). He was graphically to record these horrors later in his short stories, plays and novels.

Nkosi was sensitive to the fragility of his day to day survival, and expressed this awareness also through his passion for jazz music, which he perceived to have its roots in:

a life of insecurity, in which a single moment of self-realisation, of love, light and movement, is extra-ordinarily more important than a whole lifetime. From a situation in which violence is endemic ... has come an ebullient sound ... of all those vivid dancing good times of the body, when the now is maybe all there is.  
(Nkosi 1966f)

He commented on a mixed race party he attended on the opening night of the jazz series: "Present were Africans, Whites, mixed-bloods and Indians, and because of the free admixture of the races, the party assumed the proportions of a vast conspiracy against the state" (Nkosi 1983 :18). When South African jazz pianist Dollar Brand [Abdullah Ibrahim] was refused permission to play before mixed audiences in South Africa in 1965, Nkosi immediately questioned the lunacy of this official decision, a decision which underscored the extent to which the cultural life of black South Africans was circumscribed. To Nkosi, music did not only entertain, but also "celebrated the troubling complexities of human existence" (Nkosi 1983:65). Jazz with its distinctively African idiom was particularly important to Nkosi, who shared Dollar Brand's comment that Africa was the only continent where "music is still social and people lived their music"(Nkosi 1965 :29). He recently commented in an interview that his friend Todd Matshikiza created a style of music for the musical *King Kong* "that tried to emulate jazz music in the syntax and a quick, breathless prose in touch with the rhythm of the township" (Mackie 2006:15). Hence it was not surprising that Nkosi refused to compromise, even as a young man, unlike, according to Memmi, many other colonised Africans who accepted that "his music was like the mewling of cats ...vulgar ... and if his music nevertheless moves him, excites him more than the tame western exercises, which he finds cold and complicated, if that unison of singing and slightly intoxicating colours gladdens his eye, it is against his will" (Memmi 1990:189). Newly exiled, with no fixed address nor identity, only the burden of his past, Nkosi was later, in the depths of despair on his arrival in New York, to seek solace in music: "I thought, my God, I am a stranger here ... I wanted to hear music ... in the heart I was crying for a music which would lay the ghost and make the hideous night manageable ... only jazz could connect me to this cold brutal city now" <sup>6</sup> (Nkosi 1983:62).

The Fifties was a period of intense political activity in South Africa. It was both a time of apartheid law-making as well as a time of mass political demonstrations and defiance against these laws. The introduction of the Amended Suppression of Communism Act of 1959 placed even greater restrictions on both black and white journalists, banning many editors and writers and preventing

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<sup>6</sup> See also Chapter Four and 'Jazz in Exile' in Nkosi (1975:95) in this regard.

black journalists from obtaining press cards: "One dare not speculate as to the possible effects such a law will have upon the cultural life of the country ... South Africans are a speechless people whose fear of the spoken and the written word has created a horrible fatuity in their lives" (Nkosi 1983:126). However, Nkosi thrived as a writer despite these travails, writing on increasingly controversial issues with sardonic defiance and aplomb. His forthright attacks on the government and his vivid commentaries, born of a deep anger and resentment against injustice, abound in his many early journal articles published in the *Golden City Post*, and later in literary journals from across continents. He had little fear of political repercussions, nor did the regime manage to cow him in submission. Nkosi, intellectually defiant and unrepentant, was at home anywhere in the political colour spectrum: "I was the only African amongst the 2 500 people who attended the first public meeting of the Progressive Party at the Johannesburg City Hall" (Nkosi 1959:4). In response to Dr Verwoerd's assurance that South Africa was a democratic country, Nkosi posed a counter question in a defiant rebuttal: "if Dr Verwoerd is so sure that human nature is against racial contact, then why does he fear the persuasive nature of free discussion?" (Nkosi 1958:11) and "if we are the real representatives of the Zulu Kingdom, why should we take orders from the White Government on how to run our affairs?" (Nkosi 1959:9). Nkosi even went as far as criticising national radio: "the national radio is not only just deadly boring; it is naive to the point of stupidity" (Nkosi 1958:11).

Much like his character Molapo in *Underground People* Nkosi's earliest writing often exhibited a "self-mocking irreverent spirit, his desperate irony and his flirtation with the edge" (Nkosi 2002:10). He would maintain this acerbic irreverence, a way of looking back at the world which not even his experiences in exile would diminish. In confirmation, his friend and colleague Casey Motsisi would later comment in the March 1963 issue of *Drum* following Nkosi's departure from South Africa: "Ah, how I miss that angriest Angry Young Man, Lewis Nkosi," (Motsisi 1963:14) remembering him fondly for "his curt comments in the backroom taverns ... the man who used to wear his heavy overcoat through heatwave and hassle - I would have sworn he took it to bed with him had he not shared my bed with me occasionally" (14).

*Drum* was more than just a work place to Nkosi, it was "a symbol of the new African cut adrift from the tribal reserve - urbanised, eager, fast-talking and brash" (Nkosi 1983:8). Nkosi commented recently that: "*Drum* writers shared a certain kind of quest - the influence of *Drum* in my writing has to do with the ethos of *Drum* rather than a particular style" (Mackie 2006:15). The *Drum* environment epitomised a new life away from the townships of his youth; it was where the intellect and the imagination could freely create new worlds away from black oppression, being able to distance himself from the hardships he faced in his daily life by being very wry, very ironic and



approaching each day with youthful vitality as is evident in much of his early journal articles. Nkosi, searching for both a philosophy and a morality, had finally found himself a niche amongst individuals with unique intellectual styles, morally tough, urbane writers who voiced their political stance through brutal humour rather than sentimentalising their lot. These were Nkosi's colleagues who initiated him into the world of bright city lights, shebeens and their queens and love across the colour bar, and where he discovered a world of white liberals who openly flouted the political dictates of the government. Klaaste recalls Nkosi and Nakasa were "the guys who wrote memorable stories about the suffering of the blacks ... and played a double role by having many liberal white friends and generally fraternised with white university students, going to mixed parties just so as to rub shoulders with whites" (Klaaste 1987:52).

Nkosi was to comment on white liberal thinking of the time in his novel *Mating Birds*:

This was the necessary and tragic consequence of the ill-conceived projects of social uplift, which white liberals fondly hoped would transform the natives into something like white men ... natives, left to their tribal environment, were alright, but given a smattering of education, they became spoiled and thought of themselves as equals to white men. (Nkosi 1987:82)

Nkosi was since his youth intellectually removed from the masses, and constantly yearned for a wider cultural world away from the anarchy of township life. He did, however, reserve a distrust of the majority of white liberals of 1957 with whom he socialised frequently, and was particularly bitter about them, his main complaint being that "the liberals talked about these principles of equality, but didn't do anything about it and were actually pretty unreliable when it came down to the real situation" (Rogosin 2004:37). This distrust never left him, because he had predicted that liberals would most often align themselves with the winning side: "it is not the kind of support that can withstand the vicissitudes of African politics forever; as Africa reels from one coup to another and instability remains a pervasive phenomenon, liberal support becomes more and more tired, equivocal and uncertain" (Nkosi 1971:30).

It is a distrust which even in his later novels *Underground People* and *Mandela's Ego* still resonates in the consciousness of his characters: "Many [English speakers] wanted the Boers to succeed. Only they wanted the Boers to do the dirty work for them" (Nkosi 2006:57). Nkosi, like Modisane, held that even though the most articulate critics of apartheid were the liberals, who "showed a gloomy picture of the poverty of the Africans, [yet] in their own backyards their house servants were not paid much better" (Modisane 1986:163). The favourite question liberal South Africans "loved to ask was

'are you race prejudiced' ... and at this point we become noble and conforming" (122). Even in *Underground People*, Nkosi observed through Anthony Ferguson that "the White South Africans who craved forgiveness or protested at being misunderstood by the civilised western world were a bore" (Nkosi 2002:17). Nkosi extended his distrust even to the liberals in Europe, whom he saw as being no different from their South African counterparts:

It is the bane of the colour bar ... to endure crashing bores solely on the grounds that they are the people with whom one shares a community of suffering. For soon enough it becomes clear ... that when the chips are down in Harlem and Notting Hill Gate, and the hordes of reactionary white citizens are out in the streets looking for 'just any nigger', none of his white friends ... is likely to be out there in the streets with him. (Nkosi 1983:107)

Nkosi had as colleagues seasoned literary personalities such as Henry Nxumalo, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane, Can Themba, Casey Motsisi and Arthur Maimane, men who would richly contribute to his developing awareness of identity and belonging:

These black pioneering journalists rested on a writing tradition dating back to the Lovedale Press of 1926. The younger breed were skittish, kicking the prose medium around, giving it blood and bones. Their ghetto environment was depressing as it sharpened their vigilance and inspired a language that might lift them out of the morass. In a perverse way the ghetto gave them a purpose to live, tame and hug it. The pay was goat's droppings, really: average 40 pounds. There were no workshops and one had to educate oneself ... and the world knew nothing of what the new "black" journalism was minting there across the tracks. (*Mail and Guardian* 11 Aug 2000)

This was the milieu into which Nkosi stepped on his arrival in Johannesburg in 1956. Keenly observant of his new environment, he experienced Johannesburg as a city "totally devoid of an inner life, a brash and ugly city with vulgar buildings, noisy with chaotic traffic and homebound crowds" and compared this to the provincial Durban of his childhood: "a port, a resort town casual and luxurious, blessed with warm sunny beaches, but hardly inspiring, with not much presence or vitality" (Nkosi 1983:12). His preference for Johannesburg as a creative environment is still evident today - when he arrives for visits to South Africa, he spends most of his time in this city- because for Nkosi, Johannesburg as place remains closely linked to the early formation of his identity as a writer. Having to compete with other like-minded individuals also meant clearer identity boundaries and stronger membership loyalties for Nkosi. His commitment to writing reinforced his identity, his systems of meaning and his definitions of reality, and provided his writing with consistency and

motivation. Having lived a rootless existence for the greater part of his early life, writing relocated Nkosi within a social system which provided him with stability and refuge; writing not only provided the boundaries which gave definition to his precarious position in society as a black man, but also initiated his presencing in terms of a more focused and determined commitment. It was within the boundaries of Johannesburg that he learned to become streetwise, where he began his writing career in earnest, and where he was able to develop an arresting black voice.

On his arrival in Johannesburg, Nkosi initially resided with the Motsisi family in the Western Native Township which was across the tram tracks from Sophiatown, the cosmopolitan ghetto of its time, the South African Harlem, "the busiest, brightest ant heap ever when the Government spade turned it over" (Motsisi 1963:14). This township came into existence in the early 1900s when Johannesburg was little more than a dusty mining centre, and was one of the few areas in South Africa where black people could own property. The community, made up of a variety of cultures and races, began to take shape in the early 1920s, and irrespective of its location alongside a vast municipal refuse dump, it was to the African mind a symbol of the vitality of the emerging urban South Africa. However, as the political situation worsened, "Sophiatown became 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" (Nkosi 1961:16). A similar description is found in *Underground People*, where defiance by the township residents was their expression of an "abiding faith in the validity of their often questioned existence" (Nkosi 2002:134). To the government of the day the multiracial composition of Sophiatown stood in contradiction to their efforts to enforce segregation. It was viewed as nothing more than a congested and sordid slum, which was the purported reason for the razing of this township. This move simultaneously also curbed any possibility of subversive elements fomenting defiance against the nationalist policy of separate development. The razing of Sophiatown was more than the destruction of place, it was the death of a community's spiritual and artistic wealth and the thoughts of Bloke Modisane serve to voice the sentiments of the people of Sophiatown when it was razed in 1958: "Sophiatown was a blitzed area which had suffered the vengeance of political conquest, a living memorial to the vandalism of Dr Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd" (Modisane 1986:6). Shortly before the Sophiatown community was relocated to Meadowlands in 1958, Nkosi moved into a shack fondly named "The House of Truth" in Good Street together with Can Themba (*Drum's* later associate editor) then with Morris Hugh and later with Nat Nakasa in Gerty Street. Nkosi and Nakasa set up house together and placed an advertisement in a Johannesburg newspaper:



Wanted - one Jewish girl to live in Sophiatown for study purposes. Come to 65 Gerty Street or phone 467 894, and despite all the legislation of South Africa, they got one ... Ruth Goldin, a tall and thin girl - I could not banish the impression that she was originally constructed by being drawn through a hole, like a wire. (Klaaste 1987:52)

Nkosi and Nakasa both “displayed the same ambivalence about being black writers and scholarly liberals, and together wrote erudite articles for *Drum*. They also read books “poached from the Wits University library, and immersed themselves in black American writing and the works of Russian novelists” (Klaaste 1991:103). Nkosi commented later that “the 50s were a bad time to be seen carrying a book. I suffered because I used to carry a lot of books from Wits library and the *tsotsis* used to call me Spy. They were right - one was smuggling a culture from white suburbs into the townships” (Mackie 2006:15). Nkosi and Nakasa were close friends known for their:

dilettantish ways and their Bacchanalian forays into the shebeens of Aunt Suzie’s and Smiles, located within reach of John Vorster Square, the white man’s drink was freely available and often supplied by white Afrikaners who collected protection money for their services, and while Nkosi and Nakasa had to go to the shebeens like all of us during those days of prohibitions, they were given special rooms and treated with deference by the shebeen queens. (Klaaste 1991:11)

However, his colleagues and those who knew Nkosi during his brief stay in Johannesburg, painted a rather different picture of him as a young man to the one which Nkosi projected of himself in his writing. It was apparent to those who knew him that he in truth disliked living in Sophiatown and townships in general. He left Sophiatown after a brief stay and moved in with a white girlfriend in Parkview, a plush white suburb in Johannesburg comprising mostly of professional people. During the last days before leaving South Africa, he also shared a house with two Wits University lecturers near Zoo Lake in Johannesburg. Nkosi has never admitted to this dislike, but the memory of the adversities of township life has endured; even in 2004, whilst staying in an upmarket Durban hotel, he commented that “I came to South Africa to visit my home town, Durban, and be with relatives and so on, but primarily, to finish *Mandela’s Ego*. Which is why, instead of the townships, I’m holed up here, writing and answering invitations” (Madondo 2004:16). It seems that his locus of desire was the western lifestyle and its trappings; he was in the words of Sibiya in *Mating Birds*, “a native who, in order to gain a glimpse of a white paradise ... from which many blacks were excluded, tore up barriers, trampled down fences and defied custom and convention” (Nkosi 1987:12). Nkosi does not make mention of any of these details in his many articles on Sophiatown and his journalistic lifestyle, preferring to align and identify with black hardship throughout, constantly using cohesive references such as ‘we’ and ‘us.’ Nkosi was aware of his own ambivalence created by the dichotomy

existing between "Houghton and Sophiatown", and comments on this as follows:

In spite of all its vitality, the township is impoverished because of its lack of contact with the other side ... it is wasteful of much life, of its energy, because of its lack of the Houghton kind of discipline. The enthusiasm for life and the abounding energy is fine, but it achieves nothing until it is disciplined into creative channels ... our national life is responsible for the over-glamourisation of the townships, which in turn is responsible for making people believe that the township is going to produce the real vital culture of this country ... I think the township is going to add an arresting sense of the world to our culture. But it will need the techniques of Houghton. (Nkosi 1959:10)

Whatever else Nkosi might be, he was unarguably unlike any of his contemporaries. Whereas many were unable to endure the apartheid system, their sentiments echoed in the words of Modisane : "everywhere I turned there were these prohibitions taunting me, defying my manhood with their arrogance, their challenge was driving me out of my mind; I was only a man afraid and apprehensive" (Modisane 1986:123), Nkosi turned the tables on apartheid by defying the system "with an arrogance and a pomposity that was plainly reprehensible" (Klaaste 2000:9), taunting their prohibitions, seemingly unafraid and unaffected. He had an excellent understanding of the subtle social rules of the whites, gleaned in the main from his extensive engagement with western literature. Standing on the boundary, neither completely belonging nor suffering outright rejection, and driven by his conviction of what he *should* be, he cocked a snook at the virulent anti-black and segregation laws of the 1960s and resided quite openly in Parktown, a suburb and its people whom he describes in his novel *Underground People* as "the half-assed liberal white bakkies ... who were atoning for the sins of their parents ... and who did not know very much about African cultural traditions" (Nkosi 2002:61,71). Hansen similarly describes Nkosi as not happy about living in Sophiatown and as someone who "enjoyed being with white women" (Hansen 1998:31). He was seemingly not cowed by racist laws and in a rare stance of defiance made it quite clear to the world at large that he was not the "garden boy" at the Parktown house, carrying a copy of Sartre under his arm, firm in his belief that the way people treated one depended on the way one dressed and the way one looked whites in the eye (Nicol 1991:338). Despite his defiant stance, Nkosi was acutely aware that his position as outsider, much like his character Molapo in *Underground People*:

demanding that his survival would depend very much on the faculty of exceptional vigilance, on a detailed observation of people with whom he had to deal. He had to remember the minutest aspects of their appearance and behaviour, however trivial. Not only the sound of their voices or the shape of their bodies ... but also such things as whether they shined their shoes in the morning or properly knotted their ties, he had to observe how they held a cigarette between their fingers or even the way they chewed their food. (Nkosi 2002:137)

Nkosi was notably concerned with appearances: "He adopted the intellectual style naturally and with his smart shoes and books, jacket and tie he seemed the epitome of a 'situation', a man trying for a serious position, which ironically, *Drum* could not give him"(Nicol 1991:337). This is something that, incidentally, he still practices today, as even recently he was described as "cutting a very Victorian dandyish figure" by interviewer Bongani Madondo (2005:16); "dominating the room in his brown fedora, wide smile matched by a magnificent and well modulated voice" (Mackie 2006:15) and "dressed in exquisite ash suits, cowboy hat and a swagger stick, he could easily pass for a cosmopolitan fop...the Dickensian Mayor of Casterbridge"(Akubuiro 2006:4). I append Memmi's thoughts to Nkosi's concern with appearances:

The shrewder the ape, the better he imitates, and the more the coloniser becomes irritated ... he will track down that telltale nuance in clothing or language, the "lack of good taste" which he always manages to discover. Indeed, a man straddling two cultures is rarely well seated, and does not always find the right pose. (Memmi 1990:190)

Es'kia Mphahlele observed that "clearly Nkosi had a hang-up about white girls and never could make up his mind whether he should be married to a white - it seems to bother him a lot" (in Nicol 1991:338). To this day this still seems to 'bother' him because most of his fiction includes references to mixed relationships, and throughout his life he has been in and out of relationships with white intellectuals, and currently resides with a third white partner. It is possible that Nkosi, with the image of self-negation imprinted on his psyche by the dominant cultural discourse and the ideology of apartheid, saw interracial relationships as a stepping stone which would enable him to improve his precarious economic and social position, and perhaps to bolster his self-representation as an artist and writer. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon examines this very issue in terms of a sociocultural perspective: "The black man wants to be white ... black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thoughts, the equal value of their intellect" (Fanon 1986:12). Nkosi's lifelong involvement and fascination with white women may have had its origin in the sense of freedom these women awakened in him, by being able to conduct a liaison with white South African society.

Perhaps it was driven by the need to belong, drawn by their unselfconscious sense of belonging: "When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity, and make them mine" (63). In his novel *Mating Birds*, Nkosi makes much of the attraction to white women, where on two occasions he repeats the mantra through his character:

never lust after a white woman, my child ... our ways are not the ways of white people, their speech is not ours ... young people who talk to you out of the corner of their mouths while they blow smoke in your face. They say this is learning. Some, I'm told, even go abroad and marry white women. (Nkosi 1987:52)

Nkosi has often stated that it is the very issue of cultural *difference* that interests him profoundly, and perhaps, as he nonchalantly commented recently, his attraction to white women was simply "a case of 'vive la difference' which made life so interesting" (Lombardo in conversation with Lewis Nkosi 2005). Flying in the face of his own tongue in cheek wisdom, Nkosi's relationships with white women are not altogether unexpected when one considers the following by Fanon on the colonised subject and interracial relationships: "to what extent may it not represent a kind of subjective consecration to wiping out in himself and in his own mind the colour prejudice from which he has suffered so long ... in this fact he finds access to complete equality with the illustrious race ... the ruler of people's colour" (Fanon 1986:71). Nkosi has always been very private about his marriages to white women, hardly mentioning this in his writing. In an interview with Brian Worsfold, he simply referred to his second marriage to a white academic as "being in Poland for very personal reasons" (Worsfold 1990:71). Memmi contributes to this by arguing that there are two modes of escape from the colonial relationship for the colonised: assimilation or revolt, or a third alternative, emigration. Nkosi being a pacifist and disinclined to any form of physical violence, would, in order to survive, opt for an assimilation process which would at the same time provide him with a comfortable life style amidst his only other alternative, the mayhem of township life. He "changes his condition by changing his skin, and cleverly hides his past, his traditions, in fact all his origins which have become ignominious ... a mixed marriage is the extreme expression of this audacious leap" (Memmi 1990:188). Nkosi makes reference to this in *Mating Birds*, when Sibiya comments that: "he pointed me out as a tragic example of what white liberal education can do to simple good-natured natives, stimulating as it was ... not only a love of a western style of living, but also an unbridled desire for white women" (Nkosi 1987:82). Mkwugo Okoye's explanation of the African's capacity for optimism and courage despite his situation in terms of identity formation, may explain Nkosi's pursuance of a western lifestyle, which he maintains even today: "I had no need for complexes of contempt, rage or dissembling; everywhere I moved I saw myself as the equal of the people about me - a pardonable sin after emerging ... from a long period of repression and



humiliation" (Okere 1996:46). Nkosi's life under apartheid limited any choices he may have had, and as mentioned earlier, his only options were to either withdraw physically from those conditions, attempt to assimilate or fight to change them.

Nkosi's fast lifestyle enabled a bohemian identity. Sylvester Stein who was the editor of *Drum* when Nkosi joined, comments that Nkosi "was a very good social drinker, but I think he had problems in his life, mostly to do with drink" (Nicol 1991:338), understandable in view of the company he kept. Nadine Gordimer had this to say about him: "Lewis was such a funny, cocky young man - immensely sophisticated at the age of eighteen, nineteen. And yet such a strange phenomenon" (Nicol 1991:338). Klaaste remembers Nkosi as having a "strange kind of colonial arrogance that sat at odds with *ubuntu* and did not suffer fools - or unknown writers like me - gladly" (Klaaste 1991:11). His colleague and friend Ruby Mayet reflects that "if someone had said to me that he had committed suicide, I might well have believed it. Because he was a bit strange" (Nicol 1991:339). Memmi's portrait of the colonised subject may explain this many layered perception by Nkosi's colleagues: "First, by taking up the challenge of exclusion, the colonised accepts being separate and different" (Memmi 1990:202). Jean Hart, Can Themba's white mistress remembers Nkosi well, and suspected that he:

wore glasses when he didn't need to, for appearance sake. He was a bloody awful writer; he tried to write in a scholarly, literary style and he would use very long words. He would come around to our house and borrow the heaviest, thickest book. Lewis, who had no background to give him access to these books, would struggle through them and you knew he was reading page by page by page and he was actually reading it even though there was no context in which to place it. But he would read it and memorise a few phrases which he would throw out. For him it was like wearing a badge to be able to quote a bit of this or that. And he would walk around with these books ... he would have a loud discussion on the book he was reading so that everyone in the office knew he was talking intellectual. (Nicol 1991:339)

The following reference by Fanon on the notion of inferiority complexes amongst the more educated Africans may be relevant thus also to Nkosi:

the wearing of European clothes, whether rags or the most up-to-date style; using European ... forms of social intercourse, adorning the Native language with European expressions; using bombastic phrases in speaking or writing a European language; all these contribute to a feeling of equality with the European and his achievements. (Fanon 1986:24)

Nkosi's role as '*Drum* writer' may be seen as largely a construction by himself and the critics, as his very early columns were linguistically weak. His colleague Obed Musi, who went to meet him at the railway station on his arrival in Johannesburg, described him as: "Tough! Him! Oh God! - he used to carry a copy of James Baldwin's *Go tell it on the Mountain* under his arm. He was never assigned to the courts or township stuff: he did the egghead stuff - the background stories" (Nicol 1991:36). Nkosi will say that he covered the Sharpeville disaster for *Golden City Post* together with Nat Nakasa, helping to transport the wounded to the hospitals after the shooting. Nkosi wrote an article on this event, "Lessons learned from the Emergency" which was published in *Golden City Post* in May 1960, but in this article he makes no direct reference to the Sharpeville incident; the article serves rather as an intellectual comment on the general political situation in South Africa at that time. An article written by Ronnie Manyosi was published in *Golden City Post* on 27 March 1960 on the Sharpeville incident.

Despite all the persistence in hiring Nkosi as a reporter, he was initially assigned to the dark-room at *Drum*, a job he disliked, but which left him with some interesting knowledge about photography. It only lasted a month or two, then his name appeared with the reporters on the masthead (Lombardozi in conversation with Lewis Nkosi 2003). His colleagues however have this to say: "An Nkosi by-line is a scarce thing in those late 50s *Drums*. Although his name appears on the masthead he was working almost exclusively for *Golden City Post*, so his inclusion as a '*Drum* writer' is by default and also because it is a mantle he likes wearing" (Nicol 1991:336).

For Nkosi, it was necessary to throw around tough sounding statements, particularly in the hard and brash environment of *Drum* with its larger than life characters. The fact is that Nkosi experienced the 50s era as a 'fabulous decade' rather than a decade of struggle against a ruthless and implacable form of totalitarianism. His disinterest in becoming involved in the armed revolution confirms his stated aversion to crises and violence. It can be argued that he harnessed the political situation to advance his personal status and career as a writer, as apartheid provided him with a very fertile field of detritus, certainly once abroad. In a sardonic article written in 1959, Nkosi wryly comments on his political status as a black man:

I want to celebrate the physical fact of my colour. Not that I am particularly proud of being black. Neither am I ashamed of being black ... I don't have to struggle hard to achieve anything ... I am in the enviable position where I can just sit back and blame everything on the colour of my skin. (Nkosi 1959:61)

If at times his role and actions may have been embellished by him and others in some way, this can

be viewed in terms of Nkosi's early experiences as a marginalised individual, yet in the *'Drum'* time finding himself part of a politicised intellectual world. Memmi supports this when he considers the colonised mind: "He was torn between what he was and what he wanted to be, and now he is torn between what he wanted to be and what he is making of himself. Nonetheless, the painful discord within himself continues" (Memmi 1990:206). Burger concurs with a similar observation: "With ... all the stories we shape ourselves ... we fabricate yesterdays for ourselves which we can live with, which make the future possible" (Burger 2005:16).

During this time Nkosi not only wrote copiously as a journalist, but was also envisioning a theatre workshop for emergent playwrights, and in 1958 wrote to Mary Benson, the then secretary of the Treason Trials Defence Fund and a founder member of the Africa Bureau in London, that:

we have started an Actors Studio here modelled on Lee Strasberg's in New York ... and although we are working against great odds, it is stimulating to watch our boys and girls exploring the inner coils of Urban Africa ... every Sunday we are at the Studio - a bare room in the Union of South African Artists ... A white friend of mine is writing a play. (Benson 1997:3)

The friend Nkosi was referring to was Athol Fugard and the play *No-Good Friday*. Nkosi participated in its first performance at the Brooke Theatre, Johannesburg which was reserved for whites only. The play was moved to the Anglican Church in the centre of Johannesburg and later to the Bantu Men's Social Centre in Johannesburg, in August 1958. The city by-laws prohibited whites and blacks to perform together on the stage, and since Fugard could not play the part of the white priest in his own play, Nkosi was persuaded to play the part "as a very black white priest in order to save the production" (Lombardozzi correspondence 2007). As Mary Benson aptly observes, South Africa had become a cultural desert through the repressive apartheid laws, yet it failed to crush the creative spirit in the emerging young journalists and playwrights of the time, and their illicit friendships and collaboration across the colour bar. They believed that the best way to deal with the colour bar in Johannesburg was to ignore it. In fact, it seemed that racial restrictions stimulated rather than discouraged worthwhile discourse. Fugard, as did Rogosin, also experienced Nkosi's sense of the creative exuberance of Johannesburg, and commented that "it was one of the most exciting times ever! The energy in the air!" (Benson 1997 :7). Nkosi was still questioning the dynamic influence of this place four decades later: "There's some peculiar quality about Johannesburg. Is it its energy? Inspiring, altering energy? Powerful human spirit?" Jozi, now and in the 1950s, exactly what is it about the place?" (Madondo 2005:16).

Nkosi, together with Can Themba, Nat Nakasa and Bloke Modisane, introduced the Fugards to the vibrant but chaotic Sophiatown fondly known as “Kofifi” to the locals, the memories of this township immortalised in a number of plays written by Fugard. Sophiatown similarly became the cultural Mecca for a number of artists, and the *primum mobile* for *Come Back, Africa* which was written and filmed in 1959. Filming took place secretly under the pretext that the producers and cast were working on a documentary. Nkosi, as commentator and member of the cast, together with Bloke Modisane, assisted Rogosin to develop the script as it was being shot and whilst Sophiatown was being demolished under the Group Areas Act. Rogosin wanted to expose the truth of apartheid to the world, working with “people who were experts on their own life ... it was realism fictionalised to convey realities with immediacy” (Madondo 2005:16). Rogosin sought to create an authentic cinematic experience which would voice the truth of the African experience under a separatist regime ruthlessly obsessed with skin colour and capture the truth about Sophiatown, which also included its misery of arbitrary arrests, its illiteracy, its poverty and its helplessness. Sophiatown was also a political hotbed, as support for Nelson Mandela, the Indian Congress, the ANC and other political organisations came from the people of this cosmopolitan township. Nkosi commented on the gangsters of Sophiatown as follows: “We respected them not for their killing, but because in defying the state, they occupied an almost political position” (Nkosi in Mackie 2006:15). The portrayal of Sophiatown as being simultaneously an impoverished slum and a cultural mecca for artists in the 1950s was also supported by artists such as Fugard and Rogosin through their legacy of drama and visual media portraying aspects of township life under apartheid, as it was: “part of a global ecumene ... part of a larger urban conglomerate ‘where the action is,’ where cultural process is somehow intensified, the Soho, the Greenwich Village... of Johannesburg” (Gunner in Stiebel and Gunner 2005:51). Sophiatown was more than a township, it was home to a people whose resilience and stubbornness in the face of oppressive and discriminatory laws refused to be extinguished: “In these circumstances it is not remarkable that a great many natives succumbed to the temptation to set their face against law and order. What is remarkable, is that the vast majority still remain law-abiding and responsible citizens” (*The Natal Mercury* 10 September 1958).

The year 1960 marked a watershed. Shortly after Sophiatown was demolished by the Group Areas Act, displacing and uprooting its many inhabitants, the Cato Manor Riots and the Sharpeville protest march followed, a reaction predicted earlier by Nkosi at a meeting at the Witwatersrand University in March 1960. This peaceful protest march would become known as the Sharpeville Massacre necessitating the government to proclaim a state of emergency, the entire situation ultimately coalescing into the consolidation of African nationalism against a police state. It would also go down in the annals of South African history as the catalyst which would force the government to

rethink its pass and curfew laws. Nkosi commented in a journal article shortly thereafter, that it was hoped that “for the first time the white community has been made aware of Africans not just as a ‘native problem’, but as human beings, desperate human beings who have genuine grievances” (Nkosi 1960:4). However, contrary to the desired outcome, Sharpeville was the prelude to the implementation of an even more repressive second phase of the apartheid policy. Nkosi expresses as follows his ability to survive the destructive onslaught by apartheid:

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, for without a suicidal attack on Dr Verwoerd’s armed forces these qualities seem to provide the only means of defence against a spiritual chaos and confusion which would rob any man of his mental health. (Nkosi 1983:25)

From time to time there were other major events, such as the Zeerust Riots, which Nkosi covered together with Ronnie Manyosi. This particular incident became a *cause célèbre* and appeared on the front page of *Drum*, because Nkosi and Manyosi were arrested by the local chief of police, who handed them over to a collaborative chief and his tribal supporters. Accused of being communists from Johannesburg who had come to stir up the local population, they were severely beaten by the community. The chief was subsequently sued by *Drum* Publications, who won their case: “We were heroes that Sunday all over Sophiatown” (Lombardozzi in conversation with Lewis Nkosi 2004). Nkosi also travelled with the Treason Trialists from Johannesburg to Pretoria once a week to write the Treason Trial Diary. His radio short story “The Trial” may have had its roots in these diaries. Despite Nkosi’s involvement in political assignments, he consistently maintained an aloof distance from active political engagement as a journalist. Even before he was exiled, he had already chosen language and writing as his tools, preferring these to revolutionary actions:

for me journalism had never been more than an interesting place where one might be given a chance, if one were lucky, to write a good story once a week or perhaps a well turned-out column at least once a fortnight. Nevertheless, with the usual arrogance of ambition, I thought there were other things for me. I was in the newspaper business for many things, but the most important was to learn to use the language. (Nkosi 1968: 110)

Most of the *Drum* writers were not overtly political, preferring to broaden their horizons rather than subordinate their self-expression to the struggle: “*Drum* had a house style, and the house style was to laugh...self-pity was out of the question in *Drum*” (Akubuiro 2006:4). Nkosi never developed a liking for the so-called ‘struggle’ literature, because he felt that “it became the emblem of revolutionary credibility to say that language doesn’t matter if the content is good. I belong to a

different era" (Hotz 1991:24). In Chapter Three this statement will be more fully explored in terms of the views Nkosi holds on South African black writing and writing generally through a discussion of his non-fiction writing.

Soon after Sharpeville, this historical event recounted in Nkosi's novel *Mandela's Ego*, the official political opposition was outlawed and forced underground. Open resistance to apartheid had deceptively declined, but only because the government had mobilised the police and commando units, who were now in total control. By 1961 the legalised apartheid onslaught on human dignity began to manifest in earnest in all spheres of black daily life, fuelling the deepening resentment against oppression through a common language of protest. Convictions began to increase for influx control transgressions; the Urban Areas Act 21 of 1923 ensured destruction of the homes of many, increasing hardships and humiliations; the bizarre restrictions of the Immorality Amendment Act of 1950 were made law - Nkosi points out in his novel *Mating Birds* that merely *conspiring* to transgress this Act resulted in court action (Nkosi 1987:127) - as did the Race Classification system and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act 55 of 1949. Even possessing magazines containing pictures of mixed races was to incur ridiculously hefty fines; poll taxes and hut taxes rendered the poor poorer; urban Africans faced constant humiliation, removals, imprisonment, enforced labour; women and children were prevented from entering towns; pass laws were tightened to further restrict freedom of movement. Nkosi, familiar with the Pass law comments in *Underground People* on this law, which to the law enforcers were "another kind of sport, only more violent ..." (Nkosi 2002:88). All black males were required to carry on their persons at all times an identity document derisively called the "dompass" by the African people: "in South Africa a black man could not be born, get work, marry, die or be buried without the hated document" (Nkosi 2006:58). From 1967 to 1968 a total of 668 327 Africans were arrested for contraventions of the Pass Law Act, largely minor offences like failure to produce a passbook on demand from an accredited official of the law. As Nkosi explains:

sometimes you were caught with your pants down. A sudden kick on the door ... a khaki uniform, police stick and glittering handcuffs: "permit you kaffir," and that was that. 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. (Nkosi 1983:28)

Habeas corpus was negated by the 90-Day Detention Law of 1966 which legalised the right to detention without trial up to six months, creating convenient loopholes for the police who now could assault and murder behind closed doors with impunity; the enforced Reservation of Separate Amenities Act 49 of 1953 transformed toilets and park benches into political tools to sow hatred and

resentment; schools and churches were controlled through prohibitions; beaches were re-zoned; racial categories were enforced; the right of association was criminalised and the police became synonymous with brutality. The then Governor-General C.R. Swart (1962) authorised the police to use force, including force resulting in death, against anyone who incited others to stay away from work or thwarted any government undertaking. Any 'native' who could not account for himself where she or he might cause trouble was dealt with there and then, as the aim was not to make an arrest.<sup>7</sup> Nkosi illustrated the mindless brutality and cruelties against people of colour by separatist control in many of his early journal articles:

The Jo'burg policeman is also different from any country policeman. He is not just crudely cruel to the African. He combines the harshness of a small *dorp* policeman with the twentieth century sophistication of a Jo'burg culture, which makes him capable of exquisite swear words. "Don't you know you are a Kaffir," he will ask in hurt disbelief at an African who dares to talk back. Then his hand shoots out ... sometimes his cap falls and he waits patiently for his victim to pick it up for him. (Nkosi 1959:7)

Many South Africans were killed and injured under these conditions, apartheid superseding human and moral values in its devolvement into a totalitarian regime. These conditions are indelibly etched in Nkosi's consciousness as to this day he graphically reconstructs and transposes the facts of many remembered atrocities into his three novels<sup>8</sup>.

In 1960, the head of the Institute of Race Relations in Johannesburg invited both Nkosi and Nakasa to a dinner where they met the visiting Head of the Nieman Foundation. Mr White was so taken with the two black intellectuals that he approached the Nieman Foundation, which in turn offered Nkosi an Associate Nieman Fellowship that same year, and Nakasa one year later, inviting them to study journalism at Harvard. However, the Government refused to provide Nkosi with a passport, who in any case, much daunted by the prospects of losing the comfort of what little roots he had, was initially hesitant to leave: "As a writer I felt that to be without roots and without a country would sap me of the vital energy and inspiration that I could draw from the life of my people - I had no desire to become an American or an Englishman, so what was I to do, but stay?" (Nkosi 1961:18). Nkosi had resigned himself to the idea that he was not going to leave, but Harold Wolpe, a lawyer and

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<sup>7</sup> See G.J.Pillay - *Voices of Liberation* HSRC 1993 for additional information on the above.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed history of legislation under apartheid and historical information on the powers of the Police Force and the laws of the time, see for example De Kiewiet (1956), Duncan (1964), Bernstein (1994) and Israel (1999).





friend to Nkosi threatened the Government with Supreme Court action, invoking the obscure Departure from South Africa Act. This forced the Government to provide Nkosi with an exit permit, a little known and hardly ever used document issued under the Departure from The Union of South Africa Regulatory Act of 1955, which also required Nkosi to sign an undertaking to leave the country, never to return. In accordance with the Suppression of Communism Act of 1959, his name was entered in a register of banned persons in South Africa, which meant that his writing could no longer be published or even quoted in South Africa, banning his person and silencing his voice in this country. His newly conferred exile status effectively declared him non-existent in his country of birth, thus rendering him marked, yet permanently erased.

These extraordinary and bizarre events were to set Nkosi apart from his exiled contemporaries, in the sense that whereas they mostly fought against leaving, Nkosi in effect forced the Government to issue him with a one way exit permit. Nkosi left Johannesburg in December 1960, in time to escape the looming abyss when African nationalism would fully confront the myopic stance of apartheid in a sustained atmosphere of political and social hatred a year later. This confrontation was to last another thirty three years, a period which would also coincide with Nkosi's departure into exile and his return home on his first visit to South Africa, and would provide the exiled and politically sensitised Nkosi with a platform for his writing on various African and anti-apartheid issues. Nkosi was later sardonically to comment that he had pioneered the exit permit and his only contribution to the struggle "was to open the doors to exile" (Oliphant 2002:12). His leaving signified the closure of a chapter of his life, partly forged in the turmoil of the notorious South African political cauldron on the one hand, and partly shaped by that extraordinary, albeit short-lived, black renaissance period of the 'Fifties people' of the *Drum* era. It heralded a new chapter, one which he with hindsight, would preface with the knowledge that his exile would bring him "face to face with a self whose emergence would have been inconceivable" (Nkosi 1983:viii) had he remained in South Africa. Nkosi was able to survive his removal and severance from his history and his community, primarily because his true sanctuary lay in language and writing; he chose to withdraw into exile, a journey which was to take him to the boundaries of his creativity and a clearer understanding of his life.

Nkosi was indeed fortunate to create a distance between himself and a society obsessed with race and violence, as this distance would grant him the much needed freedom of thought and enable him intellectually to contribute more effectively to the fight for African aspirations through his writing, than would active physical participation. Nkosi's exile placed him on the brink of a wider intellectual world within which he was to extend his already prolific writing career, reaching out to a wider readership than he had imagined, a literary career which is still ongoing five decades later. Thus, if

the purpose of exile was to silence Nkosi, it failed spectacularly. However, his ambivalent experience of exile situated him in an experience Joseph Brodsky terms the 'tragicomedy' of the exiled writer and which can be applied pertinently to Nkosi: "the democracy into which he had arrived provided him with physical safety but rendered him socially insignificant. And the lack of significance is what no writer, exile or not, can take" (Brodsky in Loffin 1998:11).

After leaving South Africa, Nkosi briefly stayed over in London to obtain a visa from the American Embassy, on condition that Britain would guarantee to accept him back once his scholarship had expired. He possessed no travel documents other than the exit permit, a document with which customs officials on his arrival at Heathrow were largely unfamiliar: "Good God, Tim, do come and take a look at this" (Nkosi 1983:vii). Nkosi's exile effectively rendered him homeless with no documentation that would claim him as citizen, other than the exit permit, which served to underscore his alien status. However, the unfamiliar sense of freedom that life in London provided heightened Nkosi's awareness of the true impact of the restrictions the government had placed on African lives in South Africa: "Never had I found it more urgent to smash apartheid in South Africa than I did last night during my first taste of freedom." The realisation that for the first time in his life he was "free for a moment to think, to love, to create without suffocation," crystallised into a deep resentment against the futile suffering of his past, and urged him towards the irrevocable severing of any remaining ties: "I was glad to be out of that stinking hole ... I passed South Africa House near Trafalgar Square and stifled the urge to throw a stone" (Nkosi 1960:11).

Nkosi arrived in New York in January 1961 to begin his studies at Harvard University, Cambridge Massachusetts, where he would always be remembered as "the Nieman Fellow who could not go home" (Gates 1986:3). Despite his guarded stance towards his new environment fostered by his sense of ambivalence, he was overcome by the sheer dimensions of his new home, his estrangement disrupting the categories of native and immigrant. Nkosi's initial reaction was to "flinch from this strange cold place," his alienated status becoming a sudden conscious truth, his sense of loss overwhelmingly acute, as "there went up to my throat an insane, childish cry which demanded of this land that it should enfold me, love me more dearly than all the others ..." (Nkosi 1983:53). Nkosi was to discover that the much vaunted African brotherhood failed to coincide with the reality he encountered in New York; initially he did not receive much brotherly recognition from other Africans, compounding for a brief period his status as the 'other'. In July 1961 whilst he and two friends were walking home in the early hours of the morning, they were attacked and beaten up by a group of Whites:



*Lewis Nkosi: London*

For me the irony was inescapable. Here we were, two South Africans, one white, one black, being beaten up in New York City for being together ... Lying on the ground, Joylon (sic) asked why he was being punished, and the thug informed him [that] "that's what comes of walking with a nigger!" (Nkosi 1961:27)<sup>9</sup>

New York was a city unlike Nkosi had experienced before. He initially found the city alien, cold, brutal and above all, lonely - descriptions prominent to a consciousness faced with the confusion of displacement.<sup>10</sup> Nkosi's early lifestyle, however, had rendered him a seasoned nomad and hence he chose to draw inspiration, rather than deprivation, from his exiled status, as he needed to define himself as more than merely the sum of his South African identity of differences.

Nkosi soon developed an affection for New York city - an "awful kind of grabbing, gold-digging bitch, yet capable of extravagant passions" (Nkosi 1983:56). He recreated a sense of South Africa in this alien environment, as Harlem evoked memories of home and Sophiatown through its same "sprawling rich life despite the deprivations which people so obviously suffered ... with the same kind of philosophical resignation which was so familiar to me" (Nkosi 1983:56). For this reason Nkosi returned to New York, a city which offered him a multiplicity of personalities during his summer vacation away from Harvard, and took up an apartment in Greenwich Village, a bohemian haven for the creative individual seeking a sense of community. In his isolation of exile, Nkosi welcomed a sense of fellowship wherever it was available. It was here that he revived his erstwhile journalistic penchant to fight for justice and picked up the cudgels for other writers and artists - one such instance resulted in a letter to the *Village Voice* in support of the poet e.e. cummings, who was about to be evicted from an apartment he had been occupying since the 1930s. "How about that for civic duties in New York for a Zulu boy from South Africa!" (Lombardozzi correspondence 2004). Finding small bars in obscure places was a favourite pastime of Nkosi, a pattern he repeats even today whenever he visits South Africa. He enjoyed the artistic ambience of the Village, as here he found "a shared sense of identity"; it was a place of "harmless frolic" and moreover, "rarely ever violent" (Nkosi 1983:69). It was here, enclosed within the self-conscious decadence and shabby narrow streets of the Village that Nkosi worked on his first play, *Rhythm of Violence*, a three-act play dealing with racial and political issues in South Africa, written in response to the first act of sabotage

<sup>9</sup> Even as late as 1971, despite strict anti-segregation laws being in place, Nkosi as a black man was unable to find accommodation for his visit to the University of California (Irvine) and had initially to settle for a sleazy motel room in the city.

<sup>10</sup> See also Chapter One where issues of exile are more fully discussed, and also Siedel (1986) and Gurr (1981) on the exile condition.

by the ANC at the Johannesburg Railway station in 1961.

The Village was able to provide for his world as a writer. In the writerly spaces of the many bookshops which remained open until well after midnight, Nkosi was able to share his passion for literature with like-minded people, even with the booksellers, who "sometimes engaged you in a discursive scholarly conversation" (Nkosi 1983:61). Nkosi draws on this community of creative 'like-minded people' as newly exiled, he needed their support and his writing "as a way of dealing with the world and as a way of dealing with my own madness...for if art... can be said to control our madness, it does so by imitating it" (61). To Nkosi, New York was a collection of individuals, and "the things they said ... passionately burned forever in the consciousness of my mind," the world of language becoming the binding force which bound him to place and provided him with a sense of home. Thus to Nkosi as the outsider, New York was more than just place; the city was essentially "a collection of individuals and its literature," and these were the central elements which ultimately 'bound' Nkosi to place more than any propaganda or ideology would, where he could creatively discourse on "the life of the imagination." To Nkosi, an absence of these important consolidating elements would render place as nothing more than a tourist attraction "where people wandered about aimlessly, walking in and out of shops, bars and cafes, selling futility to every stranger" (Nkosi 1983:60). Nkosi recalls his lifelong dislike of tourist attractions and tourists, whom he regarded as intrusive: "too well fed ... fraudulent knaves ... bumbling about all over the countryside in ignorant pursuit of the unreal" in his novel *Mandela's Ego* (Nkosi 2006:108).

1962 proved to be an enormously active year for Nkosi. He left New York to return to and settle in London, becoming a literary journalist, writing for, inter alia, the *New Statesman* and *Spectator*. He wrote "The Alien Corn" subtitled "We are Marching," a short story which was to serve as an extract for a novel, yet unnamed, whilst visiting the haunts of writers and journalists in the Soho district. A footnote to this story mentions that Nkosi, "spanning Harvard ... London and West and East Africa in the past year, has almost completed his first novel, from which 'The Alien Corn' is an extract" (*Fighting Talk* 1962 :10). It is not clear which novel is being referred to, as this story does not relate to his later published *Mating Birds*. In June 1962 Nkosi attended the first African Writers of English Speaking Africa Conference at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. This was an historic occasion for African literature and its writers, organised by Es'kia Mphahlele and the Mbari Writers Club of Nigeria, in conjunction with the Congress for Cultural Freedom. It was attended by African writers such as Achebe, Soyinka, Okigbo, Modisane and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and playwrights, poets and literary editors from various parts of the English speaking continent. Nkosi commented on this auspicious occasion in his article "Press Report" published in the *Guardian* in

August 1962:

it seemed to me that ultimately, what linked various African peoples on the continent was the nature and depth of colonial experience: and this was the final irony. Colonialism had not only delivered them unto themselves, but had delivered them unto each other and had provided them, so to speak, with a common language and an African consciousness; for out of rejection had come an affirmation. (Nkosi 1962:1)

For Nkosi this was a most rewarding experience, as he was able intellectually to interact with his peers, fondly describing their presence as "a company of literary cutthroats, out to get one another at the slightest provocation" (Nkosi 1962:1). He remembers the obstinate spirit of an historically marginalised Africa running through the proceedings, that of a "harshly self contemplating irony", (1) writers who were young, impatient and sardonic, mocking and irreverent, writers mirroring the characteristics and indomitable spirit Nkosi himself possessed in his early beginnings as a writer during the brief renaissance of the 50s in South Africa. From 1962 to 1965 Nkosi was the producer of the series "Africa Abroad" at the Transcription Centre based in London, a programme designed for African radio on African cultural issues. Nkosi was first a staff member and then later became editor of the *South African Information Bulletin*. Es'kia Mphahlele had asked him to take over the editorship of the *Bulletin* as he was leaving for Africa to set up a Cultural Centre in Nairobi. Nkosi edited the paper from London, which was a digest of news about political events and resistance in South Africa, garnered mostly from media articles sent to Nkosi from South Africa. He remained actively involved with the *Bulletin* until 1968. Nkosi was at the same time also the moderator and interviewer for the NET radio series *African Writers Today USA* until 1965, a non-commercial programme consisting of a series of educational public broadcasts on cultural issues.

In August 1963 Nkosi visited Paris for the first time en route to Lagos to interview several African writers and novelists, amongst others Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Mazisi Kunene and John Nagenda for an American television company. He used this opportunity to visit his long standing friend Breyten Breytenbach, who preferred to view himself as an emigre, and who had offered free accommodation whenever Nkosi took a train to Paris. Nkosi's first experience of the Paris landscape was typically in terms of human attributes, that of "an old whore in a dirty shabby corset" (Nkosi 1983:83), a city disappointingly far removed from his "Paris of fiction" he had first known in Durban when his early boyhood created an ideal "through the power of adventure and romance expounded in the literature of Dumas, Balzac, Flaubert and Hugo" (Nkosi 1983:81).

In this year he also wrote the short stories "The Promise" and "The Hotel Room," and the essay

"Farm Jails," central to all these being the common themes of race and politics in South Africa, which will be discussed fully in Chapter Four of the thesis. In 1964 Nkosi again visited Paris, and this time he encountered not the 'drab whore', but a Paris of "imperishable beauty and ineluctable romance" (Nkosi 1983:83), both images a reflection of his own state of mind at the time, an incisive indication of how easily the duties of a writer may be changed according to the context. Nkosi wrote another short story in this year "Potgieter's Castle," and his play *Rhythm of Violence*, banned outright in South Africa, was published by Oxford University Press in 1964. This play was the first play written in English by a black South African since 1936, and was first performed in the J.K. Randle Hall in Lagos, Nigeria in October 1965.

1965 would prove to be another productive year for Nkosi. His collection of critical essays was published under the title *Home and Exile - Critical Essays* by Longman in London. He wrote two more poems "Jealousy" and "Spanish Roses (for Theresa)," and another short story "Come Back Alicia". (This story was never published and is unavailable). Despite having been abroad for four years at this stage, and despite the intellectual stimulation that new places and new people afforded him, Nkosi remained at odds with his exiled status as the other. His early essays are evocative of his life as an exile, at once a stranger and yet at home, driven by the primary concerns of the exile's mode of being in the world. The search for an identity, for self-confidence and acceptance, and above all legitimation - the inner voice of the emigre continually reminded him that he was :

living on a frontier that cuts through your language, your religion, your culture. It tells of long distance journeys and relocation, of losses, changes, conflicts, powerlessness and of infinite sadness that severely tests emotional resolve. It tells of new visions and experiences of the familiar and the unfamiliar, and for those who come from elsewhere and cannot go back, perhaps writing becomes a place to live. (King 1995:xv)

In September 1965, Nkosi attended the Conference on Race and Colour at Copenhagen at the Hotel Europa. This was to be a notable encounter between Scandinavian and African authors who first met in Stockholm at Haselby Castle, and then later split up into groups, some travelling to Norway and Finland before all coming together at Copenhagen for the final farewell colloquium. Nkosi commented that: "about twenty or more scholars, writers and observers, all carrying glamorous names ... sat in the conference room analysing the whys and wherefores of racial hate" (Nkosi 1965:111). In this year Nkosi became the literary editor of *The New African* in London, a post which he held until 1968. *The Classic* - the South African counterpart of *The New African* founded by Nat Nakasa - was "a literary quarterly as non-political as the life of a domestic servant, [and] was named

after a laundry near the offices of *Drum* magazine in Johannesburg, and a front for a shebeen where many of *Drum's* staff used to go for a quick illicit drink" (Nkosi 1965:165). These two literary magazines, *The New African* and *The Classic*, were funded in part by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which had its headquarters in Paris. This organisation was rumoured to be funded by the CIA and used by them as a cover organisation when necessary. Towards the end of the 1960s this rumour became fact "when it was revealed that several foundations including Farfield which had paid my own school fees at Harvard, were using laundered funds from the CIA with which they supported journals, writers' and artists' clubs through the Congress for Cultural Freedom" (Nkosi 1990:33). In his preface to his collection of essays *The Transplanted Heart* (1975), Nkosi sardonically was to comment that: "I am therefore in an unusual position of having to thank that many-tentacled Intelligence Agency for their support without which some of these pieces might never have seen the light of day" (Nkosi 1975:vii).

In 1965 Nkosi received the Dakar World Festival of Negro Arts Prize for his collection of essays in *Home and Exile*. In 1966 he wrote a short story, "As For Living," which dealt with issues of miscegenation similar to those which were later to be raised in his novel *Mating Birds* (1986). In 1966 Nkosi again visited Paris, this time accompanied by his wife Bronwyn Ollernshaw, a British national who worked at the BBC at the time. Under the guidance of Breyten Breytenbach, Nkosi, ever aware of his exile status and with the exile's perception for the odd and the exotic, was introduced to a different Paris yet again, this time a place "that taught that exile is a modern condition ... where exile spoke to exile, each knowing the truth of his loneliness only in the private cells of his body" (Nkosi 1983:87). Together with the Breytenbachs, Nkosi and his wife travelled to Fomentera, Spain. Shortly thereafter he departed for Brazil to address the United Nations Conference against Apartheid: "My address to the conference made headlines in the biggest newspaper in Brazil, my interventions prominently reported...because I spoke as a writer and not as a member of a political organisation, an independent voice eschewing slogans"(Lombardozzi correspondence 2006).

In 1967 Nkosi finally received his British citizenship, having missed a deadline previously by five years. He acknowledged his new citizenship in an interview with Worsfold later: "I'm living in England, which is still my country - I'm a naturalised Briton" (Worsfold 1990:71). He attended the African-Scandinavian Writer's Conference in Stockholm later in this year, questioning on this occasion the South African writer's commitment to political issues, commenting that the focus should preferably be on being good writers. Despite his busy schedule he found time to address an audience at the University of Denmark on the issue of apartheid, and shortly thereafter published "The Prisoner", a short story which exudes a brooding bitterness against the many hypocrisies of the



apartheid era. Later that year en route to Biafra shortly before the war there, Nkosi was arrested in Cameroon for not having a passport (the documents were still being processed) and he was promptly jailed for a day before permitted to continue to Nigeria. He could have escaped being jailed, but had adamantly refused to pay the bribe requested for this privilege.

In 1968 Nkosi wrote two more short stories, "Holiday Song" and "Muzi: A Short Story," fiction with the same themes of apartheid and forbidden inter-racial relationships, themes which would find resonance to some degree in all of his fictional writing - the reasons for this recurrence being discussed earlier on in this chapter. 1969 saw the broadcasting of Nkosi's short story "The Trial" adapted for radio by the BBC and produced by David Thompson. This story also deals with the recurrent themes of apartheid injustices, inter-racial relationships and the ambiguities of exile. On March 22, 1969 "The Minister of Heart Transplants," an amusing sketch about a white man's reactions on receiving the transplanted heart of a black man, was presented at the Lyceum in London as part of the Sharpeville Memorial Concert to raise funds for the Anti-Apartheid Movement in London. Stage and film personalities such as Sheila Hancock and John Cleese of the *Fawlty Towers* TV series as well as other well-known writers and directors contributed to the success of this event. Although intended as a lighthearted look at racial issues, Nkosi addressed the more serious issue of the legal position of obtaining organs for transplants after death and the irregularities which had come to light at the time surrounding heart transplants and donor issues in South Africa.

In 1970 Nkosi commenced with a four-year diploma in English Literature at the University of London to enhance his professional teaching, which would also provide him with access to the Graduate School in Sussex. 1970 also saw the production of "Virgin Malcolm Look Not So Pale," (revised for British TV as "Malcolm" in 1976) which was first produced under the auspices of the Institute for Contemporary Arts in September and directed by Lionel Ngakane. This unpublished play, commissioned by Swedish Television, deals with the predicament of a black South African revolutionary who has an affair with the wife of his white employer, a district commissioner in a Bantustan. Sheila Allan, the well-known TV and stage actress, played the role of the white woman who seduces the revolutionary in order to escape assassination - again present is the theme of interracial relationships which underpins much of Nkosi's fiction. This play was again later produced at the ICA Theatre and the Bush Theatre in London in 1972.

In 1971 he was appointed Visiting Regents Professor in African Literature at the University of California (Irvine), the same year his twin daughters, Joy and Louise, were born. During his stay at Irvine he was able for the first time to: "read many of the texts and to meditate on many themes,

questions and problems posed by African literature ... I desired to set down in writing some of the insights which had come to me then; at least, to raise some of the questions, if nothing else" (Nkosi 1981:i). These insights were to form the basis of his third volume of essays, later known as *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature* (1975). Three months later, in April 1971 Nkosi left Irvine and returned to London in time for the broadcasting of his BBC radio play, "We Can't All Be Martin Luther King," a play set in London in the 1960s which has as theme the complexities of racial politics and the recurrent theme of the marginalisation of the black artist in Britain, and is based on the lines of a black American 'protest' poem: "Come on Baby, Shake That Thing, We Can't All Be Martin Luther King".

In 1972 Nkosi was invited to participate in the BBC programme "Second Look" in which writers recalled their personal perceptions of Britain formed from afar and derived from their first encounters with English literature. Nkosi discussed the parallels he believed existed between present day Zulu society and the England of Shakespeare's time: "Ultimately, it was the cacophonous swaggering world of Elizabethan England which gave us the closest parallel to our own mode of existence; the cloak and dagger stories of Shakespeare ... came closest to reflecting our own condition" (Nkosi 1983:13). Modisane also shared Nkosi's views on the parallels which existed between township life and Shakespearean times: "The natives are always smiling, they're a happy people: how can anybody say they are oppressed and miserable? Even in Shakespeare's time people have been known to 'smile and murder while they smile', here recalling the death of their colleague Henry Nxumalo who was found stabbed to death in a gutter in Sophiatown (Modisane 1986:89). Paul Gready and Nkosi offer some insight on the diversity of literary knowledge within the wider community of Sophiatown of the 50s, which was quite extraordinary - where tsotsis forced intellectuals to recite pieces of prose. Nkosi and Modisane would spend time "holding intense discussions listening to Modisane's formidable collection on jazz and classical records of Mozart, Beethoven, Bartok and Stravinsky and listening spellbound to the recorded monologues of Olivier's Richard III and Brando's Mark Anthony" (Nkosi 1990:11). Instances such as these no doubt contributed to the claims that "Sophiatown resembled in atmosphere the rough and tumble of Shakespeare's Elizabethan London" (Gready 1990:143).

In 1975 Nkosi obtained a Diploma in English Literature from the University of London, and two years later in 1977 he was awarded his MA degree from the University of Sussex with a dissertation entitled "Daniel Defoe and the Rise of the Middle Class", his interest in this topic already evident in his essay on Defoe in *Home and Exile* (1965). The reason for this choice of topic was because he was not permitted to research the same author for both Masters and doctoral thesis, so:

I thought Defoe fitted the bill because I was in my neo-Marxist phase of Althusser/Pierre Macherey interpretation of texts in which spots of "blindness" and self-contradictions the text exposes the working of ideology and sources of the so-called "false consciousness". Thus, although Conrad was not against colonialism, his fiction works to undermine the imperialist project ... and Crusoe's imperialist project exposed internally by the text. (Lombardozzi correspondence 2007)

It is in this year that he also began writing on his novel *Underground People*, a novel which was to focus on the political struggle against apartheid rule in South Africa. Nkosi published a second book of critical essays entitled *The Transplanted Heart: Essays on South Africa* in 1975, an eclectic collection of essays and reviews reflecting Nkosi's changing outlook on current affairs, politics and writing. Nkosi's awareness of his deepening isolation through the widening rifts created by government policies, particularly in the act of the banning of literature and the censorship laws which intensified from 1948 to 1963, is clearly evident in this collection of essays, which illustrates that: "to be out of step with the prevailing mood and opinions as are many of the writers, artists and intellectuals, is to live in a strange limbo" (Nkosi 1975:11).

In 1976 he began working on a play, "The Red Rooster" - intended as a radio play - with a traditional slant about the mystification of the public by a black politician who planned to sacrifice a rooster in order to assist him in his advancement up the political ladder. The play was commissioned by NOS Holland, but Nkosi never completed this work which he dismissively refers to as being "still somewhere in a trunk in Lusaka" (Lombardozzi correspondence 2004). However, he did complete "The Chameleon and the Lizard," a libretto with 90-odd lines in Zulu which was set to music by Professor Stanley Glasser, Head of Music at Goldsmith's College University of London and translated into English by Nkosi himself. It was first performed at Goldsmith College in 1971 and later produced in London by the Bach Society in 1976. This work was also recently performed in South Africa in June 2003 during the New Music Festival Indaba held in Pretoria. The libretto is divided into eight sections, each featuring different choral voices, its simple folk music evocative of the South African rural landscape, the very same landscape described in his later novel *Mandela's Ego*. The opening lines "Hail! Hail! Thou who rules the ancestors!" introduces Nkosi's retelling of a delightful Zulu legend which tells the story of how man came to be mortal subject to death and decay, and possibly explains the intense dislike of the chameleon by the Zulu people to this day.

In May 1976 Nkosi attended a three-day "Art Contra Apartheid" workshop at the De Populier Cultural Centre of Amsterdam, an event conceived by his lifelong friend, Mazisi Kunene, and supported by Ernst Veen of the De Populier Cultural Centre. The workshop was attended by writers

from Africa, Europe and the USA; those from South African mostly exiled artists, such as Dennis Brutus, who focused on issues of exile and the black exiled writers; Nkosi presented a paper entitled "South African Writers in Exile". The irony of such a conference being hosted in the Netherlands did not escape Nkosi's acerbic attention to history:

If van Riebeeck, founder of the first Cape settlement in 1652, had been around in 1976, he would have been astonished at the spectacle, at the very audacity of it; for when van Riebeeck and his first batch of colonialists landed in the Cape little did they think that 324 years later more than thirty South African writers and artists, black and white, would be taking the 'word' back to Holland as it were, where it all started. (Nkosi 1976:106)

In 1977 Nkosi and Stanley Glasser composed a cycle of six Zulu songs and dedicated this work, "Lalela Zulu" (The Street Songs), to the King's Singers on their 10th anniversary. The songs were set to music by Stanley Glasser, a South African professor of Music and the Head of the Music Department at Goldsmith College, University of London. It was performed at the Royal Festival Hall, the Manchester Trade Hall and the Queen Elizabeth Hall London, whilst EMI made a recording for a BBC album at the Whitfield Street Studios, London. 'Listen [*Lalela*] to things Zulu' embodies various selected aspects of life in the city of Johannesburg, exposing through music its joys and sorrows, and ranging from a vibrant city life to the gaiety of the dance halls. These songs are more broadly discussed in Chapter Five of the thesis.

In February 1978 Nkosi wrote an article "Campaign to free Ngugi wa Thiong'o" published in *African Currents* in support of the mounting international demands to the Kenyatta Government to secure the release from detention fellow novelist Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who was imprisoned without trial in Kenya, on account of his play criticising social inequality and the state of emergency in Kenyan society.

In 1979 Nkosi participated in the "Horizonte '79" Festival in Berlin in celebration of African culture together with other writers, including Bessie Head, Dambudzo Marechera, Sembene Ousmane and Wole Soyinka, even writing a poem for this occasion. This festival was also the setting for the famous confrontation between Nkosi and Camara Laye who, speaking no English, was under the impression that Nkosi was attacking his work *Radiance of the King*. "There followed a shouting match until it was explained to Laye that I had been *defending* him" (Lombardozzi correspondence 2006). Nkosi returned to Africa in this year and took up his post as Senior Lecturer at the University of Zambia. He had applied for this post which was advertised in the *Guardian* whilst trying to

complete his doctoral thesis on Joseph Conrad entitled "Paradox in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad: Its Social and Political Determinants," under the Conrad scholar Cedric Watts at the University of Sussex. He had already finished writing *Tasks and Masks: a Study of African Literature*, and was debating to present that for his PhD, but "I was too arrogant - I preferred to go for a doctoral thesis on a white writer, so I chose Conrad as my subject" (Isaacson 1991:3). However, Nkosi did not complete his thesis on Conrad, and was awarded his doctorate on the contents of his critical essays *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature*, published in 1981.

The choice of Conrad as his thesis topic is not altogether unexpected, nor is this as arbitrary as it may seem when one considers two issues central to this study - language as home and the exiled subject's quest for identity. Writers who adopt a language not their own to write in is not a common phenomenon, yet both Conrad and Nkosi chose English over their native idiom and wrote *all* of their work in English. Conrad's complex life history of displacement in some instances bears a number of interesting biographical parallels to that of Nkosi's. Conrad, much like Nkosi, was familiar with conflict and upheaval from an early age, having been born an involuntary exile, and as a young boy spent much of his time reading the English classics. Conrad's Polish father, as a result of his political activities, was deprived of his land and exiled to Northern Russia in 1861 together with his family. After the death of his parents, Conrad was sent to live in Switzerland with an uncle. Conrad speaks for Nkosi when he, like Nkosi also made his exilic *salire* of faith: "I verily believe mine was the only case of a boy of my nationality and antecedents taking, a so to speak, standing jump out of his racial surroundings and associations" (Seidel 1986:1). At seventeen Conrad joined the British merchant navy, receiving his British citizenship and officially changed his name to 'Joseph Conrad' in 1886. He too traversed the world, albeit by sea, and in 1894 settled in his new home country in Kent, England where he devoted his life to writing novels and short stories until his death in 1924. Both Conrad and Nkosi shared a common understanding of the ravages of exile only too well: "What makes mankind tragic is not that they are victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it ... as soon as you know of your slavery, the pain, the anger, the strife, the tragedy begins" (<http://www.kirjasto.j.conrad.htm>). Much like Nkosi, who passionately believed in language as having primacy in reaching across the continents to raise literary consciousness, Conrad was similarly inspired by the written word; as a writer he claimed that: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel - it is, above all, to make you see. That - and no more, and it is everything" (Conrad 1904: preface).

Nkosi's choice of topic may well have been subconsciously driven by the rich and formal linguistic prose Conrad employed in his novels, which was reminiscent of the English classics both these

writers had immersed themselves in as young boys, and which would provide them with imaginative powers and an extraterritorial perspective long before they began their respective journeys. He indirectly refers to his love of the language in the classics in his novel *Underground People* through his character Joe Bulane: "he had always preferred an old-fashioned style, as though old English forms lent distinction to expression which would otherwise lack it" (Nkosi 2002:49). The fact that Nkosi shared Conrad's apolitical stance and deterministic views on the creative nature of language, supports my doubt that an accusation such as that later made by Achebe in his article on African literature (1978), that Conrad was a racist who defended the arrogance of colonialism in his writing, would have influenced Nkosi negatively against Conrad as his chosen topic for his PhD dissertation, as Nkosi would not have agreed with Achebe on this point.

Writer Kristina Masuwa visited Nkosi at his home in Zambia and presents an impression of Nkosi far removed from the young and arrogant *Drum* journalist of his youth:

One important fact that struck me then was the peace and tranquillity of his home, his love for music and the sentimental gesture of a parent who pinned up drawings made by his daughters who were then very young ... a sensitive man who defines a very high standing for issues regarding the family and love and feelings ... and who is able to feel and talk of his very personal disappointments without pretence. (Masuwa 1994:35)

In 1980 Nkosi joined thirty other writers, including Mongo Beti, Chinua Achebe, James Matthews, Bessie Head and Dambudzo Marechera at the Frankfurt Book Fair, an event during which protesting African authors temporarily occupied the South African Publishers' stand. "For the first time in the history of this Book Fair, it was shut down for one day by the protest we organised against the presence of South African publishers who were supporters or in complicity with the apartheid regime" (Lombardozzi correspondence 2006). What began as a calm but radical analysis of the alliance between South Africa and certain francophone West African states, soon developed into violence between two Senegalese writers, one being the acclaimed novelist and film maker Sembene Ousmane. This incident led to Nkosi's astute observation that:

modern African literature written in European languages was born in adversity, the result of an encounter, often marked by systematic brutality, between Europe and Africa ... Slavery and colonialism are the foster-parents of this literature; and it is a literature which however sophisticated, still bears the scars of its origins, and retains its combative role. (Nkosi 1980:1200)

In 1981 the third volume of critical essays *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature*

was published. These essays collectively formed a discourse on the development of African literature within a socio-historical context. Nkosi penned two more poems, "Images of a Nation Yet to Be" in 1982, and "Refugee Woman" in 1983. Nkosi believed that writing poetry sharpened his skills to write novels, as poetry teaches the invaluable skill of compressing language and gesture, an art to which his writing attests. In 1983 *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, the enlarged collection of critical essays, was published by Longman.

His first novel *Mating Birds*, initially intended as a longish short story, was begun as a diversion to provide Nkosi "with some comic relief" (Harris 1994:27) when he was not teaching, but then "it grew and grew, because I started to laugh so much while writing it" (Worsfold 1990:69). Taking into consideration all that has been written about *Mating Birds* by critics and the contents of Chapter Four of the thesis, reading this novel then becomes no laughing matter but rather brings to mind the phrase "laugh, clown, laugh, though your heart be torn" (George 1996:123). *Mating Birds* was first published in Nairobi in 1983, in London in 1986 and finally in South Africa in 1987, to considerable but divided acclaim. The novel was rejected by several publishers in Britain on the grounds that the name 'Nkosi' was unpronounceable by European readers and thus would fail to sell (Harris 1994:28). The novel was awarded the MacMillan Silver Pen Award in 1987 and has been translated into ten languages. *Mating Birds* was serialised in a popular left-wing Bologna newspaper in Italy every day for a week. *Mating Birds* was re-issued in 2004 in South Africa by Kwela. Much has been written about this novel, of which there are as many interpretations as there are critics. More will be said about this novel, essentially an anti-apartheid novel about the African voice finding expression in a racially divided South Africa, in Chapter Four.

In 1984 Nkosi was appointed Associate Professor of Literature at the University of Zambia in recognition of his publications, in particular *Tasks and Masks*, and in 1985 he was appointed Professor of Literature, for which he delivered an inaugural address entitled "In Defence of the Study of Literature". In this paper, Nkosi argues for literature as a valuable object in itself, and literature as an intellectual activity having in all respects a special significance for society. It was during this time that he met Jadwiga Lukanty, a visiting Polish historian at the Institute of African Studies, whom he married in 1988. During his tenure he resided in Lusaka, where he wrote "The Hold-up" a short story which was published in Lusaka by Wordsmith.

In 1986 en route to the CASA Festival to be held in Amsterdam, Nkosi also attended the Third Conference on "South African Literature and Resistance" at the Evangelische Akademie in Bad Boll, West Germany. This conference was hosted by Robert Kriger and academics from the University

of Leyden, as well as colleagues from South Africa, amongst these Alfred Qabula from COSATU, poet Mavis Myburgh and Dr Farouk Asvat from the Alexandra Health Clinic in Johannesburg. The discussions at Bad Boll served to hone the sensibilities on the textual memories of the political wars taking place in South Africa and the struggle to establish a non-racial culture in this divided country. In the same year Nkosi attended the Conference on African Literature at the Commonwealth Institute in London. The key issue debated was the prescription to write in African languages. This panel became the talking point of the conference "because in order to illustrate the problem of communication across the continent, I posed a question in Zulu to Ngugi wa Thiong'o, one of the proponents of the idea, and of course he could not understand the question because he spoke no Zulu, to much laughter in the audience" (Lombardozzi correspondence 2006).

In 1987 Nkosi and 300 other South African writers attended the CASA (Culture in another South Africa) Festival at the Bellevue Theatre in Amsterdam. This festival included artists who convened to discuss and exchange views on a non-racial multicultural South Africa, which Nkosi's literary contributions more than adequately sustained and promoted throughout his writing career. Later in that same year, Nkosi left Zambia amid student unrest and socio-economic turmoil resulting from the political changes in the then Rhodesia, for a new home in the Targowek District, Warsaw, with his wife. A cynic by nature, Nkosi commented sardonically on his new environment: "it was interesting to live in the east without any political agenda" (Hotz 1991:24). He soon discovered that the Polish attitude to Africans varied considerably, mainly because "not having colonised any black people, Poles had no experience what to do with them ... a crowd of children ran after me shrieking delightedly 'Zulu! Zulu! Ho! Ho!' after having seen *Shaka Zulu* on Polish television" (Nkosi 1989:632).

Living in Poland enabled Nkosi to "see at close range what happens to the socialist idea when it is carried out" (Worsfold 1990:71). He was appointed as Professor of African Literature in English at the University of Warsaw until 1991. During this time he also continued work on his doctoral thesis on Joseph Conrad, as discussed earlier in this chapter. In 1987 Nkosi was appointed as a member of the UNICEF Dakar Planning Committee, for the implementation of the UNICEF Dakar Plan of Action adopted by African artists and intellectuals to gain support and mobilise action for the development of African children, a cause which Nkosi, bearing intimate knowledge of disease and poverty as a child growing up under apartheid, keenly supported.

In June 1988 Nkosi gave a keynote address at the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in German-Speaking Countries in Aachen-Liege. The conference



had as its theme "Crisis and Conflict in the New Literatures in English." This organisation was founded in Europe to study the literatures of the territories which formed part of the British Commonwealth. In his address he referred to the special significance of the date of the conference, as it coincided with the 16<sup>th</sup> June Soweto uprising in South Africa. He also discussed the problem of language and the incipient struggle for control of discourse by the colonised subject. In this year he also wrote the short story "Under the Shadow of the Guns" which has the recurrent theme of racism and politics as focus. The proceeds from this publication were donated to the ANC movement in exile. Also in this year, he was honoured by the City of Montpellier, France with the Freedom of the City for his contribution to the literary criticism of African Literature. In 1989 Nkosi attended a Nieman Foundation scholars reunion at Harvard, and stopped over via Amsterdam in Lleida, Catalonia in the south of Spain in May 1989, where he planned to continue work on *Underground People*, and where he was interviewed by Brian Worsfold at the University of Barcelona.

In 1990 Nkosi and Njabulo Ndebele were keynote speakers at the 1990 Oxford Conference "Literature in another of South Africa", where his remarks on whether it was legitimate to refer to a South African national literature given the political circumstances, provoked an outraged reaction from the delegates present. The result was the book *Altered State? Writing and South Africa*, which contains Nkosi's frequently quoted essay "Constructing the 'Cross-border' Reader".

From 1991 to 1999 Nkosi was tenured professor in the English Department, University of Wyoming, Rocky Mountains, Laramie, USA. During this time he was also a featured speaker at the 'Hour with Literature,' a forum for student discussions held on the University campus where various aspects of literature were addressed. December 1991 was a memorable period for Nkosi, ending thirty years of exile when he returned to South Africa to attend the historic "New Nation Writers Conference" under the auspices of the *New Nation* International Book Festival held in Johannesburg, as a featured speaker. Returning to his land of birth was akin to a fantasy "a disorientating experience ... to come back and be directed to Foreign Passports ... and me being timid and feeling inhibited by the whole experience of coming back" (Goddard 1991:23). His once exiled voice speaking in South Africa for the first time since 1960, "his provocative manner provided the conference with memorable moments of soul searching ... his presentation set the tone for an honest appraisal of issues" (*New Nation* 1992:18). During this conference Nkosi presented a paper titled "The Land Question as Metaphor for our Literary Culture," in which he argued that nothing had changed in terms of the management of cultural activity - the white minority were still the decision makers in terms of selecting and publishing African poetry and prose. He remarked that the challenges facing illiterate people living in townships had not changed during his absence, as the exclusive possession of land by a white

minority continued to represent the dispossession of the African. After thirty years of exile, he had returned to the familiar face of South Africa, that of inequality and land hunger, a situation which he felt had largely remained unchanged. The conference brought together an eclectic array of exiled and other writers from thirty-one countries from across the African continent and abroad, inviting writers to re-examine the problems and challenges of racism in literature. He commented humourously on the obvious changes the South African society had undergone: "When I lived here I used to think life was elsewhere, but now you have everything we have in Wyoming" (Isaacson 1991:3). Nkosi took the first opportunity to revisit the village at Embo where he went to school as a young child, and expressed his disappointment in the lack of progress made in terms of equitable land distribution; he pointed out that most of the land still belonged to white farmers, including the white owned land where, fifty years ago, he used to collect firewood for his grandmother, illegally.

In March 1992 Nkosi attended the Africa Research and Information Bureau ( ARIB) Conference in London. The theme of the conference was: "African Writers in Exile: Dreaming of the Homeland". The essence of the term 'homeland' was debated, whether it was an escapist construct, a mode of nostalgia or merely a place where the heart lay. "Lewis Nkosi was present, in capital letters, visible as he was characteristically vivacious ... controversial as ever, and chose to be, in his own words, incoherent" (*ALA Bulletin* 18(2) 1992). He argued that exile was a painful reality, a physical as well as a spiritual condition, and was at best an ambivalent state of being. Later that year he was invited to present a paper at the African Studies Association Annual Convention. In this year he also headed discussions and readings at the Pacific Lutheran University in Seattle, USA. Later that year he gave a talk at the University of Wyoming Art Museum on the oral tradition in African literature.

In 1993 *De Vermissing*, the Dutch translation of *Underground People*, was published. An excerpt from the novel was published under the title "The Emissary" in *Weber Studies* in 1997. Nine years later, in 2002, *Underground People* was published in Cape Town by Kwela Books. The novel, presenting the complex struggle against apartheid in an "astutely artistic, vivid and brisk manner" (Mthethwa 2002:13), generally received positive reviews. Sheridan Griswold however, suggested that the reader skip a number of chapters because these "included an unnecessary detailed description of what the apartheid state was all about" (Mmegi 2002:10). In August 1993 Nkosi received an invitation to a state dinner at the White House, in honour of President Nelson Mandela and to celebrate his hundred days in office. However, due to certain administrative errors on the part of the White House staff, this dinner invitation never materialised, neither did the promised letter of apology - to which Nkosi appends a signature coda: "A pity, since I would have enjoyed a good chow with President Mandela, whom I had last seen in the flesh during a much humbler supper at Harold Wolpe's house thirty-four years ago, when both men had been plotters against the state"

(Nkosi 1995:21). Instead Nkosi left for Holland where he was invited to read at a short story festival in Utrecht together with South African writer Etienne van Heerden and fifteen other writers. Shortly thereafter Nkosi was invited to the Institute of World Affairs at the Iowa State University as a featured speaker and later that year he attended the Bumbershoot Arts Festival in Seattle, a roundtable on oral narratives in third and first world communities.

Nkosi's play *The Black Psychiatrist* was first staged in the Lusaka Theatre Playhouse in 1983 in Zambia. In 1994 this one act play appeared in *Weber Studies*, an inter-disciplinary humanities journal from Germany. In 1995 it was produced at the John Stripe Theatre in Winchester USA and at Houseman Studio Too at the University of Wyoming in April 1995, as well as at the Lambeth College Theatre in London. Nkosi wrote "Flying Home," a "kind of sequel" (Lombardozi correspondence 2004) to *The Black Psychiatrist* in 2002. *The Black Psychiatrist* has been translated into French and German, and has toured a number of African countries to great success, under the aegis of Alliance Francaise. The Centre Pompidou in Paris held a colloquium in December 1994 "Ink and Exile : The South African Experience" which was climaxed by a performance of this play by L'Autre Souffle Theatre Company, who also produced this play in France in 1999 and 2002. The play was read at the 2003 Berlin Literary Festival and also produced in Johannesburg in September 2005, illustrating the continued resonance this play maintains with its audience on issues of trauma, loss, displacement and identity. The most recent production was presented by La Compagnie l'Autre Souffle in Martinique in October 2006.

In 1994 Nkosi was appointed Visiting Professor of Literature at the University of Cape Town, returning to Boston USA in 1995 for a semester as Visiting Professor and Fannie Hurst Writer-in-Residence at Brandeis University, Boston. During this semester he worked on his novel, *Mandela's Ego* and taught a course on Literature and Politics of South Africa. He also directed a writing class in fiction. In the winter of 1996 Nkosi was again invited to teach for a semester, this time at Marshall University, West Virginia as visiting John Deaver Drinko Professor. He was elected as the advisor on a documentary that discussed the impact of Hollywood on South Africa, which subsequently won several awards. He returned to London to attend the British Festival of Literature "Under the Veld" in 1995 which was held in celebration of the end of apartheid and the spirit of reconciliation in South Africa. Nkosi was one of the key speakers, discoursing on the problems of living in townships in South Africa. From 1997 to 1998 Nkosi was invited as Visiting Leverhulme Professor at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London. Nkosi had become an established African writer and scholar and was sought after by the international academic world, as the above corroborates.

In 1999 Nkosi retired from his post at the University of Wyoming and took up residence in

La Compagnie l'Autre Souffle présente

# Le psychiatre noir

de Lewis N'kosi

avec  
Cécile VERNANT  
Jean-Michel MARTIAL

Traduction  
Astrid-Starck Adler

Régie et Création lumière  
Jean-Pierre Népost

Adaptation et Mise en scène  
Jean-Michel Martial

les 26, 27, 28 oct. à 20h00  
Salle Frantz Fanon cmac à l'Atrium



Co-Production : Compagnie l'Autre Souffle



ITY/IRAC

Switzerland in 2000, using Basel as a base for his ongoing research and writing. He insists, even after thirty years abroad, in describing his stay in Europe as 'temporary.' His relationship with a Swiss academic, Astrid Starck, at the University of Basel, was largely behind the reason for his choice in remaining in Basel. After ten years of democracy in South Africa, and after having received his first South African passport, this a momentous event for an exile, in 2002, Nkosi steadfastly chooses to remain in Europe. Perhaps the reason for this choice resonates in the pages of *Underground People* as expressed through the characters:

in a sudden moment of emotional recoil from the encounter with the land of his birth he was disagreeably made aware that ... he had succeeded only in postponing 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. (Nkosi 2002:93)

In 2000 he delivered a lecture on the topic "South African Writing after the Mandela Republic" at the University of Zurich and the University of Basel. In a subsequent journal article entitled "The Republic of Letters after the Mandela Republic" (2002), Nkosi argued that African literature was still under the shadow of the former apartheid animus, a tendency which continued to exert its influence over African literature because South Africa had failed to function as a unitary nation.

After his initial return to South Africa in 1991, he continued to return more frequently for brief visits. Nkosi returned to South Africa for the second time in 2001 as Visiting Professor at the University of Cape Town, where he taught a course in African Modernism, lecturing on Christopher Okigbo's poetry and Kofi Awoonor's novel, *This Earth is my Brother*, at the Centre of African Studies. In April 2001 he again discussed his paper "The Republic of Letters after the Mandela Republic" at the University of Cape Town together with Njabulo Ndebele and other writers. Nkosi's presentation dealt with the state of letters in South Africa after the fall of apartheid. In 2001 and 2002 he visited South Africa as Visiting Professor at the University of Durban-Westville, where he delivered a keynote address at the Centre for the Study of Southern African Literatures and Languages Conference. He delivered a paper on "The Native is Everywhere and Nowhere," which looks at the ambivalent nature of being a 'native' in the apartheid milieu. Shortly thereafter he returned to France to discuss South African literature as a panel member at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, organised by the Bibliotheque Nationale.

In 2003 Nkosi was one of the speakers at the "Time of the Writer Festival" held at the University of Natal, Durban. In a session chaired by Cameroonian writer and critic, Achille Mbembe, he was able to reconnect with his filiative roots and share his ideas on writers and writing with Somalian writer, Nuruddin Farah. Soon thereafter he was invited to do a reading of his work at the Gosenbohm Literary Salon at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Later that year he shared the podium with Zakes Mda at a Literary Festival held in Basel, and then left for Finland to attend the International Literature Conference with a visit to Estonia. On his return to Switzerland Nkosi wrote another poem, "What Makes Poetry not Prose" for the Berlin International Festival of Literature held on the 16-17 September 2003, and wrote a poem in honour of his partner on her birthday, "To Astrid for her 59<sup>th</sup> Birthday - in imitation of an image in Chagall's painting 'Lilies of the Valley 1916.'" He modestly laments that he has not really practised the art of verse to any appreciable extent to justify a whole essay for inclusion in a book, referring to a book on critical essays on his work published in 2005.<sup>11</sup>

In February 2004 Nkosi accepted an invitation to speak on "Cultural Images in and of Africa" with Mai Palmberg at the Nordiska Afrikainstitutet in Uppsala, Sweden. In March 2004 Nkosi was invited to present a paper at the Letters Home Festival at Cambridge University. The festival celebrated ten years of South African democracy and brought together some twenty-four authors and critics who created their works on foreign soil and then "despatched them like so many letters to a remembered address" (Lombardozi correspondence 2005). Nkosi's contribution to the discussions was to consider the ways in which identities were being constructed in the post apartheid 'rainbow' nation. He also gave a paper at the "Exiles and Emigres; South African Writers Abroad" Festival in Cambridge, UK in 2004. Also, in this year Nkosi participated in the celebrations of ten years of democracy in South Africa on South Africa Heritage Day in Switzerland where he read a poem in the tradition of praise poetry and was warmly received by the South African Ambassador to Switzerland. He completed an article for *Der Bunt* on South African literature, which formed one of the background articles for the Festival of South African Arts in Bern, Switzerland a week later. The Festival had as theme the "Development of the Arts and Literature in Post-Apartheid South Africa" and guest speakers such as Zakes Mda, ZöeWicomb and Kgafela Magogodi joined Nkosi in the discussions. The Festival concluded with a reading of a German translation of *The Black Psychiatrist*. In November 2004 Nkosi signed a contract for the re-publication of *Underground People*, as well as a contract with Rafford Films Company to film *Mating Birds* in March 2005.

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<sup>11</sup> Two other poems not seen by the researcher, a long poem published in an anti-apartheid journal in Amsterdam titled "Children of Soweto" following the massacre of students by police fire in South Africa in 1976; as well as a poem about the "Horizonte '79" Festival which celebrated African culture in Berlin in 1979, have also since come to light.

Nkosi was invited by Reedway Vally at STE Publishers to attend the launch of the book *Come Back Africa*, which was a discussion on the making of this film. In October 2004 Nkosi visited South Africa again where he was interviewed by SAfm TV followed by a book launch at Rand Afrikaans University. He also visited the University of Durban-Westville where he addressed students in the English Department on issues of place and identity, stressing the role of apartheid influences on the construction of black identity and its resultant effects on the conceptualisation of place and space. Shortly thereafter Nkosi read a paper at the newly merged University of KwaZulu-Natal entitled "Lost Identities" in which he engaged with similar issues of social identity and dislocation in South Africa through a reading of William Faulkner's *Go Down Moses* and *The Sound and the Fury*. To Nkosi, Faulkner was his earliest role model, as the issues raised by his novels were fundamentally relevant to South African history. Reading Faulkner enabled Nkosi to shape his collective and individual identity: "I discovered certain things about South Africa - I remembered that in South Africa, instead of being an African, I was also a non-white and a non-European" (Nkosi: 1983: 31). Nkosi's review of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* can equally be appended to his own fiction, which consists of:

tales full of the sound and the fury, which according to the quotation from Shakespeare, would "signify nothing". On the contrary, Faulkner's novel carries immense symbolic weight ... But it is not so much the story but the method which has influenced writers ... Partially, the novel provides at least one reply to that playful question once put to Quentin by a Canadian roommate at Harvard in another of great Faulkner's novels, *Absalom, Absalom*: "Tell about the South. What's it like there? What do they do there? Why do they live there? Why do they live at all?" (Lombardozzi correspondence 2005)

In 2005 he was invited to speak at a literature festival in Helsinki, Finland. In February 2005 Nkosi visited Durban and Johannesburg, and was invited by the National Research Foundation to conduct a workshop session together with Achille Mbembe at Wits University. He also worked on his third novel *Mandela's Ego*, a story about a young man who becomes sexually impotent when his spiritual mentor Nelson Mandela is arrested and imprisoned. Only on the release of Mandela twenty seven years later does the protagonist regain his former prowess and regenerative powers. However, as subtext this novel functions as a metaphor for Nkosi's years of exile and absence from his homeland. Nkosi, in a recent conversation, stated that "just because apartheid is gone it doesn't mean that you can't write about it anymore - the best movies today are those *about* the Holocaust - it is a story that *has* to be told" (Lombardozzi correspondence 2004).

This long list of Nkosi's activities and movements has been necessary to catalogue, in order to grasp



how multifaceted his writing and identity have become. He is sought after because he has views and he can write about them very well. Nkosi's prolific writing supports his own contention that exile is not necessarily 'a bad thing', perhaps because his relative rootlessness in many ways was able to foster the process of intellectual discovery. Nkosi's achievements may be directly ascribed to the fact that he has spent most of his writing life abroad whilst maintaining his African identity by drawing his memories of his life in South Africa. His non-fiction writing and his countless journal articles, reviews and academic papers testify to the fact that his personal misfortunes have not dimmed his power of vision. As also in the case of Nkosi, Thompson holds that:

the mainstream of literature of many nationalities is located outside rather than inside the country ... for a certain category of writers at least, exile can be a good thing. It can stimulate rather than lull the writer's sensibility. Far from weakening his grasp on language it can actually strengthen it owing to the linguistic stimuli the writer encounters abroad. (Thompson 1976:326)

Thompson's discussion on the exiled writer Gombrowicz applies equally to Nkosi, who similarly reaped the benefits of exile by becoming an internationally known writer. Nkosi's circle of friends and acquaintances were similarly constituted:

those who offered him initial criticism and encouragement consisted of people who liked to gather in literary cafes to cultivate their artistic sensitivity ... his exile has not only provided him with new and better metaphors for his concerns but also with the understanding that his basic method of presentation has universal applicability. (Thompson 1976:328)

A thorough synopsis of Nkosi's wide ranging movements throughout his adult life seen in his multitudinous invitations, presentations, engagements and writings since leaving South Africa and his return thirty years later, is purposely included in this chapter in the main to provide conclusive evidence in support of the postulation that exile to some extent had a salutary effect on Nkosi, that he has been nourished by his experiences of exile. This progression becomes clearly discernable when comparing his early journal articles to his later critical writing. This detailed biography also serves to confirm that Nkosi has lived a life devoted to his craft; his copious productivity evident from his continued intellectual engagements across the globe. It confirms that his life has been a narrative of discovery into which he has coalesced his thoughts on language and literature; his life as detailed above is a life lived in close harmony with literature, a 'home' within which he constantly questions and defines his own concepts, thereby achieving the clearest understanding of what it



means to be a writer, a goal he had envisioned a lifetime ago in the slums of Cato Manor.

To conclude this Chapter, it needs to be said that the temporal boundaries which inform Nkosi's life as contained in this biography are by no means exhaustive, as Nkosi was and still is a constant wanderer through the continents. Nkosi, from a very early age was raised in a milieu which fostered the notion that nothing in his life was permanent, and which gave no indication that he was destined to become a writer, apart from his being a voracious reader. His South African experience provided him with a life which taught that there would always be a new place waiting and new people to meet. To this day Nkosi is never without his emblematic little brown satchel, pen and diary, in which he meticulously records minute observations about his environment and the people with whom he interacts, observations which often appear as astute comments voiced through his characters in his fiction. The constant movement throughout his life, from one town to the next, from one continent to the next, from one academic engagement to the next, may have exacerbated Nkosi's sense of transience and perhaps prevented him from claiming any one place in the world he could truthfully consider as 'home', preferring always to return to the 'home' he had discovered early on in life amongst the pages of his books.

Throughout his lengthy literary career spanning a period of fifty years, he has travelled extensively, he has written a diversity of short stories, long prose fiction and novels, essays and articles; he has attended many performances, exhibits and productions not mentioned here, his professional affiliations and activities too numerous to document in detail. He wrote copiously for many leading literary journals, including *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Classic*, the *Guardian*, *New African*, *Southern African Review of Books* and *The London Review of Books*; he has taught at numerous universities, presented a large collection of papers, addressed many audiences, attended workshops and symposia, professional meetings and conventions, conferences and art festivals. Nkosi was also a book reviewer for a wide range of international journals, some notably being *The Spectator*, *Africa Magazine*, *Transition*, *New Society*, *The London Observer*, *The New Statesman*, *Présence Africaine* and numerous others. The political and literary impact of his often forthright writing and critical voice has received world-wide exposure, as some of his works have been translated into other languages, and many books on African literature and African politics today contain some reference to Nkosi's works.

Nkosi is still very much an active writer, having lived most his life outside the borders of his homeland and in retrospect his life of exile has been a political, emotional and creative necessity for his writing. Although he refers to Basel in Switzerland as his second home in Europe, London being the city of his affections "simply because my children are there" (Madondo 2005:16), he has never

forgotten his country of birth and its people, bound forever to his place of birth through landscapes wrought from a memory which has enabled him to see more clearly a world which was once incomprehensible: "it is better to see something from a distance, because it will look different from when you see it close up, and that is when you can recreate place" (Lombardozzi in conversation with Lewis Nkosi 2004).

Nkosi is a writer whose life and work remains inextricably caught up in the African continent, distinguishing him from many of his contemporaries who died prematurely, their brief lives tragically ended through suicide and alcohol, crushed by political cruelties and exile. Nkosi commented that "time, frustration and despair with their attendant drugs - alcohol and suicide - are taking a toll on South African writers ... their anguish is in many ways related to the people of South Africa" (Goddard 1991:27). Of his *Drum* colleagues, Can Themba became an alcoholic and died of a heart attack in Swaziland, Henry Nxumalo was found stabbed to death in a gutter in Sophiatown, Todd Matshikiza was driven into exile in London where he drank heavily and died prematurely, Bob Gaston and Casey Motsisi both drank heavily and died young in Johannesburg, Nat Nakasa jumped to his death from a high rise building in New York. Nkosi's words from 1961 prematurely speak for the untimely deaths of his colleagues thirty years hence:

Africans have learned that if they are to remain sane at all, it is pointless to try and live within the law. In a country where the government has legislated against sex, drinks, employment, free movement and many other things which are taken for granted in the western world, it would take a monumental kind of patience to keep up with the demands of the law. A man's sanity might even be in question by the time he reaches the ripe age of twenty-five. (Nkosi 1961:16)

There remains though, a discernable ambivalence in Nkosi's stance towards his return to South Africa, as there was at his departure in 1960. He claims that "when you are rejected finally, the only possibility of return is symbolic" (Isaacson 2002:18), yet concedes that perhaps it is not so difficult to return, musing that "if he was offered a job which would allow him to write, he would buy a little hut at the edge of the Indian Ocean and write" (Lombardozzi in conversation with Nkosi 2005). However, choosing to eschew change and clinging to his security blanket shaped by his comfortable familiarity with the European landscape, Nkosi turned down the offer of a post in the English Department at UCT in 1994. During an interview with Goddard in 1991 he attempted to clarify his reluctance to return, unlike other exiles. He commented that he was not one of those people who:

spent a lot of time in exile and thinking 'my God , the moment that the regime changes and dismantles apartheid, I'll pack my bags and rush back' ... of course the sense of responsibility may compel me to accept the imperative of South African needs and come back if, as I said, there is a role to play. (Goddard 1991:24)

He also admits that he feels more or less like an international citizen, particularly where "writers and artists who feel like me , who share my attitudes are together, and there's space for all of us, I just feel part of that life" (Nkosi 1993:4).

Perhaps his insecurities lie at the heart of a recent statement: "it is true that when you go away relationships change, sometimes growing too difficult to find people killing the fatted calf for you, and it may not taste the same" (Isaacson 2002:12). His character Anthony Ferguson in *Underground People* reinforces this when upon his return to South Africa he is unable to reconcile with his roots: "he was attacked by an uncomfortable feeling of complete displacement like a person after many years of wandering has returned home, only to discover that his home was elsewhere" (Nkosi 2002:118).

He continues to write in words he works hard to craft, firm in his belief that "for a writer, language is everything" (Nkosi 1975: viii). His reputation as an outspoken commentator on African writing remains far greater abroad than in his country of birth, possibly due to his continued living abroad and lengthy absence from South Africa, where he has not to date been as widely read. His primary non-fiction books, now long out of print, are not available in this country. With the unbanning of black political parties in 1991 and the release of Nelson Mandela and his colleagues from prison, many political exiles began to return to South Africa. As predicted by Nkosi at the time:

with the demise of apartheid there should be an amazing release of energy, especially amongst black writers. There will be a broadening of scope; there will be an exploration of consciousness of the race ... in addition, with the demise of apartheid will come the rise of the black middle classes. (Hotz 1991:24)

Nkosi's prophetic hopes have finally come to pass. The writings and contributions of black writers such as Nkosi, have come full circle, now available to those who seek to pick up the threads of black creativity and self expression of the past. And with the publication in South Africa of his most recent novel in 2006, Nkosi has been reintroduced in his 70<sup>th</sup> year to a more receptive South African public.

## Chapter 3

### A writer abroad : Lewis Nkosi's non-fictional writing

perhaps I am lucky in that I have no known point of origin;  
all of Africa is therefore my original home, and I am at liberty to make it my home.  
(Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1972)

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Nkosi's best known non-fiction published under the titles *Home and Exile and other Selections* (1983) (published first as *Home and Exile* in 1965 and later as *Home and Exile and other Selections* in 1983), *The Transplanted Heart* (1975) and *Tasks and Masks* (1981) will form the primary concerns of this chapter. These collections of essays and reviews will be approached from within the wider issues of exile, spatial discourse and identity, and the effects these sounding elements have had on Nkosi's scholarly voice as a commentator on South African literature. Nkosi's articulate voice and his sharply analytical mind were already evident even in these early pieces which are variously concerned with the broader effects of apartheid barriers, issues of home and exile, the tasks of a writer and the various masks of African literature. These essays can be viewed as a writerly space of emergence, initiating Nkosi's redefinition of selfhood, detailing his experiences as an exile while also illustrating his difficulties in transcending this subaltern position. In this sense "exile becomes an aspect of the process of writing as it motivates it - and writing becomes an aspect of exile, a way of knowing self and world within a state of foreignness" (Weiss 1992:135). Robinson's elaboration on this point is also applicable to Nkosi as an exiled writer:

For it is in this occasional prose that these exiles write their history, place themselves, and orient their other writing ... filling the interstices between the literary activity of two homes, one lost, one not yet familiar, neither of which they can occupy as natives ... these pieces provide portable shelters, prose in which the authors pass the time until larger homes, bigger books, are ready for their arrival. (Robinson 1994: xiii)

These thirty-five essays, (excluding *Tasks and Masks*), are written in a fragmented epistolary style, and embody a rich tapestry of opinions and emotions addressed to Nkosi's home culture. Perhaps less robust when compared to his later pieces, these essays are nonetheless evocative of Nkosi's production of a self in the course of his writing by means of detours into personal experiences of cultural dislocation and a fragmented and alienated existence under apartheid. Written in his characteristic muscular prose, and often narrated with wit, Nkosi's essays and journalistic pieces

occasionally may expose a consciousness detached from its surroundings. Nevertheless these collections, when viewed holistically, serve as a record of events in South African history and also chart his progression as an exiled writer and literary scholar, with some of the essays still frequently quoted.<sup>12</sup>

Nkosi, in his contemporary role as a writer and critic has convincingly trounced both the aims of the apartheid government and the concerns voiced by Nadine Gordimer in 1966:

the work of our country's African and Coloured prose writers is now non-existent, so far as South African literature, South African thinking, South African culture, is concerned. They were the voices - some rasping, some shrill, some clowning, some echoing prophetically, one or two deeply analytical - of the thirteen million on the other side of the colour bar. *We shall not hear from them again* [my emphasis]. (Gordimer 1967:44)

In the very act of censoring and finally banning Nkosi from his country with a one-way exit permit, the apartheid government paradoxically provided the necessary impetus for Nkosi's writing career, a double-edged sword which he powerfully wielded to thrust back at the racial apartheid praxis. His determined progression to re-establish a self is more than evident in these early discursive essays, within which Nkosi articulates and interprets perceptions and communal experiences of a particular history. His essays become a platform through which he develops a polemic on literature and writers, at the same time encapsulating an arresting mixture of personal thoughts and impressions. His measured insights on both the political and the theoretical also include considerable insights on the dilemmas facing the artist in exile. Evident in these essays is a deep sense of mission, through which he invites the exiled artist to become the voice of the oppressed left behind. Whilst acknowledging that writers and artists do not start uprisings, although "the South African government and their fascist allies believed you can overthrow a regime with a volume of verse" (Nkosi 1983:94), it was his sincere belief that literature by black writers could effect change by bringing into focus the feelings of anger and resentment in society: "It is by embodying the unspoken thoughts and emotions of their people that writers and poets perform a national duty" (Nkosi 1983:95). Writing enabled Nkosi to shed the shackles of apartheid to some extent. Travelling and writing about his experiences and thoughts empowered Nkosi to re-negotiate apartheid stereotyping and create a space within which he could, albeit in an ambivalent way, initiate a renewed self-definition, even though this may not have provided him with definite answers or solutions. Being neither a politician nor a

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<sup>12</sup> In this regard see, for example "Fiction by Black South Africans" (1966), "Black Power, or Souls of Black Writers" (1967) and "Black Writing in South Africa" (1985).

pedagogue, his writing is unrepresentative of the masses. Nkosi's essays reveal an ironic style of writing which sometimes will muse on the ambivalence, turbulence and confusion of having lived in a country where everything was perpetually being questioned and re-examined and where exile, emulating its original and ancient roots, was deemed the ultimate solution against perceived opposition - a suitable punishment for those whose scrutiny became too burdensome to the regime. As he mused in a recent interview: "I was doing a strange kind of writing then - asking for fellow rights"(Akubuiro 2006:4).

The essays contained in *Home and Exile and other Selections* and *The Transplanted Heart* in particular, rest firmly on the principles gained during his apprenticeship as a young writer for *Drum* and *Golden City Post*, an era which framed his intelligence in a persona which has to this day remained distinctly masculine. His brief career as a journalist in Johannesburg served as a vehicle for imaginative writing, and was decisively to shape Nkosi's style, concerns and methodologies as a writer in exile. Even if some of Nkosi's early writing may perhaps seem to masquerade as a form of travelogue in which he at times seeks simultaneously to measure both the landscape of his reality and the faded memories of home, each essay contributes to a mosaic of personal experiences and perceptions, skilfully blending these together in a collection which records a history of passage from one continent to another, providing insight into Nkosi's development of identity, his sense of place and his historical and ideological position as an exile.

Nkosi's references to 'home' should be viewed as constructs rather than actual places, which provided him with new ways of looking at place, his essay on Paris being an example of this notion. As a writer, Nkosi employed the process of articulation and rearticulation as an empowering artistic mechanism through which he was able to push back the borders of exile, and so increase his immediate social space. Simultaneously dislocated and relocated through the process of exile, writing these essays created for Nkosi a new space for his marginalised voice excluded from his own cultural discourse. His passion for language and writing enabled him through memories and reminiscences, to recreate his South African home that was no more, and at the same time a future place-as-home yet to be, in what Homi Bhabha refers to as an interstitial or third space, a notion introduced in the abstract, a "boundary from which something begins its presencing" (Bhabha 1994:1). Bhabha's boundary does not refer to a demarcating line of separation, but the opening up of space, a liminal or an in-between zone, which enabled a new way of seeing and provided a new cultural discursive platform for Nkosi, however fragmented his cultural identity may have been at the time. This new multilayered space encouraged the emergence of different perspectives, which were, as described by Bhabha "neither one or the other, but something else in-between" (Bhabha 1994:219). Walter, in line with this thinking, holds that:

in both literature and theory the local and the global intersect: writers influence each other and do not necessarily live/write in their native countries ... modes of writing transcend national and cultural borders ... literature and theory cannot be seen as expressions of one particular culture or nation nor can they be defined according to universal aesthetics. (Walter 2003:21)

Hence a stable borderline between different literatures and cultures becomes difficult to impose, as is also evident from Nkosi's early pieces.

The essays and reviews contained in these three collections are largely "messages tossed away into the ocean thousands of miles away" (Nkosi 1983:93); eclectic reminiscences and thoughts written in sometimes the voice of the apprehensive exile, sometimes that of the acerbic critic, sometimes that of the observant outsider. His essays cover a wide range of general themes and concerns, presenting a portrayal of an exiled writer seldom far from his native land: "I'm standing here by this lamp-post with my mind in a different land" (Nkosi 1983:62). The essays were purposefully selected by Nkosi to enable a wider reading of his texts across cultures, and have achieved more than the 'tiny ripple' (Nkosi 1981: Preface) he had hoped for. The effects of his writing on his readership is more than evident, as to date his essays have been the subject of numerous textual exegeses, discussions, criticism and praise alike; his wide range of literary sources providing an insight into the process of his exile, always offering fresh perspectives. Nkosi admits that he was: "bold and incautious and still very young" (Nkosi 1981: Preface), straddling two cultures and two languages when he began to formulate his controversial premises on the social commitment of the writer and black literature, issues raised in his collection titled *Tasks and Masks*, because he sincerely believed "in the power of literature to mould life and manners" (Nkosi 1983:6).

As an exiled writer Nkosi is more than familiar with controversy, yet it is his fascination with language from boyhood and his lifelong devotion to the transforming power of literature that have provided him with his true home, a place of comfort already evident in these early pieces. This profound romance with the written word has never left him, as Gagliano comments on Nkosi in 2005: "there is ... a quality of energy and even urgency, often, in his writing - something of the excitement of the young man ... never seems to have left him, even as his sophistication as a citizen of the world and his range of reference increased" (in Stiebel and Gunner 2005:6). Nkosi firmly believes that literature has the power to shape one's life, as it can undo detrimental images inflicted upon the black self by the forces of colonialism, discrimination and apartheid. His character Father Ross in *Mandela's Ego* reflects Nkosi's views on literature: "if it is not the whole of poetry, if it is not what is most popular, what is universally moving... if it is not what is most lasting and effecting in our old

legends and popular songs, then I don't know what is ..." (Nkosi 2006:4). It is a view which embodies a deep appreciation of literature, and is a view held by Nkosi in spite of the fact that the English classics and South African white writing of the 1960s in the main provided mostly negative stereotypes of the African devoid of any clear identity. To diminish this negative influence, Nkosi and other black writers such as E'skia Mphahlele and Wole Soyinka have diligently attempted through their writing to redefine the meaning of their continent, providing black literary heroes and a cultural definition able to reach out positively to the new African generation of readers.

The essays, culminating in a voice of self-awareness, are a personal celebration of both escape and mastery over adversity, drawing deeply on his own experiences, never forgetting the narrow provincial world from which he was exiled. His early writings contain the most memorable scenes of his adulthood, but at the same time they mark the distance he has travelled from his boyhood home. Heidegger's comment, that what is incalculably far from us is often illusionary "because a short distance in itself is not nearness. Nor is great distance remoteness" (Heidegger 1971:165), may explain the lack of nostalgia for his homeland in Nkosi's early writing. The collection of essays in *Home and Exile* mark the start of a young writer's definitive metamorphosis from naivete to sophistication.

The essays "Out There on a Visit: American Notes" - its title a subtle denial of the exile position - and "Doing Paris with Breyten", written in self-examining prose, occupy a particular position of importance, as these two essays reappear in the second collection of essays, *The Transplanted Heart* (1975), under the heading 'Travel'. It is evident from the essay "Out there on a Visit: American Notes" that Nkosi's career as a writer, envisioned by the hope to provide insight into a then largely uncharted area of investigation - African literature by African writers - began in earnest at Harvard University. Nkosi participated here as a Nieman Fellow during a period of significant transitions in the United States and also in Africa. Nkosi's own history, as broadly discussed in Chapter Two, had honed his sensitivity to racial issues abroad and he soon "began to notice that the deep racial conflict which had been part of the American scene throughout the sixties had finally succeeded in splitting American society into two nations, one black, one white" (Nkosi 1981:75). Even as an exile seeking to evade the legacy of colonial dominance in South Africa, he was also here not afforded an escape from this influence, as even in America it was a time of bitter crises - the Civil Rights Movement, the assassination of Kennedy, the Vietnam War and student riots contributed to the anger, disillusionment and the deepening racial conflict affecting many facets of the American life. Nkosi's journal article "I was beaten up too on a New York street" (Nkosi 1961:25) in which he describes a racist attack on his person shortly after his arrival, reminiscent of the South Africa he had so recently left behind, captures the American Negro's shared frustration and anger at the lack of



legitimate and basic human rights. This universal disillusionment underlies an article published in *Contact* on Nkosi's arrival at Harvard:

No-one can understand why the South African government refused to give Mr Nkosi a passport to come to the United States. The treatment accorded him by the custodians of White supremacy has only served to make South Africa even more unpopular in the eyes of Americans. (*Contact* 4 May 1961:8)

Nkosi's observation in his preface in *Home and Exile* (1965), that "the future of the Negro anywhere in the world as indissolubly linked with the future of Africa" (Nkosi 1981: vi) is closely linked to the above journalistic sentiments.

The 1960s as detailed also in these essays, were not only epoch making years of independence and national liberation for Africans, marking a radical transition in South African politics, but were also a watershed period for black South African literature, one which Nkosi would compare to that of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s from his position abroad. Klaaste comments that "for the black South African the act of creative writing is inescapably a form of political action, and unless he turns his back on the reality which confronts him and retreats into a private imaginary world, it is also a form of social action" (Klaaste 1991:101). The divergent yet corresponding threads of politics and literature created a cross-pollinated hybrid literary discourse which provided Nkosi as a writer with an enormous source of reference, resulting in his increased involvement in discourse and debates about social commitment by the African writer and critic, not only in Africa, but in other parts of the world, which are reflected in his essays.<sup>13</sup>

Nkosi's writing was not without a fair amount of travail. Familiar with the concepts of violence and upheaval, he became adept at taking a controversial stance through his candid reviews and criticism against other writers and critics who often would mete out critical acrimonies against him, misquote him and accuse him of masculinism. His writing often ignited vociferous ire in his critics, and he found himself having to defend numerous and often deliberate misinterpretations of his work. However, literary critics and their criticism provided the impetus for Nkosi even more resolutely to establish dialectical processes on commitment and African literature, which form the sounding elements for his collection of essays in *Tasks and Masks*. In defence of his essays and thus also in

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<sup>13</sup> See also Sandra Barkan's paper on "Their America: John Pepper Clark and Lewis Nkosi in the U.S.A." (1989).

defence of his 'home,' he wrote a scathing letter to the Editor of *Inkululekho* in March 1966, his rebuttal taking a dismissive stance against critics such as John Clare, who misinterpreted and misquoted him on his essays in *Home and Exile*: "The error [you made] is small but indicative, Bwana Clare, and ... as for my book being premature, I shall take Mr Clare's word for it" (Nkosi 1966:28).

Evident from the many reviews written on these collections of essays by critics such as Charlotte Bruner (1983), James Booth (1986), Rosalyn Smythe (1985) and others, Nkosi's early writing has elicited a barrage of both negative and positive rescriptions from his critics and readers, responses which, despite their often conflicting commentaries, have not in the least deterred Nkosi as an incisive critic from maintaining his clear and unequivocal voice on African writing and writers. Any attempt to define Nkosi as an exiled literary artist should include a reading of his essays, because these early pieces form the foundation for his writings as an exiled writer. There are critics, however, one being Ian Glenn, who disagree with the view that Nkosi's essays do have literary import for African writing:

Much of my disappointment ... stems from an expectation that the author's impatience with simplistic categories and received standards evident in some well-known essays on South African literature, would bring a new vigour and analytical power to the discussions of African literature ... a survey not critically coherent or original enough to make a methodological contribution to the subject ... his (Nkosi's) literary historical sense is not historical enough. At points he has recourse to the most traditional critical evasions ... and neglects the problem of the writer in exile. (Glenn 1982:66)

Another critical voice is that of Booth (1986) reviewing Nkosi's essay "Doing Paris with Breyten" in *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (1983). Booth views Nkosi's writing as one-dimensional; this reading renders Nkosi's imagery as "merely superior travel brochure stuff," his writing becomes "frankly, lacklustre and secondhand" as quoted previously. In terms of content, Booth furthermore feels that Nkosi's treatment of American culture in this essay is severely limited by the omission of the colonial rule of the US in Vietnam (Booth 1986:399). Critics Neil Lazarus and Roger Owen however, offer a contrasting opinion to that of Booth et al, finding Nkosi's critical practice and writing as:

sharp-eyed and sinewy, scaled down, understated, and ironic. His delivery is measured and effective; muscular, uncluttered without ever becoming simplistic, and straightforward with a tendency to harden occasionally into defiance. It is a delivery that eschews lavish gesture and or the rhetoric of emotion without thereby eschewing passion and commitment. (Lazarus 1987:108)

Roger Owen observes that, in mitigation of Nkosi as a writer, most of his limitations as a writer can be related to the facts of his experiences: "to his being an African, writing about the problems of being an African, an African writer writing for a black elitist minority in South Africa, and a small contingency of European metropolitan audiences abroad" (Owen 1966:434). Perhaps what many critics such as Booth, and particularly those who have never lived in South Africa under an apartheid dispensation, have deliberately chosen to ignore is Nkosi's reality, his history as a dispossessed and marginalised South African, oppressed from birth and deprived of many cultural opportunities. As Faulkner observes in *Absalom Absalom!* through his character Quentin, when speaking of home: "you can't understand it. You would have to be born there" (Faulkner 1972:361). Supported by the biographical content of Chapter Two, it is obvious that Nkosi's writing was subjected to diverse political, social and linguistic influences - his cognitive and creative life under pressure by extreme constraints such as exile and alienation, and these influences crucially need to be acknowledged if his early committed work is fully to be understood and appreciated. Despite his circumstances, his essays are in the main devoid of reductive propaganda; he maintains in these essays throughout a position as a profound critic and writer of African literature: "While Lewis Nkosi remains an uncompromising opponent of apartheid, he has not become as bitter as many people would if they were treated in the same way. He emphasises that his passion is writing" (*Contact* 4 May 1961:8).

In the following section of this chapter each collection of essays will be discussed separately, and pertinent reference will be made to specific essays which will support the central concerns of this thesis.

## Home and Exile

The title of this collection conveys the sense of two diametrically opposite emotional territories; on the one hand home, a place which suggests comfort and security, and on the other hand exile, a complex space inhabited by loneliness and isolation which serves as an indication of the exiled writer's state of being at the time of writing. The collection of essays under the heading *Home and Exile* is essentially an early autobiography constructed on literary conventions, recounting experiences of a life marked by boundaries, and functioning as an externalised symbol of this life, presented in a compartmentalised form under the titles 'Home', 'Exile' and 'Literary', headings which demarcate the three most influential areas in Nkosi's personal life. Although the contents of this selection are divided into sections, these demarcations are largely arbitrary as the collection as a whole deals with a vast array of memories and thoughts, often cascading over their artificially apportioned boundaries and thus blurring the definitions. Themes of home, identity and exile present throughout the collection are thus not homogenous entities, but are intimately concatenated, as

suggested through the titles of the essays. The first section entitled 'Home' suggests at once, through its choice of essay titles and content, a sense of progressive ambivalence, an unraveling of the self and a degeneration of all that constitutes the essence of 'home'; Nkosi's thoughts on his life inscribed by both a "fabulous decade" (Nkosi 1983:3), and a period of "awful dilemmas" (44). The second section entitled "Exile" constitutes Nkosi's personal encounters with place, the knowledge of being in exile finally absorbed, the stressful effects of traversing through alien landscapes evident, his crucial need for a home uppermost:

a cesspool of disasters, loneliness and private aches ... I wanted to talk books again, to talk about the life of the imagination ... so I came back to New York full of madness, absorbed on that lonesome road ... I was sensing in myself a shattered spirit and something more dangerous, a peculiar form of psychic violence. (Nkosi 1983:61)

The unsettling effect of exile is unmistakable in the striking paradox of his thoughts. His position as an exile was clearly a place of both inspiration and deep disturbance; he was both an alien and a resident in his new culture, and this ambiguity remained evident in many of his later reviews and pieces. Despite Nkosi's lengthy period of absence of twenty one years from his country of birth before publication, the preface to the 1983 edition pointedly commences with a reference to the Sharpeville Massacre, an event which Nkosi was to comment on from his position of exile in 1962: "a crisis that panicked the South African Government and nearly brought about the kind of political anarchy which all too often makes possible the transfer of power overnight" (Nkosi 1962:7). Nkosi was a political reporter with the *Golden City Post* at the time and the brutality of this event had a profound and lasting effect on him as a South African. In prefacing his memories of home with an historic event which signaled the demand for recognition by all black South Africans, he in effect also acknowledges a personal undiminished search for an identity, born out of a sense of loss and alienation through exile. The essays reveal the consciousness of an individual whose country of birth had denied him even the small courtesy of a passport, and whose only claim ever to having existed in the world, was contained on a bland piece of paper, "a cruel joke" (Nkosi 1983: viii), which had as its primary aim to mark him as an outsider from the outset. The subtext of the opening lines offers the reader a brief glimpse of this deep sense of alienation - Nkosi fuses the memories of his three prominent sites of 'home', Africa, Europe and the USA, into one cold, grey and confusing amorphous world: "indirectly, this is what I tried to bring out ... a fragment of my experiences ... I tried to state as precisely as possible what it feels like to be a black South African writer in exile" (Nkosi 1983: viii).

In the essays contained in this first selection, Nkosi affords his reader a brief glimpse of two radically

opposing worlds: the earlier chapters offering a critical view on the increasing limitations imposed on the apartheid South African society he left behind; the latter chapters exemplifying Nkosi's highly personalised experiences of living abroad as an exiled South African in a cosmopolitan society. These essays collectively attempt to look beyond the landscapes shaped by the memories of home and assume a distinctly detached western voice in dealing with the "complex fate" (Nkosi 1983: Preface) of the exile as outsider, newly encountering American and European metropolitan societies.

The essays function essentially as a vehicle which enables him to voice his difficulties as a writer emerging from a divided society, and details how the effects of his early experiences as an exile severely influenced his ability to define his relationships, determine his identity and shape his perceptions of place. Nkosi personally attests in his essays to the many ways the apartheid statutes infringed on his life - aspiring to be a writer in South Africa under a system of legalised repression was an extremely frustrating *modus vivendi*; for example, the Suppression of the Communism Act of 1959, bent on destroying the freedom of expression and thought of South African artists and writers, arrogated to itself the task of determining who should be heard. No insanity was too great for South Africa under the remorseless grip of apartheid - its mouthpiece the ludicrous Publications Board, whose mindless antics banned works such as *Black Beauty* and *The Return of the Native* on the basis of their alleged subversive titles. Even music did not escape banishment and censure. In the essay "Jazz in Exile," Nkosi points out that hostility towards all things African was foremost in the minds of Dr Verwoerd and his government - jazz, a music described as "the social music springing from the life of the people who make it" (Nkosi 1983:88) was deemed by the government as subversive, primarily because it led to racially mixed audiences and bands, an admixture strictly *verboden* and rigorously policed by the Immorality Act. In his essays, Nkosi vividly illustrates his life lived under these illogical absurdities and the stifling conditions he was forced to contend with as a black writer in South Africa; his voice ultimately silenced, his writings placed under erasure by being prohibited from reaching his fellow South Africans. Under these conditions, embracing exile was a liberating choice, as it unwittingly was to ensure that Nkosi's erstwhile apolitical voice would paradoxically be heard even more vociferously, more succinctly and more effectively, reaching a much wider audience, albeit a largely white readership abroad. His writing, though being an integral part of his personality, ensured that he did not remain relegated to the fringes of his adoptive European countries, but enabled him to participate as an African writer in the many various international academic, cultural and social adopted environments he found himself in at the time. Despite his obvious penchant for the cosmopolitan, Nkosi, unlike many of his contemporaries was able to remain committed to the South African idiom and its people in his politically consequential writing. Thus the hoped for *denouement* of exile was partially achieved, even if the consequences of exile and alienation surfaced periodically in his writing.

Nkosi, ruthlessly blunt at times, is nevertheless an astute commentator, and as such maintains through his essays a preceptorial relationship with the reader, by creating a definitive distance and constantly supervising this distance. 'Home' for Nkosi is essentially recreated in these early essays through the memories of stimulating and often humorous evocations of life in Johannesburg. However, in the essay "A Question of Identity" Nkosi's memories are abandoned in preference for the realities of being an exile in a strange environment. These essays portray Nkosi as emotionally fragile through his deepening awareness of his exile status, his arrival in New York reducing him to the status of a trespassing foreigner, an alienated and unwilling participant in what may seem to become an extension of his life in South Africa: "there was something chilling about New York ... the loneliness had nothing to do with the strangeness of the place ... the city was hard and cold in the same way I suppose Johannesburg is ... foreign places often fail to coincide with reality" (Nkosi 1983:55). Europe in many ways sharpened his sense of dislocation, as here exiles were assessed visually, skin colour being the defining factor. Whites still could escape as colonials, but "blacks were from elsewhere" (Bernstein 1994:xix). At the same time, though, underlying his fear of the unknown is Nkosi's buoyant sense of recovery and indomitable determination to overcome the obstacles of race and cultural antecedents in a strange landscape. His writing in *Home and Exile* progressively reveals a psyche becoming enthralled by the liberating milieu of a literary society, responding to an empathetic black brotherhood, stimulating conversation and creative opportunities. His constant exposure to other talented writers encouraged him to find his own African voice and he acclimatised to his new community, turning the tables on exile: "it is strange, though, how quickly one becomes part of the Village scene if one lives there" (Nkosi 1983:59). Nkosi was able to create for himself as exile a new identity, the erstwhile 'non-white' writer, regaining his self-esteem and self-confidence and metamorphosing into a worldly artist, establishing an African consciousness entrenched in a profound critical voice historically sensitised by, and now armoured against, further colonial intrusion: "In that small prefix put before the word *white* I saw the entire burden and consequence of European colonialism; its assault on the African personality; the very arrogance of its assumptions" (Nkosi 1983:32). Although he was surrounded by like-minded individuals, many similarly in search of their roots, Nkosi understood clearly that which set him apart and rendered him unlike other exiles. In his essay "Out There on a Visit: American Notes" he writes that "the American Negro has no understanding into the damning status of being an exiled African ... never having felt rootless himself and never having been deprived of a cultural identity, he is likely to take too many things for granted" (Nkosi 1983:76). His experiences as a multicultural exile enabled him shrewdly to discern the fundamental similarities and differences of the black society in America, which he recognised as having some parallel to that of South Africa. Together with an increasing self-awareness, these functioned to minimise Nkosi's sense of loss. His exiled status elevated him to a position enabling him positively to assert what he broadly describes as his "African Personality," calling upon all Africans to assert this personality (76). The term "African Personality,"

however, appears to be a contentious concept as not all Africans support Nkosi's view regarding this term; the late Nigerian Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa believed that being black should not separate the African away from the rest of humanity, upholding the primacy of person over perceptions. Because of the great diversity found in Africa, there is no such thing as a universal African, much less "a universal personality. I do not believe in what some people call the "African Personality". There is no such thing as African personality. Africans belong to the human race and talk of African personality betrays an inferiority complex" (Okere :1996:42).

However, remaining true unto himself and his own definition of his identity, irrespective whether or not it conformed to the 'African personality' and its dilemma, Nkosi continued in his former pursuits, seeking out white company as was the case in South Africa, even though he was fully aware that "being seen too often in the company of white people, dating white girls, and not turning up often enough at black functions, can lead to questions being asked" (Nkosi 1983:76). His constant quest for an own identity irrespective of societal censures enabled him to claim with confidence his right to absorb what he required from both his social environment and from imported literature.

The postulation that Nkosi's home is centrally located in literature rather than in actual landscapes is clearly evident in his essay "Doing Paris with Breyten". Nkosi describes his first encounter with the city of Paris, counterbalanced by the impressions of a Paris he initially perceived through the consciousness of writers such as Dumas and Hugo. His memories of Paris now juxtaposed in his essay against the "literary ruins of another Paris irrecoverably lost in the shadow of dream and romance" (Nkosi 1983:82), is an exemplar of the exiled mind seeking comfort in the memories of a safe haven created amongst the pages of literature in childhood. It is a memory brought into question by Nkosi when finally faced with the crass truth of modern day Paris, which was unlike the Paris of the classics, but "a vast post-war slum ... a bleak and drab place" (Nkosi 1983:83). This description resonates with Nkosi's own realities as a young boy growing up in a slum and where literature, in particular the English classics, provided him with a much needed escape from the grim isolation and loneliness of his life. Accompanied by his wife he again returned to Paris, and together with fellow South African exiled writer, Breyten Breytenbach, Nkosi explored Paris anew. He now, for the first time since his exile, experienced a sense of belonging, and thus found Paris no longer drab, as mentioned in Chapter Two, but embraced it as a city of exiles:

... out there at the café tables one knew there were others just as exiled, just as quick, just as reckless just as driven, each knowing the truth of his loneliness only in the private cells of his body or in the illuminated faces of those who had similarly suffered. (Nkosi 1983:86)

In the essay "Art Contra Apartheid," the final essay dealing with issues of exile, Nkosi pertinently examines the issue of South African writers in exile. In this essay Nkosi exemplifies his own situation as a black writer and the content serves as a prelude to the debate on African literature contained in the essays in *Tasks and Masks*. He again brings into the literary arena the exiled writers' doubts and fears - "... most black South African writers who live in exile continue to address themselves to the social problems of their own country rather than tackle those of their adopted society ... they continue to write about their country from whatever materials memory can still provide" (Nkosi 1983:95). This focus on the homeland is evident in most of Nkosi's fiction, and perhaps stems from his initial sense of alienation and loss, "that whether from choice or from the pressure of circumstance, a black South African writer living in exile continues to regard himself as an outsider in the society in which he finds himself" (Nkosi 1983:95). However, the impetus to survive exile lies in his passion for the written word, as through writing he can become the unsilenced voice of the African people across all continents.

Newly liberated from the stifling conditions of persecution and conflict, yet irrevocably separated from all that constituted home, it is inevitable that, on reflection, Nkosi would view his essays contained in the first part of *Home an Exile*, as "messages tossed away into the ocean thousands of miles away" (Nkosi 1983:3). These essays can be read as a tentative attempt of the writer reaching out to an as yet undefined readership, through "proposing questions to myself and an attempt to render coherent some impressions and issues proposed to me by exile" (Nkosi 1983:vii), thus mitigating a need crucial to the exiled consciousness, that of maintaining a link with his home culture: "any writer in exile begins to wonder just whom is he addressing. For this reason attachment to a country suddenly becomes important" (Nkosi : 1983:93). For a writer newly liberated to write without the fear of constraints for the first time in his life, particularly for "a Black South African writer in exile," with a need to contribute to "the revolutionary process that was unfolding throughout Southern Africa," this link to home was even more crucial (Nkosi 1983:94). This consciousness is clearly at work in the structure of the contents of this book. Uppermost in his mind are the concepts of home, identity and exile, centralised subconsciously through the physical divisions of the contents page of this collection, and ultimately dispersed throughout the content.

Issues of identity are important, particularly in the third division of this book, the 'Literary', in which he refines his position regarding his concern for "the future of Africa in terms of power, culture and artistic expression" (Nkosi 1983:vi). These three concerns significantly encapsulate also the three central aspects denied the maturing Nkosi during his years in South Africa under apartheid rule. This section also forms a prelude to his later selection of essays *Tasks and Masks*, in which he continues



to explore his African identity through the dialectical process of the act of writing. For a writer previously under erasure in his home country, the act of writing was a highly productive and rewarding activity which ultimately functioned to make sense of the tripartite genesis of exile, these being alienation, homelessness and loss of identity. Writing afforded Nkosi with a shelter within which he could disentangle the admixture of the remembered and the real, because in exile "moods blur, emotions fade into lukewarm guilt and anxiety, memory can no longer bear the burden of immediacy and actual contact" (Nkosi 1983:94). It is for these reasons that a writer such as Nkosi has remained in touch with his roots through his writing, maintaining a relationship with his past initiated through the writing of essays contained in his first published book. Becoming a published writer also served to strengthen his sense of identity and belonging, as this indicated societal support, a support invaluable to Nkosi as it would act as a sounding board for the vision he nurtured of Africans across the globe. Publishing a book presumed a readership; he pondered, thinking no doubt of his own audience too: "who will read the fiction, the poems and the biographies of South African writers in exile? Certainly, Europeans. Americans. Indians and Chinese. Everyone but the people in whose name one is writing" (Nkosi 1980:68). This was the stark reality of being a writer in exile; of having to maintain a fragile balance between the paradox created by exile, that of simultaneous involvement and dispassionate distance.

In the essays subtitled 'Literary', in particular the essay entitled "Black Power or Souls of Black Writers" Nkosi explores issues relating to "the African mind", and sees "the future of the Negro anywhere in the world as indissolubly linked with the future of Africa" (Nkosi 1983: vi). He reviews the works of a number of artists and writers, notably Mphahlele's book *The African Image* in an essay with the same title, and expresses his views on "the bottomless confusion which now attends the efforts by African intellectuals to recreate an image of themselves from the disparate elements of their cultures as well as from the debris of their shattered pre-colonial past"(129). In his essay "Literature and Liberation" he criticises works with purely propagandistic content: "the cult of the gun...can be a source of weakness rather than strength, for the gun by itself without an ideology to guide the actions of the gun-wielder is incapable of transforming society, except superficially"(161), and details some meaningful roles for the writer in the struggle for liberation. His exile compelled him to rethink his destiny in Africa, and writing these essays provided Nkosi with a clearer understanding of himself as an exiled individual.

### **The Transplanted Heart**

Nkosi's second collection of essays was first published in 1975 in Nigeria, the same year Nkosi obtained a Diploma in English Literature from the University of London. The title of this collection,

apart from the essay with a similar title, is reminiscent of his amusing sketch about a white man receiving the transplanted heart of an black man, entitled "The Minister of Heart Transplants". This sketch was presented at the Lyceum in London on March 22, 1969 as part of the Sharpeville Memorial Concert to raise funds for the Anti-Apartheid Movement in London. In the essay "South Africa : The Transplanted Heart" Nkosi addresses the more serious apartheid politics of race, in particular questions "which nag about the use of a dying man's heart ... especially where black donors are involved ..." (Nkosi 1975:33). However, seen from a different perspective, this title may, on closer reflection, also have as subtext the exiled writer's renewed vision. There is a sense in this collection, that although the yearning for his African landscape is ever-present, and will continue to be so throughout his writing, as he admits in his essay "Out There on a Visit : American Notes" : " if one cannot endure the present one takes refuge in what one assumes was a better past" (Nkosi 1983:69), Nkosi, much like his metaphor of the transplanted heart, has become accustomed to his life in his new host country; his awareness of himself as an exile has receded and is replaced by another more urgent need to be recognised as the academic critic. In order to achieve this goal, he admits however that he will always remain attached to his country of birth and its people:

these essays have been a result of a watching brief on daily events in South Africa ... I kept local news media under constant scrutiny for news of developments *at home* [my emphasis] ... I hope they fully make up for in the intensity of that controlled emotional response to the suffering of the black people of South Africa, to which no 'native son' can ever be totally immune. (Nkosi 1975:vii)

Nkosi's diction is seldom incidental. Whilst he insists that he does not suffer from the 'sickness' of nostalgia for his native land, the words 'home' and 'son' above contain indications of the exile's experience of the traumatic severance from home and hearth. Nkosi's purported lack of a visceral attachment to home may be explained by his view that:

South African literature consistently reveals a certain incapacity for generating nostalgia, possibly because "the unrepresentable loss, painful as it may be, is transformed by nostalgic recollections into a beautiful form. The fiction so loosened from the historical constraints of its original space and time, offers a consolation, allowing the master-project of modernity to stay its progressive course by orienting itself in relation to the nostalgic image it offers as the compensation for the forgetfulness and alienation of its guilt-ridden conscience ... instead of being bathed in a pleasant glow of nostalgia the past in South Africa is remembered mainly as a bad nightmare fomented by resistance. ([http:// dbgw. finlit.fi/fili/fi/toiminta/Nkosi.html](http://dbgw.finlit.fi/fili/fi/toiminta/Nkosi.html) : 2005)

Nkosi supports the view that his writing is never arbitrary: "nuance resides mainly in the choice of words; and for a writer, language is everything" (Nkosi 1975:viii), hence "words are not unimportant: sometimes words by writers help bring into clear focus feelings of frustration and resentment which have long remained inchoate" (Nkosi 1983:94). Heidegger adumbrates Nkosi's thoughts on language, when he says that "language belongs to the closest neighbourhood of man's being ... to discuss language, to place it, means to bring to its place of being not so much language, but ourselves: our own gathering into the appropriation" (Heidegger 1971:190).

Whereas the first collection was viewed by Nkosi as "messages tossed away", this second collection contains both published and unpublished material, a collection which he describes as "occasional notes on a pad" (Nkosi 1975:vii). Having at this point firmly established his sense of a home in writing and language, Nkosi in this collection of essays is less focused on issues of disconnection and the self, and more on ways of re-establishing connectedness with his self and others, this task being a primary point of affinity in this collection of essays. There is the implied sense that the severance from home has become less pronounced, the "severance from Africa [which] has not only meant exile from 'the scenes his fathers loved', but also a bitter and anguished exile from the self" (Nkosi 1983:104), his writing now beginning to reflect a "changing political and emotional outlook" (Nkosi 1975:viii). As in *Home and Exile and other Selections*, the content of this collection is also divided into specific headings, these being 'Politics', 'Travel' and 'Cultural Activities', three important sections which centrally emanate from the earlier concerns home, exile and writing. Although these issues continue to dominate Nkosi's exilic existence and remain major topics of debate in his writing, these new divisions clearly indicate new concerns. The collection reveals a consciousness which has progressed since the first collection - there is an intimation of issues external to South Africa and a larger world being addressed, such as Jamaican Pan-Africanism and the marginalisation of the Negro in the USA.

The essays under the heading of 'Politics' are fragments of debates on political issues which Nkosi felt compelled to comment on; issues such as his disenchantment with liberals, the Immorality Act and the fraudulent character of apartheid mentality, observations drawn from personal experiences as a native son exposed to South African politics: "such a reflection is perhaps not strange, stemming as it does from a life of humility, persecution and conflict in a tyrannical society" (96). The essays contained under the heading 'Travel' are also the same two which preeminently reside under the heading 'Exile' in *Home and Exile*, which tend to point to the importance these locations hold for Nkosi, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

In the final section 'Cultural Activities' Nkosi turns to music, writers and books, reflecting his private

thoughts on three cultural categories most severely impoverished by the totalitarian powers of apartheid in the 1960s. These essays may be read as reminiscences on writers such as Alex la Guma and Athol Fugard, which reveal "an almost incredulous fondness about the people we had known and left behind in South Africa, their courage, their optimism, even their petty stupidities" (109). Nkosi discusses African jazz in terms of exile: as racially mixed audiences were not permitted in South Africa and clubs were subjected to constant police raids, "in order to survive ... some of these kids, like Miriam Makeba, have gone on to conquer the world stage" (101). In these essays, Nkosi recalls the "wasteful" death of writers, friends driven to despair by the political situation, "a suicidal kind of living which was bound to destroy life at an early age" (102).

In the final essay of this collection, Nkosi's discussion of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (an interest which would lead to Nkosi obtaining his Masters on this writer) is essentially also a discussion of a colonial history with close affinities to his own. And all things colonial lead back to issues of home and exile, as these ultimately have their roots embedded in the "myth of empire building, of relentless proselytising of native races ..." (159). However, for Nkosi as an exile, and a black man having survived apartheid in South Africa, the colonial burden is seen to lie in the final and ultimate show of power against the African subject; it is not exile that has ultimately silenced and banished his African identity, but the fact that "Crusoe does not teach Friday to call him by his name ... 'I taught him to say Master ... I let him know that was to be my name'" (161).

## Tasks and Masks

Nkosi's final collection of essays published in 1981 is novel in the sense that it heralds his arrival as a writer and a critic, denoting the achievement of his primary goal, that of establishing his home in literature as well as providing criteria on the themes and styles of African literature. A careful scrutiny of the three titles of the collected essays reveals that these were not abstractly conceived: all three titles are subtly embedded with various nuances of exile, home and identity pertaining in particular to the African condition, and to Nkosi specifically. These nuances are variously suggested by constructs of home, exile, the mask and the transplanted heart - and taken to function as metaphors for place, identity and exile, concerns with which Nkosi engages throughout his writing. Nkosi interestingly makes a point of offering a reason for his choice of the title *Tasks and Masks*, which he omits in the other two collections. Whilst the principal function of a mask is to conceal or disguise, Nkosi provides a different and more literal reading: he compares black writing, which "historically views African society and its literature from an essentialist position, to being nothing more than a mask one turns perpetually in one's hands, each time revealing nothing more than what it is - the work of some skilful carver" (Nkosi 1981:Preface). However, a reading of

Walter adds another applicable dimension to the mask metaphor in terms of identity:

this mask .... can be seen as a re-articulation of double consciousness into double vision. Whereas double consciousness represents a state of psychological crisis that distorts the perception of the self ... double vision is an inversion of this conflict: the ability to view oneself through the eyes of one's own culturally, historically and sociopolitically informed ethnic perspective. (Walter 2003:158)

One of the most widely debated issues at literary conferences of the 70s and 80s was that of the African writer's political commitment, and in the trenchant essays in *Tasks and Masks* Nkosi posits the central task of the writer. To Nkosi, it is vital that a writer, particularly one in exile, makes a commitment to promote an understanding of African discourse, tradition and aspirations, albeit from afar. This commitment is achieved and emphasised through an ongoing discussion of the various writerly spaces entrenched in the genres of poetry, drama and the novel. The essays published in *Tasks and Masks* are essentially Nkosi's affirmation of his literary commitment and are not notes or messages, but "the result of many accidents and conjunctures" (Nkosi 1981:Preface). Klima's discussion of the critic and the role of literary criticism is necessary to quote at length as it serves as a profile of Nkosi as critic in this collection:

There is a very close relationship between modern black African writers and their critics ... many authors deal in criticism themselves, while the critics sometimes present concrete examples of their theoretical ideas. They also meet quite often at conferences, festivals, etc. This relationship results partly from the general scarcity of intellectuals in Black Africa, and partly from the fact that a number of questions having to do with creative methods and aspirations have not yet been cleared up. While many European and American theorists devote their attention to the classics and works written long ago, African critics concentrate mostly on contemporary production and its topical aspects. One of their tasks is to give young authors advice and basic instruction and sometimes even encourage them a bit. But this relationship is not so one-sided. The critic's opinion is not always accepted and obeyed ... some literary works constitute a polemic reply to the critic's view ... such an exchange is necessary in the dynamic, passion-charged atmosphere in which the literature of Africa is developing. (Klima 1976:266)

In his preface to *Tasks and Masks* Nkosi does just that - he takes the critic to task and recommends absorption and diversity as primary aims. This collection of essays contains also Nkosi's outspoken commentaries on the themes and styles of sub-Saharan African literature, underpinned by his concern with socio-historical ideologies in African societies, broadening his discursive domain

established in his earlier essays. This work consists of eight essays, some of the material reworked from past interviews with African writers and other writing. The central position of these pieces holds that literature is inconceivable outside the context of language, and both these are intimately connected to issues of cultural identity and societal values.

These essays reveal Nkosi's earliest stance on the issues which inform his world of letters and are underpinned by various meanings of exile, colonial tradition and western literary forms. His writing has provided him with a home, albeit a bastardised cultural space of his own design. This writerly space has been forged on the one hand through his empathy with the problems associated with the African sense of belonging and rejection, and on the other hand through urban cosmopolitan intellectual traditions. His essays in *Tasks and Masks* underscore the importance of the influence which western literature, rooted in the colonial past, has had on the 'Other'. In these essays he rigorously removes the 'mask' from the stereotypical face of African literature to challenge the critical task of this literature, which is to promote social and political regeneration.

It is no surprise that the introductory chapter to these essays of "general criticism on the themes and styles of African literature" (Nkosi 1981:Preface) should pertinently address the language crisis. As mentioned earlier on in this chapter, language has been the primary concern of this exiled writer, particularly as he has first-hand experience of his own writing "having to employ the language of [his] colonial masters" (Nkosi 1981:1). Nkosi viewed language as an objective marker of his culture, and embarked on a lifelong search for identity using language as his literary and cultural expression, instituting aggressive measures to recapture his linguistic heritage. For this reason he viewed language as a "living organism, forever changing to accommodate concepts and ideas" (Nkosi 1981:2), and his allegiance to language has provided Nkosi with an abiding strength and critical edge as an African writer and critic educated on western literary traditions. Here Nkosi aligns himself with Weiss, who comments that:

language for the individual conscience, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other ... it becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. (Weiss 1992:135)

Nkosi is never more aware of his erstwhile marginalised status under apartheid when he writes in "The Language Crisis" that, "in trying to rehabilitate their smashed up cultures African writers are forced to write ... in the same languages that were used to enslave them" (Nkosi 1981:2). Whilst empathetic with the African writer's dilemma, faced with cultural ambiguity, Nkosi remains

preoccupied with literary excellence. As an impeccable stylist in the tradition of modernist aesthetics, he developed a preference for modernist texts as seen in his essay "The New African Novel : A Search for Modernism" in this collection, perhaps because these texts avoided overtly suggestive writing and were primarily concerned with the philosophies of existentialism and humanism. Modernism is obsessed with journeying, and perhaps what drew Nkosi to modernist thinking was its relationship with themes of fragmentation, displacement, dislocation and alienation and ensuing marginality, often suggested in "the mood of nihilism and pessimism which affects some of the modernist fiction and which is in itself the measure of the alienation of these literary intellectuals from the ordinary people" (Nkosi 1981:74). His insistence on literary accomplishment resulted in a number of patronising and often provocative judgements against the writings of some of his compatriots and other internationally acclaimed writers such as Mphahlele, Rive, Soyinka, Pinter, Osborne and others. The intentions of the artist and the polemicist do not always run parallel, as Nkosi himself can be viewed as a writer who has consistently written abroad, clinging to the English language, writing for a small enclave of literary intelligentsia in the UK and the USA in the main. Nkosi acknowledges the different modes of self-expression of the African artist and states that literature alien to African cultures does have intrinsic value to offer its African readers. Malcolm Crick explains that:

Different cultures characterize the diversities and the unifying features differently, and over time the images of what is universal and what separates one culture from another change ... so there can be no final definition of the relation between "ourselves" and "others". The real meaning of the relation is thus in all its versions. (1977:28)

The second essay "Negritude : New and Old Perspectives" in this collection addresses issues of identity. Quoting Sartre and Senghor to support his views on Negritude, Nkosi argues the various definitions of blackness put to him through questions which already were in the forefront of his consciousness during his tenure at various American universities, and which he debates at length in some of his essays in his earlier collection *Home and Exile*. Living under apartheid and finally erased by this system from his birthplace, he recalls, in the words of the poet Aimé Césaire, that "we lived in an atmosphere of rejection and we developed an inferiority complex" (Nkosi 1981:10). Nkosi, having personal insight into humiliation and oppression as a victim of the colour-based ideology of the apartheid regime, is able to identify with the conditions as set out by writers such as Césaire and concurs that, in order to establish one's identity, one needs firstly to "have a concrete consciousness of what we are - that is, of the first fact of our lives; that we are black; that we were black, and that we have a history that contains certain cultural elements of great value ... that could make an important contribution to the world" (11). This observation and his later view that "writers whose works are created from the perspective of the struggle of the people for social justice will

always have an inner buoyancy and hope denied the writer who feels himself entirely isolated from the people" (74), leads Nkosi as critic to formulate a new perspective on being black. He asks that being black not be regarded as "an aberration ... but as being part of an old legitimate and even respectable intellectual tradition" (19). As critic he must continue to "exert an influence on black writing in areas of legitimate interests for any student of African literature" (27). This idea is more fully explored in the third essay "History as the Hero of the African Novel" which is not fully discussed here as it has little import on the issues addressed in this thesis. However, what can be said here is that Nkosi as a black writer has, as have other black writers, been accused of lacking a formal literary history - the black writer's historical marginal position was premised on the European conviction that "blacks and other people of colour could not write" (Gates 1985:6). It can be said that Anglo-African writing arose directly in defence of and in response to this notion, as early narratives by black writers were a collective criticism against their marginalised literary history and were hence the earliest proponents of a black literary tradition, a challenging tradition which Nkosi has steadfastly advanced throughout his writing career, culminating in the current critical literary tradition of black difference.

In his essay "Southern Africa : Protest and Commitment" Nkosi moves closer to home. Fiction by writers such as Alex la Guma, Doris Lessing, Bessie Head and Es'kia Mphahlele, is discussed at length - writers who have managed to "construct from the shattered fragments of life under oppression, a literature of value and defiance which goes beyond simple protest" (Nkosi 1981:104). He comments that literature by its very nature should be universal and relevant; even though imprisoned by time and place, literature has the power to reach across cultures and transcend its rootedness.

Nkosi's critical eye is evident in this collection. His central criticism of writers, irrespective of their colour or political persuasion, is their alleged lack of passion, method and precision in their writing, their compromising art in favour of revolutionary leanings of politics; and most of all, the lack of concern for the liberation of Africans. Even his closest friend did not escape censure; parts of Modisane's *Blame me on History* Nkosi found wanting, accusing him of writing for foreign consumption, "for those who truly did not know the truth, I was truly revolted" (Nkosi 1964:54). Commenting in the 60s on a work by Margaret Black, Nkosi writes: "What I find even more extraordinary about this book is its particular brand of dullness ... the vocabulary of most white South Africans is shockingly limited, they lack the vitality and the imagination ... the liberals are no more immune from it than the illiberal" (Nkosi 1965:27). Even prior to the essays in *Tasks and Masks* Nkosi's decidedly blunt and irritated review of *The African Revolution* by Russell Warren Howe exemplifies his unremitting distrust of patronising and pontificating liberals devoid of sincere



commitment, broadly discussed in Chapter Two: "this is a rather silly book. Its modish title is even sillier since nothing inside its pages explains or justifies it ... not only is this book silly, it is also ignorant" (Nkosi 1969:605). On Alex la Guma's writing skill with the short story, Nkosi in *The Transplanted Heart* likened his talent to "a crotchety old lady knitting a pair of gloves on a Cape Town balcony. Only a big novel will free him from the exigencies of Cape Malay home cooking" (Nkosi 1975:115). In much the same vein Nkosi later labelled Richard Rive's novel *Emergency*, as "bad, jerky writing and long chunks of dialogue which add nothing to the understanding of the characters" (Nkosi 1983:137).

Harsh words perhaps, but when one considers Nkosi's stance on literature functioning as propaganda, it is felt that these criticisms have been made not in malice, but with the wish to elevate the image of the African writer to the level at which they can compete and compare favourably in the international arena. In taking this stance, it is salutary to recall here Nkosi's own initial limitations as a writer. Considering the political climate of South Africa in the late 50s and Nkosi's social realities, it must be said in his defence, particularly in view of the opinions held by critics such as Glenn and Booth, that it is commendable that Nkosi wrote at all. His own early essays must stand, not as exemplars of a "lacklustre and secondhand" literature, or his questionable "competence to deal with French literature," but as a tribute to his stubborn endurance given the circumstances and adversities as discussed at length in Chapter Two. Kristina Masuwa aptly underscores these sentiments with her observation that: "one cannot speak of a South African writer, indeed of any writer of the 'oppressed persuasion' without being drawn by the politics and the culture that have made the writers" (Masuwa 1994:35).

Nkosi as an exiled writer and peripatetic wanderer became a pioneer in African literary criticism through his essays in the three collections discussed in this chapter. He has contributed to the political struggle in South Africa in a singular way, never writing with the sole aim to change or broaden the reader's perception on what was happening in South Africa, but to create an awareness of African literature through his country's political history. He has steadfastly maintained that personally he has never aspired to be "a poet of the revolution. I have never been and am not a member of a political party. I will not allow anyone to give me directives ... I am opposed to writing in collusion to political programmes, and I believe that it is important to me that writing is committed" (Isaacson 1991:3). His writing indirectly is able to exemplify to what extent, given the oppressive circumstances, this has impacted on the writer's creative potential and imagination. This is necessary, because Nkosi believes that the social conditions in Africa and its problems require that the writer be relevant and conform to a formalised and artistic expression at all times. He views the role and intervention of the writer to be that of mentor and mediator, the constructor of cultural

values and norms in the quest for the liberation of the African continent, championing the integrity of the writer's visionary role. This role will simultaneously provide a permanent home for literature, the writer and his art, and that must be finally the writer's ultimate goal. Writers are "the eyes and ears of the revolution ... literature provides us with unique insights into historical conditions ... its materials including language, is ideological, and literature achieves its power by working upon these ideological values into something fresh and startling" (Nkosi 1983:164). Nkosi views the writer as an influential emissary who is able to interpret the world through the act of writing for their audience, and so promote a clearer understanding and a renewal of African literature. With this conviction in mind, his collection *Tasks and Masks* is hence written with a directness, in a tone which is sharp and shrewd. The discourse in the essays is purposefully composed to ensure that black literature and its political legacy receives its proper place in South African history, infinitely accessible to new generations of both black and white critical and independent readers.

Mediated through language and the conventions that define the literary form, the power entrenched in language could be harnessed effectively by the writer if "every writer has a vision. Otherwise I do not see what he is doing writing" (Nkosi 1983:107). A writer's commitment to language also will commit him to social responsibilities, because language ultimately is shaped by social forces. Not only has Nkosi found a cultural space in his writing from where he is able to make active political commitment, but it also serves as a means of maintaining "his essential identity against the constricting measures of another tongue" (Nkosi 1981:108). His essays provide a new location from which to articulate his sense of the world and from where a homeplace may be created. Bell hooks describes marginality such as experienced by Nkosi as "a space of resistance ... a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in the habits of being and in the way one lives" (1990:149). As a writer and intellectual mentor he is able to create through his writing, the necessary artistic product that will exert a lasting impact on the reader, without creating the need to resort to armed conflict. Both his play *Rhythm of Violence* (1964) and his novel *Underground People* (2002) through their characters, voice Nkosi's lifelong belief in the futility of physical violence, preferring language and writing as the enduring weapons to achieve political aims:

The white South Africans who craved forgiveness or protested at being misunderstood were a bore...and so were the blacks and their representatives who appeared with stupefying frequency ... to promote their cause in rhetorical voices rent between impotent rage and futile menace as they solicited support from the great 'Western democracies'. (Nkosi 2002:17)

However, what writing must not do, is lionise the writer at the expense of his art. Nkosi argued that the social value of literature should not be determined by the social stature of a writer. Writers should never compromise the truth of their own experiences in a quest to be part of fashionable world consciousness. The key factor of good literature is an element of estrangement, a good novel could discourse on everyday phenomena but still maintain its position as paradoxically presenting something wholly new.

Nkosi remained convinced that the cause for the lack of craftsmanship in African writing was to be found in the apartheid system of cultural deprivation, as discussed in the essay "Southern Africa : Protest and Commitment" (Nkosi 1981:76). He decries the fact that the works of writers in exile had ceased to be relevant regarding issues pertaining to the African continent as a whole. Although Nkosi does not presume to prescribe to writers what they should discourse on, he does however exhort the writer to continue to expose the inherent conflicts of their immediate situations, in the light of possible solutions. Writers not only have an ideological obligation, but also an artistic obligation - they need to re-evaluate their own experiences and construct their own subjectivity in the creation of a text.

Nkosi, in an attempt to protect black identity and difference, found that the South African writer in exile often fails to find an alternative mode of expression other than that expressed through an existence conditioned by white South African policies. Hence, as legitimate critics of society, African writers should become less preoccupied with colonial stereotypes and the legacy of apartheid - they need to establish a legacy of their own, a more imaginative and homegrown body of literature dealing with issues other than themes of exploitation and oppression, and move away from prescriptive forms and imitations of white writing. African literature should embody the results of black experiences of contemporary African situations by creating three dimensional characters who do not live as mere expressions of the author but take on a life of their own to "express ... a celebration of life, by making the reader conscious that we do have to fall in love, that we do have marriages, we do have a lot of occurrences in the townships ... which has nothing specifically to do with just responding to or being a victim of apartheid" (Worsfold 1990:64).

Thus through his essays Nkosi negotiated a discursive space for the South African narrative within a specific intellectual and political conjuncture. As a long-term expatriate, his enduring obsession with his native land enabled him as a critical writer to produce a literature abroad that has focused almost exclusively on South Africa. Masuwa points out that Nkosi represents a particular genre: "the exiled writer who, denied the right to live in his own home, must now watch from afar - and only feel what the pen feels" (Masuwa 1994:36). Nkosi in his essays expresses the belief that African

literature needs to ensure a re-invigoration of black consciousness, by writers who will not shy away from social criticism. In the words of novelist Armah, the role and concern of the African writer finally ... "is with smashing the loneliness of modern Africa as fashioned by the West" (Wanjala 1980:3). Nkosi concludes his essays in *Tasks and Masks* with the observation that although "independence has liberated enormous energies in terms of artistic production" the writing of African writers reveal "unexpected hesitations and social ambivalence, because they only make a pretense at striking out against the ruling class ... their works cannot tell us anything of value about the lives of ordinary people because in the main their imaginative capital is mortgaged to the remains of the bourgeois colonial culture" (Nkosi 1981:181). The primary role of the critic is hence:

not to stand sentry guard at the thinning frontiers between one art and another, trying to arrest the process of intercourse which is radically altering one local idiom after another. His function is to identify the varieties of human experience embodied in each idiom, to note what is vital and useful, and where his critical skills enable him to assist his people in preserving the best from their tradition and absorbing the best from outside. (Nkosi 1981:Preface)

In the next chapter, Nkosi's novels and short stories will be studied to determine what they further reveal of Nkosi's construction of exile, home and identity.

## Chapter 4

### Writing against history : Lewis Nkosi's novels and short stories

Stories are only true when they are well-told ... whether you believe them or not, that is another matter. (Nkosi 2006 : 22)

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This chapter will commence with a broad introduction to Nkosi's fiction in order to situate the fictional works of this writer in terms of the central concerns of the thesis. This will be followed by a discourse on Nkosi's short stories and the chapter will continue with a critical appraisal of his novels *Mating Birds*, *Underground People* and his most recent novel, *Mandela's Ego*. Nkosi's plays and poetry will be discussed as separate genres in Chapter Five.

Nkosi, driven by his conviction that literature was not only a vehicle for intellectual engagement and contemplation, but also an effective vehicle of protest against the injustices of apartheid, wrote fiction which, sometimes critically acclaimed, sometimes controversial, wholly supported this belief. As an erudite critic of African literature he is, however, severely critical of content which has as theme the narrow confines of South African politics, and unless the writer is: "interested in exploring the interior life of his character, unless he can perform an extended investigation of their psyches under pressure, or use the flashback method more extensively to relate us to the life outside, he *tells* everything about what happens to them ... but *illuminates* nothing" (Nkosi 1975:115). The content of Nkosi's novels and short stories, although rooted in an apartheid South African context, transcends the historical narrative predicated largely on the abject chronicles of apartheid and its system of oppression. Nkosi avoids writing in which there is "nothing in the way of background or tradition other than the monstrous working of the apartheid system" (Nkosi 1965:164). His fiction, true to its own complex vision, explores the South African experiences from an historical perspective and in relation to his wider world. Thus there are as many readings of Nkosi's works of fiction as there are readers; some may read his fiction as dated and tedious, largely irrelevant in a postcolonial South Africa. Some may argue that Nkosi's writing is saturated with racial and political stereotypes, his fiction embedded in a world of pervasive racial oppression. Some might even view the lives of his characters as largely formulaic, always revolving around the centrifugal forces of explosive racial hostilities and forever aspiring towards freedom. One may perhaps accuse Nkosi of favouring a central theme, that of the hero's journey by creating characters who constantly lay down paradoxical markers through their thoughts and actions. Some may read his fiction having as its primary function

the signposting of a complex vision on issues of belonging, inhabited by Nkosi's own cultural and memorial history. However, for the purpose of this thesis, Nkosi's fiction will be revisited in terms of the construction of home, exile and identity, which he presents through this writing.

Nkosi embeds into his fiction a particular kind of narrative in which many different identities live out their lives in the varied spaces in the South African landscape, theirs a story that must be told and retold in a multiplicity of ways, so that Nkosi himself may find redemption for an early fractured sense of self by exposing a history of a life conceived in penury and social revolution, played out in an urban wasteland of crossing boundaries, a history reaching far beyond the confines of the text. Fiction can promote an understanding of the past and in so doing make a different future possible, each story possessing "a kind of eloquence which he has never been able to resist" (Nkosi 1987:70). Walter confirms this view and comments that stories:

do not exist in isolation - but are always interwoven, mapping the experiences and knowledge of people living at the margins, people who live in the interstitial space between domination and resistance, precisely because their histories have systematically been silenced and distorted through various forms of hegemonic otherisation. (2003:30)

Hence Nkosi's characters depict more than just individual lives; they most often become symbolic icons of, and metaphors for, a larger human drama, pointing to the destiny of a nation rather than petty conflicts between individuals. A reading from this perspective will also assist in teasing out the effects exile has had on Nkosi's construction of place and identity, as the texts themselves seem to function as narrative sites of struggle through the very process of writing. Nkosi, writing out of a psychology formed by an apartheid background, writes into his fiction and into the lives of his characters the genesis of his realities and his own existence. He exposes a deep synergy with the South African landscape and its contours that his South African readers will recognise. When asked in an interview why he wrote, Nkosi mused that there were various reasons, but mostly he wrote "out of a need to represent the world both for others and for oneself ... and to share an experience of being" (in Stiebel and Gunner 2005:220). His novels are rich in nuances of place and identity, offering an understanding of his past and present, a writing which historically "touch[es] on the nodal points at which love and revolution intersect, the points at which the incorrigible private and the irrevocable public are finally reconciled" (Nkosi 2002:9).

Throughout his fiction, Nkosi foregrounds the African experience within the history of apartheid, juxtaposing his fiction against apartheid's own interpretation of this history. Inherent in the titles of

his novels are issues of divided identities, racial antipathies and a turbulent political history; inherent in the contents is the ever-present nuance of exile, shaped by a definitive existence of wandering and rootlessness. These issues are recounted in the many personal journeys which Nkosi, indirectly through his characters, undertakes in a search for selfhood, a culture and a history in order to find a meaning for his own life, as his fiction notably depicts adult characters of an age when Nkosi was exiled. Nkosi's writing is not so much an act of self expression, as it is an "act of knowledge through self-confrontation" (Ndebele 1984:22). In a sense his fiction also functions imaginatively as part narrative and part fictionalised autobiography, since the consciousness of his characters is tempered by his own personal history, intellect and sensitivities. By aligning himself strategically with the voice of the narrator, Nkosi assumes and maintains a tight control over the text. Nkosi is less concerned with the memories of the past than he is with the philosophy that these reflections on his past give rise to. As a writer, he perceptively holds through his character Nozizwe in his novel *Mandela's Ego*, that: "stories are meant to be interpreted as symbols ... symbols for things we want or desire or dream about, things we dare not talk openly of. So we create these stories ... where everything is a symbol for something else" (Nkosi 2006:141). Although Nkosi locates his texts in the consciousness of his characters, this consciousness is conversely shaped by the words of the text, "creating out of bare words a world of living people" (Nkosi 1975:117). There is a sense of an ambiguous narrative voice in Nkosi's fiction, a voice internally divided between a first person masculine voice and a framed author narrator, both who maintain the traditional masculine narrative, as the consciousness of his female characters remains tellingly inaccessible to the reader, a point of discussion not within the scope of this current thesis. To begin a detailed discussion of Nkosi's fiction, I will now turn to his short stories.

## The Short Stories

Nkosi's short stories, a small oeuvre of writing now relegated to the pages of history, were at the time of writing both the continuation of the voice of a new generation of black writers beginning to emerge at the height of the political unrest in South Africa in the 1960s, as well as being exemplars of Nkosi's own internal war with himself as a writer at the time, the pain inflicted on him by apartheid much in evidence. His short stories are an oblique attack on racists and racism alike, creating a hybrid fiction which functions both as a fusion between social criticism and literature, and as an intellectual and artistic manipulation of form. Nkosi's short stories are not so much about writerly spaces tied to the realities and experiences of a life lived in the present under a repressive regime, but about memories of a place now distant in space. This collection of short stories functions rather as a literature of *re-discovery*, evocative of the inner landscape of a colonised consciousness with its own personal historic nuances. Writing from a position of exile, these stories proclaim the

exile's state of being. This fiction is permeated with Nkosi's own sense of trepidation, having newly arrived abroad and deeply haunted by a sense of despair and abasement. These stories, albeit not acclaimed literary pieces, reveal much of Nkosi's own consciousness evident in his quest for an identity and a home different from the one hitherto shaped by a human rights denial. Inherent in all the stories is a sense of space constituted from a traumatic geopolitical dislocation and may perhaps explain Nkosi's insistence in creating characters who remain fixed in a localised environment which is narrowly South African throughout. His early writing enabled him to deal with the many private demons of apartheid and issues resonant with his South African past. These works of fiction are exemplars of Nkosi's earliest literary expression which even then strove to liberate the African people from the restrictions imposed on them by apartheid through consciousness raising rather than through revolutionary actions.

His stories are fictive sites in which Nkosi sets up a dialogue with his past through language. From this position he constructs a platform from which to examine both his South African identity and the society from which he was geographically exiled. He articulates his perceptions through his characters who exemplify both a colonial consciousness and an African perspective, looking back from two different positions simultaneously. Their bifurcated dimensions are unavoidable, as Nkosi was raised in a disparate cultural space which at once inscribed a conglomeration of traditions, values and struggles onto his consciousness. To this end the statement by Davies that "we re-imagine, as we re-engage the task of writing new worlds into existence" (1995: xviii), may support the process of discovery evident in these hybrid, semi-biographical pieces. This early anti-apartheid writing is Nkosi's revenge on, as well as a relentless exploration of, his identity and masculinity in a white world, misshapenly shaped by the colonist's conviction which "entertained the illusion that however badly treated, the slave not only loves them but will help them maintain their rule forever" (Mphahlele 1967:306). If one is fully to appreciate Nkosi's construction of home and identity, the short stories are the place to begin.

Newly expelled and thus in a sense conversely 'released' from the social confinement of apartheid through exile, Nkosi began writing to a contemporary cosmopolitan readership soon after his arrival abroad, not turning his back on his home language, yet loathe to give up the advantage of wielding as weapon against apartheid an international language, which he acknowledged was a means to create common ground to reach a wider community. His stories represent a creative space in which he authors different perspectives on what it meant to be black under apartheid and hence offer an understanding into the limiting and confined spaces of the disenfranchised. Most black townships created on the outer margins of the white world were one such attempt of confinement of both the black psyche and identity, which would render the 'native problem' invisible and the African thus



a non-presence. Nkosi's fiction transforms the narrowed perspectives of his social place into spaces of freedom through the act of writing, by writing into existence politicised characters marked and divided by the cruelties of apartheid and liberating them through his fiction. His own liberation from apartheid is written into that of his characters, whom he empowers to form relationships across the colour bar and assume positions of power, modalities which he was denied as a black man in his country of birth. This is evident in his novel *Mating Birds*: "I often think of how I wanted to write a story of what happens on a Durban beach ... I didn't read a Zulu novel, but things like *The Great Gatsby* in order to remember certain things I had left in South Africa ... in order to think how to create those characters" (Nkosi in Stiebel and Gunner 2005:235).

Writing from a renewed consciousness, that of the exile journeying away from a monochromatic home, saturated with anxieties and uncertainties, Nkosi finds in his fiction a home for his voice, an infinite and continuous space from where he is able to reshape his life. His stories reveal the tragedy of a homeplace which had failed in every respect to nurture him, leaving him with a cynical awareness of his lacerated identity and the lifelong effects of apartheid on his consciousness, particularly when "discussion turned suddenly to topics of great misfortune like death, injury or illness. Or apartheid" (Nkosi 2002:24). These stories have as subtext Nkosi's attempt to claim back the journey that had brought him to the threshold of a new and foreign life and to face forward, his writing an act which enables him to discover some stable place within himself. Nkosi's short stories are also a writing in which his search for a 'home' in writing was beginning to gain shape, his desire for a nurturing creative space deepening as he travelled from one continent to the next, his peregrinations constantly eroding, destabilising and fragmenting his sense of any one place as home. These are then the central concerns that form the nexus of his short stories, a fiction in which the "I of the narrator is so closely bound up with that of the author, as to be inseparable" (Nkosi 1981:95).

Exiled and isolated from the intellectual stimulation of the *Drum* writing environment, Nkosi was determined to realise his aspirations as a writer and continued his writing career abroad. Nkosi's short stories, albeit only ten in total, are not only historically specific discourses, but a fiction purposefully depicting acts of transgression and contraventions of the laws imposed by apartheid, Nkosi flaunting his exile in the face of apartheid. This expression of political defiance against unjust apartheid laws was Nkosi's South African identity coming to the fore to show his solidarity with the masses. He voiced his defiance even though he could not write specifically for a South African audience, as his writing was banned in South Africa. His writing, deemed by Nkosi as his preferred form of revolutionary action, would certainly have been classified as "indecent, objectionable and obscene" by the apartheid driven Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963, which held that a publication "... shall be deemed to be undesirable if it brings any section of the inhabitants of the

Republic into ridicule or contempt" (Lindfors:1966:62). Modisane's views on writing may equally be applied to Nkosi's early writing, in that newly exiled, the short story served as "an urgent, immediate, intense, concentrated form of unburdening yourself - and you must unburden yourself" (51). The predominant and contentious themes of miscegenation, the defiance of political systems, taboos and laws, and criticism of the regime ensured that Nkosi's writing would find a publisher abroad. Opting for the short story as his chosen genre in the early 1960s was largely driven by economics, as Nkosi had left on exile with very little material wealth, and being involved in academia, he soon discovered that it was easier and quicker to publish a short story in a magazine than to launch a novel. Nkosi was aware that "some of the magazines have employed such low standards of selection that beginning writers began to get the idea that one could detour ... from the labour of good writing by bashing out a short story in a matter of a day or two and getting it published immediately" (60) and used this to his own advantage to ensure publication abroad. What needs to be said here, though, is that these short stories leave one with the sense that this writing was published abroad in the main for its political content and by virtue of being written by a black (South African) writer, as this early writing does not in any way do justice to Nkosi's writing skills and sense of critical authenticity evident in his later works and non-fiction writing. Lindfors confirms this perception when he comments that it was generally accepted at the time that "the only literature from the Republic which has any guarantee of selling abroad are works highly critical of the regime" (60).

His relative inexperience in balancing creative writing with political protest at the time is clearly evident in these early pieces, as his personal circumstances and experiences prevented him from writing with the necessary dispassion. Although writing from exile and drawing on his memories which tended to bring the past into sharper focus, Nkosi was unable, at this point in his writing career to "disengage himself from his environment long enough to write truthfully and powerfully" (59) and moreover, convincingly, because at that time he was, like many African writers, unable to strike a balance between extravagant sensationalism and angry protest. Nkosi's early criticism of black fiction, that "what we have so far are characters that are there really to illustrate certain problems of apartheid ... they [the black characters] are victims, the white characters are devils", (Worsfold 1990:65) must also apply to his own writing. His short stories subscribe to the sensational nature of apartheid throughout; his characters nothing more than the expression of the authorial voice. However, read in the context of this thesis, Nkosi's short stories reveal his early engagement with issues of identity, exile, place and home, themes which would continue to manifest with increasing clarity in his novels. The short stories are in the main narrations of transience and loss, the characters constantly in transit to an elsewhere and seldom positioned in a home setting - always journeying, constantly being uprooted, imprisoned, alienated and always portrayed in desperate and transgressive relationships.

Shortly after his arrival abroad, Nkosi's first short story entitled "The Alien Corn" was published in December 1962 in *Fighting Talk*, an outspoken journal which published protest writing banned in South Africa, and was introduced as "an extract from an almost completed first novel" (Nkosi 1962:10). This story is in a sense a moment of introspection, an attempt by the exile to remap his identity in a foreign space. "The Alien Corn" may be read as an encounter with the postcolonial culture of racial division as the characters are drawn in terms of black and white identities inhabiting the hybrid spaces of an ideology premised on colonial dictates. It tells the story of Ruth, a white girl who wanders along a footpath through a Coloured neighbourhood and discovers "the ruins of a vast colonial house" ... with its "wrecked splendour" and innate sense of "permanently satisfied lives" (10), weighted metaphors describing the colonist's confrontation with the inevitable erosion of colonial power. This politically fractured space becomes even more alienating when it is suddenly invaded by the imposing and threatening appearance of an unknown black man, to whom Ruth curiously finds herself both drawn and yet repelled. She is able to overcome her fear of him only when she discovers that he has been mentally emasculated by the loss of his mother through the brutality of police actions. When she realises that "he is incapable of violating her," he becomes just another "black man who could be commanded," the spectre of apartheid superiority reaching out across the ruins of Nkosi's own youth. Inherent in the title with its echo of the biblical Ruth is the notion of Nkosi's search for a clearer sense of identity and a search for a home space as yet not quite defined: "something unspoken [lay between him] ... and the other world, it struggled to take shape, still, formless, subsided, still unspoken" (10). This early fiction is an attempt to capture the bitter truths about the alienating conditions of an apartheid-riven world. This narrative is permeated with a deep sense of insecurity, the writing reflecting Nkosi's consciousness of his identity as a black man subsisting in a racist dispensation. This awareness is expressed through the narrator's sensitivity to his own blackness and the estrangement this skin colour has caused in a society based on the belief that the identity of the black man only existed as "a variety of human gestures responding to commands, to beckoning fingers, like puppets in a world that was permanently locked to him" (10). When Nkosi finally provides his character with a voice, what becomes audible above the "human roar of the shums which reached them only slightly, like the pebbly sounds of the waves knocking repeatedly against distant shores" (12) is an inner monologue describing the mind of an emasculated and exiled black man steeped in "the sadness, the desolation and a pain which was uncontainable" (12). A universe of suffering is laid bare in Nkosi's early fiction, as at this juncture of his fledgling writing career he was still searching to find a balance between two worlds, and as exile, two continents. In "The Alien Corn" Nkosi captures "a truth, perhaps *the* truth about a certain kind of inner condition" (10), that of the desolation of an alienated and fragmented identity.

"The Promise" published a year later adopts a less emotive stance than that of his first story, although the theme is similar to that of "The Alien Corn". In "The Promise" Nkosi yet again reflects on issues

of racial superiority and the divisive policies of an apartheid dispensation with its unparalleled deprivations, through his character George Lama. A highly educated and deracinated intellectual, Lama finds himself constantly being patronised by his condescending white employer. In order to escape his bleak working environment, Lama reminisces on his school days, in particular his school teacher Miss Tula, who deemed him to be "a boy who held vast promise" (Nkosi 1963:28). In a series of flashbacks, Lama fondly recalls his last day at school when Miss Tula not only extracted a promise from him to excel always, but also kissed him, leaving him with "a fire of emotions which were quite unforgettable ... and a panic which seemed to rise out of strange and bewildering emotion" (32). Nkosi again places his character in a familiar world of empty promises and limitations imposed by apartheid on "a kaffir with a B.Sc degree ... a rare position for a native" (27). There is no redefinition of selfhood and growth of consciousness from his marginalised position in this story, the author leaving his character on the periphery of power and privilege and isolated in an internal drama of conflicting emotions. This story embodies Nkosi's earliest determination to create a 'home' in writing, voiced through the thoughts of his character, who gives shape to Nkosi's own "arrogance of ambition" to become a writer with a home in language, as "writing lit up something in him which it became his duty to preserve; to pursue a goal that would lead to success, honour and fame, and to use these as tools for advancing the cause of his people" (28). His love for language and writing, which had nurtured him even as a young boy, was "a burden which seemed ... too important and unspeakably ennobling," and like his character, Nkosi finds solace in the knowledge that writing would eventually provide him with a secure space, releasing him finally from the constraints of apartheid "leaving behind him an extracted promise to honour with his mind a gift whose value was the nobility of its intent" (32).

"The Hotel Room", his third story, appeared in *Contrast* in 1964, and is the first of his more substantial short stories. It continues, albeit with a sense of detachment, to question the destructive forces of apartheid in terms of rootlessness and the limitations placed on black writers. The central character in this story is Sid Bailey, a man unable to resign himself to the crippling burden of his colour, deeply resentful of his circumstances as a victim and his life fraught with prejudice and insecurities, his identity equally fragmented. Bailey, a writer from London, seeks solace from the urban rush and takes a room in a hotel at an unnamed resort for a short vacation. He confines himself purposefully to this colourless space not only to work on his script but also to avoid the tourists whom he despises. However, the weather deteriorates and his confinement to the drabness of his hotel room and desolate beaches drive him to "scotch and water to chase away the demons of ennui" (Nkosi 1964:56), and later to a brief affair with a married woman who occupies the room across the corridor from him. Her eventual departure leaves him with a dreadful sense of abandonment and a "terror very familiar to men when they suddenly make the judgement and discover they can't do without certain women whom they know they are about to lose" (63).

"The Hotel Room", a story about uncertainty and loss, may be read as a large metaphor for that which apartheid represented to the oppressed. In this story Nkosi also expresses what it truly means to be exiled, to find oneself in an unfamiliar environment, living in a country far from where he was born, and having to adopt the values of the mainstream civilization, a man whose identity is shaped "without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity" (Fanon 1986:140). The narrator describes this life against the demoralising and dispiriting effects of stultifying enclosed spaces, negatively impinging on his creativity and resulting in a terrifying bleakness of spirit. In this aspect it is reminiscent of his later novel *Mating Birds*. Into this story Nkosi weaves his own overpowering sense of loss and transiency, intensified through the descriptions of his character's isolation and inability to communicate meaningfully with other human beings, a man who is "unable to be assimilated, unable to pass unnoticed ... an anxious man who cannot escape his body" (Fanon 1986:65). This sense of defeat is expressed through descriptions of physical spaces framed contiguously against the larger external natural world, the "musty walls of the hotel room" (Nkosi 1964:53) juxtaposed against scenes of an unnamed desolate beach "covered with scraps of brown paper wrappings ... which looked like the squalid leavings of a recently expired carnival, combined with the melancholy squalor of his soul" (55). The natural landscape mirrors the moods of both author and narrator, their consciousness fused and entrapped in the dispassionate world of apartheid, an indifferent, nameless, empty place of "grey drizzly mornings" (63), "grey sheets of rain," (54) and "grey skylines" (56). Nkosi draws on his own memories, illustrating through his character's confused inner state of being, a man who "having lived long with the illusion that he was a free man, suddenly tries the door one fine morning and finds it locked from without" (54). In comparison to "The Alien Corn," this writing is much more sophisticated and Nkosi's heightened awareness of place and issues of identity begin to manifest more clearly. The setting, purposely not named and described as an impersonal and transient space - the hotel room - dictates the flow of the narrative and the actions of his characters. His central character is yet again a writer, "a playwright of wit and imagination" (59), suffering from a "cultured lack of enthusiasm" (55). The death of the creative spirit and the lack of motivation is to any writer a "cause for genuine alarm, but he had long since ... lost the power to panic" (55). In an attempt to relieve the somber monotony of "the empty hours of a dead vacation," his character finds solace in the company of "an equally aggrieved soul" (55) through whose consciousness Nkosi expresses his own in terms of "sharing a sense of grievance against the entire world" (55). Isolated through exile, and emotionally haunted by the memories of apartheid, loss is still uppermost in Nkosi's mind.

Nkosi, though at the time of writing "The Hotel Room" fairly new to his exiled environment, nurtures the urge to oppose and challenge authority. This story expresses a need for retribution, an overpowering desire to "confront the law in the person of a policeman, ... to provoke an argument, a confusion of sorts, finally to extricate himself by sheer gift of tongue" (57). This story is also the

story of Nkosi's own sense of alienation and his as yet undefined identity, constantly manipulated by his new environment. Nkosi's own perceptions are subtly filtered through the realities of his characters in this story, through whose eyes and mind he expresses his own life away from the absurdities of apartheid, yet mentally still residing under its damning control in exile. His character is unable to escape from the sense of transiency his immediate environment wreaks on his self-awareness, and when he finally does find a kindred spirit, it is with the bitter knowledge that it is a relationship as evanescent and as confining as the hotel room, the knowledge leaving him with a deep sense of desolation, "sitting there until the sun set definitely behind him, and a creeping coldness began to make itself felt to his bones" (63). For Nkosi, newly liberated from apartheid but left to fend for himself in a totally new environment, the awareness of his insular existence and his deep sense of misgiving were paramount at this stage of his writing career.

"Potgieter's Castle" was first published in *Transition* in 1964 and later in *Come back, Africa! Short Stories from South Africa* in 1970. Its fictionalised content is based on an actual case involving a farmer, JP Potgieter in the Heidelberg district whose inhumane treatment of prisoners on his farm led to the Supreme Court and investigations into the labour conditions on farms in South Africa. This was a case which Nkosi wrote about in a journal article "Farm Jails" in 1963. He describes how beatings took place during the working day or when the farmer visited the fields. Potgieter would hoot from his car and instruct his *indunas* (boss boys) to 'slaan hulle dood' [beat them to death] (Nkosi 1963:68). Nkosi was later to comment in his collection of essays *Tasks and Masks* that "Potgieter's Castle" offers an uncensored glimpse into the daily agony of poor black living in South Africa, "the facts, raw experience and the aching memory of what it felt like" (Nkosi 1981:103). It is a story which directly confronts the ugly truths of "contracting prisoners out to country gentleman as cheap convict labour ... a form of slavery called by another name" (Nkosi 1967:300). The imprisonment of the African under apartheid rule was, whether on farms or in jails, an issue Nkosi felt deeply about and a subject he addressed again in his short story "The Prisoner" (1967) and in his later novels. Nkosi revisited the farm labour issue in his novel *Underground People*, its cruel realities recaptured in his character Gert Potgieter, who voices the popular colonial view of the African, "darkies who were no better than baboons ... savages armed with automatic weapons trying to bring about a new dark age in the most enlightened part of Africa" (Nkosi 2002:209). Potgieter in this novel is conversely assessed by Molapo's men as being "nothing more than white trash. And a criminal. Using forced labour. How many workers did you torture on your farm. How many did you kill?" (209). Nkosi uses his fiction to create an awareness of the political conditions in South Africa, and "Potgieter's Castle" exposes the realities of farm jails and prisons as enclosures which wholly denigrated the African identity:

in South Africa suffering has an especial honoured place from which one views the rest of the populace who have not yet suffered ... and as for blacks, jail qualifies as possessing all the qualities of a purgatory through which every adult male must pass to have any claim on maturity. After that the man can truly say, "I know, I was there, I suffered". (Nkosi 1963:61)

Nkosi, having been a detainee in police cells and having himself narrowly escaped this system as discussed in Chapter Two, presents in "Potgieter's Castle" the brutal truths of the Nationalist policy to sell prisoners as cheap labour to farmers and the inhumane cruelties this system imposed on the psyche and mind of the black man, by both the farmer and their "black stooges, who are doing the dirty work for the white man" (Nkosi 1970:132). Nkosi draws on the South African landscape symbolically to map the suffering of the prisoners. The description of the landscape not only details the violent debasement of the country and its people, but also becomes a mediation on identity and belonging. Their humanity diminished, these black men are portrayed as the collective property of the state, objects with no more purpose for their lives other than to "stare bleakly at the sky which rose like a vast canopy in the deathless majesty of space" (134). Their tortuous progress to the farm jail is marked by the "uneasy treacherous roads and gaping dongas, a dry veld where hordes of men toiled under the yellowing sky" (135), visual images contributing to the sense of brutality and the sapping of the prisoners' morale. The emptiness and heat evokes an atmosphere of brooding violence which describes Nkosi's own experience of place in the apartheid-governed world as a world "hard and Dutch" (Nkosi 2002:109). Even the countryside with its silent out-of-the-way farms, often described in romantic terms by the colonial traveller, becomes an audible and vast "deafening turmoil within the depths of a cavernous hell ... a shrieking nightmare ... where a brutal atmosphere of arid, insensitive violence and despair encompassed everything ... a form of chaos, of disaster, which connected the brutality of the mind to that of the land" (Nkosi 1970:135). Nkosi comments in a journal article that violence plays an integral part in the fiction of black writers, who explore this with frightening effect, as the violence portrayed has gone beyond the physical reality to become "a quiet brooding thing that is a state of mind" (Nkosi 1962:4). Nkosi's minutely detailed description of the prisoners may be compared to a similar description by Conrad of the enslaved chain gangs in *Heart of Darkness*. Like Conrad's prisoners, they too "stood with their hands hanging limply by their sides their legs pressed tightly together, their stomachs turned in sharply at their navels, a row of ragged looking shivering, wide-eyed brown faced men breathing through their mouths and nostrils at once" (Nkosi 1970:135). Nkosi chillingly describes the violence of apartheid: "a violence which they used casually with an annoying precision, as though the fact of it was the most beautiful thing they had discovered about the ordering of human society" (137). In this short story Nkosi emphasises his abiding conviction of the importance of language and writing. To be heard, to have a voice through writing is to be politically empowered, as writing is a means to negate the invisibility

of the black man created through myopic ideologies, a theme which underlies all the short stories. Fanon shares a similar conviction on the importance of creating a voice in one's writing, that "it is implicit that to speak, is to exist absolutely for the other ... to speak not only means to assume a culture but to support the weight of a civilization" (Fanon 1986:17). Nkosi explains this function of language more clearly in a later essay in *Tasks and Masks*: "here is the heart of the paradox which is perhaps the very nub of the mystery of all artistic operations - this picture of evil can be presented in a language which can be incongruously poetic at times, in spite of its uncompromising rejection of 'misplaced beauty'" (Nkosi 1981:104).

"As for Living," published in 1966 in *Frontier*, although conceived as the character's own story, draws on Nkosi's experiences of living illegally in a white upmarket suburb in Johannesburg shortly before his departure. Nkosi has had a longstanding interest in the issue of mixed relationships, his concern with this politicised issue evident in much of his fiction. This short story describes the involuted human relationship between black and white. The central character is Ruth Shaw, wife of a wealthy motor tycoon, who is initiated into the pleasures of sexual encounters by "the Baldwin boy" and "a friend Joyce" as a teenager (Nkosi 1966:104), and who continues to explore new sexual avenues. She finds the possibilities of an extramarital affair hugely appealing, particularly with a black man, and insists that Sipho Dumisa, a law student looking for "a single quiet room in the back of the house" (103) be registered as "Anything. Houseboy. Garden boy" (103) to legalise his presence on the premises. When her husband, Eddie Shaw, objects to the possibility of having a black tenant in the house, she counters with the argument that as liberals they should do everything to assist. When her husband departs on a business trip, "she sensed a cheerful explosion hovering in the air" (104), and the ensuing sensual exploration between two races culminates in "the black man sleeping in the hollow of her shoulder" (105), her seduction of Sipho finally attained.

This short story is a sensual piece of writing in which Nkosi takes issue with legislation such as the Urban Areas Act and the Servants Act of 1945, which decreed that "an African can under no circumstances occupy the premises in an area set aside for white occupation, and only if employed here" (103), and the notorious Immorality Act. Nkosi, writing from his position abroad and hence away from the clutches of the South African Censor Board, writes in assured and defiant prose, yet again cocking a snook at the Immorality Act. This time he does so in his writing, in which he subverts his own memories of Parktown and its liberals, "the blue stocking types, vaguely bohemian and only too happy to cultivate an affair with an African student" (104). In this story Nkosi creates a literary space in which the theme of interracial mixing is uppermost, thus devaluing at once the apartheid taboo and its colour prejudice inscribed on its society.



With "Holiday Song - A Story", published in 1968 in *The New African*, Nkosi returns yet again to the landscapes he had closely known as his home. Although the characters have the same names as those in "As for Living" there is no discernible link between the two stories. It is a story Nkosi aptly begins with a reference to an early 1950s tune "Memories Are Made of This," as in this short story, Nkosi, through his characters, recalls memories of home, albeit shaped by the apartheid dictates of the Population Registration Act. The story begins with Ruth and Eddie waiting in the airport lounge for their flight back to Johannesburg. The usually animated atmosphere of the airport becomes "touched by a sombre fatalism" (Nkosi 1968:14) by the announcement of an airline crash. Ruth becomes introspective, leaving her husband to discuss the crash with others and walks off to reminisce on their recent vacation in Durban, notably on the young couple from Ladysmith who had joined them for drinks in the hotel ballroom bar one evening. She recalls that while Eddie was being disagreeable and confrontational towards his guests, she had asked the young man to join her on the dance floor, even knowing that they were looking a bit incongruous in the company of the other couples. She and Mike Denzig were "like stones polished only on the one side and chipped on the other" (16). They later slip away and during their walk along the Esplanade Ruth discovers the reason for Mike's reticence and sadness - the Population Registration Act had classified him as a Coloured person, which would have far-reaching consequences for himself and his family. In an effort to console Mike, Ruth offers him her body as a brief comfort. As in all the short stories thus far discussed, Nkosi's characters, perhaps much like the author himself, tend to find solace against their 'otherness' in relationships across the colour bar.

In this story Nkosi purposely selects as setting for the action spaces which embody transiency and homelessness: airports and hotels, (a recurrent setting in his fiction), and articulates his longing for his birth place through the character's wish to "stick one's toes into the Indian Ocean" (17), a desire he was to express in precisely the same words decades later during a visit to Durban. He creates an illusion of belonging by naming places which function as beacons throughout his story, illuminating the trajectory of his childhood. By recalling the real places of his childhood, Nkosi inscribes these places with a particular importance. References to South African cities and towns, places he had personally known and lived in, such as Durban and Johannesburg, Ladysmith, the Durban Bay, the Esplanade and the Indian Ocean, leave his reader under no illusion as to the import of these places. Transfixed in his memory, they record in some way "the pain and the sense of loss ... of childhood years as a time of unhappy circumstances and deprivation" (16). In a quest to protect his fractured identity from further disintegration through the memories of the hostilities of apartheid, Nkosi cloaks his main character behind an impenetrable mask, albeit a "hard shell of fear," thus hiding his own insecurities as an exile in a strange environment in which people only "show their polished surfaces, hiding other more intolerable natures from public view in order not to disturb an infirmly held belief that their lives were somehow endurable" (17).

"Muzi" was published in *Présence Africaine* in 1968 - a lengthy short story consisting of six sections in which the names of the characters from the other short stories reappear, creating an artificial continuity between the stories. This story contains similar elements present in the previous stories, and centrally focuses on issues of black and white desire under the control of apartheid statutes. Nkosi again attacks the enduring colonial mindset about black stereotypes: "we are not talking about ordinary men - we're talking about a native" (Nkosi 1968:181). "Muzi" is a story about multiple identities mostly in conflict with each other. This is perhaps better understood if one considers Mbembe's critique on this form of stereotyping :

... the African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a negative interpretation. Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of human nature. Or when it is, its things and attributes are generally of lesser value, little importance, and poor quality. It is this elementariness and primitiveness that make Africa all that is incomplete, mutilated and unfinished, its history reduced to a series of setbacks of nature in its quest for humankind. (Mbembe 2001a :1)

This short story deals primarily with the memories of Ruth Shaw as a young girl growing up on her father's farm. Initially set in the lounge of the Durban Airport, Ruth and her husband Eddie Shaw are awaiting their flight. In an unexpected flashback "Ruth Shaw remembered the black man suddenly for no reason that she could comprehend"(181) and so begins her psychological journey fraught with emotional upheaval back to her childhood and the farm where she grew up. Her thoughts are immersed in the past and the arrival of Muzi on the farm; his blackness and his imposing presence when he touched her hand in greeting: "it was the sight of this black man which had first violated her mind, her innocence" (186). She also recalls her hatred for her mother when she discovers that her mother is having an affair with Muzi, and the story concludes with the realisation that she had always desired her mother's position: "she knew that she would never be all right because though it was her flesh that the man had touched, it was finally her mother who had taken her place on the bed of straw" (196). When Ruth finally regains her sense of the present, she knows that she can never share her memories with her husband, a man who had "made a great deal of money and was keeping a major portion for himself" (181), a man who was critical and insensitive to the needs of others, and who had no insight into human relationships, let alone those bonded across the colour bar. This story has heavy Fanonian undertones in terms of the awareness of racial issues, "the exchanging of looks between native and settler, that structures their psychic relation in the paranoid fantasy of boundless possession and its familiar language of reversal" (Fanon 1986:xv), the fear of the black man usurping the position of the master. But it also draws on Nkosi's multilayered memories of being black in a white universe, never at home in any place and always in

transit to an undefined somewhere. It is a story about [forbidden] relationships and their transient natures, and characters filled with a confusing mixture of emotions when confronted with the alienating effects which apartheid had inscribed on their psyches.

In his article "South African Writers in Exile" (1980) Nkosi writes that:

recently a Japanese anthologist ... asked for a story to print in an African collection he was editing for Japanese readers. Months later a slim volume turned up in the post at my London flat with Japanese characters alongside my story, "The Prisoner." The irony was not lost on me. So the Japanese was going to be able to read my story before South Africans could enjoy the privilege. (Nkosi 1980:63)

Nkosi once commented that his short story "The Prisoner" (1975), a piece written later than "Potgieter's Castle" is a "very funny short story ... it's funny and it also shows some of the comic aspects of any political process ... it's also about the fundamental truth about people who love slogans and rhetoric" (Nkosi in Worsfold 1990:70). This story attempts to make light of his own experience of detention and subsequent court appearance. Nkosi's critique of DM Zwelonke's novel *Robben Island*, in which he lauds this writer's erudite manipulation of language, must also be applied to his own writing in this piece which similarly has the power to convert hatred into tolerance through "a fierce wit that turns suffering into an object of grim, barely suppressed comedy" (Nkosi 1981:104). Nkosi commented that he was attracted to the tragi-comic aspect of apartheid, and chose to see not only its gloomy side. However, read in the context of this thesis, "The Prisoner" is anything but "a very funny short story". It is, in keeping with the universal theme of racism, a depiction of the harrowing brutality and mental torture of apartheid. What grim humour there is, functions rather as a defence strategy used by Nkosi, its mocking qualities serving indirectly to emphasise his critical indictment of apartheid. Nkosi confirms this view in a recent interview: "We wrote about injustice, so ... I laugh a lot instead of being angry" (Akubuiro 2006:4).

In this story Nkosi claims for himself a brief respite from apartheid by subverting the apartheid reality to favour the African for a fictitious moment in history. He creates a new space for the voiceless by reversing the roles of power, though simultaneously acknowledging its futility, "though I am now George's jailer, I am equally a prisoner of circumstance, I rage in the cell of my body, but who will free me?" (Nkosi 1967:296). "The Prisoner" is the story of Mulela, the prison warden placed in charge of the prisoner George Hollingworth Esq, an erstwhile "broad and tanned ware South African" previously in charge of Mulela when he was contracted out to him as cheap convict labour after imprisoned on the "ridiculous charge of vagrancy ... and labelled a native of no fixed

abode" (300). George, now mentally disturbed, "lost the will to govern, to rule, even to be master when he first laid eyes on Zaza the African maid" (299). Unbeknown to George, Mulela had purposefully orchestrated his downfall in a bid to revenge himself on the apartheid system and its acolytes - George, clearly representing all that apartheid stood for, is imprisoned for transgressing the Immorality Act and Mulela comments on his loss of liberty and honour with contrived innocence and unconcealed one-upmanship: "it is strange to sleep next to George's wife while he lies in the cell covered in rags and lice, writhing in the agony of a desire unfulfilled these past twelve years" (295).

Nkosi's writing, like that of his characters "satisfied the need to let off steam about the crassness of the apartheid system," and in this story this is accomplished through role reversal - the white man is punished for having lusted after a black woman, because "in South Africa laws against racial mixing is very strict; one can be forgiven for anything but diluting what the popular imagination conceives as the pure racial strain" (299). However, irrespective of theme and content, Nkosi segues back into the theme of writing and the notion that political aims can be achieved not through violence but through writing. Entrenched in this short story is Nkosi's awareness of his desire to establish his home in language, as in "The Prisoner" his character Mulela is yet again cast as a writer, who enjoys writing speeches "to earn a little pocket money" and who takes note of language, remarking: "African politicians preferred involved syntax, long rolling periods and ornate mellifluous phrases in order to carry the masses with them ... most of all African politicians distrusted action, hence their dislike for concise sentences" (303). Nkosi's own innate love for language is similarly declared through his main character:

For hours I used to sit and think up words which would carry a lot of wind in them, the more colourful the better. I used to pile up subordinate clauses on top of one another right up to the climax of a back-breaking main clause ... I considered myself something of an artist, really, a wordsmith, turning out the kind of prose which combined true literary merit with a dramatic appeal ... and having a ready stock of phrases for every occasion and audience. (303)

His character admits that, much like the author, he was a writer who "being a modern sort of person, had a great love for irony and ambiguity, often writing long ponderous speeches which had the air of being weighty and vaguely radical without having real teeth in them" (304). Nkosi is not above having a dig at himself in this short story as there are many oblique references to autobiographical material voiced through the consciousness of Mulela, possessing similar acerbic wit and cynicism as the author.

"Under the Shadow of the Guns" published in *Colours of a New Day* in 1990, Nkosi's penultimate short story, explores the volatile South African political situation. He writes relationships into existence in a turbulent political space "filled with the language of murderous violence" (Nkosi in Lefanu and Hayward 1990:288) and discourses on the devastating consequences of creativity under persecution in a politically explosive dispensation. The title "Under the Shadow of the Guns" is an apt description of the political dispensation under which many black people were forced to live in South Africa, particularly in the townships during the 1980s. It is the story of not only Jackson Moloi, the main character, but also of the many nameless black people under police scrutiny for possible political involvement against the State. Moloi describes a shooting incident (reminiscent of the Sharpeville Massacre) which takes place in the Nakeledi Township outside Johannesburg. Moloi manages to avoid being shot and makes his way home together with a girl he finds hiding in a donga. Later in the day they hear that the security forces were searching for certain individuals who had painted slogans and distributed pamphlets. Moloi, an artist and painter is in possession of the items mentioned, and decides to burn all but one poster, which he hides under his mattress, as the girl had expressed a liking for the brightly coloured poster. Unfortunately, the police "came early in the morning before the first light of day ... their service pistols stuck inside their belts scattering a lot of chickens as they swung the car recklessly into the yard ... then he heard the noise of crashing chairs, overturning tables and breaking plates" (Nkosi 1990:288) as they gained entrance, and Moloi is arrested and brutally removed from his home. In this story Nkosi not only opens a door onto his own space in history, but provides a view of the life of a black man under apartheid through the relentless and focused gaze of his narrator.

Nkosi wrote a final short story "The Hold-up," published by Wordsmith in Lusaka between 1979 and 1980, a story which is, in Nkosi's favoured response to his unobtainable material, "probably somewhere in a trunk in Lusaka" (Lombardozzi correspondence 2003). This story is out of print and unobtainable thus no comment is able to be made on this narrative.

In conclusion, a reflection on Nkosi's short stories must include the consideration that he began writing in the 1960s, a time when it was necessary that literature by black writers should react to and articulate the harrowing experiences of apartheid. When the political situation became even more urgent in the 1970s, the art forms that proved most appropriate were the short story and poetry, because of their immediacy. Apartheid did not succeed in its objective to silence writers such as Nkosi and their politically charged writing - Nkosi used his exile to find an outlet for his voice. Liberated from the influence of apartheid and writing from abroad enabled Nkosi to establish a platform from which he could create a new readership and develop his writing skills. His short

stories and their contemporary black realities served to encourage his determination to make a home in literature. Nkosi's stories enabled him to tell his own story with its fractured sense of home, split identities, sexual exploits, politics and frail human hopes, all underscored by the proposed silence imposed by a system which could only visualize the South African landscape in stereotypes of black and white.

In his later essays Nkosi reflects on the choice by black writers to write short stories: ... "it is not so much the intense suffering which makes it impossible for writers to produce long and complex works of literary genius, as it is the very absorbing, violent and immediate nature of experience which impinges upon individual life ..." (Nkosi 1983:12). Nkosi's short stories may be seen as a writing shaped and reconstructed from the painful memories of the apartheid experience, a literature certainly more than protest, a writing compelling its reader to recognise the 'other' in this expression of defiant self-awareness. Perhaps the writer Breyten Breytenbach echoes the exiled writer's thoughts in writing these short stories:

writing for me is a means, a way of survival. Writing is an extension of my senses, it is in itself a sense which permits me to grasp, to understand, and to some extent to integrate that which is happening to me ... you in reality construct through your scribbles, your own mirror. (1984:155)

In the next section Nkosi's novels will form the nexus of the discussion seen in the context of the thesis.

## **The Novels of Lewis Nkosi**

In presenting a constructed world of margins and boundaries, Nkosi's negotiation of his re-imagined historic space in his novels is forthright and unapologetic. These narratives function in the main as a process for mediating between society and the self, whilst also articulating "the impossibility of evading the destructive and marginalising power of the dominant centre and the need for its abrogation" (Ashcroft et al 1989:115). Nkosi comments that:

working with materials so riven, rent and inscribed by the letter and spirit of ideology, as in the case with language and literary works, the writer himself may not really know what is going on ... that is because as a subject of discourse, the writer is himself constructed within language ... so that the writer himself in the process of writing, becomes the very site of struggle in which the contradictions of the society at large are played out. (Nkosi 1983:27)

Nkosi's exile status, which defines him as the transient outsider enables him to enter the worlds which he describes in his fiction. Through his character Sibiya in *Mating Birds* Nkosi comments on the act of writing, which:

sets out what memory thrusts to the forefront ... in writing my story, I try not to lose a grip over my emotions. That is very important. A kind of taut moral compactness ... phrases rounded up and cut down to size like blocks of ice ... I try to see everything keenly, nakedly, but above all I have tried to explain as much to myself as to the hordes of anonymous readers. (Nkosi 1987:24)

Nkosi deliberately creates textual worlds in his novels which remain true to an African idiom throughout, his writing substantiating a statement he made shortly after he was exiled: "Africa no longer desires to be spoken for by self-appointed spokesmen. Africa desires to speak for herself" (Nkosi 1962:937). He promotes this voice largely through his many descriptions and inclusions of the landscapes of South Africa in his fiction. The centrality of landscape is dominant throughout Nkosi's fiction. As exile, he writes about places and spaces he could reclaim only through memory driven by, as the exiled writer Christopher Hope admits, "the desire, somehow to put these experiences, these places into history" (Hope 1984:286). Nkosi's novels complete his relationship with his South African space, a relationship which was rendered incomplete first through apartheid and later through exile. Nkosi's novels also subtly suggest that the colonial experience frustrates any sense of identity on both sides of the artificial racial divide, the dispossessed unable to relate to what is rightfully theirs; the oppressors never rightfully belonging to a country claimed through domination. The emotional territories of home and exile are always present in the experiences of his characters, who also negotiate similar boundaries and restrictions as those placed on him during apartheid South Africa.

A reading of his novels will show that Nkosi continues to retain a large sense of his South Africanness in his fiction, as his writing is both a space of belonging and a form of homecoming; much like Clark articulates, Nkosi has "a need to unlock the past before [he] could hope to write about anything else" (Gready 1990:159). His severance from his homeland motivates Nkosi to write fiction in which he explores his childhood, his memories, the effects of his exile on his identity and on his sense of place - his fiction reflects a recursive voyage that constantly leads him back to his native land, and in which he not only reveals the harsh conditions imposed on him by apartheid and exile, but within which he imaginatively dwells. The landscapes throughout *Mating Birds*, for example, are shaped by a subjective consciousness which draws extensively on Nkosi's experience

and memories, and this remembered landscape becomes an integral part of the narrative geography. Nkosi undertakes a journey of a re-discovery of places and people, as well as his own identity through a narration of his childhood landscapes (*Mating Birds*), struggle landscapes (*Underground People*) and ancestral landscapes (*Mandela's Ego*):

I carried the landscape inside my head; I had read of events there, of the heroic resistance to apartheid, of the detentions, the tortures and the community removals, of brutal wars waged openly and clandestinely, of the personal and national mutilations ... I had learned of the changes which were taking place, the transformation to the landscape. (Nkosi 1994:5)

The landscapes of memory evident in Nkosi's three novels function as descriptions of home which often may sound a threnodic note for a lost homespace, however, they are carefully devoid of "self-pity and sentimentality, two faults I hope I shall never be accused of" (Nkosi 1987:24). His fiction is an act of reclaiming the home that he had been exiled from as was discussed in Chapter Two. Like Nkosi, his character Sibiya's (*Mating Birds*) imprisonment and exile began long before he entered his prison cell, as he too inhabited a restrictive society which to the repressed African functioned much like a prison. His exile is not only forced upon him through his environment, it is also in his mind: "I am nothing more than a specimen ..." (Nkosi 1987:65). Perhaps Nkosi's fetishist descriptions of women's breasts and the many images of his mother in his fiction may be seen as metaphors for his search for reassurance, security and a need to be nurtured - his remembered spaces thus being at once biological, material and political. His is a memory of place which consistently defines his zones of transition, and through his novels acquires a deeper meaning through the passage of time and distance. His affection as a native son for the South African landscape is clearly visible in his novels, landscapes he paradoxically has had to move away from in order fully to appreciate their influences. In his novels the notion of a homespace is utterly bound to the detailed description of the natural features of the landscape. There is a keen sense of place in Nkosi's descriptions of landscape, his clarity of description suggests a territorial instinct for his homespace. His experiences of dislocation have enabled Nkosi to create a new definition of home, travelling between the hostile world of domicile and the comfortable haven of the imagination and letters, constantly reworking the imaginative space of memories within the material space of home in his fiction.

All three of his novels depict the debilitating confines of the narrow repressive South African apartheid world, where the only agency the oppressed could claim was resistance through subversive tactics - resistance and transformation being key concepts in postcolonial literature. It is a writing which embodies social and cultural displacement and disempowerment, within which postcolonial theory is constantly "raking this writing for clues of a physical struggle and violation" (Nkosi 1987:36). The silences created by apartheid through racial division are also evident in Nkosi's



novels and are reminiscent of the resonant silences in Conrad's fiction on Africa, a writer Nkosi much admired, as previously mentioned. Nkosi's fiction focuses on the fragmented cultural identity problematised through the South African political conflict with its roots steeped in a colonial history of domination and subordination. He problematised the voiceless marginalised subject by representing his reality through language, and through the process of narration presents South Africa's history of apartheid as a linear continuum. By telling Sibiya's story, that of a silenced social outcast, for example, he in fact subverts this silence by also exploring the events and the truths of his own life through language. In his novels he portrays how mixed identities are constructed, both individually and collectively, and how these fragmented identities are mobilised and expressed in a geographically and psychically bounded space. Through Sibiya's monologue in *Mating Birds*, Nkosi also creates himself through the words that create his character, all the while leaving spaces of silence which also tell the story about his life, moving from bright sunlit spaces into the heart of darkness itself. Stiebel writes that "writers are not only shaped by their surroundings ... but also shape them ... and in such a way is a 'real' physical place transformed into a country of the mind by both writer and reader" (Stiebel 2004:40). In just such a way Nkosi does not only ground his work in the South African landscape, but also adds to it.

His novels are not so much about the *story* it tells, but are more about the complexities of human relationships fomented by failed communication between two cultures and differing political outlooks. Said's comment, that the coloniser and the colonised inhabit a particular space, that of "a world divided into two separate halves, communicating with each other by a logic of violence and counter-violence" (Said 1989:207) exemplifies this statement. In *Mating Birds*, Sibiya's yearning to make contact with the white girl Veronica is not only a metaphor for his desire to be acknowledged as a member of a community to which access was forbidden, but represents Sibiya's unspoken attempt to establish an own identity, one which is capable of speaking for itself, and not always spoken for. This also occurs in *Underground People* and in Nkosi's short stories, where the characters are in a perpetual quest for acceptance and meaningful interaction across the racial divide. Nkosi's fictional writing is in a sense implicit and explicit statements about his relation to his social spaces. It is clear from Nkosi's novels that:

Writers live in two worlds, the creative inner world and the outer social world: after all, everybody, that is, everybody who writes, is interested in living inside themselves in order to tell what is inside themselves. That is why writers have to have two countries, the one where they belong and the one in which they live really. The second one is romantic, it is separate from themselves, it is not real but it is really there. (Stein 1940:2)

Cixous adds to this and observes that writing is the space that may “serve as the springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (Cixous 1976:879). Banned from his country and thus also from his audience, Nkosi began to write fiction in addition to his many journal articles, fully realising that although “stories are mostly lies, we write, as we know that we have no other way of understanding ourselves and the world” (Lombardozi correspondence 2004). Nkosi emphasizes this point in *Mating Birds* through the voice of Sibiya, where the “writer weaves a web of fiction” (Nkosi 1987:169), a necessary activity which enables an understanding of what is happening to us. Nkosi’s open-ended novels represent different powerful layers of discourse as they are constructions of remembrance and forgetting, of inclusion and exclusion, metaphors for both imprisonment and escape. At the heart of each novel is the desire by the author to explore the impact of apartheid and to draw his reader into the centre of his experience of loss and violence.

This chapter will now turn to a more detailed discussion of Nkosi’s first novel *Mating Birds*, which, as suggested above, is in many ways an emotional reflection of the trajectory of Nkosi’s life under apartheid.

### **Mating Birds (1986)**

In 1986 Tim Holmes, on reading *Mating Birds*, wrote the following poem for Lewis Nkosi, which reflects this poet’s compassion and understanding of miscegenation and the resultant conflicts manifest in *Mating Birds*, expressed here, too, in terms of the South African landscape. The allusion to Camoens and the *Lusiads* adds a symbolic significance to this poem, its subtext functioning as a veiled metaphor for the encounter between Europe and Africa represented in *Mating Birds* by the central characters Ndi Sibiya and Veronica Slater, their story a rite of passage:

#### **“The Beach”**

(After Camoens, *Lusiadas*, V. 52-59, AD 1572)

for Lewis Nkosi

One day I saw her  
(with daughters of the sea)  
Unclad upon the beach:  
Desire like no desire  
Engrappled me.

Could this fair woman

Warm to my strange face? -

"Could I sustain a giant?"

She answered laughing,

Smiling grace,

Hair a thorn-filled mat,

Myself unmanned-

Oh what mutation is this?

Converted to the earth my flesh,

Rocks my bones, limbs and nape

Stretch vastly through the sea,

My body changed

Into this distant Cape.

I am Adamastor,

Most mighty, secret cape of all,

Africa's sharp and final point:

Tormented I:

Watch retribution fall! (Holmes 1990:11)

This award winning novel was originally published in 1983 in Nairobi, though the first publication date referred to is generally 1986 when it was published by St Martins and by Ravan Press in 1987, but remained banned in South Africa until 1990, as unacceptable as its exiled author in his own country. *Mating Birds* captures a crucial historic moment in South Africa and exposes this period through a double-voiced discourse that alternates between the oppressed exile and the liberated writer. This novel may be read in terms of Nkosi's own experiences of apartheid and in particular here the South African legal system, a system which endeavoured narrowly to subscribe to the apartheid vision of authoritarianism and a world in which Nkosi presumes to unmask a distorted representation of history.

Apart from other ordinary law-abiding Africans, most writers of my generation have been to jail and back, and most cannot by any stretch of the imagination, be considered even mildly dangerous or have special criminal tendencies. Teachers, doctors and lawyers who have displayed meritorious virtue in the face of great provocation by the white rulers of South Africa and by the unspeakably wretched life black people are forced to live in that country, have also been inside jail. (Nkosi 1963:61)

In 1991 Nkosi wrote in *New Nation* that “for a very long time, progressive literature in South Africa had a simple character, especially to write was to write *against*” (Nkosi 1991:8), and this is clearly manifested in *Mating Birds*. This novel in particular reveals the above implied obliquities of human injustice, the epitome of prejudice residing in the trial of Ndi Sibiyi, exacerbated when one considers the realities Nkosi was writing against: “A custodian of the law, a white police constable Andries Smit, (19) of Johannesburg who raped a pregnant African woman under arrest was sentenced in Johannesburg to four years imprisonment. An African who rapes a white woman would get the death sentence” (*Sechaba* 5(4)1971:7). Writing provided Nkosi with the freedom he yearned for - but did not come with political or moral quietude. Nkosi’s *Mating Birds* functions as a literary platform from which he extemporises witheringly on both the justice system and apartheid, both systems having influenced his identity as an exiled writer to a great extent. Underlying the exile experience was the need to describe “the reality of living under apartheid; the past on which it rests; the alienation of colonialism which concealed history and distorted culture; the terrible impress of inferiority” (Bernstein 1994: xxi), which made the memory a powerful ally in the regeneration of the self.

The court scenes in the novel serve to provide insight into the larger South African political landscape, revealing the true nature of the apartheid judicial system and its atavistic ritual, one with which Nkosi was all too familiar. He exposes a system which rendered its victims powerless through the silences imposed on them, an ideology concealing a system of binary opposites built on colonial repression and deceit. It was a legal procedure which had as its dubious core “elegant form, gorgeous ceremony, empty ritual - the fiction of impartial justice towards black and white” (Nkosi 1987:165), the judges ironically likened to “African medicine men presiding over some dark ceremonial proceedings” (165) and “chieftains on the throne glaring ... with flaming red eyes” (119).

Through the consciousness of both author and character, the reader is sensitised to a black man’s reality of the many inhumane injustices which permeate the novel. Simply by being black placed him at the mercy of the very social institutions which were ironically established to protect human rights, thus Sibiyi’s odyssey becomes “a brutal confrontation between the lawless forces of what are ludicrously called the forces of law and order” (Davis 1990:19). The roots of Sibiyi’s depersonalisation stem from his treatment at the hands of the apartheid structures where the voice of the Other is obliterated through the subversive silencing by those in power. *Mating Birds*, as also Nkosi’s earlier fiction, exposes “the marginal world between the despised, segregated blacks and the indifferent, privileged whites who looked upon us Africans as interlopers ... marked forever with the mark of Cain” (Nkosi 1987:7,9). Apartheid viewed Africans as nothing more than “pegs to hang their hats on” (113), a dichotomy similarly described in Morrison’s *Beloved* through the eyes of her colonised character Stamp Paid: “White people believed that whatever the manners, under every

dark skin was a jungle ... but it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them, it was the jungle white folks planted in them ... and it grew ... until it invaded the whites who had made it" (Morrison 1998:244). Nkosi comments on this perception through the trial of Sibiya. Negative images of the African identity abound in this novel driven by apartheid barriers, with its "odour of racial conspiracy," and its conviction that Africans were "not normal men but creatures who were little above animals" (Nkosi 1987:83). This novel has as its nexus the belief that the 'crime' of the African resided chiefly in the colour of his skin. This division is rampantly visible throughout the novel, the hollow echoes of the cavernous colonial divide accentuated by the apartheid stance, a stance "dully impassive, without any light or radiance, and the black dispossessed, the eternally humiliated" (58). Nkosi echoes Fanon when he describes the contact between white and black as a contact marked by "fear and horror at the touch of a white skin upon black skin" (58), and apartheid's impassive refusal to grant the black man his humanity: "perhaps it was true what every African believes, that white people never regard blacks as human beings with eyes and ears, but more like flies on walls" (80). Ngugi wa Thiong'o's comment conjoins the fragmentation of identity and the redemptive act of writing: "here the culture of violence and silence which has come to define the postcolonial state and the state's desire to saturate the public space with its propaganda, is counterpoised against a radically redemptive art that seeks to erect a new regime of truth by reclaiming those spaces through the barrel of the pen" (in Ogude 2006:9).

Novels with a political content often fail the test of time, but Nkosi's *Mating Birds* has not lost its significance even in the new millennium. The story of Sibiya remains compelling because it is engaged literature writing against history; the enduring effects of racism are still present in South Africa, post 1994. In a recent interview Nkosi stated that:

nothing has changed in the power relations between black and white. When Europeans talk about South African literature, they aren't talking about Lewis Nkosi or Alex la Guma, they're talking about Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink, and James [sic] Coetzee. When you're talking about paintings, the people who own the galleries in South Africa are still the white people ... it's still what it was during apartheid ... the blacks still don't own lands and factories ... (Akubuiro 2006:4)

For this reason, novels such as *Mating Birds* show that it is important to take a vigilant stance against oppression of any kind. Set in the 1960s, *Mating Birds* is an imaginative blend of fact and fiction, functioning both as commentary and narrative. It is firmly located within colonial history, and as a colonised subject, Sibiya is its victim, deracinated and fragmented, judged, condemned and in exile long before his crime, much like the author. *Mating Birds* was Nkosi's first extended work of fiction in which he challenged the relationship between text and writer, introducing the conventions of

realism through his first person narration. It is the text and the act of writing which finally grants Sibiya's difference its legitimate place and voice in the landscape of memories. It is the story of Ndi Sibiya, a black man who makes the fatal error of desiring a white woman in apartheid South Africa, a relationship wholly compromised and problematised by the Immorality Act and the politics of segregation. Sibiya is accused of rape and despite the lack of evidence and a poor defence, is nonetheless sentenced to death for this alleged crime.

Contrary to the many reviews which focus predominantly on themes of miscegenation and sexual politics in the book, (see, for example, reviews by A Horn (1987), A P Brink (1992) and J Dodd (1996)), I suggest that *Mating Birds* may be read as an analytical novel on the various forms of exile, and which has as its central theme failure, entrapment and erasure. These themes are played out in two different raced spaces, depicted in detail, and inhabited simultaneously by both author and character. These two historically different spaces are framed against the Immorality Act, a law instituted to prevent racial miscegenation. *Mating Birds* is a novel less about the violation of an apartheid taboo, less about a rape, and more about the opposing identities of slave and master, and the relationship between black and white.

A first person account, its narrator assuming control of the text, *Mating Birds* is Nkosi's attempt as an outsider, like his character Sibiya, to delve into the place of what and where he is as a writer. Nkosi's own life, as illustrated in Chapter Two, is evident in the novel through flash backs which range between rural and urban space. Sibiya is constantly reminded of *what* rather than *who* he is. The point of this novel is not "the rape of a girl but the colour of the alleged rapist and that of the victim" (Nkosi 1987:28); this novel is a fictionalised exploration of a cultural violation by the destructive legacy of apartheid, where control is achieved over the oppressed through the absence of language. *Mating Birds* is not only a novel about apartheid, but it is also a form of revenge on white writers such as Paton, as Nkosi "wanted to rewrite some of those [colonial] texts from our point of view" (Vinassa and de Kock 1991:22). By giving Sibiya the controlling voice as the first person narrator of his novel, Nkosi imaginatively empowers the African exiled artist and liberates him from the restrictions of colonial space through his language and writing. The novel recreates from a position of exile and hindsight, Nkosi's own historical and territorial home space, a binary world of black and white. It is not Sibiya's dilemma which is of importance, but his socio-political context which can be traced back to Nkosi's own historically objectified identity. This novel emphasises his statement on African identity he made earlier in his critical writing: "The African is not only a statistical unit: he is also all men, various, possessing human strengths as well as weaknesses, combining all forms of naivete as well as sophistication. He defies classification. The best way to look at him is to look at him individually" (Nkosi 1959:10).

Amongst all the different voices which intersect throughout the novel, Sibiya is afforded the clearest voice, that of the outcast and Other. *Mating Birds* in effect is a novel within a novel, as Nkosi allows Sibiya, himself a writer, to 'write' his own life story whilst in prison, thus providing him with an opportunity not only to record his own situation, but also that of the author. Conversely these texts also function as spaces of empowerment - Nkosi 'entitles' his character Ndi Sibiya by permitting him, through his writing, to "dream of escape from South Africa, from the life of oppression and wretched exploitation" (Nkosi 1987:38). Sibiya's consciousness reflects also Nkosi's own musing on what he might have become had he not escaped from apartheid: "I have often wondered how my life would have turned out had I not gone ... if I had stayed well within the limits ..." (4). Nkosi's fiction hence provides fitting contours to his home in writing, giving meaning to his existence and reinforcing his identity. As he comments through Sibiya, "I had simply wanted opportunities for shaping my own life and my own destiny, according to my own efforts and possibilities ... even the failures I wanted to be my own" (Nkosi 1987:66). Nkosi's fiction has unarguably been shaped by what he terms "a painful effort and a vivid memory". To recreate "the sensations one once experienced, requires a certain superhuman effort and an intensity of feeling which can break any but the strongest writer" (Nkosi 1983:94). Siedel comments on this representation of intensity: "the mental energy expended on the image of home as absence proves incommensurate with the reality of home as presence" (Siedel 1986:12).

Exile often provokes extreme responses, and Nkosi illustrates this ably through Sibiya, whose incarceration and 'unacceptable' behaviour as a Zulu leads to his ostracism from his community. This loss of inclusion and the loss of a recognisable identity is intensified though the inability to communicate with his family: "My African visitors say nothing. They sigh and press the fingers of their hands together and say nothing ... my ways are no longer their ways ... I am now as foreign to them as the white girl ..." (Nkosi 1987:21). Writing his story is Sibiya's only point of contact. Nkosi, by way of introducing a first person narrator into his fiction thus invites his readers into a world of both private and objective truths, where they will not be repressed. Writing from exile, his novel reflects a liberated sense of self expression, an attempt to escape the oppressive world of the "white master, ... someone who has the power to make you laugh on the other side of your mouth" (Nkosi 2002:209). *Mating Birds* is characterised by a colonised subjectivity shaped by apartheid, where the African is forced to justify his existence, where Sibiya's confirmation as a human presence in the world is sought through the eyes of a white woman, the very symbol of white supremacy. It is also more than this; it is a landscape of anger underpinned by a deep sense of the exile's alienation, where the black man is placed in a position of subservience to white supremacy. Hence Nkosi's first novel becomes a rich fusion of biography, romance, intellectual history and political analysis, drawing on a wide range of experience and memory vividly recreating Nkosi's own experiences as a young and impressionable black man. Nkosi achieves this richness with the sharp eye of the

observer and the authority of a historian, placing his own experiences firmly in the context of apartheid. *Mating Birds* represents Nkosi's determination and defiance as a writer to survive in the racist South African context in spite of the many deprivations. Nkosi symbolically recasts the "everlasting tragedy of Desdemona and the Moor" (Nkosi 1987:175), into this racially conscious novel which has as its roots the psychological effects of racial division on both black and white identities. As in Shakespeare's play, the relationship of Ndi and Veronica fails due to the space created by apartheid boundaries which prevented even the simplest form of human communication, that of "indulging in the exchanging of names" (112). This failure to establish a connection, purposely engineered by apartheid laws, is premised on the Fanonian belief that "contact between the races is a cause for the profoundest alarm" (180). *Mating Birds* is hence an admixture of the many boundaries instituted by the apartheid policy, racial issues, a subordinated gender divide, artificially created townships, sexual taboos, fragmented identities and memories of the landscapes of home.

In writing *Mating Birds*, Nkosi reconstructs imaginatively the events of Sibiya's life whilst exposing the afflicted lives of those who were born into the history of apartheid. The many images of confined spaces imprison even the reader in the ambivalent space of a divisive historical position. Nkosi as an exile also undertakes in his novel two separate journeys, that of his private inward journey through the development of his character and the outward public journey, his trajectory through landscape and place. The only sense of freedom inherent in this novel is in the inner processes of Sibiya's consciousness, where he imagines liberation through invoking memories of place. *Mating Birds* is a novel of separation, and functions as a metaphor for apartheid itself. The variously described South African landscapes and places are envisioned through the limitations of memory, the small barred window of the cell being a metaphor for this restrictive view. Sibiya is triply incarcerated "in the castle of my skin" (35) - in his prison cell, restricted in language and by virtue of his race. Thus for Nkosi, as for Sibiya, who writes the story of his life from the protection of the text as a contested site, the restricted textual space becomes also his personal and social space. It is a writerly site which supports the possibility of introspection; the spaces of his text become extensions of his own reality, past and present, a place in writing within which he can confront loss.

From the outset Nkosi places his character Sibiya firmly in language, from whence he may be liberated from exile through writing his life story, so that his history may reverberate in the silences created by apartheid. The opening statement of *Mating Birds* imitates the discourse of an autobiographical text: "In a few days I am going to die" (1). This statement can be read as a metaphor of Nkosi's own premature and unnatural departure from his homeland, a symbolic death sentence. Nkosi, as does Sibiya, displays an ambivalence towards his impending severance from the



known: "strange, the idea neither shocks nor frightens me. What I feel most is a kind of numbness, a total lack of involvement in my own fate, as though I was an observer watching the last days of another man" (1). Weiss explains this emotional apathy as follows:

Exile fragments the self, reconstructs it syncretistically, or fragments and reconstructs it in cycles. Because the exile breaks ties with others, he lives within a solitude, and although other intellectuals have found freedom through not belonging to a community, the experience of exile can produce an intense splitting of the self and world. (Weiss 1992:9)

It was to take the efforts of his lawyer Harold Wolpe, echoed in *Mating Birds* as "Max Siegfried Müller Q.C., the most celebrated advocate for the oppressed and the downtrodden in our country" (Nkosi 1987:35), to dislodge Nkosi from his apathy and force him to take agency for his future abroad, becoming "something of a celebrity" (13) as a result. Conversely his exile, a constructed place imagined as "brick walls and barbed wire" (15) becomes also his impetus to write: "I hope to preserve these fruits of self scrutiny for posterity ... to write the story of my life" (16). A daunting task perhaps for the exile, as Nkosi comments in his essay 'Art Contra Apartheid' that exile negatively affects memories of certain sensations associated with living in South Africa, and "for a fiction writer obliged to rely on the memory of these sensations, - the colours of the landscape, the smells of plants and flowers, and the peculiar accents of a people amongst whom one grows up with ... only a painful effort and a vivid memory preserve for the imagination the immediacy of a second-hand experience" (Nkosi 1983:95). Certainly Nkosi's novels are emblematic of a writer whose vision of the South African landscape remains uniquely his own, albeit frozen in the temporal universe of his fiction. However, the determination to overcome the adversities of exile is central to survival in a new environment, and hence a writer in exile is much like a knight preparing for a crusade. Nkosi maintains that: "it strikes me that when you leave your country [as an exile] you really are like someone going to war" (in Stiebel and Gunner 2005:231). This image of conflict is repeated by his character Sibiya, who, though an *imprisoned* writer, ironically envisions himself as "a young man setting out on a long and tortuous journey, beset by dangers and uncertainty. For this adventure, I need my battle dress ... and implements of war, such as books and notebooks and pens" (Nkosi 1987:88). As an exiled writer Nkosi lived and wrote in terms of absence: "living in an acquired linguistic zone, the exiled writer ... lives elsewhere and writes differently. The exile becomes a translated person and in his writing formulas replace perceptions, and clichés and stereotypes must serve for those untranslatable concepts which unlock a culture" (Jacobs 1990:126). Nkosi's exile which had as its aim to silence the "university-educated native who went bad" (Nkosi 1987:12) and serve as a "deterrent for ... other misguided natives" (33), is recreated in *Mating Birds*, a novel which vividly exposes the world of the internally and externally exiled identity. Hence in

a sense, exile to Nkosi becomes a welcome release from the colonial space of immense conflict as described in *Mating Birds*, a place which, viewed through the jaundiced eyes of Sibiya was “quite honestly, grubby, mean, uncharitable, a place in which the best in us contends with the worst, with human greed, destructive lust and vanity of every kind” (15).

Through Nkosi’s detailed visual description of his South African place and space, *Mating Birds* uses the geographic landscape to expose the many boundaries and inhuman divisions that apartheid had inscribed on these remembered spaces. Nkosi redefines the boundaries invented by apartheid as spaces of communicated difference rather than merely contested spaces - as it is centrally at these figurative zones of disputed history where communication between characters take place; for example, the “inappropriate” awareness of desire between Ndi Sibiya and Veronica Slater, “alternating between boldness and fear, craving and revulsion” (111). This symbolic space enables Nkosi to bring “the other into focus, if only as an enemy, as a perceivable space” (Carter 1987:152). The poverty and decay of Cato Manor as described in *Mating Birds*, for example, despite being filtered through the lens of the memories of home, is relentlessly communicated as a frustrated space within which Nkosi and others like him historically had been cast as objects in the landscape, possessing little or no value other than as labourers. Nkosi’s sense of place is evident through the descriptive passages throughout this novel.

Significantly, *Mating Birds* contains many references to the notion of boundaries and borders, shifting from pastoral to urban to rural inhabited by a heterogeneity of races and people. Although the perceptions of place belong undoubtably to Sibiya through an intensely self-reflective discourse, it is Nkosi’s own experience of place as an exile, ranging in scale from that of a small prison cell to an entire continent, which constantly defines these places and provides their identity. Sibiya’s imagination constructs a variety of places and spaces in an attempt to broaden his limited physical space, his prison cell not only accentuating his position as the subordinate Other, but signifying the first of many senses of boundedness and confinement in Sibiya’s mind. The narrator provides Sibiya with a sense of freedom from his confined space by placing him imaginatively in a selection of places: Eshowe, Durban, Norwood, Zurich and Vienna, the Trier on the Moselle, Germany and Zululand, Berea and Cato Manor. He imagines an escape from his boundaried space through the memories of the landscape beyond his line of vision, the open spaces of freedom represented by the farthest margin, the seascape, returning via a circular route to his home in writing. The sea is central to the prisoner’s sense of freedom as it is a place of infinite arrivals and departures. It also offers the possibilities of escape, as the sea has no set boundaries other than the horizon. The sea is also Nkosi’s own continual fascination and he returns to this place, both in his fiction and on his visits to Durban, where he will insist on having a room with a view of the sea. Sibiya’s moods are minutely recorded

in the descriptions of the sea and expressed through specific visual memories and penned in simple yet evocative prose: "I try to imagine the colours of the Indian Ocean in the early morning, when the water is already flecked with brilliant sunspots or in the early afternoon when hardly moving at all, the water turns into shiny turquoise" (Nkosi 1987:2). Descriptions of the Durban beaches and the sea abound in this novel. Nkosi through Sibiya's imprisoned consciousness returns always to this continuity of infinite geographical space, its only possible demarcation the horizon, a space in which Nkosi discovers a vast source of literary possibilities and associations, because for writers, who are much like explorers:

in transforming destructive tension into a constructive force, it is the sea that mediates. It is the sea that is supremely fluid, a devourer of horizons, charged with muscular currents, a site of conflict. The sea is the ambiguous element ... which turns the tension in his intimate spaces to healthy account. For the sea ... a mountain that moves, it carries towards and beyond horizons ... it is a plain where there is no threat of falling ... a prison which releases. (Carter 1987:198)

Nkosi recalls that when he was growing up in Durban the seafront was mainly forbidden territory to the African:

a white paradise of privilege from which we were excluded but which by the very logic of exclusion, was made even more desirable to the segregated poor and the black unwashed; we were irresistibly drawn to these miles and miles of white shining sands and the ceaseless shimmer of the Indian Ocean that looked like a gateway to distant lands and offered a false promise of escape from the land of apartheid. (Nkosi n.d: 3)

With this comment in mind, it is clear that the seascapes described in his fiction are Nkosi's emotional and private territory, an enduring geographical space capable of mirroring and absorbing different aspects of his personality: "away from the seaside, I felt only more acutely the lack of my own sense of worth and direction ... I felt about the world an innate sense of uselessness very difficult to explain or account for" (Nkosi 1987:139); the boom and crash of the sea was the beat of blood in my own heart" (142).

Every writer, according to Doris Lessing, has a myth-country (in Ranger 1994:7) and Nkosi's myth-country has, as is evident from his writing, always been his native province KwaZulu- Natal and "the sleepy provincial town of Durban" (Nkosi 1991:12). His creative writing provides disparate fragments of this erstwhile home-place, sometimes reflected as idealised and sentimental perceptions of 'home' he took with him into exile. His descriptions are mostly a remembered paradox of

contrasts: up-market sea front hotels bordering the brothels of Point Road, the KwaZulu-Natal seascapes and the rural countryside he was raised in. This is landscape verging on the paradisaical and mythical in his writing: the "puce-coloured" landscape (Nkosi 1987:42), "a sea that sparkled like cluster of jewelry" (129), "old men and women pausing to peer with incredulous wonder at the bright carnival of summer being endlessly enacted in the streets" (138), "the goodness in the streets matched only by the goodness of the sky ... everything a neon-lit pink" (139), "calm blue waters against a sky as pure as a chorister's smile" (141) "the sigh of the waves" (142). Although this aspect of the landscape is described as nurturing, the consciousness observing this paradisaical landscape is nevertheless aware of its flipside: "the sky turned dark above the horizon of the swirling undulating waves ... the sea became agitated. Waves as big as the mountains came crashing into shore ... from the docks the horn of a loading vessel honked... adding its fretful lamentation to the plaintive sounds of the afternoon" (130). Nkosi also describes a remembered landscape scarred with the mocking signs of white solidarity "Bathing area - for whites only" (143), spaces designed to exclude the African presence. Although *Mating Birds* is a work of fiction, the landscapes and places as described therein are part of lived experience: "Durban and Cato Manor is *there* in *Mating Birds* and certainly a share of Zululand is in *Mating Birds* ... all of those are strands of memory about place I realistically reproduced ... I put all these things in my novels and I am aware of where it comes from ... you discover them by having been removed from those things (Lombardozi 2003:332). In this novel Nkosi recreates his remembered South African spaces viewed through the eyes of his characters, a largely politicised space inscribed with a particular ethos and worldview. This is evident in Sibiya's descriptions of the sea and the Durban law courts. Nkosi comments that "In *Mating Birds* there is a description of the sea seen from Eshowe - from the highlands of Eshowe ... we were high enough to see the ships even beyond the horizon" (Lombardozi 2003:331). In his description of these memories of place, both Nkosi and his characters often assume the gaze of Pratt's monarch-of-all-I-survey,<sup>14</sup> his only brief claim to authority, power and his native soil residing in his imagination and concealed from possible persecution: "nothing is better than the view of the Indian Ocean from the brow of this hill ... with a slow, monarchal progress I am driven through the busy streets" (Nkosi 1987:37). In this novel and also in *Underground People* Nkosi effectively employs a convention commonplace in 19th century travelogues, where the monarch-of-all-I-survey trope is typically used to render definitive the moments of discovery of geographically important phenomena. The protagonist is usually placed on a high place of some kind and describes the panorama below, producing a simultaneously verbal and visual landscape. His journey is ultimately an exploration of his world which begins and ends in language, his vocation is ultimately "to make himself a member of the group ... the extent to which he looks after his own interests must also be matched by the extent to which he serves others" (Nkosi 2002:159).

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<sup>14</sup> See in this regard Pratt (1992) for a more detailed discussion of this term.



In *Mating Birds* Nkosi explores the roles of writing and language which are central to this novel, not only because Nkosi has made writing and language his 'home', but also because the transformation of imagined spaces as well as the construction of the characters take place in language. Nkosi, his stance albeit protective of African identity and difference, assumes a Western voice as discourse and as literary expression, writing in English, using the "language of the scientists, but also without a doubt the language of police inquisition and of torture" (Nkosi 1987:40). He writes in English in *Mating Birds*, not only in terms of a perceived readership, but also as an attempt by the African writer to reach across the colonial divide: "for in the end what can we say to each other, this white man and I, that can break the shell of history and liberate us from the time capsule in which we are both enclosed?" (41). The enormity of the physical and mental divide between white and black in this novel is also expressed through the boundaries imposed on fiction through the exclusion or absence of language: "Veronica and I could use no words beyond the primitive language of looks and gestures, in short, we could not declare ourselves" (112). Hence both narrator and author empower each other to "derive great satisfaction from writing. I write all the time," says Sibiya (24). As in the case of his character Sibiya, who is the writer of Nkosi's novel, Nkosi's writing is similarly a determined effort to free himself from prejudice and judgement; writing about his history enables him to reaffirm himself as an individual, and not as an object - as Sibiya comments, writing is "a great discipline. One might even say it is character forming" (23). Thus writing, as is language, is central to Nkosi's understanding of himself and his identity. Nkosi broadens this view by pointing out the paradox, also evident in *Mating Birds*, that in history, as in fiction, "it is no longer possible for the former masters as much as for the former slaves to define themselves without taking into account the existence of the Other" (Davis 1990:24). Sibiya's need to be acknowledged (by Veronica) is based on the Hegelian notion of recognition, in which "the other needs the gaze of the other in order to achieve full identity" (Nkosi in Lombardozzi 2003:330).

The Lacanian view of language may exemplify this further: "the first object of desire is to be recognised ... In order to be recognised by the other ... I call him by a name which he must assume or refute in order to reply to me" (Lacan 1977:86). There is another aspect to Nkosi's home in language, in that Nkosi, having no interest in revolutionary actions, prefers to manipulate language to demonstrate the discriminatory apartheid ideology of division, through the miscegenation of European and indigenous languages. In *Mating Birds* he marries German, a polite language soliciting feigned concern for the oppressed; English, the language of the colonial oppressor; Afrikaans and its vulgar expletives, the language of police brutality and repression; and the Zulu language, in which politicised voices unite to protest against oppression and demand liberty, creating a cosmopolitan admixture of culture and language reminiscent of his world as an exile: terms such as "kaffir boy" (Nkosi 1987:12), "garden boy and house servant" (13), the "contagious disease" (13) "dirty black bastard," "kaffir shit" (75), *kaffirmeidjie* (80), *my baas, my Kroon* (126), *jou bliksem*

(126), "native" (155), *donderse kaffir* (157), *vuil bobbejaan* (157), baboon (166) bloody rapist kaffir bastard (167), and the warning answer from the marginalised: "*Izokunyathel 'iAfrika' ... mabayek umhlaba wethu ... thwal 'umthwalo sigoduke ... the nation will step on you'*" (183).

Nkosi comments wryly through *Mating Birds* that "culturally speaking, the native had nothing. Caliban had to be taught language ... Man Friday did not have a name until Baas Robinson Crusoe was kind enough to give him one" (Davis 1990:25). Brink comments that one of the most dangerous aspects of colonisation is that it invites both reader and writer to think "in ethnic and group terms, however hard as individuals they may be struggling against the process of labelling" (Brink 1987:38). *Mating Birds* is Nkosi's statement against all apartheid stood for, filling the spaces between memory and history, framing many interpretations of African suffering. Hence, the inarticulate native speaks in *Mating Birds*. Sibiya's visitors do not confront the truth of apartheid, they ask no questions, but rather "talk of the weather, the drought and of the ruined countryside after last year's spring rains" (Nkosi 1987:19) preferring to identify with their rural spaces in which they feel comfortable. The reason for their perceived lack of participation railed against by Sibiya resides in the limitations of language, which fails adequately to express or to do justice to the trauma and pain experienced by the victims of apartheid. Noyes offers the following rationale:

This, it seems, is how the truth is destined to present itself ... as a painful discrepancy between the gestures of trauma and the language it is spoken in. The need to find words for the pain of the victims and the silence of the perpetrators presents ... a challenge [for language] to consider the forms in which it expresses itself when dealing with suffering, and to interrogate the meaning of truth in relation to language. (Noyes 1998:445)

It is largely through Sibiya's inquisitor, Dufre, paradoxically also a representative of a persecuted nation, "a Jew who has seen much that is odd and unpleasant in the world" (Nkosi 1987:25) and possessing "the accuracy of a diligently acquired language" (40), that Nkosi interweaves the local and international environment. In telling Dufre, a white academic who will ultimately benefit from the mind of the "African criminal" (82) his history, Nkosi is also 'talking back' in his writing, taking back the alienated spaces. Dufre carefully chooses to ignore the political elements in the colonial relationship, and has as his quest the "childhood stories" of the colonised (18) a metaphor for the narrative, within which Nkosi "excavates the charred seams of the unconscious" (41). Sibiya's writing becomes his "constant companion," "his persistent suitor," "his interrogator," "his torturer," the "wrecker of his peace," his "solemn inquisitor" and "his confessor" (22,39). Dufre is the embodiment of the archetypal colonial mind, who through his 'acquired language', misconstrues the black psyche as a dehumanised alien specimen worthy of a study in terms of a "fractured

personality" (181) and only to "advance scientific knowledge" (23), his concern is with "proving hypotheses [rather] than with discovering the true character of one man's passion for another human being" (75).<sup>15</sup> In *Mating Birds* Nkosi through his writing attempts to "fill the gaps left in the void by the privileged texts of the dominant culture" (Davis 1990:26). This novel portrays Sibiya not as the "Kaffir boy who had the temerity, the audacity" (Nkosi 1987:12) to challenge the hegemony with revolution, but as a writer, "reading, writing and reflecting on the human condition" (37). Thus, by providing Sibiya with a purpose, status and a professional identity which empowers him to take control of his world through writing, Sibiya constructs his identity on the interstices of place, language and social status. This holds true for Nkosi himself as a writer in exile, wrestling for control of a discourse claimed as an inalienable right, its ownership vested in the colonial hegemony. Thus as the subject of discourse, Nkosi comments through Sibiya that "the writer constructs himself within language, and in the process of writing, becomes the very site of struggle in which the contradictions of the society at large are played out" (27).

*Mating Birds* as a novel represents and encapsulates Nkosi's own identity as a marginalised black man living in the world of "a superior race" (14). That Nkosi was an exile in his own country of birth long before he was forced out, is evident in the descriptions of Sibiya's emotions of impotent rage. Nkosi and his writing, viewed as "contraband goods" by apartheid in his own country (Nkosi n.d:2) and who "no longer exists" (Nkosi 1987:25), having "lived always, resentfully, on the fringes of a white world that tried to keep me out" (101), must have experienced the same "black mutinous rage" (3). His remembered anger against the strictures of apartheid, without which there would not be this story to tell, is finally given a voice in his writing, language providing him with the means to articulate his outrage. This emotive response is not only externalised through his protagonist Sibiya, but inscribed also on the body of the white woman, a metaphor for a system finally "turning against me" (111). Christopher Hope also describes *Mating Birds* as a "passionately angry book, its strength lies in the presentation of the rage and humiliation which black South Africans endure as a result of racial phobias of white Calvinists" (Davis 1990:24). Nkosi denies this interpretation, as he insists that he did not write this novel to expunge or heal a wound - "I tried to situate myself into the situation of someone treated in a certain way" (Lombardozzi 2003:329), but then goes on to admit that "authors tell the most terrible lies" (2003:330). Veronica's betrayal of Sibiya through the lies she tells similarly serves as metaphor for the apartheid erasure of black identity. Hers is a body no longer described as appealing, but something that is predatory and devouring, and variously described through tellingly negative images. However, reading the novel as a representation of Nkosi's home in language, Nkosi's characters, in telling their stories, take on the role of the writer,

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<sup>15</sup> See also the article "The African Personality under the Microscope" (Nkosi 1959:4) and "Would you let your daughter ..." (Nkosi 1970:10-21).



they are "just like the novelist - inventing stories - they have the authority to write what they like" (2003:330). While *Mating Birds* does not offer ready-made solutions to the many conflicts involved in the struggle against alienation and oppression, Nkosi employs the novel to stress how writing can be a means of identity construction and potential transformation of the relationship between black and white. Sibiya's preoccupation with whiteness - for example, his perception of Veronica's bathroom and her personal appearance - has not to do with purity but as signifying an absence of black, a colour both marked by its presence and absence. Nkosi's mining of his South African space as a site of memory is not a nostalgic looking back nor a harking back to traditions. Far from succumbing to a yearning for his native home and culture, in this nostalgic celebration he reconstructs place and landscape to come to a clearer understanding of himself as an exiled writer, the writer and his natural world constantly overlapping each other. In *Mating Birds* Nkosi describes place from the deepest sense of his apartheid experiences, always re-entering, reconstructing and revising this world, evaluating his remembered spaces through a memory sharpened through distance and his life abroad. The home country can only be realised through struggle, and the urgent need for this transformation and liberation is revealed by landscapes such as Cato Manor, which Nkosi remembers in this novel with brutal clarity :

the tin shanties of Cato Manor clung precariously as if for dear life to the hillsides and slopes overlooking a stream whose greenish slimy waters ... embraced to its already heavily polluted bosom all the scum and filth of innumerable shacks without proper sewage, without proper toilets or plumbing ... on hot days unbearable hot as overheated ovens, on rainy days as leaky as open sieves. (Nkosi 1987: 90)

Nkosi, having lived in Cato Manor as a young boy, describes his memories of township life not only to exemplify the frustrations and restrictions black South Africans were subjected to, but also to reconstruct a place constantly transformed through the people and their collective human difference.

Nkosi's remembered spaces mine and recreate a specific South African landscape which is described as both beautiful and stultifying, tempered by the obligations of childhood memories and realities. In remembering his past in terms of historical events and people, he also remembers and remakes his fragmented identity. In *Mating Birds*, which has as its landscape exclusively Nkosi's own erstwhile home ground, he gives landscape, identity and exile a particular historical and social significance. *Mating Birds* is a novel in which the boundaries of black people's lives are exposed, and in which Nkosi's own sense of origin is woven into the landscape. What *Mating Birds* is finally saying, is that: "history is the hero of the novel. For black writers who have made their home in language, exile begins in language and is a history that language both records and distorts. They do not have to choose to oppose a system which is contrary to all observable reality; their colour makes the choice for them; what they have to do is learn to survive the system" (Nkosi 1967 : 20).



## Underground People (2002)

Nkosi in his own words introduces his novel *Underground People*:

It is about a man who pretends to be in police detention, when in fact he is in the Northern Transvaal, in the bush, waging a guerilla war. And it is an attempt to show how he gradually becomes a responsible political leader, as a result of being thrust into a very difficult situation after having been a school teacher in Johannesburg, and having made lots of speeches about the necessity to die for freedom. Finally the Movement says: "it's you who has to go and mastermind this uprising in the Northern Transvaal". And all the time he has always assumed when he was talking about the need to sacrifice, to make sacrifices, that other people would have to make those sacrifices. The problem at the end of the novel is the refusal of the hero to lay down arms and define his own leadership, and there is a minor conflict there and he is assassinated as a result. (in Goddard 1991:30)

Nkosi's novel *Mating Birds* concludes with the conviction that "there are no lessons to be learned from history, only images to be relearned and repeated" (Nkosi 1987:181). This observation underpins the essence of *Underground People*, a novel which not only journeys back through South African places and spaces, but also explores the institution of apartheid. The action in this novel enables Nkosi to roam through the landscapes of his memory to present a mixture of historical and political situations without restrictions. Nkosi began to work on this novel as far back as 1977, even before *Mating Birds*. It was published for the first time in 1993 in Dutch under the title *De Vermissing*. *Underground People* was published in South Africa in 2002. An extract of this novel was published under the title "The Emissary" (1997), this title a pertinent reminder of the role of the writer "serving at the Altar of History ... a servant of the people" (Nkosi 1997:80).

The novel chronicles the lives of two South African families, one black, one white; both trapped in the apartheid realities of a segregated country. The plot of this novel revolves around the political manipulation and transformation of Cornelius Molapo, who reluctantly progresses from poet to revolutionary, blindly determined to die for his cause. The lives of the characters are framed against the actualities of South African apartheid politics, from the banning of the liberation movements which were then forced underground, to the suspension of the armed struggle and the release of Mandela. The outcome of Molapo's life and actions are largely shaped by his interaction with white liberal Anthony Ferguson, an exile from South Africa attached to the Human Rights Organisation in London. These two central characters are not presented as heroes of the struggle, but as pawns drawn unwittingly into the political subterfuge of the time, where finally the hunter becomes the

hunted, and neither is afforded an equitable resolution to their respective lives at the conclusion of this open-ended novel. The narrative plot of *Underground People* is familiar to the South African reader, which may superficially read as a cliché of the liberation novel as Nkosi invests in his characters an historical and political consciousness, and purposefully manipulates this as a strategy for empowerment and resistance. At the first level the narrative delineates the journey of Molapo, erstwhile teacher and writer turned leader of a disparate underground resistance group whose stated objective it becomes to liberate the people of Tabanyane, an indeterminate peasant village in Northern Transvaal: "on the fringes were blackened trees whose trunks were stained with the pee of generations of urinating dogs...a dry heat, luminous in the midday glare, rose in the nearly motionless air carrying motes of dust in shimmering waves" (Nkosi 2002:223). At the second level, the novel confronts the journey of the exile depicted by Ferguson in his symbolic quest to find that which has been lost to him, namely his place in the world. Being nomads in the largest sense of the word, both Molapo and Ferguson exist within the parameters of Nkosi's own world, characters on whom Nkosi rests the weight of his difference. The characters Ferguson and Molapo search for not only a fulfilment of their respective missions, but are forced to face their own realities, a reality similar perhaps also to Nkosi's own conviction as an exile that "what was lost forever for both of them was home and security, always a return to a home that was finally not home" (259). Thus Ferguson, ever the exile, leaves his comfortable home space abroad in a tangle of conflicting ideas and feelings, and the direction of Molapo's life, and to some extent also his identity, is shaped by the half-hearted pursuit of Ferguson, both characters whose fictitious lives resonate with Nkosi's realities as an exile. Both undergo changes in their lives during the novel, and when Ferguson and Molapo finally meet, they are no longer the compliant individuals they once were. Molapo in particular, as the erstwhile teacher, cricket player, jitterbug dancer, bibliophile and dreamer finds himself irrevocably and unwittingly drawn into the struggle world of resistance propaganda and hidden agendas. Even the South African landscape conspires against him, powerfully sharpening and resolving his alliances and identities, Nkosi depicting these changes against the backdrop of a hostile landscape: "Night falls very swiftly in Africa ... a jungle of wild undergrowth ... in which the bulked shapes of trees rise like ghosts ... horrifying in its primordial muteness"(179). It is in this landscape that Molapo's character changes, as "since joining the mountain fighters ... he had grown with the job, his very pulse had begun to beat with the steady rhythm of his mountain fighters; he had become one of them" (226). Ferguson, on the other hand, described as the "putative international civil servant"(12), is mercilessly confronted with the brutal realities of apartheid South Africa, a truth, he realises, wholly absent in the surreal existence of his South African family, who elect to remain oblivious to their realities. The most pressing concern held by Ferguson's mother, was whether "the boys remembered to water my flowers in the west wing garden" (236), her response to the report on the attack on Tabanyane. The novel offers a poignant insight into the insular worlds created and divided through apartheid boundaries, these divisions an expression of social fragmentation and alienation: "and on the other side of the fence ... some native boys were playing on their

pennywhistles and dancing ... a township jazz step resembling the 'jitterbug'" (136). The jitterbug dance is inherent to this novel: depicted on the novel's dust jacket is a man dancing the jitterbug on a manhole cover, "legs bent at the knees and arms flapping like the wings of a flamingo"(Nkosi2002:25). The jitterbug, a term derived from an early slang term to describe alcoholics who suffered from the "jitters"(delirium tremens) was an energetic jazz dance popularised in the 1940s in America. This dance became popular in the black townships such as Sophiatown and the dance halls in Johannesburg in the 50s and 60s. Nkosi writes in *Underground People*: "There is even a new dance which has hit the town. Something like the old-fashioned American jitterbug dance. It is now the craze of the location. No-one knows how it came into town but some people say it has its links with the underground" (Nkosi 2002:221). Dancing the jitterbug not only suggests that underground life was perhaps vibrant to some, but it is also an inherent expression of Molapo's identity as a black man. Music under apartheid, because it is non- literal, was not subjected:

to the same limitations as literature and is less self-conscious in the modes it adopts to express the agony of the South African situation ... it has provided a glaring paradigm of what is happening in the underground life of the nation ... it also shows that the oppressed in South Africa have an amazing form of resilience, emotional certitude and optimism. (Nkosi 1967:20)

Molapo and Ferguson in *Underground People* and Ndi Sibiya in *Mating Birds* are characters firmly located - at times trapped, at times fortified both emotionally and spatially - in their African landscape, and who finally emerge charged with a deeper understanding of their personal and social situation. This textual space provides not only a setting for the action of the characters, but also functions as a 'home' in writing, a sanctuary away from the destructive presence of apartheid for Nkosi. Much like Nkosi, his character Molapo fills his time "by writing, reading and reflection. Writing ... provided the means of entering into another world in which time itself seemed meaningless" (Nkosi 2002:171). The novel has thus as subtext a voice clamouring for the recognition of the creativity of black writers, a writing palpably manifesting itself as "the heartbeat of a subcontinent" (165). Apartheid's "white nightmare" (206) was based on the general assumption that writers in particular were subversive in intent, that the "underground people ... were criminals ... people suspected of being terrorists" (211). Nkosi attempts through his characters Molapo and Ferguson to change the perception that not all politically aware writers in South Africa during the 80s were bent on subversive activities. Nkosi says in an interview that :

Black writing in South Africa has had to do a fundamental job of reporting on the situation ... it has had to respond to each twist and turn of the political vicissitudes ... in a sense that has also been part of its imprisonment because it has never been able to move outside a certain pattern of provocation ... and a reaction on the part of the oppressed people through their writers ... it expresses the lives of the people and everything that makes us human, not simply ciphers or pieces on a chess board. (in Worsfold 1990:63)

It hardly needs mentioning here that many of the characters in Nkosi's fiction are writers, notably in his short stories, for example "The Hotel Room"(Sid Bailey),"The Promise"(George Lama), The Trial(David Kambule) and in his novels *Mating Birds* (Ndi Sibiyi) and *Underground People* (Cornelius Molapo).

*Underground People* is a novel which supports the comment made by the character Cornelius Molapo, that "in order to attain a state of lucidity ... one must make one's way through many underground passages" (Nkosi 2002:148). This 'lucidity' is achieved through cross-cultural 'trespassing', the text creating an open space between ideologies where the quest to assert an own identity by the oppressed can also lead to conflict, exile and even death, and it is into these spaces that Nkosi as writer inserts himself. Noyes points out that:

when in our actions we convert space to time and time to space, we emerge as raced, classed and gendered subjects ... this means to invoke a discourse against injustice and violence ... we need to take of the stratified spaces of society, using them to define spaces where it is possible to conceive of justice, and spaces where this can be articulated. And to speak about space is always also to speak within the spaces whose imperatives we respond to ... [ultimately], space is always only human. (Noyes 1998:460)

Much like *Mating Birds*, this novel also centres on a particular theme in South African history, in the main the political struggle of the African masses in South Africa during the turbulent years of apartheid rule. It was a time when an entire people had been pushed "beyond the fringes of society outside the world of social meanings ... as far as we are concerned there is no recognisable authority that we can respond to. How can we, when morality itself has been annulled and colour morality has been substituted in its place?" (Nkosi 1959:5) Within the boundaries of this narrative the characters embody various representative identities of the apartheid society with which Nkosi was once well acquainted: the liberals, the clerics, the politicians, the security police, the freedom fighters; characters with predetermined historical roles in the novel and, like the author, acting out their lives

within the unstable parameters of racial politics. The character of Ferguson functions as a metaphor for colonialism whilst Molapo, on the other hand, is the voice of the exile activist who pointedly comments that:

The struggle for liberation in this country is not the occasional disappearance of individuals. It is not concerned with merely fixing and adjusting the nuts and bolts of our miserable political institutions. No, what we wish to see eliminated in our country is the great social iniquity of a system resting on unrequited toil and unpitied suffering. (Nkosi 2002:132)

Nkosi's act of creative writing thus becomes his contribution to the struggle, a form of discursive resistance revealing the many constraints induced by an apartheid system. The fictional discourse in *Underground People* questions a supremacy which refuses to embrace cultural differences and history. The following perspective on this view on historical fiction is a relevant position from which to read Nkosi's *Underground People*: "If literature is to have a real historical value, we must regard it in the inclusive sense, having to do with its larger significance in embodying the ways of life, patterns of experience and the structures of thoughts and feelings of communities and classes at large" (Green 1997:20). In a review of *Underground People*, the reviewer suggests that Chapters Three, Eight and Nine should be omitted as these "include an unnecessarily detailed description of what the apartheid state was all about" (Mmegi 2003:10). This is at best an irresponsible suggestion, as ignoring apartheid history would be to render Nkosi's writing in this novel irrelevant and incomprehensible. For example, the destruction of Molapo's house and hence also his personal home space is an index of the turmoil of the greater South African political system against which this novel is set. Even language fails here, as the many "small instances of unidentified horror"(26), one such the trashing of Molapo's books, cannot adequately be explained by language: "no-one had heard or seen anything" (26), the truth forever trapped and obscured in the chaotic silence. The inadequacy of language to articulate the negative influences of a life under apartheid, resulting in silence, as referred to previously in *Mating Birds*, also occurs in this novel, where the destruction of Molapo's home becomes synonymous with the destruction apartheid wreaks in the lives of the oppressed. Black people in this novel are nothing more than ciphers, forgotten and gone, "passed forever into history" (Nkosi 2002:25), a people stripped of any fixed identity, "we are no longer as once were ... as a people we are shrunk - no, reduced - to a fistful of dust crushed into slouching, snivelling submission" (30). Nkosi responds to the colonial view of black identity through his central character Molapo: a black man who refuses to surrender and who defies othering in the face of death. The characters of this novel bear witness to Nkosi's ambivalence towards Western literature with its often negative stereotyping and lack of understanding of the African, arising from his belief that: "South African Whites cannot become full human beings until they have dealt, however painfully, with their fear of black people" (Nkosi 1983:128). Nkosi's xenophobic character Potgieter in this novel

embodies this particular aspect of apartheid and its ingrained colonial distrust of the Other; a distrust also evident in Nkosi's other fiction. In the novel, the control exerted over black lives by apartheid is ultimately rendered powerless through the capture of the adulterous Potgieter, a character symbolising vividly the colonial lack of imagination, and who, like the character de Kock and his ilk, resorts to insults as insulation against his apartheid-induced fear of the black man: "Monkeys, the lot of you! A bunch of terrorists, you call yourselves freedom fighters! What will you do with the freedom when you get it? Chop one another up! Have a fine festival eating one another as you used to do before the white man came" (Nkosi 2002:209).<sup>16</sup>

Lieutenant colonel Adam de Kock, the resident police chief of Tabanyane, is a possible reference to the notorious Security Branch policeman Eugene de Kock. He represents the collective apartheid mindset when he interrogates a black man of no fixed abode: "Look at yourself! Do you know what you look like? Like a bloody baboon ... take your *verdomde* carcass away from my sight before I run you in, *jou bliksem*. Just looking at you makes me want to puke! *Loop! Voertsek!*" (224). Nkosi creates in de Kock a character whose blind prejudices are shown to render his life as empty as the environment in which he is depicted.

Although the title *Underground People* read in the context of South African history is suggestive of subversive political activities, Nkosi creates in Ferguson a character who, much like Nkosi, is generally hostile to politics: "normally as soon as talk got onto politics, Ferguson usually found an excuse to withdraw to his room" (122) ... "he was happier to discover a hand-printed edition of Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and read it through in one sitting" (121). Molapo is also an individual who prefers quietude; he is described as "a dabbler in poetry" ... rather than "a ranter", who spoke "softly, caressingly of what he described poetically as the gathering clouds of the revolution" (9) and who, at the conclusion of the novel embraces not politics, but a conviction. Never a "poet of the revolution" (Isaacson 1991:3) such is Nkosi's dislike of self-serving political posturing and revolutionary sloganeering that this novel, his "contribution to struggle literature, was to have a representation of guys physically fighting inside the office over a woman" (Isaacson 2002:18). More revealing is Nkosi's own scepticism against revolutionaries who are always demanding action, but usually "have somebody else in mind who is expected to take all the risks," (Nkosi 2002:200). Nkosi clearly shows this scepticism in the treatment of his character, the writer and poet Molapo, who is left wondering throughout the novel "what the joke had been truly about" (12), his "mission doomed to failure from the start" (198), himself a posturing "bloody clown" (262), a pathetic political pawn

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<sup>16</sup> See road signs erected along roads in South Africa during the 1940s: "Caution: Beware of Natives" (*Apartheid in Black and White* *Sunday Times* 5 March 2006:26-31).





used in the revolutionary game of “elaborate hoaxes, disinformation and counter-disinformation” (248). Nkosi perhaps even purposefully, positions Molapo and his disparate band of freedom fighters in a place which, although they control the historical space in the narrative, is a place of illusion, both through its name and through the evocation of atmosphere. Nkosi’s own stance against the ‘cult of the gun’ (Nkosi 1980:116) is then clearly evident in this largely bloodless novel with violence constantly pushed on the periphery. Unlike many examples of liberation writing, *Underground People*, much like his play *The Rhythm of Violence*, contains a paucity of explicit violent scenes or obvious violent resistance to apartheid. The characters live as an expression of the writer, generally eschewing violence to obtain political objectives.

At the core of all Nkosi’s fiction as mentioned elsewhere, are questions of identity and the impact of exile on identity. The trope of exile with its notions of temporality and spatiality is central to an understanding of postcolonial literature and experience, particularly as it translates the many artificially instituted and mobile borders of the modern world. This is a novel marked by frequent and sometimes unsuccessful journeys which serve to underline the difficulties experienced by the exile, endlessly traversing between the widely dispersed poles of his worlds. The title *Underground People* itself suggests that the condition of exile, away from the prying eyes of the State makes “underground life [exile] sometimes more interesting, more thrilling, where even the best things can happen” (Goddard 1991:34). Another view held on the title of this novel is that the separate cells of activity in the underground environment further express the barriers between the character’s exiled self and others. Molapo for example, is unable to create a home in his new environment into which he has been displaced. He also experiences the exile’s disjunction between idea and action, and the only escape from his reality is through his dreams, as: “after all, dreams often played this game of concealment, which left the possessor uncertain of what he possessed”(85). Nkosi, having lived most of his exiled life abroad, writes fiction in a way to make his “past present, to bring the distant near” (Green 1997:15), and *Underground People* does just that - it is a fiction in which Nkosi articulates the anxieties and achievements of a people historically oppressed.

The respective arrivals of Ferguson and Molapo at their places of birth are marked with the bittersweet memories of the past and deep insecurities and fears for the future; these emotions are the hallmark of an exiled consciousness. Ferguson’s feelings of guilt, alienation and ambivalence towards his impending visit to South Africa after an absence of fifteen years reflect perhaps Nkosi’s own perceptions of himself and his own “form of treachery against his country of birth” (38), “defection seeming a bit too strong to use for what was after all only a temporary and voluntary exile” (39). Ironically, Nkosi places Ferguson in a position of arriving from a position of exile, whilst Molapo enters a symbolic exile position by conversely returning to his homeland, thus both characters experience their initial homecoming with a sense of alienation. Nkosi reveals the many

emotional masks of exile through the perceptions of his male characters. Ferguson experiences a sense of unease, "a moment of emotional recoil" (92), a mental exile from his surroundings, whereas Molapo's alienation weighs upon him as he passes through on his journey into what has become the unknown through absence, a homecoming which degenerates into a morass of anxieties:

strange birds populated the night with hoarse shrieking screams and calls ...  
night falls swiftly in Africa, before you know it there is jungle of dark forest  
trees, the world seems to melt away into sombre shadows ... the rest is a  
massed darkness. (179)

Nkosi's exiled background is reflected in that of the character Molapo, who similarly is drawn towards a discourse on the affiliative, choosing to remember the *context* of the struggle rather than the struggle itself. For Nkosi, writing this novel was not only a powerfully personal act but also a purposeful political act, a work in which he contextualises issues of home and identity. It would seem that in *Underground People* it is Nkosi himself who, through his characters, attempts to come to terms with the conflicting emotions wrought through exile when confronted with the option of a return to native soil.

Like Nkosi, Ferguson is unsure how to preserve "his acquired identity" (93), or even "how to belong without belonging" (93). Like his characters, Nkosi prefers to maintain a deliberate distance, electing not to become embroiled in any emotional dilemmas as he accepts "his allegiance to that original experience of having been born in this place, but does not want to submit to the demands of a commitment" (93), an aloofness which is also evident in various interviews Nkosi gave on his first visit to South Africa after 1990. Nkosi's inclusion of the writer William Faulkner, one of his literary 'fathers', "whom I sometimes called Willie Faulkner just to show how intimate I am with the man" (Stiebel 2005:235) in *Underground People* is not as arbitrary as it may seem. Germane to Faulkner's novels were issues of homecoming, lack, loss and miscegenation which inhabit a shared space:

I had dreamed of course of some final return in the future and had silently wondered what that would be like. In my fiction I had even prefigured and imaginatively staged that final return ... but what was missing was the drama of arrival that I had envisioned in thirty years of exile. The wind did not hold its breath; no crowds applauded at the airport; for most part writers and academics rather than political activists, we were not known to the general public ... it was an anticlimax. (Nkosi 1994:5)

Much like Molapo, Nkosi on his return to his native country is faced with non-recognition: "being herded into a queue emblazoned with the sign for alienation: Foreign Passports. So here we were at last; thirty years before we had left as South Africans, and we were now returning as foreigners" (Nkosi 1994:5). Gready notes that homecoming is often an ambiguous and disorientating experience, as is evident from Nkosi's own comments, "with joy and relief tempered, even eclipsed, by other emotions such as disappointment and unfulfilled expectations, disillusionment and anger" (Gready 1994:512). Nkosi has admitted in many interviews that he had indeed, despite his memories, become a stranger to his homeland, and these realisations are echoed in *Underground People* by his character Stephens Mayfield when he says: "you have no idea how much South Africa has changed in all the years you've been away ... what the country was ... bears absolutely no relation to what it is today" (Nkosi 2002:13); Molapo and Ferguson are scarcely able to recognise the almost "unfamiliar countryside ... in ten years so much has changed" (91). Nkosi admitted in an interview that he was feeling "inhibited by the whole experience of coming back" (Goddard 1991:28). Ferguson, like Nkosi, after years of living in Britain and Europe, felt "no desire to return to the country of his birth" (Nkosi 2002:19) illustrating the knowledge that Nkosi's erstwhile sense of displacement, leaving him stranded as an outsider in his country of birth, has never left him. His characters much like himself, are depicted mostly without roots and a homeland, the detritus of the apartheid system, forever the pilgrims in search of knowledge about their role within their adopted community. Nkosi's return to South Africa is experienced much like that of Ferguson; it serves to reinforce yet again the sense that "he is no longer one of the tribe" (38), his fiction often mirroring his own exilic frame of mind:

the sensation of being surrounded entirely by white South Africans, listening only to the collective whine of nasal English accents and heavy Afrikaans ones provoked a mild form of discomfort ... the language reminded him of the inviolable solidarity amongst white people who saw themselves as having a collective destiny and feeling a collective threat. (38)

Perhaps what Nkosi illustrates most clearly through his character Ferguson, is that exile from one's birthright affects everyone, irrespective of the colour of their skin. Ferguson's search for Molapo is his way of reconciling himself with that which apartheid stood for and then to move on from this into a new political dispensation. Nkosi subverts his exiled status by conferring it upon Ferguson rather than on Molapo, in a sense throwing his exile back into the face of his colonial tormentors. Thus both colonialism and its purported humanitarian ethos stand mocked, the implied innuendo clear to any political exile - the ludicrousness and incongruousness of Ferguson's "questionable" mission (Nkosi 2002:253), as both pursuer and quarry are described as being at a loss as to the import of their respective missions - are obvious: "a white South African, born and bred" yet who

had “kept away from the country of his birth, like a wandering Hottentot” (115), and described as a “true son of the soil ... who would understand our struggle better than most” (11) is sent back to his “beastly homeland” (22) to find a missing black South African. Although this novel has as its quest the rediscovery of lost roots and identity through the portrayal of the lives of individuals, it also simultaneously recounts the history of the African nation, “whose men and women disappear” through the working of a system marked by “a preference for refined torture and technical innovation” (7), exile being one of the modes of this refined torture.

Following on from the above discussion, *Underground People*, like *Mating Birds*, centres on the multilayered politics of a homeplace, depicted this time against the circular nature of revolutionary violence, a theme not only given importance to from the outset as indicated by the title, but also a theme which points to issues of history and race. Nkosi’s second novel poses the question of belonging in a number of significant ways early on in the text, a belonging to place which cannot be clearly defined. The fragmented political arena of South Africa is the setting of both Molapo and Ferguson’s search for identity and a sense of belonging. This he effects through shifting between various narrated perspectives; in the main that of Molapo and Ferguson. Of the many resonances with ‘home’ that structure *Underground People*, the first and most powerful cue is Ferguson whose return to a home space is central. By refusing his character a final ‘homecoming’ he also makes him a diasporic citizen with no possibility of going home, “reduced from subject to object, circulating like a commodity from one country to another through the global conduits of international politics” (Nkosi n.d :3). *Underground People* is a writing in which the identity of the self is masked and a novel in which Nkosi explores issues of home and homecoming, of arrival and departures. Ferguson’s homecoming is transformed into a constant process of temporary relocation across shifting borders - going home means to move through space and coming to places only to disembark again, much like Nkosi traversing the world as detailed in Chapter Two of the thesis. The parallel journeys of Ferguson and Molapo become Nkosi’s own narrative, as much of his personal experiences are projected onto the central characters. Molapo may be seen to represent the rural and Ferguson the westernised aspects of Nkosi’s identity as a cosmopolitan South African, his polarised characters in the act of arriving and departing to and from their places of birth. The exile’s sense of perpetual movement enacted through his characters underpins all three of his novels, a writing in which Nkosi subconsciously recounts also his own life, one deeply predicted on departures, arrivals and returns. In *Mating Birds* the world is “a rumour of trains arriving and departing, of ships honking in the black harbour ...” (Nkosi 1987:183); in *Underground People*, Nkosi refers to “trains, railway stations, airports, flights to foreign countries. Ships steaming into ports” (Nkosi 2002:43); and in *Mandela’s Ego* his main character Dumisa is described as “a man of no fixed abode, travelling constantly to far flung places” (Nkosi 2006:178). By Nkosi’s own admission, *Underground People* has two thematically linked returns, that of Ferguson and Molapo, both unable fully to reconcile with

their roots. "They come back but they will never feel at home ... when you are rejected finally, the only possibility of return is symbolic ... as in Joyce's *Ulysses*, you have to leave Ireland to love Ireland" (Isaacson 2002:18). Whereas to Nkosi "being back here is very much like a fantasy" (Isaacson 1991:3), for his character Ferguson, the ambiguity of return is akin to a place "where we shall meet with our broken selves" (Kunene 1981:65), thus placing exile back into its historical position of loss and anguish. This theme of displacement and loss receives even more emphasis in the title of the Dutch translation of this novel, *De Vermissing*. It becomes evident that whilst the South African landscape partially lives up to Ferguson's imagination and memory - his family's beautiful home in Johannesburg - it provides no real sense of home for him. He has a memory of home that has left him, upon his return, with an uncertainty as to "what he had possessed in the past. He was like someone who had lost something he could never regain" (85). Ferguson, Nkosi's voice of the exile, has little sense of familiarity or belonging, perhaps because:

belonging to a particular locality evokes the notion of loyalty to a place, a loyalty that may be expressed through ... written histories, narratives ... yet belonging is also fundamentally defined through a sense of experience, a phenomenology of locality which serves to create, mould and reflect perceived ideals surrounding place ... belonging may thus be seen as a way of remembering. (Lovell 1998:1)

Nkosi structures this novel through overlapping narratives, each of which depend on the quest for, or the return to, home. The notion of home in both *Mating Birds* and *Underground People* is largely an unsettling and dangerous space, a space which is linked to deep-seated emotional turmoil, rooted in remembrance of the South African landscape, a yearning for home soil which reaches epic proportions in *Mandela's Ego*. The narrative, which constantly shifts between black and white perspectives, thus addresses the phenomenon of homecoming in a variety of ways. Nkosi's relation to particular places in South Africa is a significant aspect of his South African identity, and his constant return to these places in his fiction is closely related to his exiled status - his mobility rather than his stability in place is that which defines the notion of 'home' for Nkosi.

As is evident from the above, *Underground People* explores two central themes, these being issues of exile and place, which ultimately coalesce into one central concern, this being the identity of the individual as well as a people, "the life lived by the oppressed, the people who were all around you but were invisible as far as the apartheid state was concerned, except when it wanted to use the whip" (Goddard 1991:34). Nkosi shows in this novel that the political is inextricably wedded to the private lives of the individual, and that identity is not always and only shaped by the forces of history. *Underground People* has as its strength the construction of identity in terms of both the experiences of the characters within the South African political arena and also within the broader external world of the exile.

In manipulating both the consciousness of Molapo and Ferguson, characters who are invested with various biographical aspects of the writer, Nkosi reveals his own split bi-cultural identity, an identity which although having absorbed western culture, is equally at home in a multicultural world. Some of the characters who belong to the fictional world of his novels are drawn from real people in Nkosi's world. Molapo, for example, is clearly a character Nkosi creates from his history with *Drum* writers, and admits this much during an interview when he says that Can Themba was partly his inspiration for this character "whose eloquence and passion he remembers from his *Drum* days" (Rosenthal 2002:111). Likewise, in *Mandela's Ego*, Nkosi draws on his memories of the antics of his colleague KC Moses, whom he recalls as the resident wit at *Drum*. Nkosi echoes his own early marginalisation by placing on his white character Ferguson the burden of an impoverished childhood - he provides a cynical twist to the apartheid dream by deliberately positioning Ferguson into his own history. He inscribes into Ferguson's identity that of his own, a boy growing up under the "indifferent eye of a shiftless father and the obsessed brooding devotion of a doting mother, who at the age of twenty-one fled the country" (Nkosi 2002:14), but who insists that his identity be acknowledged despite his lengthy absence: "I am a South African, you know ..." (13) and constantly reaffirms this in the novel: "after all, South Africa is still my home, you know" (22).

Molapo, also depicted as a solitary figure of abandonment, is a character who most closely resembles Nkosi as a writer in exile, his life evocative of the young *Drum* journalists of the 50s, whose "love of fine words only made him seem dangerous" (10). He is a character variously described as a man without "a wife, parents or relatives," ... an intellectual maverick who lived for most part in the richly tapestried world of ideas ..., a man with a self-mocking irreverent spirit, a desperate irony and his flirtation with the edge" (9). Molapo also appears to have a need to reaffirm his existence, as in the novel he constantly refers to his place of birth: "I was born in Tabanyane" (90), an affirmation which was denied Nkosi. Molapo is a character clearly shaped by Nkosi's memory of his own early life as a writer and journalist, a man who "is more popular in liberal white circles around Johannesburg suburbs than in the black townships" (21), whose writing "had been praised in local reviews and overseas journals" (9), who is not particularly heroic nor a revolutionist, who "reads Hegel before going to bed, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, that sort of thing" (20) and who shares Nkosi's abiding fascination with language and the "mellifluous music to which words can sometimes lend themselves" (10). By mining the site of memory, his character Ferguson re-imagines his individual identity as rooted in a country precisely by virtue of its political conflicts: "he was thinking of fifteen years of self-imposed exile during which he mentally had continuously moulded the country in his mind, its physical and political landscape changing according to the alterations of his own emotional states" (97). Molapo develops his identity by relating history to the experience of place, which he remembers mostly in terms of the negative "it was a landscape similar to that projected in films after a nuclear disaster" (140). Nkosi adapts the vocabulary and language of his characters in keeping with

the memories he recalls during his writing, becoming more military, more rigid. This is evident in his description of Molapo when confronted with apartheid's violence against the black man, when he is discovered on the train stopped for a routine search. In order to save himself from certain death should the true nature of his journey be discovered, he immediately seeks refuge in his namelessness, becoming the invisible other: "He held out his identity document ... and instinctively the Movement's Representative raised his hands to his face to defend himself against the blows" (88). Stripped of a fixed identity by apartheid brutality, the black man becomes anonymity preserved, erased and nameless, seeking expression and refuge in the sanctuary of home, his world of letters: "a phrase from an old English poem came back to him ... another line of poetry came to him uninvited like a bubble of fear: How dread an army hath enrouned him" (88). The character Bulane pointedly comments on this anonymity: "the native is the most preposterous Western invention ... the figment of white imagination ... if the native, so-called, exists *he exists by virtue of remaining outside vision*. The native genius ... is to remain *invisible*, to be only one of many" (251).

As in *Mating Birds*, Nkosi reiterates here too the need for the African to reclaim his African identity and voice through writing and literature, to end the silence and exile colonial thinking has imposed on African creativity, to end his exile from himself and his community, even despite the risks this entails: "... we should never forget. The *native* does not speak. The *native* is always mute. Once a *native* acquires speech he or she is done for, for he or she ceases to be a *native*. And that's when the so-called *native* risks imprisonment and risks being shot" (252). Nkosi's discourse is thus rich in emotional responses to his different cultural identities, a point also previously discussed in Chapter Two. The narrative in *Underground People* helps Nkosi to maintain ties with his original cultural environment through distance, textualising his South African political history to "coax the memory, which is as best unreliable or at the very worst treacherous" (Nkosi 1987:26). Through the depiction of the characters, *Underground People* can be seen as a fractured enquiry by Nkosi into his own South African identity framed against the colonial complexities of the personal and the political.

As the title suggests, place is central to *Underground People*, and many senses of place converge in this novel. This theme is subtly woven into the lives of the characters who are continuously defined in terms of their surrounding spaces and places: Ferguson, forced to modify his acquired identity on his arrival in a concretised Johannesburg with the "crisp air of his youth and a slummy Braamfontein childhood ... memories so raw yet so tender" (Nkosi 2002:93); Molapo, becoming a nameless non-person journeying to his nondescript place of origin, Tabanyane "the end of the world, a small dot on the map" (140), a fictional rural wasteland representing Molapo's bleak cosmos, a construct that grows out of and symbolises Molapo's own experience of exile. Nkosi succeeds in distancing himself from the immediacy of the drama of disappearance and exile by



describing this "speciality of our century" as a global phenomenon, a experience which can be read as "a form of castration, a dismembering and estrangement"(Nkosi n.d.:4). He removes himself through the naming not only of places, but entire continents which have suffered similar scenes of "pathos and drama,"(14) a global collection of place names broadly ranging from "Africa, South America, Asia, and Middle East" (8) to Oxford, the Soviet Union, Algeria and also the nominal dot on the map, Tabanyane (63), places "whose record of repression can yield pride of place to none in the world, including South Africa" (14). Nkosi effectively appends names to places to push back the boundaries placed on his own life and world through the confines of apartheid. "One of the primary stepping stones on the explorer's route to form a perception of space out there to a perception of place, is the act of naming ... space is transformed symbolically into a place, that is, as space with a history" (Stiebel 2001:11). Tabanyane, the heartland of *Underground People*, is such a space converted to place by the act of naming. Carter follows on this with the view that names precede places. The spacial effect is to "render what lies 'yonder' central, to transform a former boundary into communicable space; 'there' becomes 'here', where an exchange of opinion can occur"(Carter 1987:264). Thus similar to his character Molapo, the spaces Nkosi inhabits in his writing are imaginative spaces within which he transforms himself from a position of erasure to a culturally visible individual. Nkosi's novels may seem to function as oblique critiques of black social realities, as his writing is a place of repetition, where the struggle for freedom and the return of a heritage remains his ultimate quest.

*Underground People* is a novel of substance and import in terms of this thesis, as it is centrally about negotiating boundaries and reconstructing landscapes through the political and social forces of memory, as well as locating shifts in identity and value systems. These negotiations and shifts are created in the main through Nkosi's characters as they negotiate their place in the landscape of this novel, Molapo and Ferguson functioning as metaphors of the social patterns of apartheid. Schama sounds a warning, pointing out that:

when we set off on a trial of social memory, we will inevitably end up in places where, in a century of horror, we would rather not go, places that represent a re-enforcement of, rather than an escape from, public tragedy ... landscapes will not always be simple places of delight ... scenery as sedative, topography so arranged to feast the eye. For those eyes, as we will discover, are seldom clarified of the promptings of memory. And the memories are not all pastoral picnics. (Schama 2004:18)

Throughout the novel Nkosi maps the South African landscape through memories preserved by many years of exile, a writer looking inwards by introducing the novel at the outset in terms of absence in

the first words: "Disappearance ... causing other human beings to disappear without a trace, leaving behind them the empty air, blue and vivid with unanswered questions" (Nkosi 2002:7). This notion of empty space resonates with the dissonant consciousness of the exile, a sense present also in *Mating Birds*. Like Molapo, the character Sibiya has also in a sense 'disappeared' as he no longer exists as a free entity in society, his is a confined consciousness looking outward from the small grilled window of the tiny cell, "where I gaze at the empty sky for minutes on end, like someone waiting for the rain to fall" (Nkosi 1987:27). In *Mating Birds* Nkosi describes places and spaces as unassailable fortifications, but also sometimes presented as a place of imprisonment and confinement. This sense of place and space is also evident in *Underground People*. Nkosi uses the imagery of a castle in his writing generally to convey two very different symbolic messages of space and boundaries - "the castle of my skin" (Nkosi 1983:35) and "his sister's shiny white castle in which he was feeling pleasantly trapped" (Nkosi 2002:120). These images of exclusion also conjure up a sense of a powerful stronghold, an impenetrable, enclosed and immense facade against threat: "a fortified building which implies by its very existence the capacity to exclude all who are not intentionally admitted" (Appelton 1990:47).

Landscape in *Underground People* is written as a site of contestation, but it also forms an inherent part of a remembered past, where being alone and isolated from humanity forms the central ethic of all exiled existence, irrespective of whether by choice or by default. Nkosi combines nature and history in this novel to create a landscape which becomes a harsh and a masculine space of contest and revolution. If "to colonise something was to pile writing upon it" (Boehmer 1995:97), then Nkosi, writing about his native land, is attempting to recolonise his familiar South African landscape in this novel, giving shape to his remembered experiences of place as home through his writing. As Abrahams explains, "memory takes root only half in the folds of the brain: half's in the concrete streets we have lived along" (Abrahams 1984:70). In describing the landscape of historical South Africa, Nkosi remembers not just a country, but a continent. The humiliation of being a constant trespasser in the apartheid-controlled landscape has never left Nkosi and this often directs his description of the African landscape, which becomes at times his emotional barometer. Images of place are central to Nkosi as exile; his landscapes are freighted as legacy, to him landscape is not just "simply scenery and *genres de vie*" (Lowenthal 1991:213), but invested with meaning. Nkosi allows the reader to see through his eyes the perceptions of the early colonial explorers who historically experienced and described the African landscape as "immensely vast and empty, a land which filled him with a feeling of wonder and awe, a religious emotion, a kind of ecstasy even, accompanied by an obscure conviction that God had put the white man here for a purpose" (75). Nkosi's characters are similarly the expressions of their African landscape, theirs is an identity with the ground. Does Molapo in fact describe the landscape from a point of view of the fantasy of dominance, or does he see it through fearful eyes? He is constantly defining the territory and

scanning the perimeters of a colonial landscape emptied of people - landscape here is variously textualised as a source of comfort, danger or safety or as a trigger for the outpouring of emotion. An example of this is Molapo's own homecoming in fulfilment of his mission against apartheid, his is a journey into the heart of darkness, much like Nkosi setting out on his exile. It is a journey undertaken through a landscape which no longer has "sunlit skies and gleaming air," (Nkosi 2002:74) but becomes a threatening place of impending violence, confining, alien and threatening at once: "the land was invisible beyond the sombre bushes ... he felt the profound silence of the African night like the weight of an immense cloth drawn around everything." (83) The African landscape is transformed into "a tiny cell, an interrogation room with a single naked bulb, beaming its vapid yellow light straight into the eye" (84). The discovery of a cigarette butt, representing that which is alien and foreign to the natural landscape, is described in terms of evil and impending danger: "the men stared at it as if it were the shining eye of an evil reptile ... and stood gazing at it in stupefied horror" (179). This sense of unease and abandonment is pervasive throughout this novel, and dominates the entire existence of the central protagonists: "the darkness closed in everywhere. Alone with his terrors Cornelius felt strangely, profoundly isolated; he was travelling without a companion in a darkness dense and fathomless" (86). Nkosi, on leaving his home space for the unknown, may have experienced a similar severance in terms of the familiar countryside from which he was forever barred from re-entering. His erstwhile environment looming about him as a "cavernous space of silence," an alien space from which he is severed, the idea of 'place' becomes emotionally resonant through the process of exclusion.

Nkosi's sense of place is expressed through the sensibilities of his characters - when Ferguson leaves London it is grey and dismal, "a dark chill in the air ... with the threat of more snow" (12,24); Molapo was "utterly overwhelmed by the landscape" (142). Nkosi's descriptions of this landscape provide a view into the narrowed places of memory and convey a sense of shifting zones of light and darkness: "the mountains, vast, deep and rugged, stood sentry above the *dorp* as it had done since time immemorial, separating Tabanyane from the rest of the world ... so quiet that Cornelius had the sensation of having arrived at the end of the world" (140). As with his characters, Nkosi is never immune to the emotional process of his remembered landscape through the moods of his characters. Mphahlele writes that a setting "that generates so much pain as South Africa does claim all our physical and emotional response. You hold on to it, document it; even though... it riles you up, you feed on the poison it releases; it drains much out of you, but you love it for all that" (in Malan 1987:53). The landscape in *Underground People* has as undercurrent the wish by Nkosi to regain his sense of his South African homespace, as the action in *Underground People* is into the heat and dust of the veld, historically the territory of the oppressor. Nkosi emphasises both his love for, and his alienation from, this territory "its renowned tawny coloured veld ... was only a backdrop to an ugly urban childhood" (Nkosi 2002:23). There is no equivalent to African space anywhere in the

world, this is evident from Nkosi's descriptions of South Africa; the nightscapes are explored through a seared consciousness and expressed through Nkosi's careful language: "tawny brown ... puce ... the light assumes the soft diaphanous quality which invests the dawns and dusk with a peculiar luminosity" (47). At times, however, as noted the landscape in this novel is described as hostile, powerfully threatening, and inhospitable to man: "In the bush men slowly changed their characters, like objects left in the open air upon which rain, sun and air beat down and finally did their work of transformation ... the faces of the young men were growing older ... the older ones hardened even more" (174). Nkosi's description of landscape harks back to the colonial descriptions of the land as seen by the settlers, devoid of human presence: "The grim silence of rock ... the giant trees massed like an enemy in formation ... everything was strange. Creepy. Hostile" (183). Boehmer says on this point: "colonial texts are littered with images of nameless threat and trauma, of inertia and impossible immensity, of places of engulfing darkness and overwhelming enigma, recalcitrant peoples, unbreachable jungles, vast wastelands, huge and shapeless crowds, cavernous mountains" (1995:94). The scenery is however, largely filtered through the eye of the exile, long removed from this kind of landscape, yet recalled with "an ache for something they could not name, something remembered from childhood" (Nkosi 2002:177), a memory of place Nkosi similarly and more fully exploits in his novel, *Mandela's Ego. Underground People* is hence about territoriality and a sense of contested place which is inextricably bound to identity, and may be read in part as a narrative of Nkosi's life, a fiction informed by history. Ferguson and Molapo, as does Nkosi, must come to terms with a "broken vision of an incomplete reality, accommodate the lack and recognise exile for the maimed state it is" (Jacobs 1990:125). Following on from this Nkosi observes that the exile, "abandoned as a relic on the scrapheap...becomes proscribed and is left to die"(Nkosi n.d:4). In his novel *Mating Birds* and also in *Underground People*, Nkosi tellingly condemns both his central characters, Sibiya and Molapo, to this nihilistic view.

The polarisation of home and exile as we now know is a recurrent theme of Nkosi's political and literary writing. Absent from his home country for the better part of fifty years, perhaps Nkosi's subject material may now seem outdated in terms of the new and a different political dispensation in South Africa, his writing perhaps viewed as a constriction in terms of creative vision. Nonetheless, and irrespective of this possible criticism, Nkosi believes that it is to the political ground that he always compulsively returns as his imaginative source for his fiction. Although Nkosi's fiction may be labelled by some as redundant in the new millennium, writing about his South African history is in truth writing about "the solidarity of a common identity, because the struggle is no longer in the narrow fight against apartheid, but to ensure that the solidarity mode remains firmly in place" (Morphet 1999:114). Morphet's statement is applicable to Nkosi, as through his writing, Nkosi has always attempted to connect with a heterogeneity of people across the colour spectrum - as a writer he has in a sense "always lived with the people ... that was my strength. It is my strength now"

(Nkosi 2002:261). Nkosi in this novel signals a need for social commitment as the only way to alter the political status quo. Nkosi understands only too well that the human spirit can only triumph when goodness prevails over evil. The endings of his novels are invitations to his readers to speculate on the above postulation. As an *exiled* writer Nkosi's fiction inhabits a particular cultural space; as a *writer* he is, much in his own words, "handcuffed to South African colonial history" (Nkosi 1991:12). He writes about his memories of South Africa, perhaps because "as writers we assume the character of the Ancient Mariner, wrenched with woeful agony, obliged to tell again and again the story of the killing of the albatross in order to gain relief" (12).

*Underground People* is a discourse which thinks about exile, marginalised identity and the difficult issue of home. The significance of this novel does not lie in the outcome of the liberating struggle, but in its message, that struggle is a necessary action against erasure, not only for the South African situation, but for all exiled and displaced people globally. This novel concludes with a warning that "in South Africa, the war has only just begun" (Nkosi 2002:263), a reminder that the new South Africa is still not wholly purged of the colonial influence, and perhaps never will be.

### **Mandela's Ego (2006)**

In Nkosi's own words:

this is the story of a struggle for the body and mind of a young Zulu named Dumisa Gumede, a struggle if you like between two ways of life, the Christian Western way and the Zulu traditional way. This struggle was waged on the Khamlamba Mountains (renamed the Drakensberg by the white colonists) in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even the change of name from the Khamlamba to the Drakensberg tells its own story. In this narrative the Christian way of life was represented by a gentle Scottish priest named Father Edmund Ross who taught school at the foothills of the Khamlamba Mountains, and on the African side by the great nationalist leader Nelson Mandela, who no doubt without his knowledge, constituted Dumisani Gumede's other major influence as a symbol of black desire. In this story the ultimate prize for Dumisani Gumede was a Zulu maiden called Nobuhle, the most beautiful girl in all of Mondi, maybe all of Zululand. (Lombardozzi correspondence 2006)

Nkosi, still writing at the age of seventy, has recently published *Mandela's Ego*, a satirical novel which documents the life story of Dumisani Gumede, a young herdboyc growing up in the 60s in the rural valleys of KwaZulu-Natal, his education moulded by the Scottish priest Father Ross, his sexual



education moulded by his peers. Dumisani's sexual prowess, legendary amongst the ladies, is inexplicably affected when his lifelong role model and alter ego, political icon Nelson Mandela is arrested by the Security Police, and sentenced to imprisonment on Robben Island. For the next twenty seven years Dumisa remains sexually incapacitated and he refocuses his energies into searching for a cure for his condition, whilst at the same time campaigning for the release of Mandela. He becomes a wanderer, "a man of no fixed abode" (Nkosi 2006:178) and it is only when Mandela is released twenty-seven years later, that Dumisa is finally able to set about regaining his lost youth (181). Nkosi explains in a recent interview that:

One thing that contributed to the big myth was when he - the Black Pimpernel, was on the run. The feeling was that he was an elusive outlaw who could not be apprehended ... in a way he was like Homer's Ulysses who returns a hero after 20 years of fighting ... South Africans, especially black people are more inclined to believe in the powers of legends and have a "Christ will free us" mentality, they are still holding on to the romantic image of a pre-Robben Island Mandela. *Mandela's Ego* is about how Mandela's capture affected the confidence and sexual prowess of a township man. It merges political memoirs and themes of representation - the God-fearing and the God-like. (Madondo 2005:16)

*Mandela's Ego* deserves a much closer analysis than is possible within the limits of this thesis, however, a few relevant observations will be drawn from this very new work. On the one hand this novel may be read as "disturbing the boundaries between biography, fiction and history, and engaging directly with national myth" (ZA@Play 2006:2). However, in terms of the thesis, in this novel Nkosi seems finally to establish his identity as a black man from South Africa, simultaneously reinstating the African as a 'natural' figure in the rural South African landscape. His character Dumisa Gumede is the antithesis of Cornelius Molapo in *Underground People* who "ironically though a native of the country ... showed himself to be something of a foreigner" (Nkosi 2002:142).

During his visit to South Africa in 2004, Nkosi commented in an interview that for African writers in exile wishing to express their legitimate African pride in their cultural roots, they must give voice to the dissonant silences of their South African history, to look beyond the ideology shaped by the white paternalism of apartheid: "Shaka was a continental hero ... Senghor, Mazisi Kunene, Paul Kruger - you can't dismiss them ... and with Mandela - we are dealing with a national obsession, an icon shaped by a combination of different mythologies about him" (Madondo 2005:16). However, for Nkosi as a writer, renowned liberation heroes such as Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe, Bambatha, have all become frozen in textual time, fixed in the struggle history of South Africa, a hostile environment where the black majority had no say in the matter and a new constitution was



long overdue. Even *Underground People* completed after 1994 concludes with a reference to a future frozen in time: "In South Africa the war has only just begun" (Nkosi 2002:263). With this in mind, I refer to Fred Khumalo's recent article "Free at last, but slow to fly" in which he raises a valid point:

The year 1994, when we achieved our democracy, is inevitably an important reference point in tracking how far we have come as a nation. We therefore have to go back to 1994 to track the growth of the so-called new wave of black local writing. Has there been a wave? An alien landing in this country would think seasoned black writers must be the most boring species ever created. Why, the alien would wonder, do these black writers always have to tell their readers about the hardships of being black? Why dredge up the past? Don't these people have love stories? Don't they have comedies? (2005:19)

This is a relevant question in terms of Nkosi's perceived stasis and concern with the past, and also in terms of this thesis, as this fixity in his fiction pointedly refers to Nkosi's construction of an identity and a home in writing always connected to the South African landscape. A reading of the introduction to *Mandela's Ego* immediately calls to mind a particular rural landscape, that of KwaZulu-Natal, a landscape which continuously comes to the fore in all his fiction, variously described, with an undertone of longing evident in the diction which reflects the binding psychological condition of nostalgia, a yearning for a homeland far away: "The happy hour! Men talking, women singing, children squealing, cattle lowing, goats bleating ... Columns of smoke rose from a myriad of cooking fires ... after the first hearing the village sounds briefly paused, a moment of profound stillness ..." (Nkosi 2006:100). This novel disputes his protestations that he has never been bound to any particular place, as seen in Chapter Two, as *Mandela's Ego* is clearly a novel which unarguably reflects a part of the world which continues to hold a deep affinity for him. It is a novel in which his engagement with his past spaces may well be found in the response to exile by Carol Hermer, herself an exile from South Africa:

True exiles have always feared that leaving would dry up the flow of words, that separation from the homeland would remove the force that nourishes the muse ... South Africa is a place that ... shaped my thinking ... but I can no longer write of it in the present tense ... cannot feel the omni-presence of society ... I can write with my memories, as for me South Africa has become fixed in time. (Daymond 1984:283).

Paradoxically, it would seem that the further and the longer away Nkosi is from his homeland, the



more precisely he remembers it, an observation validated by *Mandela's Ego*. His world, seen through the eyes of Dumisa, consists of a landscape which "grows sweeter with distance" (Roberts 1993:170). In terms of his rootedness to this landscape, his stance towards South Africa has remained ambivalent, as it simultaneously functions both as his memory of origin and a place of impossible return. On the one hand Nkosi admits that there is the desire to refresh childhood memories, "as exiles always hope for a return to their roots, to the graves of their ancestors" (Nkosi 1994:5), however, he also maintains that "I couldn't care about the prospect of not returning. My sense of what was wrong in South Africa at the time remains. Leaving helped me come to terms with the fact that we did 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 2002:12). Although Nkosi writes with less animus against apartheid than many of his contemporaries, he has never forgotten the sense of abuse embedded in him by this ideology, and this is clearly illustrated in the contents of *Mandela's Ego*. The political content of this novel is corroborated in Chapter Two of this thesis, the many references and nuances of fact in this novel creates the superscript "I-Qiniso"[The Truth] (23) to the title of this novel.

Nkosi, through various narrative voices, delves deeply into his earliest memories retrospectively to capture a long lost rural past framed by the hardships of apartheid. Unlike his characters in *Underground People* whose identities have irrevocably been shaped by cosmopolitan encounters, in *Mandela's Ego*, Nkosi studiously concentrates on a brief period in his own life, exploring his rural childhood memories and drawing from these the inspiration for his character Dumisa Gumede. A possible reason for this convergence on the rural and the tribal may be that this period of his life marked a time when he possessed the clearest and purest sense of his identity as an African. Nkosi, through various narrative voices, delves deeply into his earliest memories retrospectively to capture a long lost rural past framed by the hardships of apartheid. Unlike his characters in *Underground People* whose identities have irrevocably been shaped by cosmopolitan encounters, in *Mandela's Ego*, Nkosi studiously concentrates on a brief period in his own life, exploring his rural childhood memories and drawing from these the inspiration for his character Dumisa Gumede.

Through his character Dumisa, Nkosi expresses his intense alignment with his African identity, he himself having once been a young boy growing up in the seemingly idyllic KwaZulu-Natal landscape of "serene Zulu hills and the listening bush" (Nkosi 2006:7). Into Gumede's history he weaves the capture and imprisonment of a political and national icon, who becomes "the representative of the great ideals of freedom, fairness and democracy in a society that dishonoured those virtues" (163). This novel serves as a large metaphor for the creative and artistic powers of the writer, who through his skill in language becomes an authoritative voice of the African idiom, and projects an African

identity undaunted by oppression. Creating an enduring artwork through writing and language is the ultimate goal of any writer, as this in turn prevents the writer from being "rendered neuter, no longer possessed of superabundant, inexhaustible powers ... to give up such an identity ... was impossible to contemplate ... he would become as nothing" (Nkosi 2006:125).

Nkosi writes with two audiences in mind, that of his "African readers, and the reviewers who don't even understand the experiences out of which you are writing your books" (Stiebel 2005:233). Writing provides Nkosi with a sense of absolution - particularly as his role in the struggle was largely passive - because history "will not forgive us if we should fold our hands and do nothing to assist our people who are most cruelly suppressed ... never let it be said that we did not step forward when History summoned us to the barricades" (Nkosi 2002:73). Nkosi defends his concern with history as he believes that "just because apartheid is gone it doesn't mean that you can't write about it anymore - the best movies today are those *about* the Holocaust - it is a story that *has* to be told" (Lombardo in conversation with Lewis Nkosi 2003). However, *Mandela's Ego* recounts more than just historical fact; it is also about a large personal history, as Nkosi delves deep into his memories of home in this novel.

In his role as literary critic, Nkosi critically assessed Mphahlele's first novel, *The Wanderers*, in his essay "Southern Africa and Commitment," as a work which he finds "packed with incidents from real life ... with only slight variations to give them a dubious fictional disguise" (Nkosi 1981:95). He criticizes the author's constant demand on his reader to see "the hero as a man of superior qualities ... turning his novel into the deadliest tomb of self-love" (95). It is hence interesting to note that *Mandela's Ego* is possibly Nkosi's most extensive example yet of "a splendid autobiography" amply illustrating his very own strident criticism against other writers who "make their own lives so unreservedly the subject matter of the novel" (Nkosi 1981:91). Its narrator seemingly adrift in the time continuum, moving aimlessly back and forth between different perspectives, this novel is premised on much of Nkosi's own personal experience as a young child, and his later observations as an adult. The narrative is viewed through the eyes of the twelve-year old Dumisa, who is told "fantastic tall tales which were always based on some small elemental fact, however distorted" (Nkosi 2006:20). The element of distortion is, however, relatively small in this novel: the cruelties of the security police, for example, are based on fact, as is the anecdote about Nelson Mandela stealing pigs (19). In a recent interview Nelson Mandela, who, much like Nkosi and his character Dumisa, spent part of his youth as a herdboyc in his village, masterfully expounded on his exploits as a pig thief:

All of us were very mischievous in our younger days. We had very clever ways of doing so. We would take the remains of kaffir beer, as they called it, and then we'd go to the direction of the wind, so that the wind would blow it from us to the village where the pigs were. And then we leave a little bit of the remains of the beer, and then the pigs come out ... then we put the stuff further away ... and they will follow us. When they were far away ... we stab it ... the owners will not hear its shouts. And then we roast it and eat it. (Sewnath 2006:5)

*Mandela's Ego* is in a sense the manifestation of a difficult belonging as Nkosi in this novel writes an identity for himself by closely aligning the contents to a symbolic remembered South African landscape. The novel also functions as a commentary on apartheid South Africa by Nkosi; by anchoring his present identity to a particular moment in history, he also attempts to rehabilitate a social memory. This semi-autobiographical writing is a palliative writing which exposes a deep-seated but consistently denied nostalgia for his rural Zulu culture and South African landscape. In the novel there are many references to his brief childhood legacy in Ladysmith and Eshowe, places he once called home, the memories of which subtly reveal a childhood marked from inception as a voyage towards exile. Urry argues that nostalgia signifies "a general abdication, an actual desertion from the present ... nostalgia is for an idealised past, for a sanitised version of not history, but heritage" (Urry 1995:218), and furthermore, when "the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (91). The reference to heritage, and the notion of nostalgia able to assume a prominent position in writing is pertinent to *Mandela's Ego*, as it draws together Nkosi's own history as a writer pioneering the African cause from abroad, with Nelson Mandela's history, a South African political icon whose release from incarceration after almost three decades coincided with Nkosi's own return to his native country, "after all that time wandering in the wilderness" (Nkosi 2006:181). Mandela's loss of freedom in his own country is paralleled with Nkosi's own exile.

Unlike his previous fiction, this novel, in which Nkosi not only reminisces about his culture and tradition, but also explores his roots through his native language, is perhaps in the main penned for a largely black readership. There is, unusually so for Nkosi, a conspicuous absence of white characters. The theme of miscegenation so evident in most of Nkosi's fiction also remains singularly lacking here. There are no stereotypes of white women in their generic seductive title roles in this novel, only "a coloured woman from the Western Cape passing for white, a mysterious woman who rarely showed herself" (Nkosi 2006:169). The only white woman mentioned is presented as asexual and atypical of the women of the time, the character Helen Lombard. She is introduced into the novel as a maverick artist who jeopardises her position in her own white society by associating with a "naked muntu" (107), even if it is to present the colonial abasement of the oppressed unashamedly as a work of art: "I'll put chains around your ankles and a steel collar around your neck and you'll be completely naked ... like a Nubian slave ready to be bought or sold" (106).

Nkosi places this often idyllic narrative within the social framework of a divisively chaotic apartheid South Africa; a remorselessly tough place described by the maturing Dumisani in all its political extremities. The few white characters present in the novel, in the main members of the security police, are grossly caricatured yet recognisable to any South African reader. This shrinking of white characters interestingly implies a certain shift in perspective, one which becomes evident throughout this novel - the exorcising of the colonial presence from black cultural identity, and the reclaiming of a cultural heritage by the marginalised. This political shift also historically reverberated nationally which resulted in the release of Nelson Mandela into a new South Africa, free from the shackles of apartheid. This political victory is also that of Nkosi's and celebrated through this novel, as he too has been finally liberated from the need to align himself with the white world to gain acceptance. The exclusion of any relationship with the white world is a deliberate literary omission on the part of the author, signalling, I would argue, his ability to separate his African identity from that of his western acquired identity.

*Mandela's Ego*, unusually intimate, describes a much more private space than the other two novels, a space which attempts to eliminate all things colonial, the western stance which had never cared fully to understand Africa. This wilful ignorance is based on the colonial's notions of superiority expressed through the gaze of the white tourists who "swung their cameras at everything in sight, including the *empty* (my emphasis) countryside" (Nkosi 2006:132): "First we visit something called a 'cultural village' ... and what they call a cultural village is nothing more than a cluster of huts on an old-fashioned reservation" (130); an opinion which, as expressed through his character Nobuhle, reveals an African perception of the colonial's superficial interest in all things African. Nkosi himself had fully experienced the colonial gaze during his life under apartheid, and was keenly aware of the conception held by apartheid that the collective African identity was perceived as that of savage and uncivilised. Nkosi extemporised on this point in his novel *Underground People* through his character Potgieter, mentioned earlier. The character Nobuhle in *Mandela's Ego* reveals Nkosi's own dislike of tourists as seen earlier in the short story "The Hotel Room" (1964) and the anger of all Africans against being viewed as objects when she accuses the tourists as being nothing more than:

sensation seekers! thrill seekers! Will they sit down with us and eat *amasi*? This is not a zoo, Dumisani. Take them to a game reserve where they can see animals. Isn't that what most of them come to see? ... why don't they stay in Durban where they can swim in the ocean like all the other whites. We have nothing to show them here. (Nkosi 2005:134)

Hence with this novel Nkosi reclaims a particular literary space using the South African context to re-connect to his roots and his own lineage of Zulu tradition; his surname 'Nkosi' meaning "king" in Zulu.

Despite the inclusion of a liberation icon against whom Nkosi parallels his own history, there is a sense of a less politicised, more liberated civil space verbalising the African mood in this novel. Nkosi is astutely aware that Mandela's name is synonymous not only with a particularly turbulent historical period in South African politics, but also with the new breath of democracy, spanning a time frame which neatly coincides with Nkosi's departure into exile and his return to South Africa. Nkosi's novel thus functions as a metaphor for his own sense of loss, both in terms of his home and his African identity through absence and exile from his native land, a comment which will be more broadly discussed further on in the chapter.

In this novel of celebration of black perseverance for freedom from oppression, in which Nkosi enters into a close and confiding communion with his native place, and in which he splendidly recreates the world of his ancestors, Nkosi, native son of KwaZulu-Natal finally comes home. Through this childhood memoir, a writing often of pure poetry in celebration of country life, Nkosi presents his reader with a myriad of sepia coloured snapshots of a rural KwaZulu-Natal traditional Zulu society with which he became familiar as a child living with family members in the Natal Midlands. His memories of home, with the many descriptions of sounds, smells and sights in this novel, are vividly suggested in a landscape mapped and elaborated upon in this tribute to his boyhood. These memories are captured in the almost cinematic descriptions of the sweeping KwaZulu-Natal landscape, in which Nkosi positions a wide social spectrum of colourful characters, whose lives and actions serve to paint a portrait of a past steeped in Zulu customs and traditions. In this novel Nkosi invokes memories of the rustic lifestyle of the 1950s as a moral corrective to the notoriety of the urban slums and townships he so graphically describes in his novel *Mating Birds*.

Although the novel is underpinned by a broad sense of sympathetic humanity rather than a depiction with a moral edge - even the stereotypical activities of security police are caricatured - it retains at its core the author's confrontation with the hardships of apartheid and exile, the years of separation from his country of birth, and the effects these years have wrought on his identity and sense of self as a writer. A dangerous world of urban darkness and desperate measures becomes discernable at times through the terseness of the narrative, albeit masked by the many instances of irony and the often humorous descriptions of his characters. The simplicity of the plot does not deflect attention away from the dilemmas of home and identity in a country riven with divisions and boundaries. The notion of Nkosi who, through writing believed that he would contribute to the struggle, is illustrated

in the words of the character simply known as the 'man', who extemporises on the notion of 'home':

In his vocabulary 'home' did not mean what the Christians had in mind ... 'pick up your load and let us go home,' home meant taking up your responsibility to resist oppression and fight on until you reached the beautiful land of freedom, the end to all struggles. (Nkosi 2006:74)

'Home' to Nkosi has always meant the freedom to write and to create in order to reach a stated goal, that of mass liberation from oppression and the recognition of black literature as a creative reality. His departure from South Africa as an exile was a crucial step towards the liberation of his creative muse, away from the suffocating confines of apartheid, particularly as "there was no such thing as 'open air' in South Africa ... all this, the lands, the rivers, the mountains, everything belongs to the government. There are borders surrounding this country. Everything inside those borders, including the open air, belongs to the government" (75). Recalling these memories causes even the countryside to conspire against the idyll of childhood; to emphasise the inevitable and approaching sense of change, the landscape is no longer described as a place of "sunshine, pouring down from a blue cloudless sky" (81), but as violent and threatening "clouds were gathering over the Khahlamba Mountains, and the air smelled of gunpowder, as if a storm was approaching (75) ... the rain trapping them in what felt like a very hostile environment" (76).

Nkosi's novel is presented as a circular narrative, deepening the perception that this novel, with its roots set in apartheid history, is a never-ending story, one which could just as easily begin with the introduction to stories told to children, *kwasukasukela*, once upon a time, despite its subject matter having become distant through democracy and the changes imposed on the new South Africa. Yet, even if the current landscape has become vastly different from that which Nkosi had left behind as an exile, to him the South African history remains a never-ending story. It was a history he came to understand forged in "the serene hills and the listening bush," (Nkosi 2006:7) through his education at the hands of the priests at the mission school and a brief rural childhood, a curtailed career in journalistic engagement with political issues at the time, and one which he carried with him into exile.

Nkosi expresses his very real sense of loss through the experiences of his character Father Ross, the Scottish priest who founded the Mondi Mission school, and who, much like Nkosi, was forced to reconsider his position, as the apartheid regime had become untenable: "he might want to leave the country altogether rather than teach his pupils that men were born unequal ... he spoke at length of his love for the land, for the veld, for the mountains and rivers of South Africa ... how much he

would miss the South African landscape and her peoples in his premature retirement" (73), this phrase serving as a veiled euphemism for his own impending exile. Father Ross's estrangement is also that of Nkosi's, in that his lengthy absence from his country had often placed him "living at the cross-roads, and many things have come to pass that I never thought I would live to see" (29).

Nkosi, through his characters subtly invites his readers to trust the veracity of his memories created not only through the naming of real personalities and places in South Africa, but also through aspects of the Zulu culture, tradition and the telling of legends evident in this novel. These he often allows his characters mockingly to confront from a colonial point of view, thus enabling himself critically to review practices from which he has become estranged through exile: "Khezo soon had him in knots ... well, what about our long departed ancestors who return to us in the guise of snakes ... every harvest time we slaughter cows as sacrifice to the greedy buggers, don't we - appeasing snakes, aren't we?" (28). As narrative centre, the character of Dumisa Gumede is portrayed as a self-assured and politically aware individual, embodying Nkosi as a young journalist at *Drum*, who similarly, despite his underlying overt display of bravado, is in truth an intensely lonely individual concerned with the forging of close interpersonal relationships with others. His character's constant search for human interaction is suggestive of the exile's overwhelming need for love and protection, a need for "the invisible power of love and forgiveness as it shapes us and heals those we love" (Nkosi 1981:101).

In this novel, as elsewhere in his fiction, Nkosi includes a number of references to the negative father figure who fails Dumisa in many respects, and whose unapproachability ultimately leads Dumisa to choose as father his political icon Mandela, much as Nkosi had from an early age chosen various writers - Faulkner for one as previously mentioned - as his mentors: "Just how many fathers do you need, Dumisa would later ask himself" (29).

*Mandela's Ego* may be regarded as a form of homage to Nkosi's childhood memories. There is no invented landscape here. He returns to a place in memory, incisively depicted, where he was "formed, moulded, kneaded like recalcitrant clay ... when in a sudden grip of inexplicable nostalgia, he would return to the mission grounds like a long lost pilgrim ... in the manner of one searching for a lost object" (30), loss being a recurrent theme in Nkosi's fiction. The mission school was to Nkosi, as already discussed in Chapter Two, a place not attached to spiritual values so much as a place which brought him into a marriage with his passion for the written word and his desire for knowledge about language and writers. He describes his passion for the written word in his essays in *Home and Exile* (1983), in which he recalls his love of the English classics and poetry instilled through the teachers at the Mission School; this theme similarly described in this novel in the character of Father Ross and his "illuminating teachings about European courtships and ... about love-making between

the knights and ladies in those great unrepeatable times" (33). Yet Father Ross also illustrates the perceptions of the church which subscribed to the same beliefs held by the colonial world about Africans: "you Africans seem to think that you invented everything, including pain" (35), "... you Zulus have very little knowledge of what true love is ... you think it is only something to do with reproductive organs" (40). Nkosi, recalling his experiences of his life as a black man in South Africa, juxtaposes the colonial perceptions against African culture and its Zulu myths able to instill "something more palpable ... a nameless fear" (46).

Issues of identity are evident in Nkosi's portrayal of the black and white divide in this novel. Dumisa's African identity is moulded through his education at the mission school and nurtured through a careful aggregation of black and white worlds, blending into the white world much like a chameleon, adapting to whatever would safeguard him from expulsion from this world at the time. Nkosi, like his character, knew as a young man that adapting and blending would provide him with a mask from behind which he could safely observe and participate in a white world. It would also enable him to avoid as far as possible unwanted attention by the law enforcers: "there was no challenge to his extravagance of his blended repertoire! For what was the true nature of his costume? It was hard to tell. What was its true origin or proper provenance, what was its authentic style - Black, White, West, East, African, European or something in-between? No-one could say" (64). As the novel progresses, political references and historical fact begin to increase. Supported by the content of Chapter Two of this thesis; this inclusion of factual data increases the awareness of the colonial impact on black lives, an influence he subtly weaves into the lives of his characters.

Much like in his novel *Mating Birds*, Nkosi in this novel again attacks the empty rituals of the South African apartheid judicial system, deemed a farcical system concerned with the rigid enforcement of law and order. Nkosi takes it upon himself to illustrate the South African judicial system and its laws as having its roots not in justice for all but a justice rooted in colonial dictates. He again emphasises the importance of language as a catalyst for change, "taking it upon himself to explain native custom to an ignorant white magistrate" who is attempting to implement the law in a situation divided through an abyss of silence, where "neither of them is able to understand the other's language" (88), its facade mockingly exposed in Nkosi's own cynical humour:

Oh please tell the man he must plead  
Guilty or not guilty for that is the law  
never mind his mother's private parts  
is he guilty or not guilty  
tell him he must plead. (90)



Nkosi's inability to exercise his sense of self as a writer in a riven South Africa, and the realisation that exile was the only liberating possibility, is metaphorically presented throughout the novel through the dilemma of his character Dumisa. Nkosi acknowledges that remaining in South Africa would have rendered him voiceless and thus impotent as a writer, and become like his character Dumisa, "robbed, deprived and castrated" (175) the prospect of being effectively gagged viewed as an untenable failure, as suggested through Dumisa's loss of his sexual powers: "it was the beginning of a dark and terrible time. He became a drifter, homeless in his own home ... unable to pursue his grand ambition ... gelded, he wandered all over the countryside" (163). Even Nkosi's multi-cultural life abroad, symbolised in the novel by the flamboyant and bohemian character Madame Bianca Rosi, "a German, Italian, Gypsy or Cape Coloured, a character seemingly at home and not at home" (171), does not fully compensate for the loss of his homeland, in much the same way as she is unable to restore his character Dumisa from a sexual cripple to his former self. Nkosi's early life in exile is paralleled with the life of his character Dumisa, who, disempowered through loss, becomes a man of endless peregrinations, "a man of no fixed abode... travelling to far-flung places ..." (178), a man who finally returns to South Africa, albeit on a visit, and who is restored only when Mandela is finally liberated. The liberation of Mandela also signals the liberation from a condition of physical and mental exile, not only for his character Dumisa, but also finally for exiled writers such as Nkosi. The acute memories of home kept alive through cherished sounds, smells and sights contributed to his ability to survive the years of separation: for example, "the sweet smell of the tall grass" (24), "the mountains black squiggles against a paling sky" (35), "musky goat" smells (24), the "smoky evening air dense with the odour of burning wood," "the pale blue hills, tinged with a fading gold, the trees smell of night incense" (90). This is the landscape on which Nkosi continues to reflect with nostalgia in his closing years, ably reflected in his inclusion in the novel of Keats's nostalgic poem, "Ode to Autumn" (35).

To conclude this chapter, it would thus seem, that for African writers the story of colonisation is a circular narrative which has no finale. Despite the defeat of apartheid and the genuine and ongoing efforts in the new democratic South Africa, it is doubtful that a closure on the complicated issues of exile, home and identity can ever be fully achieved. As Nkosi comments on *Mandela's Ego* in a recent interview: "literature is not only a fictionalised adventure, but is a reflection of a people's realities; it is an existential experience, that we led this kind of life. One way [of writing it] is by connecting to real history, and the real history is people like Mandela being taken away to Robben Island" (Akubuiro 2006:4).

Chapter Five will now turn to Nkosi's plays and his small oeuvre of poetry, both genres which similarly contain many nuances of home, exile and identity, as demonstrated in the previous chapters.

## Chapter 5

### A question of audience

In a century of false testimonies, the writer becomes a witness to man.

(Octavio Paz in Walder 1999:347)

Chapter Five concludes the discussion on Nkosi's literary works in terms of their relevance to the concerns posed by this thesis. It is relevant to the content of this chapter to point out that notably, some of the works discussed in this chapter are now largely out of print and also under-researched, and thus these works have not received the critical attention they deserve. The following available works will form the basis for the discourse in this chapter: *Come Back, Africa* (1959), *The Rhythm of Violence* (1964), "The Trial" (1969), *We Can't all be Martin Luther King* (1971), "Lalela Zulu" (1977), *The Black Psychiatrist* (1994), "Flying Home" (2000), and Nkosi's little known poetic oeuvre.

Although the contents of Nkosi's plays are possibly no longer topical as political testimonies, and may, if read out of their historical context, appear as sensational or stereotypical writing, they remain works which offer valuable insights into the personal and political life of this writer. His writing retains its historical importance as a determined attempt to write black experience into South African literature. Nkosi's writing is often premised on a subtext which demonstrates throughout an abiding interest in the historically boundaried spaces of South Africa. He writes back to South Africa through the filtered lens of exile reconstructing his own history, his writing providing a familiar historical edifice against which he views and measures the continent that bore him. This observation is supported by Nkosi's relentless preoccupation in his writing with a country he once regarded as home; to him the South African landscape is not merely a place of fading memories, but a place from which he is able to confirm his existence and his identity as an African. His entire sense of being as an African is premised on the accessibility to his past and the injustices meted out to the African by the erstwhile South African system of governance. His early writing, although often an expression of the existential *angst* of the exile forced to live between identities, carried within it nonetheless the demand of entitlement to identity. His later writing continued to fill the empty spaces of his absence from his homeland, replacing this absence with his memories of a self-conscious past

and present, and is a reminder of Soyinka's words that: "the African writer must stop being a mere chronicler ... his essential purpose in society is to write with a very definite vision ... he must begin by exposing the future in a clear and truthful exposition of his present"(Wastberg 1968:58).

Although Nkosi's fictional writing is marked by his own personal experiences, his purpose is not only to illuminate the darker areas of a people's social experience or to recount history, but to provide for new ways of thinking and encountering the past. The landscapes of the past are never constructed from passive space which the writer invades through his memories, but rather, space and place are themselves dynamic entities. Writing about his South African homeplace provides Nkosi as exile with the power to heal himself, as he is able to emerge through his writing into a new place where he is able to give form to his thoughts, no longer trapped by his troubled past. Hence his novels and stories encapsulate reflections on the shaping of identity and a place called home, as crossing borders both physically and imaginatively is an intrinsic feature of Nkosi's nomadic identity. His transnational and transcultural exchanges and existence have played a major role in the hybridisation of his identity, much of it forged in the diversity of landscapes he has travelled through. His nomadic experiencing of exile has contributed to a large extent to his ability to create multilayered thresholds in his writing, ultimately resulting in a new synthesis on the delicate and complex issues of place, exile, identity and home. Much of Nkosi's writing is a first-person experience of intense consciousness, and provides a space within which Nkosi, a writer seasoned in restrictive apartheid socio-political practices, may reconstitute his home in letters, a place where he is able to belong. His writing becomes an inspiring space in which he can reconstruct his identity as an exiled writer, free to inhabit an intellectual home, albeit one which is self-consciously eclectic. Hence, in order fully to appreciate his works, it has been necessary carefully to consider the facts about Nkosi's life as a private and public individual, as has been discussed in Chapter Two and elsewhere in this thesis. His writing reveals crucially what it meant to be a black man living in the violent atmosphere of apartheid during the 1950s, where his identity was constantly expressed in the negative terms of the colonial dictum, that of a *non-white*, a *non-European* and finally erased from society altogether as a *non-being*, the erasure made permanent by being forced to surrender to the conditions of the exit permit.

It is hence not difficult to comprehend the reason for Nkosi's choice of focus in his writing, as virtually all of his fiction concerns itself with the fractious South African landscape, as mentioned before. Nkosi's peer Breyten Breytenbach, on being awarded the CNA literary Award in 1970, refused for personal reasons to return to his country of birth to receive this award, as he felt that this would compromise his stance on "laws which are reactionary, inhuman and completely stupid" (Sechaba 1971:21). Mphahlele, too, illustrates these "completely stupid" laws by recalling that

towards the end of the 60s, students were hauled before courts to defend charges against them for using their poetry to cause violence. "It was the first time in South African history that imaginative literature stood trial in a court of law" (Mphahlele 1992:55). Moreover, censorship provisions made it an offence to write or publish any material by banned persons:

Under most banning orders imposed in South Africa today - and there are hundreds and hundreds of them - to have even a page of manuscript or a sheet of paper in a typewriter can constitute a criminal offence, punishable by a minimum of one year and up to ten years imprisonment - or even the death penalty if the subject can be construed as an encouragement to "sabotage" or "terrorism". (*Sechaba* 1971:21)

Apartheid ideology was responsible for much of the destruction and loss of the creative spirit and literary wealth of almost an entire generation of black writers through its banning and gagging policies as shown in Chapter Two. South African writers such as Nkosi and Breytenbach were forced into the hostile spaces of exile because of their perceived opposition to the apartheid regime. This entrenched lack of tolerance and its preferred divisive ideology of segregation left in its wake countless stunted lives, stifled aspirations, dysfunctional relationships and individuals who were outlawed in their own society. When considering the above, it is little wonder then that Nkosi experienced exile much like a rescued shipwrecked castaway, on the one hand finally free from the frustrations and deprivations of life under apartheid, but also cast adrift and alienated from any supportive social circle. Hence his turning to writing, and within this outlet it was the genre of plays that early captured his imagination.

Nkosi wrote numerous articles on African theatre, a genre he recognised not only as an art form that would survive the test of time, but also as a valuable platform of expression from which to assert his cultural determination and to develop his artistic identity as a writer. As early as 1958 in a journal article Nkosi questioned the state of South African theatre and accused it of lacking "remarkably in vision, enterprise and honesty", posing the question "just whom does it portray and whose expression is it?" (Nkosi 1958:11). He found that theatre comprised mostly of imports from abroad and was of the opinion that "the only time my generation sees what even approximates its image is when it sees the American movie". He concluded that "the emergence of a theatre which will have something important to say will depend on how far South African playwrights are prepared to stretch their honesty" (11).

The content and focus of his plays show that Nkosi devoted his craft to correct the perceptions of a theatre steeped in a false sense of tradition. He attempted to address this lack of authenticity by

writing plays which sought to involve the whole community instead of trying to appease the establishment, as will become evident from a reading of his first play to follow. Nkosi as playwright is the quintessential "image maker of confrontation, the individual artist who has sought not only to submerge his identity into the collective polity, but to collapse the text into the social arena" (Chapman 1992:524). The purpose for the primacy of South African history in the dramas of Nkosi is twofold - to produce a literature which is a memory of itself and so preserve a collective memory for those he left behind in South Africa, and secondly, to forge his identity separate from his erstwhile oppression by re-interpreting his primal identity as a black man under apartheid. By externalising his experiences through drama, Nkosi provides for himself a perspective on life as an exile; by constructing a landscape of his life through his memories he constructs a home for himself in language and writing. Not only does writing become his 'home' but he also empowers himself to affirm his identity through language. His writing is a form of social osmosis enabling Nkosi to become part of the cosmopolitan milieu, not quite the outsider, but not an integral part of it either. It is evident from his writing that Nkosi remains ever conscious of the inescapable baggage of the ambiguities of his Euro-Africanness, as the landscapes and memories of South Africa assume a dominant position in his writing.

### **Come Back, Africa (1959)<sup>17</sup>**

*Come Back, Africa* is an historically specific visual discourse. This work, regarded as a controversial film in the 60s, was never banned as such in South Africa because it was never submitted to the Censorship Board and hence not released in this country. Nkosi's participation in this film script was not only a quest to expose apartheid but also to expose the African's being-in-the-world under brutalising apartheid dictates. This groundbreaking anti-racist film forms the common reference point between the political and the personal for Nkosi. *Come Back, Africa*, a film striking in its intent and its film making techniques, was written by black South Africans and directed by New Yorker Lionel Rogosin in 1959. It had as its aim to provide a voice for those rendered invisible by apartheid. It sought to rewrite the silenced and distorted history of the dispossessed in apartheid South Africa in an honest and powerful way.

Nkosi and his co-producers provided a visual history of Sophiatown and its forbearance in the face of decades of abject poverty and denial of basic rights. As the script of this film was written before Nkosi was exiled, the relevance to the thesis will be in terms of place and identity only.

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<sup>17</sup> This film was also titled "An African Story" in Europe.

*Come Back, Africa* is a tribute to left-wing documentary film maker Lionel Rogosin's artistic cinematographic capturing of the realities of marginal existence in the apartheid-constructed boundaried spaces of Sophiatown and Johannesburg. His dynamic descriptions of Sophiatown and its people serve also to reflect the lives of writers such as Nkosi and his contemporaries. Through its visual dimension it explores issues of identity and otherness, uncertainty and discontinuity, depicting and exploring the minds of a people primarily through the artful fusion of text and landscape, setting and geographic boundaries. It is a documentary film central to the intellectual landscape that shaped Nkosi's development as a writer and poet, as the same structures evident in this film are also discernable throughout his corpus of writing. The issues of home, place and identity explored in this film are issues which continue to haunt the cultural memories of South Africa to this day. The film depicts the many sites of trauma created by apartheid, and the hand of Nkosi writing to text and image is clearly visible in this film. It is a medium which engages directly with key issues of apartheid and colonialism, and provides a writerly space for Nkosi within which he is able to revise aspects of communal and national belonging and consciousness, the terms of discussion remaining wide-ranging and deep probing.

What sets this film apart from films like "Jim Comes to Jo'burg," is its authenticity, in that Rogosin enabled the actors to participate not as just as actors, but as "creative collaborators on both sides of the camera" in the telling of their own stories (Nkosi 1995:7); "people who are experts on their own life". (Madondo 2005:16-17). This feature film was shot in Sophiatown and Johannesburg, the camera lens capturing original images of the township, often presented as comic apocalypse. The constant flashbacks between the sterility of the concrete city and its barbed wire walls and the dusty unkempt dimension of Sophiatown emphasise a world divided into two halves, that of home and half-home, both being refuge to Nkosi. The filming was constantly disrupted by the prohibitive scrutiny of the Security Police and problematised by the segregationist policies governing entry into townships by whites. Nkosi, together with Bloke Modisane and Lionel Rogosin, wrote the script for the film, its title derived from the "great rallying cry of the dispossessed of the 50s - Mayebuye i Afrika" (Rogosin 2004:10). Rogosin, the film's producer and director "wanted them [Nkosi and Modisane] to give me the story. And so the three of us sat down on a Saturday afternoon and I made notes. It took about six hours. And that was it. That was our story" (Rogosin 2004:53).

The film tells the story of Zachariah, a black man from Zululand who, driven off his land through starvation, arrives in Johannesburg in search of a job. He finds himself faced with many problems because he has no 'dompass', which, under the Influx Control and pass laws, was a serious and punishable offence during apartheid rule. He finds some menial work and goes to live in Sophiatown, where his wife later joins him, only to be senselessly murdered by a gangster. The film

is not only the story of Zachariah, who is finally destroyed by the soullessness of his experiences and existence, but is the articulation of the universal social truth of all people of colour about themselves and their determination to survive unjust laws, politics, relationships and hardships determined by a "grossly misgoverned, misinformed and misdirected country" (Nkosi 1960:13). It is a brutally honest portrayal of a people who are perpetually engaged in a quest to eke out for themselves and their families a life and a future, however fragile, framed against the mandatory passbook. These issues also defined Nkosi's own life, his sense of home and his native landscapes shaped into harsh spaces of distorted realities. *Come Back, Africa* is finally about a people who refuse to be pitied, as this would amount to being patronised. The visual medium often more than the written word is able vividly to articulate the realities of everyday life in a claustrophobic and fragmented landscape of poverty and want, the visual attribute of film more vividly portraying the abusive space which constantly emphasised Nkosi's own sense of nonentity and lack of belonging. Although not a technically great film by today's standards, the real life quality of this black and white film is oddly not colourless, despite the drabness of the landscape. The often discordant and dissonant musical score serves to underscore the lives of the inhabitants of this theatre of both drama and comedy encapsulated within the drabness. Nkosi's hand is clearly evident in the depiction of his beloved 'Jozzi' which he was to write into his fiction so copiously and passionately, and which is visually depicted in this film, with interesting parallels to its contemporary description:

a city made of steel and glass, illuminated from within ... bolted down, recessed and double glazed, framed and sealed ... double-sided and laminated, revolving in the wind on a well-greased axle ... the township written in longhand across the printed page of this white city ... in gaudy heeltaps of enamel, framed against the township made of cardboard and hardboard, buckling in the sunlight, it is handpainted on unprimed plaster, scribbled on the underside of things, unjustified, in alphabets with an African sense of personal space, smudged. (Vladislavic 2006:66)

As in *The Rhythm of Violence* here too is a sense of healing and the ability to transcend the destruction of dreams. A tremendous sense of hope for change in South Africa emanates from this film in spite of the daily hardships experienced, and this sense of hope is evident through the redemptive music of the penny whistle boys and the singing of the black women even in the face of the despair and the violence. The story emerges as a powerful document of social truth, as the film is devoid of any professional actors and the participants are acknowledged simply as the People of Johannesburg, South Africa. Working on this film enabled Nkosi to gain a perspective on his own life and identity, as "people revealed more poignantly their innermost fears, hopes and aspirations ... and an inner experience of which we had not been aware" (Nkosi 1960:13). Rogosin writes of Nkosi at the time that:

he was an excellent reporter who had a lot of courage ... and showed it against every form of racism that he encountered. One time, reporting a court case he refused to sit in the African section, and had an altercation with the judge, and believe me, in South Africa that takes a bit of courage to do. (Rogosin 2004:30)

It was this indomitable spirit that enabled Nkosi to pursue his role as a writer and which would enable him to overcome the bitterness of exile, converting this into a creative energy to emerge as an acclaimed critic and writer.

Nkosi, in a recent interview with Bongani Madondo, quoted here at length for its content pertinent to this discussion, recalls:

Yes, Bloke and I wrote the story for that film as it was being shot. We had never worked on a film before, but we were savvy to the power and influence that films have on viewers. The shooting itself was revolutionary. They used hand-held cameras, often concealing them with blankets or clothing. Rogosin had managed to fool the Afrikaner authorities that he was shooting a film about dancing, prancing Africans that are content with separate development. The sort of codswallop the authorities wanted to hear. That meant...that we were accompanied by police officers who kept the crowds watching the filming at bay. Soon as the cops left, the director got the rawness and politically charged footage. That Lionel! How he convinced mining bosses to let him film thousands of exploited black men in their raw, muscled, sweaty existence still beats me, 50 years later ... Look, the film has its shortcomings. But the remarkable thing about it is the mixture of styles. You can choose to see it as a documentary, although it wasn't a documentary as such. It was a feature film. This was an invented experience. An invented story. Realism fictionalised to convey realities with immediacy. (Madondo 2005:16-17)

### **The Rhythm of Violence (1964)**

Liberated from censorship, Nkosi was able to initiate an understanding of the African dilemma under the colonial overlordship through his writing. In this he succeeds admirably by converting the act of writing into an open forum for robust and independent thinking. Writing from exile, Nkosi in this play addresses the realities of his native soil he was forced to leave behind, hoping to illustrate the particular hardships that is the inevitable result of apartheid ideology.

Newly exiled, Nkosi in *The Rhythm of Violence* (1964) records memories wholly shaped by his



dislocation vividly dissembled against the backdrop of his South African landscapes of division. Through this play he situates himself firmly as a playwright engaging with not only the political realities of his erstwhile society, but more importantly, with the human aspect of his society. Nkosi writes directly to his South African readership, even if he was unable to reach this intended audience by virtue of his exiled status. This play, with its theme of political strife was written shortly after Nkosi left South Africa, and is an example of drama presenting itself as a complex form of both cultural and political expression. *The Rhythm of Violence* with its notable fusion of seduction and sedition is directly inspired by the contemporary events of the time and illustrates the problems of a powerless but intellectually articulate younger generation, revealing through their actions the cultural attitudes, tensions and uncertainties of the 1960s. It contains Nkosi's premise for an urgent need for change: he comments in the preface to a collection of his essays that this play is "a demonstration of the futility of attempts at liberal reconciliation in South Africa" (Nkosi 1983: x).

Committed to his homeland, albeit from a position of exile, this play represents the trauma of the black South African experience in terms of identity and place, and provokes an awareness of the fragile South African political situation, raising questions about the key theme of fragmented identities under apartheid. In this sense it is difficult to separate the text from the playwright. In this play there is the sense of many voices previously silenced, the previously marginalised Other now speaking out and being heard. Nkosi enables his characters to speak for him as they focus their dialogue on a wide range of political issues and debates of the day, which not only centre on the condemnation of apartheid but also place the focus to a large extent on individual choice. This play encourages the audience to explore the multiple layers of conflict which fragment relationships problematised by apartheid, and Nkosi does this ably by providing many opinions expressed through his characters, albeit often stereotyped. Even the policemen, stereotyped as brutal and shallow, are presented as victims, themselves caught up in the web of racism. Not only does *The Rhythm of Violence* provide a window into the dark heart of apartheid through its intense dialogue, clarity of observation and its lack of ambiguities in the writing, but Nkosi, in the illuminating words of Sartre, also "addresses an appeal to two publics simultaneously: to his own (bourgeois) class, it is an incitement to revolt ... to the ruling class (it is) an invitation to lucidity, to critical self-examination, to the giving up of its privileges" (in Walder 1999:351). To Nkosi, the theatre functions as a potentially powerful space for addressing social inequalities and is the most effective medium to reach the masses, as the potential economy of language in a play is more able directly to reach his South African audience.

Shortly after his arrival at Harvard to take up his Nieman scholarship, Nkosi began work on *The Rhythm of Violence*. This piece of writing was in response to the first act of violence against the apartheid regime by the ANC, the bomb attack at the Johannesburg Railway station in 1961, which

heralded "the change in rhythm" (Nkosi 1964:51) to the non-violent policy of the ANC, as mentioned in Chapter Two. Shortly after its completion, Nkosi entered this play in a competition held at the Brattle Theatre at Harvard, but it was turned down. Banned outright in South Africa, *The Rhythm of Violence* was the first play to be written in English by a black South African since 1936. This three act play was later produced in London in 1961 and in 1965 in Nigeria, the proceeds donated to the ANC movement abroad.

Nkosi's first play represents the broadest engagement with the apartheid milieu. This play may be viewed in a sense as an attempt to protect his cultural identity and give voice to this awareness of himself as an African, albeit scarred by injustices and exiled from this birthright. His theatre is an exploration of an individual consciousness and his relationship with Africa, a landscape to which he is drawn to but to which he can never belong again. His first attempt at theatre is hence in itself a direct response to his own African history and is a bold statement committed to protect this heritage through a literature set against the busy fabric of his erstwhile social memories, and linked to many political issues. It is also in a sense, a feeble attempt by the playwright at being an activist and a revolutionary. Nkosi, as previously mentioned, even as a journalist writing for *Drum* and *Golden City Post* refused to espouse violence as a means to a solution, and much like his character Tula, "doesn't like violence. Blood makes him sick" (Nkosi 1964:34). Nkosi seeks rather to create an awareness and a condemnation of the apartheid policy and the need for change through language and writing. He remains firm on his conviction that his "commitment to writing is a commitment to craft, to being good writers. If, by being cowards, we prove to be bad writers, then this is just too bad, but let us at least separate the problem of gun-running from the problem of wielding a pen" (Nkosi in Westberg 1968:27). This conviction is evident in this play, as Nkosi never places the oppressors in the foreground - despite the latent suggestion of violence in the title, there is no violence on stage other than that which is suggested through the conversation of the characters and the stage directions. At the conclusion of the play one of the policemen slaps a character, but does so in self defence. By placing the two policemen in a dream-like scene, the implied presence of aggression becomes more pronounced in the all-pervasive apartheid atmosphere, the anguish of the characters emanating from their oppression by an ideology founded on the brutality of colonialism.

Despite Nkosi's personal experiences of an apartheid dispensation, he is able to recognise and acknowledge the redemptive potential of the South African society. A sense of Ubuntu is clearly evident in this play, largely framed and qualified by the actions and words of the characters. There is the implied sense that acceptance and understanding are more desirable than revolutionary violence - when Sarie admires Tula's artwork, she comments that "It's beautiful. It's very gentle. Now I understand a lot of things about you" (Nkosi 1964:41). This play is centrally about relationships,

the focus is on the inevitable destruction and disintegration of liaisons wrought through political pressure. Although Nkosi asserts that the connection between art and life, which forms the basis for all 'protest writing,' has become most obvious in South Africa, where "music and literature cannot, even if they wished, breathe a pure air free from the smell of gunpowder" (Gerard 1986:447), he was never a successful propagandist or revolutionary, and his lack of expertise in this field is obvious from some of the unconvincing interactions and reasons given for the actions and dialogue of some of his characters. Dathorne points out that the artist and the politician often co-exist in a text, and hence issues of love and alienation are all expressed in terms of the political. He does though single out Nkosi as a dramatist who translates "the situation into human terms that reveal the nature of man's inner crisis" thus supporting the contention that even though this play is written from exile, Nkosi is more concerned with the inner life of his characters rather than with obvious apartheid politics. Dathorne also contends that in this play the focus is on "love, the love for ideals, for humans, for a woman. Tula Zulu most strongly reflects this love in all he does ... through his love he is able to rise above their despair and offer a final gesture of hope" (Dathorne 1974:412). This comment supports my earlier remark *à propos* Nkosi manipulating dialogue not so much as to reveal the political, but rather the inner conflicts of the character. Evident from this play is that as a writer, Nkosi centrally relies on his memories and his own inherent assertion of the self to guide him in his writing, a task always predicted against the immediate, often daunting and perpetually changing cosmopolitan presence of his exile.

Contrary to the insistence by various critics such as Orkin and Steadman that this play could be viewed as protest theatre, this thesis does not support this view, as Nkosi was critical of this kind of writing. Much like the poet Pascal Gwala, he subscribed to a theatre which promoted "dignity and self-reliance, and affirm [ed] new positive self-images for blacks and not merely drama of lament and protest" (Solberg 1999:14). Nkosi's play introduces a lively catalogue of racially mixed students who are forced into subsuming the role of revolutionaries in a conscious opposition to apartheid, largely in the face of the constant attack on their collective identity as South Africans by the many anti-black apartheid laws and policies. Similar to the situation of the marginalised characters in the "The Trial" this group of activists representative of students across the spectrum, devises a consciousness-raising stunt to strike back against their oppression, by planting a bomb in the basement of the Johannesburg city hall during a National Party rally. Their intentions are those of students typically "in the vanguard of the fight against injustice, corruption and the status quo" (Nkosi 1964:47). They are non-violent, effectively wanting to create an awareness of "political necessities ... when society gets this flabby, morally and politically, change is a necessity and violence can let in a bit of air" (33). Most of them innocently believe that "there will not be a great deal of damage done" (35). The exaggerated actions and dialogue are typical of young politically aware students passionate about causes, their objectives are centrally aimed at injuring the

Governments' pride: "Maybe a wall or two will blow off and interrupt the Minister's oratory, but that's about all" (35). Unfortunately, due to their inexperience, the bomb does more than the hoped for minimal damage and a number of people die in the explosion, notably a parent of one group member, and the main character who is also the group leader, which concludes the play's circularity of structure. The central focus of this play is thus to provide an understanding for the actions of the various protagonists in an arena of violence.

In his opening scene Nkosi introduces the brutality of the apartheid system - a landscape of social devastation, together with the symbols of control and violence: "a police cap, a machine-gun and a revolver in a waist- strap, all lying on a bench in an empty room" (1); items which underscore the title of the play, and do more than merely allude to the "tenuous quality of insanity and nightmares" (1). Derogatory colonial labels which Nkosi was familiar with, such as "bloody-son-of-a-bitchin'-kaffir," abound in this scene and are constantly brought to the forefront of the audience's consciousness by the characters Jan and Piet, the policemen appointed to protect the citizens and represent law and order, members cynically described as belonging to a "very efficient police force in this country, dedicated to the elimination of young life" (45). The background to this scene and to the play in general is Johannesburg, described here as a "savage jungle of multi-coloured neon lights, fluorescing nervously with a come hither bitchiness of a city at sundown" (1). Johannesburg was a place Nkosi came to know well and described in his essays as "dense and rhythmic, swaggering and wasteful and totally without an inner life" (Nkosi 1983:12). The milieu of this play was in fact home to Nkosi until his exile in 1961 as outlined in Chapter Two.

The first scene of this play outlines Nkosi's sense of place and the volatile political environment inhabited by the people of South Africa in the 60s made evident in the dialogue of the characters peppered with expletives and insults. Nkosi also uses descriptions of the African landscape to support the general mood of the play, particularly evident in the references to the times of day in this play: twilight, night and sunsets. The predictable rhythm of nature is juxtaposed against an arrhythmic and dissonant society, its brooding menace reflected in its "neurotic" jazz rhythms (Nkosi 1964:1), the "hysterical" quality of life (1), the "tenuous" beat of the music (1), a sun setting against the drum beats of the "Death Ceremonies"(1), the imagery contributing to suggest mounting turbulence and fear, the world a place of conspiracies and subterfuge, the outcome of the future resting in the balance.

Despite being away from this destructive milieu at the time of writing, Nkosi never allows himself to forget the colour barriers which defined and continued to define his life even in exile, an issue broadly discussed in Chapter Two. He affords the character Piet the task of debating the issue of

blackness, using this irony to emphasise the fact that the concept of racial definition, the contributory cause of the chasm between white and black in South Africa, was enforced by colonial mores as a negative attribute on the black mind: "To be black! A curse! I tell you, it's a curse! Honest, Jannie, what would you do if you woke up with a black skin? ... sometimes I lie awake at night and try to imagine what it would be like to be born black and I start having nightmares" (15). Nkosi exposes the deceptive masks of apartheid through role reversal to reveal under close scrutiny the split identity of racism and the dangerous consequences of the apartheid policies of the time. Scene One is fraught with images of violence, threats, weapons of war, insults and derogatory statements against the African, but the onslaught takes place in language only. This play may be read as Nkosi's statement against violence framed against the deeply hostile landscapes of apartheid. The play's emphasis rests on Nkosi's belief that meaningful change is not initiated through acts of terror. This message is subtly nuanced by the allusions to various rhythms: the steadfast ticking of the bomb, the jazz rhythms, the rhythm of the youthful lives of a new generation and the cadence of the words of the text. Nkosi's writing fills in the spaces created by the silence enforced on the people by apartheid - he writes always in the hope of change.

Act Two draws extensively on Nkosi's memories of his life in Johannesburg as a journalist with *Drum* and *Golden City Post*, recalling his checkered artistic life as the quintessential man of the sixties, his intimate knowledge of the shebeen culture, the Sophiatown joie de vivre with its frenetic jazz music, the conviviality of township and student banter, the liberal conscience which failed to bear the promised witness, the mixed parties of the Houghton set - issues extensively discussed in Chapter Two. The interaction and dialogue of the characters speak as much for themselves as for Nkosi, enabling him to revisit familiar sites from which he continues to draw on for reference points as an exile writer. In this way he succeeds in minimising the impact of uprootedness and disorientation created by his leaving the country of his birth.

As stated previously, this play is centrally not about the role and influence of apartheid on politics, but is rather about giving shape to Nkosi's own youthful views on theatre, urging that the theatre "should speak for young people in a quest of personal and emotional identity, and all the young people everywhere who are caught in the emotional crossfire which has arisen out of *our* social experience" (Nkosi 1959:11). In this play Nkosi makes direct reference to his fellow journalist and friend Can Themba, using him as his mouthpiece in describing the literary style of the 50s writers. Nkosi draws on his own *Drum* milieu when he describes the vibrant student life in Scene Two. His character Slowfoot (Nkosi 1964:63) quotes the well-known lines in "Crepuscule" by Can Themba:

We drank, joked, conversed, sang and horseplayed ... it was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.  
(Stuart and Holland 1972:155)

Act Three concludes the play with a renewed focus on the inescapable effects of the mindless brutality of the apartheid system on the South African psyche. The two policemen, bowing to the gods of separatism and portrayed as symbols of a system devoid of the spirit of Ubuntu even in the face of impending disaster, are finally denounced as "Brutes! All of you. A whole pack of murderers. All of you. Black and white and yellow. It doesn't make a damn bit of difference! You're all killers. Murderers!" (Nkosi 1964:67). This diatribe serves not as a confrontation, but as an expression of endurance by the exile even in the face of suffering and destruction, a public acknowledgment of pain and loss. In this drama of resistance and suffering there is a discernable link between memory and identity, as Nkosi's writing fulfils his basic human need for recognition, a site where he is able to regain and reclaim his different identities, and like the proverbial phoenix rising from the ashes of apartheid, he is able through his art, to celebrate his dignity and his self esteem as a South African writer.

### **The Trial (1969)**

"The Trial", a story adapted for radio consists of a mere 14 pages and was broadcast in 1969, being one of only two radio stories by Nkosi which was accepted by the BBC for transmission, and read by Cosmo Pieterse, a South African writer similarly exiled. "The BBC Third Programme devoted broadcasting time for stories which were then read by authors over the air" (Lombardozzi correspondence 2006). This story begins by describing in detail the physical appearances of the prosecutor, with his "theatrical gestures" (Nkosi 1969:2) and the three "stolid judges with their misplaced gun-crack humour" (3) who are about to pass sentence on a group of "political gangsters" (8) accused of High Treason - the 123 accused were students caught by police writing slogans on a public building. The drama in the court room unfolds through the arguments between the defence lawyers and the state prosecutors on the one hand, and the thoughts, flashbacks and memories of the central character, whose consciousness is the voice of the people of South Africa. The story ends with no clear resolution in terms of the treason trial, other than with sentiments of hope which Nkosi himself was to uphold throughout his writing.

A reading of this story confirms the contention that it is always to 'place' that Nkosi returns as his

primary focus for his writing - essentially, Nkosi as a serious South African writer, has "no other subject other than that of his own country" (Colleran 1988:3). Banished from his ancestral ground through exile, in this story he calls to mind the memories of home against the claustrophobic and dehumanising effects of apartheid. This piece of writing is symptomatic of the bleakness endemic in the cultural expression of the exile, and this pervading sense of bleakness is relived through the memories of the soulless apartheid laws which governed every facet of black existence. Nkosi describes the court rooms as metaphors of this sterile control mechanism, as "rooms without quality, halls without memory" (Nkosi 1969:9), cement corridors which smelled of "antiseptic and violence" (14) this dismal atmosphere evocative of the external landscape of the "granite-like totalitarian state," (5) whose intrinsic aim was "to defend white civilisation in its last outpost in darkest Africa" (14). It is a story in which Nkosi recalls his encounters with the laws of the apartheid state and re-addresses issues of exile through the musings of his characters. Nkosi admits through his nameless central character that the South African landscape was central to his sense of definition and that his release from the defining boundaries of apartheid and his arrival in exile had not been free from paradox and ambiguity:

walking the streets of London, feeling completely free, the whole future before me. And yet there is the frightful realisation - suddenly I don't know how to take this freedom, what to make of it. ... I perceive now that those very restrictions are what formed me, gave me an identity, my most essential being. In freedom I feel naked. (3)

Exile is an uncomfortable condition; it "can leave one hungry, dissatisfied and unsure what to do with freedom" (4). Unlike his other stories, the central character is introduced as a first person narrator but is never given a name, and thus functions directly as the collective conscience for the Other, representative of all people imprisoned and unjustly treated. The character speaks for Nkosi when he recalls a yearning for a better place:

the African students who were always more vulnerable than ... yearned to be somewhere else, in other great cities of the world: in New York, London, Vienna, Paris, with other people, other accents, other languages. Even today the names of these foreign cities evoke in me a poetry which cannot be known to people who have always lived there, London, Vienna, Paris! They have the enchantment of a dying melody. (10)

Nkosi, locked in a discourse which frames his own life into a story, draws on factual and personal details in this story. For example, Aunt Lizzy's shebeen near Marshall Square, Johannesburg's

notorious police station, is similarly described in his essays. This shebeen was a neutral space where race was not an issue, but where nevertheless "we the African students sensed our proximity to Marshall Square with a wordless agitation which gave an edge of hysteria to our gaiety and excitement" (Nkosi 1969:14). Nkosi's abiding attraction to white women, a theme which weaves its way through most of his fiction, in this story is used to emphasise his abiding disdain for the Immorality Act: "we on our part offered the thrill of danger, the scope for expiation of their guilt, the opportunity to rebel against their parents and a way of expressing this rebellion more completely by breaking the law in a manner most hateful to the country - that is sleeping with black men" (Nkosi 1983:11).

This is a sentiment that appears often in Nkosi's writing and which is discussed fully in Chapter Two. The Jewish girl, Ruth, who occupies a central position in this story (and also in the short stories), was in fact a friend of both Nkosi and Nakasa and stayed with them in the township in defiance of the race laws, as discussed in Chapter Two.

"The Trial" introduces the audience to some of the many oddities of apartheid, here personified by the prosecutor, whose description reveals the underbelly of Apartheid's inherent malice through suggestions of sadistic sensuality: "there is almost a quality of affection in the tone in which he implores the judges to find us guilty and send us to the gallows. At such moments his smile is unbearable intense; his mouth drools as though he were in the presence of the most desirable woman imaginable!" (2). The entire action takes place in a court room, a space of extreme ambivalence, a place of conflict and human drama at its worst. In just such a place Nkosi some years before was made to swear never to return to his native home, effectively stripped of his identity as a South African and banished to an alien environment. Underlying this drama is a real sense of frustration and conflict, these emotions evident in the consciousness of the central character and in his interaction with the other characters: "My anger was volcanic: You listen here, I spluttered ... I don't even know what you are talking about!" (16). Frustration of hopes formed an intrinsic part of the lives of both African men and women living in the 1960s in apartheid South Africa, as they were made ever cognisant of "the racial gulf so huge that the only bridge was the anger and the lust we felt towards each other" (16). The anger of the marginalised, the oppressed and the silenced Other forms the central expression of this story, calling into question the uncompromising attitude of the whites whose demand that the African justify himself on every level, and is expressed thus: "bitterly, hysterically I shouted back: It may come as a surprise to you but I positively enjoy being black" (16). This deep sense of anger is expressed throughout the story through the characters: "she watched men out of rigid eyes. With a mouth always harshly drawn as though she were preparing for a fight - which she often is" (9), the court room representing the arena where conflict was at its most intense.



Nkosi describes the court room as a space of humiliation, where Africans were forced to obey a largely unjust set of rules which favoured the minority. The judges are purposefully caricatured in a futile attempt to undermine their overbearing sense of self-importance and their biased judicial system; these men are described variously as having plump ruddy faces, or lean hungry faces, the chief justice with the front of his trousers undone. Even as far back as in the 18<sup>th</sup> century writer Andrew Geddes Bain similarly used his famous anti-establishmentarian character Kaatje Kekkelbek to mock the colonial administration and ridicule the judges of the Colony: “so the judge thinks he is clever and educated, sitting there with what looks like a mop on his head and his cloak and bib like a preacher - but believe me, we hot’nots are far smarter (Clarke and Tyson 2003:126). Nkosi commented on the anger in this story and in his other works of fiction, that the rage that consumes many of his characters in his fiction “comes out of this apprehension of the black writer’s world as a prison of futility securely enclosed within the walls of oppression that cannot be scaled”(Nkosi 1966f:236). Nkosi’s negative portrayals of the judiciary, as also evident in his other fiction, aim to create a visual impact on the listeners whilst at the same time pointing to the sense of farce brought about by a ridiculous judicial system which: “gave the whole affair an air of surrealistic theatricality but no credibility as a serious pursuit of justice” (Nkosi 1969:3).

Reminiscent of the characters and plot of the earlier play *Rhythm of Violence* the characters are similarly students, here described by the prosecutor as “a dangerous clique of political gangsters joined in a conspiracy to subvert law and order” to which the voice of the reasonable man appends his truth with mocking ridicule “I’m not only a slogan writer, but a conspirator and a clear and present danger to my country” (7). It portrays a system distorted and removed from reality which demands that slogan writing pranksters daubing paint on public buildings stand trial for treason, an offence which carried the death sentence in South Africa. Thus Nkosi ridicules the lengths to which the apartheid mechanism would go to find any excuse to impose their unjust laws on the black man, a skewed system which was capable of generating the most destructive anger, hatred and frustration in the voiceless: “I ... long [ed] to smash my fist into its bland white arrogance” (16). Yet the message of this story does not seek violence as a solution to the system, although, as in Nkosi’s other works, here too is the expressed desire to seek a solution “to the South African war between black and white” (17). He eloquently points out to the listener that even in the face of this oppression there is that mood in this country, a desire to come together. This radio story is in itself a vehicle for the promotion of the spirit of Ubuntu, which has as its core a uniquely African approach to human interaction and existence - *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a human being is a human being through other human beings). Nkosi, much like his nameless character in this story, has remained “possessed with infinite hope and boundless enthusiasm and a brand of humour” (5) to create an opportunity for change, an abiding positive outlook which apartheid failed to destroy. This story supports Nkosi’s later statement that “though we need propaganda that helps us to expose the appalling social

conditions under which our people are forced to live, we also need propaganda that tells of us as we really are - a people of supreme strength and boundless faith"( Nkosi 1966f :236).

Nkosi has perhaps in his own way contributed to promoting this need for change throughout his writing, an activity central to his creative spirit. This centrality is alluded to throughout : "David is too busy writing letters, to both high-placed and lowly individuals ... as well as to private individuals he writes to Cabinet Ministers, to tribal chiefs, to newspaper editors ... all day long David writes his letters, complaining, protesting, avowing, averting" (5). Expressed through his character David Kambule, (and perhaps Nkosi), the act of writing releases "the poetry of his being, his most hidden love ... Protest is David's mightiest weapon, his forte"(5). Thus in the prophetically optimistic words of this writer, the people of South Africa do "hold one thing in common, despite the fact that they have different and differing political affiliations, and that is the belief in the brotherhood of man and a desire to work for his betterment and towards his ultimate freedom" (18), these closing sentiments being the ultimate message of this narrative.

### **We Can't All Be Martin Luther King (1971)**

In April 1971 Nkosi left Irvine USA and returned to London in time for the broadcasting of his BBC radio play, "We Can't All Be Martin Luther King." This play was published in the *Benin Review* in June 1974. Set in London in the 1960s, it has as theme the complexities of racial politics and looks at the possibilities for unifying Africans across the continents, touching on Negritude and the recurrent theme of the marginalisation of the black artist in Britain. The title suggests that the play is loosely based on the lines of a black American 'protest' poem, "Come on Baby, shake that thing, we can't all be Martin Luther King." The subtext of the title however also reflects Nkosi's innate admiration for two veteran activists at the forefront of the civil rights movement in America: Martin Luther King and Julian Bond, both dedicated and aggressive spokesmen for the dispossessed and marginalised people who espoused non-violent anti-segregation ideals, similar to those upheld by Nkosi in his writing. Bond, a formidable writer and currently a professor at the University of Virginia and co-director of Explorations in Black Leadership, wrote the poem "Look at that Girl ( ... shake dat thing)" in the late 50s whilst still a student at Morehouse College, Atlanta. The poem was a direct response to comments made by his white student counterparts, whenever they were with him, who wished that all blacks were like Bond. Martin Luther King, a pastor with the Baptist Church became the leader of the American civil rights movement and was also a dedicated proponent of non-violent protest against the racist system of discrimination based on skin colour. He was assassinated in 1968 because of his unrelenting insistence on racial equality through non-violent means. Nkosi as an exile subscribed to their principles in his writing, as King famously said

"freedom is one thing. You have it all or you are not free" and whilst Nkosi was never an activist in the mould of these men, his establishing a home in writing was an attempt to create a solid foundation from which he could testify for the advancement of a similar social justice which these men promoted.

"We can't all be Martin Luther King" is one of the very few works by Nkosi which focuses on a landscape and a people other than that of South Africa. It is set in London and this may be ascribed to the fact that the plays written specifically for radio represented a whole new space by which he was able to extend his reputation, albeit limited to the homes of listeners across Britain. It may also be significant that writing away from his own known landscapes of home is in a sense responding to the alienating effects of the experience of exile. The characters are stereotypes of the poised and cultured Anthony and Hazel Ferguson in *Underground People* (written later), westernised characters clearly influenced by a bohemian circle of artists and writers similar to those with whom Nkosi came into contact in his extensive journeying across the globe. There are a number of inescapable allusions to Nkosi's own history in the subtext of this play, notably the oblique reference to his predilection for white women as voiced by the patriarchal character David, who, using his success as a medium for revolt and affirmation all at once, rejects black women because "black women don't seem to understand. You are so busy trying to act white and respectable, you don't seem to realise that the white girls you are so busy aping are trying to get off that kick as fast as they can" (Nkosi 1974:25). He similarly comments on exile: "In my unhappy exile far from the sunny lands of my youth, they [white girls] are a source of great comfort to me. They minister to my needs and I am grateful for the little distraction they provide" (23). Underlying these comments by the character are Nkosi's experiences of his exile, a condition which at the time of writing was still fairly recent.

This play tells the story of David Guiana, a successful, smooth-talking, image-conscious, name-dropping black actor whose taste for fame and fortune and well-connected white girls has caused him to neglect his own people in favour of being accepted into the white enclave, to such an extent that he vehemently begins to deny his roots and worse, his identity: "Miss, I've been taken for many things before, but never a coloured immigrant. I have been mistaken for many people ... but never for a coloured immigrant" (Nkosi 1974:27). He guiltily attempts a weak denial when confronted with the accusation that he is reneging on his origins: "Listen, every time I am up in front of those lights I am fighting for Coloured people. Every time I am up there I am fighting for their rights. After all, we can't all be Martin Luther King, you know!" (24). Perhaps this guilt is also shared in some small way by the playwright who, much like his character, claims to be African "while he pretends to be above the indigenous majority culture, while he glories in the imagined superiority of western civilisation and behaves as an extension of it" (Malan 1987:52). Guiana is soon, however,

brought *vis á vis* with the outcome of this continual denial of his identity by the black activist Moses B, who persuades him to use his privileged position amongst the whites and his artistic fame to promote the cause of black grievances. He deliberately plays on Guiana's feelings of guilt, by pointing to his collection of costly but meaningless *objets d'art*, which incidentally also includes his wealthy white girlfriend: "don't let that shining white ass keep you away from your people too long, boy" (Nkosi 1974:34). When Guiana puts his sister's warning to the test, that his skin colour will always be a barrier despite his success, he is finally confronted with the inescapable truth of his identity defined ultimately by the colonial boundaries of race and class: "Poor David. Our civilisation has created a nasty role for you and you've no idea how to escape it" (38). Nkosi also takes a swipe at the hypocrisy practised by many liberals: "Now look here David, don't you start beating me over the head with your colour. I did not take up with you as a sop to help sponge my guilt or your wounds" (41). He emerges from his liaison with whites disillusioned yet more resolute in his understanding of the need to indeed take up the cudgels for black empowerment, and accepts the responsibilities of his task as a revolutionary as suggested earlier by Moses B, and so acquiesces into following in the footsteps of Martin Luther King.

Fanon's comments on the issues of identity and blackness raised by Nkosi in this play are relevant to the actions of the main character: "From the moment that the Negro accepts the separation imposed by the European he has no further respite, and it is understandable that henceforward he will try and elevate himself to the white man's level. To elevate himself in the range of colours to which he attributes a kind of hierarchy" (Fanon 1986:81). In this play Nkosi addresses racism, named variously apartheid and many another names the world over, its aim always the subjugation and disenfranchisement of the black individual. As Fanon cogently points out, in the case of the African "white society has smashed his old world without giving him a new one. It has destroyed the traditional tribal foundations of his existence and blocks the road to the future after having closed the road to the past - apartheid aspires to banish the Negro from participating in modern history as a free and independent force" (185). Herein lies the strength of Nkosi's exile, that he was able, albeit with some difficulty, to rebuild a new world for himself through his writing, constantly recreating known psychological landscapes which assisted him in the maintenance of his identity and culture. Although this play is not set in South Africa, it nevertheless underscores the realisation that memories of home to Nkosi is uppermost. Irrespective of the setting, the content is always linked to South Africa, the determinant for his subject material, his writing uncompromisingly the defining act which converts absence into a positive presence.

## Lalela Zulu (1977)

Nkosi, together with Stanley Glasser, wrote the words for this a cappella work which was commissioned by the Halle Music Society of Manchester for the King's Singers in 1977 and first performed at the New Trades Hall, Manchester, then at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Royal Festival Hall. A BBC album was recorded by EMI at the Whitfield Street Studios, London, and RCA Victor released a CD entitled "The Street Songs" in 1998, performed by the King's Singers and singer Evelyn Glennie. Glasser comments as follows on the popularity of "Lalela Zulu":

Since then [1977] there has not been one year in which this work has been omitted from their [King's Singers] programmes ... the most popular, most appreciated and most performed is "Lalela Zulu" - whether the audience is Russian, Japanese, South African, Brazilian etc. In the darker days of South African politics, one of England's leading music critics, Ernest Bradbury, headlined his review of a King's Singers concert (*Yorkshire Post* 10 August 1978) with "King's Zulu songs worth 100 Protest Marches". Had life allowed Lewis and I to live together in the same town for a long stretch I have no hesitation in claiming that we would have produced further important words/music collaborations reflecting the richly endowed character of the peoples of our mutual homeland South Africa. "Iihubo" and "Mambabo!" I wrote the words for, since at the time Lewis was having to meet journalistic deadlines - and the King's Singers were on our tails so to speak! The other four items, "Lala Mntwana", "Uhambo Ngesitimela", "E-Goli, iswe Lokuhlupheka" and "Umdanso Wasegoli" are all by Lewis. It may be of interest to note that only the King's Singers perform "Lalela Zulu". Over the years I have received many requests for copies of the music and permission to perform. All I have rejected. (Lombardozzi correspondence 2006)

"Lalela Zulu" comprises six short texts written for music, their contents expressed through various moods created by the music. Underlying these texts is a belief in the abiding unity of all things Zulu. The texts are concerned primarily with place, Zulu cultural traditions and a rural way of life, set against the city landscapes of South Africa. Place, as I have already established is a definitive aspect in the writings of Nkosi; as a traveller unfettered by geographic boundaries he is acutely aware of his surroundings and the essence of place. However, it is always to his home in language and writing to which Nkosi returns, a place which functions as his collective memory as well as a place in which he becomes the custodian of culture preservation. The four pieces written by Nkosi are a synthesis of the darkly truthful dynamics of what it means to be a victim of apartheid and an exiled artist abroad. These pieces reflect a memory of the best and the worst of a particular place and time, a lost childhood and boyhood filtered through sophisticated African sensibilities. Predictably, all four pieces are about Johannesburg and Sophiatown, places of sentimentality frozen in time and

memories, places to which Nkosi has always emotively responded by firmly rooting these in his writing.

Stanley Glasser wrote "Ilibubo" (a traditional chant performed by Zulu dancers), in which the ownership of land is of deep concern to the people, as it is the nodal point which draws a nation together and on which they place their values, hopes and aspirations. He also wrote "Mambabo!" (Wow!), which is an exclamation of pleasure uttered by a young man when he sees a pretty girl. The content is a discourse on the sensual nature of women who are likened to sleek loquat fruit. Although Glasser wrote the texts, Nkosi's hand is also clearly evident in these two pieces, which recall the sensual nature of women and issues of land ownership, recurrent themes in his fiction.

Nkosi's "Lala Mntwana" (Sleep, my child) is a lullaby sung wistfully by a mother who watches her husband prepare to leave for the Johannesburg mines by train, "the Iron of the White Man that trims the mountain rocks", a visual memory bleakly and similarly captured in the film *Come Back, Africa*.

"Uhambo Ngesitimela" (A journey by train) is essentially about travelling and place. Here the focus is on Johannesburg, a place variously described by Nkosi in his fiction and essays as both his beloved Jozi and a place of "appalling loneliness, which made it desperately important and frightfully necessary for its citizens to ... live harshly and vividly" (Nkosi 1983:12) as previously quoted. These attributes and the undisguised sense of frenetic living converge in this fast paced musical piece which describes the urge to move the train along as the passengers are late for work. Nkosi explains that Zulus like to urge on moving things like buses or trains and even human beings at work; this in fact is the source of work songs. "Uhambo Ngesitimela" is what Zulus might sing when they are travelling on a train that is late.

"Egoli, izwe Lokuhlupheka" (Egoli, place of suffering) is a lament indirectly pointing to apartheid through the harshness which place can evoke. "Jo'burg, City of Sorrows" is a place devoid of friends and freedom, where there are only toiling masses and orphans, a city of "the blind and the world of policemen". As described in detail in Chapter Two, Nkosi lived in Johannesburg for a brief period of his life and the memories of this South African city and its landscapes are deeply etched into his consciousness even as he writes from a position of exile. Nearly 50 years later, Nkosi describes Johannesburg with much the same ambivalence: "Johannesburg is still a beast - albeit a multiheaded, multicoloured, multicultured one. The city's energy and hope represents luck and charm to some; woe and emotional emaciation to others" (Madondo 2005:17).

Nkosi follows this with a final song "Umdanso Wasegoli," (The Jo'burg Dance) in which he recalls the golden renaissance period of the 50s, the jazz era of Sophiatown and its people revelling in the joys of a night on the town, a veritable "festival of thighs" jiving the night away to the music of the trumpet, drums and the flute, the cruelties and hardships of township and city life temporarily set aside.

These songs may be simple in content and structure, but as in all Nkosi's writing they too reveal a dark subtext of a life dictated to by apartheid and its concomitant suffering. At the time of writing these songs, Nkosi had been exiled from his home country for a number of years, yet issues of home and identity continued to dominate his writing, whether essays, lyrics, fiction, drama or poetry.

### **The Black Psychiatrist (1994)**

For Nkosi the act of writing, as evidenced from his previous plays, is much like excavating a private archaeological site, where he is able to select a particular landscape from his memories and calling it into being. Place has enabled Nkosi to exist between identities, between being a Zulu, a South African, a Londoner, between being the urban, the rural and the cosmopolitan man. Places Nkosi has inhabited have also defined his identity, and much of his writing acts as a sounding board for his life lived in these places, in which he is able to question the validity and meaning of his identity and being. There is a need to render the self on the page, in order to treat the psychological wounds inflicted on this self by apartheid and its totalitarian notions. Exile provided him with a scrapbook of his life as a writer and writing enabled him to mark out a new territory with old memories.

Nkosi's play *The Black Psychiatrist* confronts some of the exile's deep-seated psychological issues and was first staged in the Lusaka Theatre Playhouse in 1983 in Zambia. It later premiered in a number of theatres across Europe and in the USA, and was produced in Johannesburg in September 2005, illustrating the continued resonance this play maintains with its audience on issues of trauma, loss, displacement and identity. When asked about this title in an interview, Nkosi replied that:

one has to use a black psychiatrist - first of all because it ties up with the theme of this guy being the first black psychiatrist - which one wants to emphasise, because it was an unusual thing in London and it immediately raises certain issues when a white woman is visiting a black psychiatrist rather than any psychiatrist - you immediately know something is going to happen there ... it's an easy way of evoking a situation that is going to become important. (Lombardozi 2003:328)

In his play "Flying Home", Nkosi refers to *The Black Psychiatrist* as a dark comedy about black and white relationships. In an interview he also referred to this play as "funny" (Harris 1994 : 25). Although it deals with interracial relationships, it is hardly a comedy and may be read as a psychological journey into the consciousness of a people and their struggle to reconstitute their fragmented identities against the corrosive presence of the apartheid society.

Although *The Black Psychiatrist* is set in London, its overarching theme is the complex issue of miscegenation and the master-slave relationship viewed from a prohibitive South African perspective. The deceptively simple plot of this one-act play revolves around an unexpected meeting between two characters: one exiled and a product of miscegenation; the other a white woman, a half sister, also distanced from her homeland. The woman claims that they had known each other intimately when they both lived on a farm in South Africa. Gloria Gresham is shrewdly manipulative, constantly rationalising her abstractions, Dan Kerry the psychologist is presented as an isolated, distanced and disconnected observer of his tortured consciousness, his memories haunted by the colonial codes that tie him to his coloured history, his shame latent in his racial identity as a 'coloured', a non-white and a non-black person as negatively defined by the Population Registration Act of 1950.

Wicomb observes that:

Miscegenation, the origins of which lie within a discourse of 'race,' concupiscence and degeneracy continues to be bound up with shame, a pervasive shame exploited in apartheid's strategy of the naming of a Coloured race, and recurring in the current attempts by coloureds to establish brownness as a pure category, which is a denial of shame - we do not speak about miscegenation; it is after all the very nature of shame to stifle its own discourse. (in Attridge and Jolly 1998:92)

Kerry, by virtue of his racial hybridity, exists on the edge of his in-between reality and verbalises much of his existential anguish in his interaction with Gloria, but beyond voicing this in words, he remains impotent to act decisively, if at all. Kerry eventually admits that his affair with Gloria had been incestuous as they shared the same father, yet they again defy this taboo by continuing their relationship later on in the play. The subtext of this play of angry eloquence is complex and deals pertinently with issues of identity, place and exile, as will become evident from a close reading of the contents. The action is presented throughout in the form of a dialogue between two characters, the setting a bare, austere and claustrophobic consulting room, the subliminal sense of both exclusion and imprisonment heightened by Nkosi's description of enclosed and stifling spaces. The restrictive and cold external environment mirrors the mind of Dan Kerry, his imprisoned consciousness ranging



over his life as a racially marked subject. Gloria represents the privileged white woman in apartheid where empowerment included entitlement and possession. Nkosi places his characters in an environment which is psychologically fraught with issues and precludes any intrusion, a room described as having no exterior view, the windows out of reach and permanently closed, the door kept shut, all points of exit and entrance closed off, the need for "complete silence" (Nkosi 1994:12) paramount. Nkosi introduces as a foil to this sense of isolation, imprisonment and soullessness, a larger sense of another undefined looming presence created through the dialogue of the two characters. In sharp contrast to their asocial environment, the characters are described as having dazzling good looks, their powerful sexuality continually expressed in the many drawn out sexual allusions and the laborious double *entendres* voiced by Gloria. Nkosi, in his essay "Sex and the Law in South Africa," commented that South Africa was a country "perpetually on heat, but with no immediate prospects in sight" (Nkosi 1983:37). Yet beneath the easy banter, Nkosi addresses the broader issues of identity, including its cultural, personal and social aspects. Kerry's economic and social ascendancy is suggested through the reference to Harley Street, a place synonymous with social prestige amongst the medical fraternity incongruously dissembled by Dan Kerry's historical past: "I don't care if you're black and South African and have been oppressed for as long as anyone can remember" (Nkosi 1994:5).

The role of memory is crucial to this play, as the actions of the characters are continually determined by their recollection and acknowledgments of the past. Nkosi relies on his own personal experiences to provide the backdrop for the play. There are many indirect references to his native home, such as Dr Barlow [Barnard] the South African heart surgeon, the Midlands of Natal, the South African rural landscapes and the political activities of the ANC. The constant reference to the past, albeit somewhat disguised, creates a certain dissonance and sets the tone for the entire play in which Nkosi focuses attention on the dehumanising experiences of a marginalised black man in a segregated society, his theatre reliant on his abrasive memories of an apartheid landscape, a landscape rendered "bare, naked, empty" (2). The dialogue in this play can almost be read as a monologue, as there is a sense that the dialogue of the characters is framed by an authorship other than that of the protagonist. The actors and the writer are inextricably linked into one voice, addressing one another as mirror images, hence also the sense of confinement through the many spatial descriptions: "simple and uncluttered for your immense soul to roam in: enclosed, entwined and locked" (17). The characters speak with one voice, but possess a "double identity and a double inheritance" (Nkosi 2002:58), that is not just black, or coloured or white but also South African. Nkosi, much like his character Kerry, creates the awareness that "beneath the surface people aren't quite what they seem at first glance" (Nkosi 1994:8).

The female character, Gloria Gresham, pointedly referred to as 'woman' throughout in the stage directions, usurps the central position in this play, as her dialogue not only acts as the inner voice of the playwright's consciousness, but the concerns of the African continent and its people are also voiced through Gloria's consciousness:

lately I have developed an extraordinary capacity for unhappiness ... all the same I am not without hope. It's just a phase. I keep telling myself it will soon pass. Meanwhile I ruin quite a lot of things, mainly material possessions of which I am unhappily surrounded, a sign no doubt of an immense spiritual wastage going on within. (9)

It is mostly through her memories and actions that this play is given its impetus; Gloria Gresham berates the psychiatrist / Nkosi figure: "how you've changed! You never used to be so timid, what have they done to you? In South Africa you used to be so bold, prepared to snatch your opportunities wherever they offered themselves ... I could remind you who you are, where you come from, some of the things you've done, things you have forgotten about" (13). The denouement becomes starkly evident in the conclusion of this play: "You can't face up to your responsibilities! You think you can just shrug me off as though I didn't exist, but I do! I'm your memory! I'm what you are trying to forget about South Africa, but you won't forget me! I won't allow you to! You can't forget my suffering! And the others? What about those left behind? Are you going to shrug them off too?" (19).

The character Dan Kerry exists merely as the mirror image of the writer and this soliloquy forces Kerry to confront his inner self, knowing the severe emotional stress memory can unleash: "I wanted to relive the past? There are usually scorpions under rocks" (20). Kerry is made to confront the truth of his life thus far, the anger against racial classification, the laws determining racial relationships and identities, the "strident guilt-ridden laws" (Nkosi 1983:37). Nkosi details in this play the burden of those who carry with them the slurs of miscegenation, of being a nonperson through the admixture of "steel and black mortar and the blood of the Dutch immigrants" (Nkosi 1994:20). Yet Kerry stands accused of having taken a pacifist stance: "why didn't you fight, why didn't you murder them ... why did you let them murder freedom?" (13). This is also reflective of the condition of exile, that "it is not given to most of us to be happy. Merely to cope with our unhappiness" (11). Kerry's inner voice defends his stance, offering the argument that "people forget very easily these days. It is their last-ditch defence against unhappiness. How can I blame you? I myself have forgotten you" (13). Gloria in her role as mentor takes control of the situation and advises Kerry, in a complete reversal of professional roles, that "only through acceptance of one's life and one's history lies the path to health and happiness ... you needn't feel ashamed of your past,

that's what I am here to tell you" (14). However, in her role as the harsh and unforgiving voice of apartheid, Gloria stridently insists on bringing up the past: "I know too much about you ... communist trash ... pretending that you are clean and innocent ... The places you've been. Boy, I could show you files of your activities which would make your hair stand on end" (15) "... your secret underground activities, you belong to several questionable organisations ... the ANC for instance, an organisation dedicated to the violent overthrow of the white government of South Africa" (16) to which Kerry, representing the voice of the dispossessed responds with a feeble show of vehemence, knowing the outcome only too well, his efforts already taken hostage and sabotaged: "you think that you can go around scaring people, innocent citizens ... putting undue pressure on innocent citizens ... menaces and demands ... well you won't get away with it ... whatever happened to law and order around here?" (17)

The voice of the writer has the final say in this play, returning the focus from the political back to the personal, from the violent to the non-aggressive, guiding the play back to familiar territory: "Writers ... that's all they know: how to write or talk about it. They may not know how to do it, but they certainly know how to write or talk about it" (Nkosi 2002:41). There is the sense that this play strives for reconciliation despite the scars of apartheid as Kerry, and thus also Nkosi, exhorts his audience, both black and white, to free themselves from the debilitating shackles of negativity and unhappiness caused by apartheid, and "repossess our thoughts, rescue ourselves from the suffocating imbecility of our present society of social strife, of dog eat dog, of wildly fluctuating stock exchanges, of property sharks, and the whole bunch of fat-assed, tight-assed swindling pimps the 'buy and sell' international brigade. Above all, I [am] for love" (18), thus concluding this play in keeping with his own philosophy, that writing for change rather than advocating change through violence will prove to be the ultimate solution for a country such as South Africa.

### **Flying Home (2002)**

Nkosi wrote his last play "Flying Home" in 2002, an as yet unpublished possible sequel to *The Black Psychiatrist*. The play displays a continuity of similar issues evident in *The Black Psychiatrist*, again raising questions of identity, authority, power and subversion through the metaphorical voices of apartheid and Africa respectively, and always in vociferous contestation. These two plays transcend national boundaries, their contents reaching across countries and continents as they explore well-known issues and themes of identity, ethnicity, race and gender and interrogate the issues of home and colonial power. The focus in this play is less on grand politics and more on relationships; it concerns the commitment to territory and events, and the resultant human reaction and evaluation of these events through the action of the characters. Both plays have as core concerns the psychic scars

of exile and apartheid attitudes. The play is set in one of the busiest and most populated public spaces in the world, London's Heathrow Airport, a nomadic and impermanent space, its only purpose the moving of travellers from and to their destinations as swiftly as possible. This impersonal city landscape forms the centre of gravity in this play, a space which Nkosi perceptively manipulates to frame his portrayal of interracial conflict and relationships. At a subtextual level, this setting is a space reflecting the exile's insecurity, a place filled with soulless linear forms and shapes of surreal figures engaged in transient daily encounters, a space filled with fleeting moments of connectivity and empty spaces evocative of the exiled condition - a space reflecting the subconscious mind dwelling on a particularly repressive experience.

The airport lounge bar at Heathrow International with its broad cosmopolitan subculture and its material environment provides verisimilitude to the moral progress of Nkosi's characters. The South African politics of interracial relationships is imaginatively filtered through this contemporary city landscape, a place with which Nkosi as a perennial traveller is intimately familiar. This locale deepens the theme of isolation and alienation, and provides different readings to the controversial apartheid theme through "the interpretation of different logics and fresh metaphors ... one that puts things back in their place and forces a return to the source, to the origins, implying a redefinition which is also a re-creation" (Starck in Stiebel and Gunner 2005:102). The setting emphasises the distance between the writer in exile and his intended audience, as the cosmopolitan landscape of exile becomes the chosen field of reference. This choice of setting possibly arises from Nkosi's own attraction to the frenetic pace of airports, as Nkosi in his essay "Out there on a Visit" admits that he is:

one of the few individuals who not only love flying but actually find air travel, from the traffic of men and machines to the sordid dazzle of airport bars, lounges and the incessant whining of Muzak, mildly exhilarating. For that reason I always arrive early at an airport in order to savour its rather banal and transient delights with appropriate guilt. (Nkosi 1983:73)

"Flying Home," with its significantly ambiguous title open to numerous interpretations, is set outside the borders of Nkosi's home country, yet imparts an acute sense of place whilst also dealing with a multitude of issues including territories of time and bounded spaces, all irrevocably linked to a particular South African history and tied to an as yet undefined temporal present and future. Not only does this play deal with the confrontation between African and Western sensibilities, but also crystallises Nkosi's experiences in exile and the struggle for a sense of identity and belonging in a post-apartheid South Africa. In most cases these issues "are not built on anything positive but rather on a lack, a void ... and any search for meaning and identity remains trivial if it does not count absence, loss and trauma among its constitutive elements" (Steffen in Stiebel and Gunner 2005:106).

Nkosi also expresses through his characters his views on the thorny dilemma of returning to South Africa. It is an option steeped in ambivalence, which perhaps, as the play aims to show, after having lived through the pain of rejection, is not always desirable as "it seems all so easy doesn't it, forgetting about the past, but when a country like South Africa changes, it may take quite a time for the old birds to shed off the old feathers" (Nkosi 2002:3).

The entire action of this play takes place in the airport lounge in which Dan Kerry and Gloria Gresham, representing the racial metaphors created in *The Black Psychiatrist*, are significantly "marooned together" (52), politically hobbled, and about to return home together on an aircraft aptly named 'Flying Home'. This return predictably becomes a non-event at the conclusion of the play, as returning to one's home after thirty years in exile "is not simply a matter of flying home, unfortunately" (Nkosi 2002:52), the playwright alluding to the effects of long term exile and also to the difficulties of a true reconciliation between black and white in a new democracy. The conflict between the characters becomes symbolic of the larger issues involving the destinies of a people and a nation and is not merely focused on the individual. Kerry's dialogue is fraught with the inanities of politic rhetoric, describing the possibilities of "a new start in which the private and the public in our lives will no longer be at war, when the two spheres will conjoin to create something completely and altogether new and unexpected" (49). Its idealistic content of "false sentiments and hopeless illusions" (50) however fails to appease the exile intuition.

In this play Nkosi reveals his own sentiments on the issue of reconciliation in South Africa, which centres on the smouldering question of ownership of land, a crucial concern of this playwright. He has pointed out in numerous writings that the dominant source of division and conflict in this country will always rest on land issues. As his character points out, "all revolutions are about land" (57), and the lengthy debate on the land issue between Gloria and Kerry exemplifies the views held by black and white South Africans alike regarding this most contentious issue, where people continue to define their identities in terms of land ownership. This need for identification with the soil of one's birth is eloquently expressed by Nkosi as exiled writer, who, like many of his compatriots, had been denied a share in the land of their birth: "but sometimes I wake up and think I'M SOUTH AFRICAN because that is what I am ... I'm going back to inherit the earth ... my place in the sun"(60). Nkosi, through his characters, makes the implicit statement that atonement for the colonial past can only be through the surrender of land, and therefore also of place. However, this hope remains clouded by the apartheid history of the landless, Gloria voicing the fears of the whites while insisting on her claim to her inheritance "before this beautiful man Mandela takes it all away" (60). Kerry countermands her claims to their family farm, pointedly drawing on her fears: "You have stolen the farm"(60), "It doesn't belong to you. It belongs to the people" (61), "... your ancestors stole the land

you're all attached to"(58). Nkosi concludes with the suggestion that the struggle is not yet over because "people like you are not going to change overnight just because a new democratic government is in power. You're going to try and cling onto all the remnants of privilege. Land is only the most crucial test"(61). The play urgently offers a word of caution for the future, concluding with the message that the colonial influence in South Africa will take a very long time to correct itself despite the rallied cries around the new democracy and the newly constituted 'rainbow' nation. This sentiment is clearly seen in Gloria's final actions when she attempts to offer Kerry, in keeping with her colonial past and her socially privileged position, yet again "trash wrapped up in tinselled paper and sprinkled with sweet smelling toilet water" (63). Gloria's unwillingness to change her stance underpins the exile's bleak outlook on the possibility of a true spirit of Ubuntu and future reconciliation becoming a national ideology. This refusal to provide for equal rights in claiming an African identity is evident in Gloria's taunting sarcasm and mocking strip tease to the sounds of the title song with its double *entendre*, 'Mandela I'm coming':

In the new South Africa we whites have to learn to *divest* - to take off every item, bit by bit, of the things we stole-and give them back to the people who own them - the land, the factories, the ports - I mean everything - just take it off! Give it all back to the natives. (64)

This closing scene provides the reason for the characters' failure to board Flight 1994. The scepticism particularly amongst exiles is evident still, that the end of white power has not yet been attained as the racial barriers of apartheid are still in evidence despite the new dispensation, clearly expressed and embodied in the confused and troubled emotions of the characters, marooned on either side of the great divide.

This one act play opens on a deceptively sociable note with Kerry and Gloria amiably sharing their political views over drinks on the eve of their departure to South Africa - Kerry as the returnee from exile in time to celebrate the victory of the death of the "Evil Empire" (6), returning to attend the auspicious inauguration of President Mandela as the first president of a newly democratic South Africa. The iconic stature of Nelson Mandela is a notable feature of Nkosi's writing after 1994, particularly as he was a key figure of the struggle era and a man who realised many of the ideals Nkosi himself had hoped for his country of birth. The audience is kept informed of the situation in South Africa via televised commentary, which acts as a modern day electronic chorus in this play thus contributing to the undertones of a Greek tragedy. This backdrop is offset against the dialogue between the two characters, which enables the audience to form their own conclusions on the political situation of the exile. The dialogue ranges initially from the general to the particular, from politics

to the eulogisation of the Heathrow airport, Gloria expressing the bizarre wish always to have "nostalgic but lovely memories of this airport", a place with "a life all of its own ... its own rhythms, the times of day when it throbs to life and the slow afternoons" (14). It is a space falling outside the restrictions of the larger society and becomes the focal point of the action, providing an unstable physical and moral backdrop for the characters, who are equally unpredictable, and through whom the entire action of this play is filtered. Eagleton's conclusion perhaps explains this instability in his examination of the often paradoxical position a writer assumes when he is writing about the recollections and history of his own country: "the writer's stance is a difficult balance of intimate involvement and dispassionate distance and the resulting work is a mixture of the subtle and the involuted tensions between the remembered and the real, the potential and the actual, integration and dispossession, exile and involvement" (Eagleton 1970:18).

Nkosi selects as setting the transient space of an airport purposefully, its central function the processing of human arrivals and departures to destinies across the world. It is a programmed, synthetic space devoid of human connectivity, impersonal and cold, its transient nature emphasised by Gloria's comments on love when she recalls how a "complete stranger in a pinstripe suit" offered to "bugger [her] on the plushy seat of the first-class lounge" (Nkosi 2002: 14), which places her earlier notions of this place as a nurturing environment in question. Gloria's rigidly maintained superior attitude symbolises the voice of apartheid as her interaction with Kerry is based on a relationship of racial and sexual dominance, polarising the division between the white oppressor and marginalised African. Her power to dominate lies in her manipulation of racial privileges. She is able to subordinate and objectify Kerry, whom she treats as an empty space into which she transfers her own submerged hatred and fears. Her world is devoid of the intimacy and warmth of a home in the country she so covets, it is in truth a place of artificiality, invention, politically and morally corrupt, as nothing in her world has permanence or meaning - it is simply a place where journeys begin and end, with nothing in-between, and in a sense encapsulates the worldview of the exile. Yet this urban space of mobility provides not only a place for the explanatory interchange between the two characters, but also becomes a narrative space for the intersection of gender, race, social positioning and posturing. The characters do not journey as those passing through an airport would, but are immobilised by the space they occupy. The significance of this setting is that the airport is an unpredictable cosmopolitan space which becomes the occasion for a rite of passage for both characters. It is in this place that Kerry is defined by Gloria in terms of skin colour, to emphasise not only his status as a nonperson despite his professional success, but also the nature of South African society in dealing with these loaded terms. This identity as exposed by Gloria is seen in terms of race and ethnicity only, expressing group and not individual ideals, particularly in terms of the macro issue of the land distribution in South Africa. Yet Kerry confesses to his fears as an individual, which perhaps is one of the reasons for their eventual non-return to an historically violent

homespace: Kerry has “a great distaste for violence. I’ve always hated violence, even as a member of the Liberation Movement”(22). Kerry is on his way home also to reclaim his South African identity, a foreseeable problem as he is unable to “strip himself of every pointless disguise and camouflage that mask our authentic inner selves, our own naked being and true identity” (49). The characters are not recognised as individual people, but are presented as stereotypes of colour: “what *native* heritage - ‘you’re a *coloured* aren’t you? - the best and worst of two streams” (25), accentuating Kerry’s status as a non-being, unacceptable to neither black or white. Colleran emphasises this point also as a reason for the many sexual allusions evident in Nkosi’s works, why he needs to write about the intimacies of people’s lives and append these intimacies to the political:

from the bedroom to the beach, no aspect of human existence has been left untouched by government interference ... and for writers this has had a profound effect on their work ... part of the influence can be traced to the fact that whites and non-whites seldom interact in other than rigidly maintained relationships of dominator and dominated. (Colleran 1988:74)

The audience is made to share in the reluctance and ambivalence of many exiles to return to their erstwhile homeland, their absence marked as “years of conflict, self-doubt anxiety lacking in any self definition” (Nkosi 2002:35) creating daunting and unfamiliar landscapes of home. This fear to re-engage with the landscape of home is expressed clearly by these words: “for a returnee you are remarkably restrained, is all I can say. Mandela assumes power after half a century of the most hated racist regime and you sit there cold as a fish” (33). This caution is a trait of the oppressed, whose response has been wholly conditioned by their social and political environment. Both Gloria and Kerry are caught up in the politics of nostalgia which often sentimentalises loss of place and identity; they are depicted as products from their separatist past. Their own tragedies are superimposed on the larger tragedy of apartheid, which has rendered them equally unstable characters with a touch of madness “a person may be forgiven for going round the bend a bit” (25), and immoral to boot, “taking a nigger to bed....and a half brother at that” (43), yet both incongruously aspiring to “remain white and intact and as pure as the day I was born” (28). Their fractured past takes its toll and makes them incapable of a conscience: “I just couldn’t work up enough guilt” (46). Kerry and Gloria inhabit a distorted world, their social order predicated on racism, their identities contextualised through the juxtapositioning of opposites, one “from the centre, one from the margins”(53), and framed against Gloria’s “never-ending rummaging in the sexual undergrowth of human society” (29).

Kerry, despite his training as a psychologist, is deeply affected and demoralised by his past, the origin of his ‘shame’ is having mated with the coloniser. This sense of a diminished identity is compounded by a nagging anger that he was “born the bastard son of a white man and then not



acknowledged" (39), the "ram caught in the thicket by his horns" (40). He is consumed by disgust and anger on his mother's behalf; Nkosi's abiding portrayal of a negative father figure rising yet again to the fore when Kerry demonises his father for the rape of his mother who was a servant in his employ at the time, whilst fully cognisant of his own act of incest and his role in the statutory rape of his sister. Gloria is the double-edged voice cajoling in smooth defence of her dissolute past and her white father from her position of power: "as white men go, he's not such a bad man, our father, is he? Morally weak, maybe, but not evil" (37). Nkosi's voice as a writer is heard, his contempt at the postcolonial stance on racial categories of unbelonging audible. There is this ability to explain away moral corruption by apartheid to be "sometimes more art than science" (27) as in these stories "there are always gaps and silences when people display symptoms of their long-hidden traumas" (27). Nkosi subtextually expresses the hope that the differences and diversities which define the identity of all South Africans will negate the illusion of connectedness, creating an ending to this play which refuses closure. Nkosi's play questions the issue of the postcolonial hybrid identity and the spaces of belonging in which identity is produced, particularly in the case of the exiled consciousness and points at the need for a new social dispensation, where his erstwhile erasure through exile can be inverted.

The climax of "Flying Home" is realistic in terms of Nkosi's own situation as exile. By denying his characters the opportunity to board Flight 1994, he reduces them to caricatures, subverting the expectations raised in the title of this play. Nkosi sounds a warning in his play against the possible hypocrisy of the newfound dispensation for the country and for the exile alike, that "the past will haunt you...and you won't be able to divest yourself completely of your old habits and your bad ways" (50), that change in a country is never without problems (50). They both remain behind, neither afforded the opportunity to escape their respective demons, thus in a sense complicating the representation of racial conflict. Piotr Kuhiwcsak offers the following on exile, which is pertinent to the outcome of this play:

First of all, returning does not fit the romantic paradigm in which exile is framed. Return, if possible, is rarely on the agenda, since it requires a confrontation with reality, adjustment to changed circumstances at home and sometimes even to a new language ... Most painful is the discovery that while the idealised homelands got on with their lives, the exiles remained frozen in their outdated youthful postures ... exile returns are often too disappointing and too ambiguous to be celebrated and perhaps this is why there are so few convincing representations of them ... and in no case do they measure up to the pathos and sublimity of departure. (2000:37)

The underlying message of this play, which speaks for both the exiled and the returnee, is that although there is this sense of renewal and the possibilities of homecoming, there is also the innate conviction that the racial divide will retain its abysmal proportions, that a person of mixed blood such as Kerry will never be recognised as a person *because of his colour*. This fear of continued racial discrimination remains entrenched in the subtext, despite the acknowledgement that the men and women of this country have a new self-confidence, that they are part of a new direction of their history and moving forward. This play strongly voices the writer's unwillingness to rise above the years of isolation through apartheid prejudice and exile. Mphahlele examines this urge by writers to maintain their link with their identity and homeland from a position of exile through their writing:

the longer you stay out, the more you resist involvement with territory that is your asylum. Your aesthetic seems forever in a state of suspension, even though the memory of your origins will never really forsake you. You want to go back to those articulars, and so you fluctuate between hope and despair, hear your own voice echo back to yourself and know that there is no specific audience contained in the specific place you are writing about that will hear the voices and respond. (in Malan 1987:57)

HIE Dhlomo, whose primary interest was his African roots and his culture, commented as far back as 1936 on the purpose and function of the African dramatist who: "cannot delve into the Past unless he has grasped the Present ... African art must deal with the present day realities as ... the African dramatist has an important part to play. In the stories of African travail, Birth and Progress, lies an inexhaustible source of African dramatic creations" (in Solberg 1999:5). Nkosi as playwright has indeed lived up to Dhlomo's vision of an artist, and has given shape and voice to his impassioned plea for the creation of an African theatre worthy of South African literature, hopefully in a society where racial separateness will cease to be responsible for hampering the creative aspirations for writers yet to be. Nkosi writes with a particular purpose, his drama functions to create a space where there are no silences, where the "actors don't invent anything, they interpret .... for better or for worse, the script is already written. All you do is fill in the gaps, fill in whatever is missing (Nkosi 2002:22).

### **Lewis Nkosi's Poetry**

Lewis Nkosi is known for his academic essays, dramas, short stories and novels. Although acclaimed as an astute critic and author, he has received minimal, if any, attention as a poet. Nkosi's small oeuvre of poems, often intensely personal, is unknown to his reading public, as the poems have not often been cited in critical discussions. His poetry has hence remained almost entirely unexamined;

there is no critical writing available on his poetry.

The contents of the poems are directly related to the social and historical perceptions of the poet at the time of writing, the aesthetic and cultural concerns deriving from, and drawing on, Nkosi's personal experiences, his exile and his political circumstances during his life under apartheid. His collection of poems, albeit small, is firmly rooted in a particularly strong sense of time and place, presenting a collage of his historical heritage, and hence have imminent discursive significance in terms of the defining issues of this thesis. All but one poem were written from a position of exile, and are often interesting forms of hybrid creations enabling the reader to see South African experience through Nkosi's exiled eyes. Nkosi's poetry differs in many respects from his other works, in that the subject matter is both directly political and also personal. Although the issues raised in the early poems are no longer of topical relevance, his poems will always be a reminder of the liberating power of literature. A close scrutiny of Nkosi's use of language and poetics in these poems will allow the reader to enter Nkosi's world, as these poems as a whole provide an insight into the poet's emotional response to the places and spaces he inhabits. His early poems can productively be read as a poetry of pain and violence, as they are responses to the totalising public landscape of apartheid and form the anchor points which cogently bind together the notion of exile and displacement.

Nkosi began writing poetry at a time when racial intolerance, rigid segregation and political bigotry prohibited access to cultural experiences and denied writers their primary material condition, the freedom of expression. He responded to this disintegrative milieu of imaginative confinement with precocious maturity as is evident in his poetry. Exile was also a milieu which did not always provide support for his literary creativity. Nonetheless, social turmoil provided the bedrock for Nkosi's writing, inspiring his astute and often acerbic social and literary commentary through his poetic imagination, as the poetic and the political are overtly coterminous in these poems. The intention of this discussion is not to unmask, expose or deconstruct Nkosi's poetic discourse, but rather to allow the poems to speak for themselves, as these form the beginning of Nkosi's search for continuity, creating a platform from which he addresses the coalescence of identity, racism and cultural spaces.

When considering Nkosi's poetry, there is much truth in Michael Chapman's observation, that black poetry generally had to:

create an emotional currency which rejected the norms of a literary academy ... value was attached not to skill with words but to the idea, the action, the life: to speak boldly, to shape history, to saturate words with purpose was to carry the poem beyond closed form and by implication, the closed society into the open field, where the call for solidarity invited endorsement. (Chapman 2003:335)

Nadine Gordimer earlier pointed out that "black writers had to look for survival away from the explicit if not to the cryptic then to the implicit, and in their case they have turned instinctively to poetry"( in Shava 1989:71). Nkosi's refusal to remain a victim of his social condition is clearly evident in his early poems, where subtle and complex social protest takes precedence over the aesthetic form. Nkosi began to write poetry at a time when both his emotional and intellectual development and conflicts were already partly shaped by his urban then rural childhood of poverty and loss. John Cage's view, that "there is poetry as soon as we realise that we possess nothing" (in Sullivan 2003:55) is nowhere more relevant than in the life of this writer.

Nkosi's poetry should not be seen in context of what is termed variously as 'township' or 'Soweto' poetry, because these poems were not written for the popular audience. His early poems reflect the many forms of black South African despair, the brutality of injustice, the bitterness of self-awareness and lost opportunities. Poetry enabled Nkosi to reshape many of the detrimental images he developed of his selfhood in an oppressive milieu, as the poems do not only reflect on the negative, but look forward and conclude with a unique sense of hope. The seven poems to be discussed in this section are as follows: "To Herbert Dhlomo" (1955) "Jealousy" (1965), "Spanish Roses (for Theresa)" (1965), "Images of a Nation Yet to Be" (1982), "Refugee Woman" (1983), "What Makes Poetry not Prose" (2003) and "To Astrid for her 59th Birthday: in imitation of an image in Chagall's painting 'Lilies of the Valley 1916'" (2003). Nkosi also wrote "Children of Soweto" a lengthy poem following the massacre of students by police fire in 1976 and published this in an anti-apartheid journal in Amsterdam; as well as a poem about the "Horizonte '79" Festival in Berlin. Unfortunately these two poems are not available and hence not accessible for analysis.

These seven poems may be read as Nkosi's personal landscapes. The contemplative first person 'I', the central voice in these poems, personifies Nkosi's own kinship as a poet with the representative figures in his poetry. These poems were written between 1955 and 2003, and each poem constitutes a voice of Nkosi not often heard in his primary works and literary critiques, revealing a writer very different from that of the often abrasive essayist and cynical academic. Although both an experienced internal and external exile, Nkosi as a writer is not representative of the masses - as a journalist and member of the intellectual elite of the time he enjoyed privileges which were not accessible or extended to all Africans in apartheid South Africa as already discussed. However,

through his poetry Nkosi identifies and names much of what he has experienced with a voice that eschews the shrill demands of the revolutionary, yet speaks with obstinate authority from the bitterness and rage of the truths about a history of alienation and exploitation. As Nkosi was later to remark in his seminal collection of essays "Poetry will have failed if it ignores its main function which is to make us perceive better and experience more. Poetry must enlarge our sensibility and our capacity for sympathy" (Nkosi 1983:116).

His poetic voice is that of a voice locally rooted though birth but globally connected through exile, as Nkosi addresses the marginalised condition of everyman, the poet in dialogue with his people, the distance between exile and home the roughest ordeal. The poems depict a progression in the journey of Nkosi's life, from a vibrantly ambitious young adult raging against the memories of psychological and physical trauma and rejection under an apartheid dispensation, to a mature man who has finally found a meaning to his life despite its often bitter ravages. Each poem forms a catharsis in the mosaic of Nkosi's life, each one a miniature world of words, each world encapsulating a different persona of the poet. His early poems are embodiments of themes which question and speak out against the suffering of those who have been left to "mumble in the dust" (1955) through the political absurdities of the day. The poems are an attempt by Nkosi in some small way to redefine the meaning of the African continent, to construct new self-images, to justify a place in society and provide a meaning for life, essential aspects of an identity denied by apartheid. The poems convey the human predicament of a people locked into a particular time and place, and offer astute reflections on the oppression of the African through a criticism of the South African political ideologies. Nkosi's poems take the reader to the centre of what it means to be black in a world of perpetual disfranchisement through the mores of colonialism, discrimination and apartheid, and where to be black also means to be in constant conflict with oneself and with the society at large. Nkosi in an interview once stated that: "in the moral chaos through which we were living, we longed to find a work about us which would contain a significant amount of our experiences and in which we could find our own attitudes and feelings" (Nkosi 1983:6).

Nkosi's poems were mostly written from the position of an exile abroad and are therefore even more remarkable in terms of their message of hope. It is this undiminished positive outlook in the face of adversities which forms the cohesive core in his poetry, the hope embedded in "the vision of a free Africa" (1955), and given depth by a sense of the wider world. This is evident in the poem "To Herbert Dhlomo," written in 1955 whilst Nkosi was a staff member at *Ilanga lase Natal*:

To Herbert Dhlomo

H.I.E., H.I.E.,

Me and all my brothers dark,  
 Those that mumble in the dust,  
 Without a hope, without a joy,  
 Streaked with tears for ravaged Africa  
 Have, with thy silence, ceased to live.

In vain we seek the lost dream to regain,  
 In vain the vision yet to capture:  
 The Destiny of a thousand  
 million dark folk  
 Who seek, who yearn –  
 Alas! A fruitless toil.

H.I.E., H.I.E.,  
 Speak to us again;  
 Whisper thoughts yet to empower us  
 To live the Dream, to live the Vision  
 Of a free Africa over again. (Nkosi 1955:17)

This elegy was penned by Nkosi in memory of the writer, essayist and poet Herbert Dhlomo (1903-1955), editor of the first black South African newspaper, *Ilanga lase Natal*. As discussed elsewhere in this thesis, this literary icon was clearly a mentor to the youthful Nkosi particularly as much public literary and political energy was centred in the black newspapers of the time. In the words of Nkosi “When I was at high school everybody who knew H.I.E Dhlomo called him simply ‘H.I.E’ He was so iconic!” (Lombardozzi correspondence 2004). This first poem derives its primary material from Nkosi’s own rural boyhood and early adulthood in South Africa, a world which maintains a presence throughout his poetry. The powerful images of an oppressed nation “mumbling in the dust” weeping for a “ravaged Africa” are scorching indictments of the realities of the apartheid regime. This poem voices an urgency to rise above an identity forged in lost dreams, fruitless toil and a joyless existence, and Nkosi’s poetry succeeds in creating a homegrown genre which speaks for the “thousand million dark folk”, thus enabling the redefinition of a new identity, not in terms of hopelessness, but one finally empowered to speak. This poem is initially a downward journey into a dark despair and a sense of inconsolable personal and tragic loss, the desperate poetic voice emerging as a figure of lonely unconnectedness. Dhlomo’s passing leaves behind not only the individual, but an entire nation, floundering. The poem is however not without hope for the future, and concludes with a diction exemplary of a spirit which remains undaunted throughout, stubbornly insisting on the right

to be acknowledged.

Similarly, "Images Of a Nation Yet To Be" (1982) directly confronts the crisis of the black man and a nation emerging from the pain of division, having as theme the political situation in South Africa at the time, and written in commemoration of Amandla's (ANC Cultural Group) visit to Lusaka in 1981.

### Images Of A Nation Yet To Be

*(In commemoration of Amandla's visit to Lusaka, December 1981)*

They came to Lusaka

Amandla came

They came to Lusaka

Power to the People!

They came

They came

They came riding on a wind of fire

They came power muscle dance and song.

They came

The tangled branch of a stately tree

They came

Amandla came with them

Those limbs glowing oil from self-produced sweat

Bushfire of pure flames

Purifying hearts in doubt or ignorant

They came

The wizards of an unstoppable army

They came

Witchdoctors sprinkling spears with songs of freedom

They came

Princely princesses melting hearts with peerless smiles

They came

Costumes Xhosas Zulus and Sothos

Fleshy images

Of a nation yet to be!

But -

Here we are already!  
 Spear is here! The Nation is here!  
 Listening to your songs  
 The enemy cannot sleep  
 The drumbeat swallows the antelope  
 Dumbstruck  
 The enemy dreams of dervishes  
 Leaping awesomely into the gunsmoke air  
 The Enemy dreams of Spear  
 About to sever the jugular  
 The bull in Pretoria has no more gonads  
 He will try in vain to fertilize  
 The People's virgins! (Nkosi 1982: 32)

This poem was published in *Sechaba*, the official organ of the African National Congress in South Africa, and published in Tanzania as this publication was banned in South Africa. The difficulties in South African politics are formally dramatised by the rigid and almost militaristic precision of the linear form of the poem. The tone of this poem conveys the poet's intimacy with place, and resonates with a deep agony and anger at the colonial exploitation of the African landscape. Through the diction, echoing the rhythmic footfall of the advancing warriors and the drumbeats sounding a challenging note of defiance, the poet attempts to reach the very psyche of the African nation in its stance for recognition of identity and selfhood, reaffirming the African presence in the face of hypocrisy.

In a speech given at the 4<sup>th</sup> Steve Biko Annual Lecture held in Cape Town, Ngugi wa Thiong'o stated that Black consciousness is "the right of black people to draw an image of themselves that negates and transcends that drawn by those who would weaken them in their fight for and assertion of their humanity" (2004:571). Nkosi's poetry asserts this very issue of humanity; through his poetry he sculpts with words a different image of the world, he does indeed link images to a particular moment and to a particular vision, images imprisoned by his memory of place and time. In "Images of a nation yet to be," Nkosi rallies the youth of South Africa to take a stance against their bleak future through the powerful images of the African warrior of old. The poem is not subversively extolling black nationalism through uprisings and wars, Nkosi being too bohemian a figure to be a partisan, but through its artistic cacophony of sound and colour, depicts a nation in motion, surging towards a new identity and selfhood. Nkosi's recent reflections on *Dingane* by R. R. R. Dhlomo, serve to underscore his deep cultural attachment to his African history and his African



identity which has survived the attempts of erasure by apartheid's enforced exile:

Let historians tell us that the history of nations is the history of their ruling classes. And of course no one is more 'ruling class' than the kings. Working classes may hate or dislike them but they feel impoverished if they have never had them to hate or dislike. Then they try to find substitutes. Is that why Americans worship film stars and hotel tycoons and, secretly, even Mafia bosses? We had our kings: Shaka for one, but white historians said he was only a blood-thirsty tyrant. Then there was his brother, Dingane, and white historians said he was a murderous monster, not a king really, perhaps only a Mafia boss; but for us he was a great king, even a man of culture who loved music and dance, and after reading Dhlomo's *Dingane* we concluded that he had done what he did because he felt hemmed in by foreign invaders. At school, after reading Dhlomo's biographical novels of the Zulu kings - Shaka, Dingane, Mpande, especially Dingane - I was deeply moved by the plight of the Zulu monarch, and the ultimate defeat of the Zulu armies at Ncome brought tears to our eyes. (Lombardozzi correspondence 2005)

The contents of this poem are a reversal of the emotions and attitudes visible in Nkosi's first attempt at emotive writing, "To Herbert Dhlomo" (1955). In "Images of a Nation yet to be" (1982), the first of his poems written in exile, the memories of the magnificence of the South African landscape and the pride of the Zulu nation dominates his thoughts. There is a sense of nostalgia here, primarily for the rural landscape of his lost youth, memories which the landscape is able to revive but can never restore. Those who "mumble in the dust" are now elevated and transformed into the arresting sight of "a stately tree", those who could only mumble without a voice now ride on a wind of fire, singing songs of freedom. The poem exhibits an exuberance and energy undimmed by exile from his native soil for over twenty years. He observed in an interview, that "black South Africans cannot be anything but South Africans, or at least, Africans, even after years of living abroad" (Booth 1986:401). Ever the artist rather than the activist, Nkosi draws on his childhood impressions and memories of the imagined and the real, the warrior fighter in full confrontation, with "glowing limbs" leaping "awesomely" into the "gun smoked air". The poem is representative of a vision of a disempowered nation now clamouring for recognition. The poet draws on his own cultural background, the African imagery derived from African cultural traditions to promote not so much a call to arms, but to sharpen the sense of outrage and an awareness in terms of cultural definition particularly in the youth, urging them to unite as brothers and pursue the quest for change and so to assert themselves against the tragedy of the enforced radical apartheid policies of the time.

Along with themes of suffering and protest common to the poetry in the 1970s, was the theme of the woman or mother figure as the source of strength and refuge for the emasculated black man under

white rule. "Refugee Woman" (1983) contains elements of both, but defies easy interpretation, as the interaction between text and subtext creates different meanings and functions on more than one level, resonating with the consciousness of division and loss.

### Refugee Woman

Refugee woman!

Woman of no name, no country, no friends

Woman whose name is Misery

Surely a very perishable flower!

Men have seen you everywhere

Each time

A child slackly held in your arms

Men have seen you in Judea

Huddled up in a bed of straw

Waiting to give birth to a child in a manger

Or ready to take flight from King Herod's

mighty soldiers

Once you were seen running from bombs in

Korea / Hiroshima / and Dresden

Once sheltering from tree to tree in Vietnam

but-

Always a baby in your arms!

Always, that mute cry in your mouth

Hungry, thirsty, worn out as a bean string

Camped, bivouacked, cold and lonely, raped

or abandoned

Your eyes shut off from the light of every sky.

Once I saw you in Soweto  
 Angry as a mother-hen is angry  
 Sheltering children wantonly fired on  
 Then I saw you no more refugee but Refuge  
 Of all the world's miserable children.

Oh Refugee Woman!

Mother, Aunt, Sister, Great

Grandmother - Refugee Woman!

Shelter this one more child under your stern

steady arms! (Nkosi 1983:32)

"Refugee Woman" (1983) is a painful evocation of the traumatised human mind and the soul of a people in bondage, but also evokes the toughness of the African woman as perceived by Nkosi. The fleeing exile has no social space in which to live out identity, and racial differences are used as weapons of humiliation. On the surface, this poem is a poignant portrayal of the unspoken difficulties of the exiled, marginalised, dispossessed and disempowered woman entrapped in a patriarchal and discriminatory hegemony. This poem vividly portrays the miserable experiences of all women, irrespective of race or status, existing in a fragmented and dysfunctional society. The poetic voice is that of the poet, who admits that women throughout history have never really been the so-called 'protected' weaker sex. On the contrary, even the mother of Christ has known suffering and marginalisation, as have all those mothers and women in war-torn countries globally. Their plight is acknowledged in a male constructed universe, "men have seen [used] you everywhere" but very little has been done in real terms to assuage their horrors, contained in the vivid analogy "worn out as a bean string" and described as "cold and lonely ... raped and abandoned." However, this poem, in acknowledging the horrors that women continue to face at the hands of men in a world of conflict, also succeeds in elevating the woman from a position of debasement to that of an icon of universal refuge. Like a child in need of the security of maternal love, the persona seeks shelter from the world in the image of woman as refuge, rather than as refugee. There is a shift away from the image of woman as displaced, excluded and ineffective, to that of upliftment. The woman is placed in a position of strength, instead of *seeking* refuge, she *becomes* empowered as the sanctuary and support of men in a time of crises, and so the woman's value and sacrifices universally are acknowledged. Contemporary feminist positions might, however, read this image as a particularly patriarchal construct.

However, a reading other than that of a feminist perspective is also possible, lending the poem a much wider definition. "Refugee Woman" can also be seen in context of a metaphor for a ravaged landscape and its oppressed and denigrated people, and may be seen as the expression of the poet's own sorrow and experiences as an exile, writing from a damaged sense of place. The plea for justice, compassion and freedom discernible in the poetic voice extends beyond the borders of his native land to include the effects of political, social and religious intolerance globally. The scenes of depravation and hardship, isolation and exclusion, where "your eyes shut off from the light of every sky" serves to jolt limp consciences to the harsh realities based on artificial divisions. The persona is the "miserable child," the stunted human personality crying out to his motherland in a time of brutality and death, desperately in need of a refuge, a place in the world to call home. There is a need for reaffirmation and reassurance to be able to escape his inner bewilderment brought about through the deprivation of roots, culture and identity. Yet in the midst of anguish, there is again that thread of stubborn hope for a better future and a new black perspective.

As stated earlier, Nkosi's poetry reveals a man very different from that of the often abrasive essayist and cynical academic. There is another, lighter, side to Nkosi; a man who loves women. Whilst his writing has shown that Nkosi succeeds at times at being an "appallingly sexist" (Booth 1986:401) in many ways, I cannot agree entirely with critics such as James Booth when he accuses Nkosi of being exclusively masculinist, particularly in his description of women. Booth places Nkosi firmly in the position of spectator, who views women as a commodity and nothing more. However, there is more depth to Nkosi as writer than being relegated to the ranks of a male chauvinist, this view supported in a reading of his early poems "Spanish Roses (for Teresa )" (1965) and "Jealousy" (1965).

#### Spanish Roses (for Teresa )

I wear your smell-  
 The awkward memory  
 Of your matadored body  
 And bring my hands to weave a crown  
 Upon your crested head.  
 Your smile has a wounded way  
 Of coming and going.

Unclasp these silent Spanish roses!

To feed a fabulous bull,  
 Pave your body thick  
 With breaking apples.  
 Give one bending breast  
 To this slowly culling.  
 Think of when the noonday sun  
 Shall quietly turn away,  
 And give your towering sunlight  
 To a wavering crowd (*Black Orpheus* 17 June 1965: 21)

### Jealousy

Though I have not touched  
 The bending suppleness  
 With which you shaped her body,  
 Nor smoothed the amazing erectness  
 Of her private fortune;  
 Though I know you governed her well  
 Across the mossy stones;  
 I know tangibly you feel  
 The lack of fleshiness or  
 The swell of breast  
 To rump this evening's lassitude.  
 I know too the verisimilarity—  
 The slender litheness,  
 The nimbleness of her legs!

I too am an African.  
 I have hugged the budding rain  
 As well as you; I have sung and loved  
 Her unlimbering thighs. (Nkosi 1965: 21)

These are personal poems with a lyrical quality written in celebration of women and the body,

revealing a male poetic voice which is both spectator and participant. The poems abound with sensual imagery of all that constitutes woman in the physical and emotional sense in the mind of the persona. "Spanish Roses" and "Jealousy" present two different levels of reading - the subtext is a sensual description of an intensely physical relationship between two lovers. However, on a more subtle level, it functions as an intensely visual description of a landscape shaped by memories of home and native soil. The imagery of the body, and the intense relationship between the two lovers also serve as metaphors for a nostalgic memory of a place called home. South Africa, the place of "towering sunlight", where the noonday sun "shall quietly turn away"; a memory of home where the persona has hugged the "budding rain", and has stepped across the mossy stones; all of which have become "an awkward memory". One has a sense of almost topographical enactment of sympathetic involvement with the subject matter underlying this poem. Through its analogies, it clearly suggests the connection between the exile and his native land which provides the emotional sustenance for the exiled subject. The poet is paradoxically at once estranged and familiar in his environment, becoming simultaneously both the exile from, and the native of, his motherland.

Nkosi's later poems are intensely intimate and reveal a gradual change of mood, progressing from a despairing and angry young man to a man who has established his identity and has found his particular purpose in life. Nkosi's appreciative stance on women is encapsulated in a recent poem dedicated to his partner Astrid Starck. This poem is less about grand politics and more personal, a gentle monologue and a sentimental musing on nothing much, but about a great deal too.

#### To Astrid For Her 59<sup>th</sup> Birthday

*An imitation of an image in Chagall's painting*

*'Lilies of the Valley 1916'*

These flowers tell about you  
 what is most beautiful  
 This tender-hearted blooming  
 of passionate love  
 in secret rooms  
 without windows  
 and white petals  
 with envy  
 so beside themselves  
 they always jostle

for comfortable places  
 on a bright green stem  
 when true happiness  
 is but two pale pink flowers  
 sitting side by side  
 on a smiling sunflower. (Nkosi 2003:140)

This love poem was written in contemplation of a painting of lilies by the surrealist French painter, Marc Chagall, who was noted for his fanciful visual potpourri of scenes from his life, depicted in arbitrary colours of blues, greens, yellows and pinks. The poet imitates these same colours to inscribe his poem with a particular mood, finally claiming his space as that of a contented individual and no longer the Other, one who is neither spectator nor voyeur, but an active participant enjoying the happiness found in the pleasant contemplation of a work of art. However, the poem also alludes to a micro-environment, a comfortably domesticated place where happiness is fostered by a close relationship with another person, this poem functioning as a large antithesis to "Refugee Woman". "To Astrid for her 59<sup>th</sup> Birthday" is ultimately about self reflection, where Nkosi's concern has shifted from his political voice to finding a new balance away from the irredeemably bleak view of everything apartheid stood for. These final poems suggest that the poet has perhaps come to terms with his exiled past, as here the exile has found a niche in the world, a place finally to call home, exile relegated to being purely a state of mind. The poem retrieves memories in a personal relationship of intimate closeness, with no intrusion possible from outside influences, which might negatively influence this harmonious state of being. The relationship is intensely private and precludes any scrutiny or criticism by the external world, and likened to "a room without windows," a "secret place" known only to the participants. The object of his delight is vividly portrayed in surrealistic colours of yellow, pinks and green, becoming itself an original work of art, a personal artifact no longer dependent on external interpretation. The image of the smiling sunflower transcends the original Chagall work of art, firmly rooting life in the realism of the present, rather than the idealism of the past.

Nkosi's most recent poem was written in response to a theme set by the organisers of the 2003 Berlin International Literature Festival: "What makes poetry tick?"

### **What Makes Poetry Not Prose**

Poetry is not like Prose

conventional  
 a thing of grime and slime  
 full of blubber  
 red-eyed, dishevelled  
 a real skivvy  
 hitched to some one-eyed monster  
 named Realism.

Poetry is more severe  
 arch and knowing  
 she takes the measure of each  
 challenge each scruple  
 before plunging in  
 and knows how to swim  
 like a cork, her limbs like knives  
 flashing stroke after stroke  
 and slicing water indifferent  
 to every language  
 barrier.

Poetry is not like Prose  
 degenerate  
 her stays always half undone  
 cotton-loose showing milk-white breasts  
 that are dimpled bruised  
 below the narrow cicatrice  
 surely tell-tale signs  
 of life's thorough beating  
 by a fellow named  
 Realism.

Prose!  
 She is every writer's exploitable wife  
 long-suffering, elbow-deep  
 in life's daily soapsuds



She is sweaty, greedy, omnivorous  
 always on some binge gorging herself  
 on yesterday's life's left-overs  
 biographies memoirs scandal confessions  
 every tart considers saleable!  
 Poetry lives on iron rations  
 her nails are carefully cut  
 her stays tight as cables  
 she gives only glimpses of flesh  
 bound by perfect lingerie  
 mood and voice  
 knotted into verbs grown  
 belligerent  
 at simple nouns  
 that simply coil with pleasure  
 at the mere touch  
 of an adjective.

Poetry is not like Prose  
 Sweaty with struggles  
 of the Everyday named Realism  
 not always naked beneath rolled-up sleeves  
 and racked by lust  
 at every stranger's touch.  
 Herself a hooker  
 Poetry knows her worth  
 She goes to bed sometimes  
 with men and women sharp enough  
 to see the glint in her roving eye. (Nkosi 2003 unpublished)

The poem "What Makes Poetry Not Prose," is a metapoem artfully comparing prose and poetry, a poem *about* poems and poetry, which subtly serves to weaken any argument in favour of prose. The characteristics of poetry and prose are defined in terms of the female and the feminine. The poet draws analogies between poetry and prose, juxtaposed against the perceived wanton and capricious behaviour of women, effectively foregrounding the differences between the two genres. Douglas

Livingstone once said that poetry was his way of "making love to the planet and its heavens," and he too compared poetry to the wiles of the feminine: "Poetry possesses you - body, mind and soul. And she is capricious, even a cruel, a wanton and delightful and very jealous mistress. I try to handle her with respect and humour, but she is a sight bigger than I am" (Livingstone 1992:10). These sentiments are also mirrored in this poem by Nkosi though he had said elsewhere:

needless to say, I don't hold to the idea that poetry, except in a very narrow sense, is superior to prose. But I tried an evocation of how poetry gives the impression by its language play and rigour compared to the democratic all-inclusiveness of prose. (Lombardozi correspondence 2005)

The images and diction cavort and tumble about playfully to illustrate and reinforce the flexibility of thought and construction in poetry, a genre the persona opines, is more demanding than the novel, which relies on the vagaries of the more "exploitable and degenerate" prose. That poetry is more "severe", "indifferent" and tightly constructed according to a formula, is merely an impression created through reading strategies. Poetry, a particular creation with many destinations, is likened to a prostitute who knows her worth and can command any price. However, poetry is also like a woman who can take care of herself, who "knows how to swim like a cork, her limbs like knives flashing stroke after stroke." Poetry, unless read and interpreted, will stagnate - it is all form and content, but will remain meaningless, unless it is allowed to transform into many shapes and convey many different meanings through the various readings it may lend itself to. Poetry, as Nkosi so wonderfully describes in his poem, is a construct within which words can cohabit in a tangle of sensual images, where nouns can "simply coil with pleasure at the touch of an adjective", their meaning and function ultimately depending on the interpretation ascribed to a poem by the reader who is able to "see the glint in her roving eye", a reference to poetry's opportunistic character and allusive nature of meaning. Despite its often didactic voice, a poem can never be wholly objective, because by its very nature it appeals to, and elicits a response from, the emotive domain. Poetry acquires meaning, precisely because of its free form and fragmented nature, and because it is not "hitched to some one-eyed monster named realism." Prose must admit to its essentially interrogative nature, as it can ask uncomfortable questions when and if allowed to slip loose of the burden of memory. Unlike poetry, which enables total escape by engaging with the past to grapple with the present, prose is only able to offer a vague lifeline, at best.

In conclusion, this thesis hopes to have illuminated this largely unfêted writer's achievement as historian, playwright, critic, novelist and poet, and to have brought acute insights to bear on both his impact as a South African writer in exile and his enduring importance as a writer in a key phase of

South African literary history. Nkosi's poems are constructs which contain a wealth of experiences, invite many interpretations and deserve to be read. His poetry is, in a sense, a way of identifying and defining himself, his writing placing him in a particular time and space, assuaging his erasure from his own homeplace, and providing a clearer understanding of his sense of belonging. His emblematic poetry has many different destinations and messages for those who care to look beyond the superficial construct of form and structure. Nkosi's poetry, in the final analysis, is able to sculpt its own particular space and its own particular identity.

## Chapter 6

### Writing home : Conclusion

Who am I? Who are we? ... to explain that, I have told the difficult part at last.

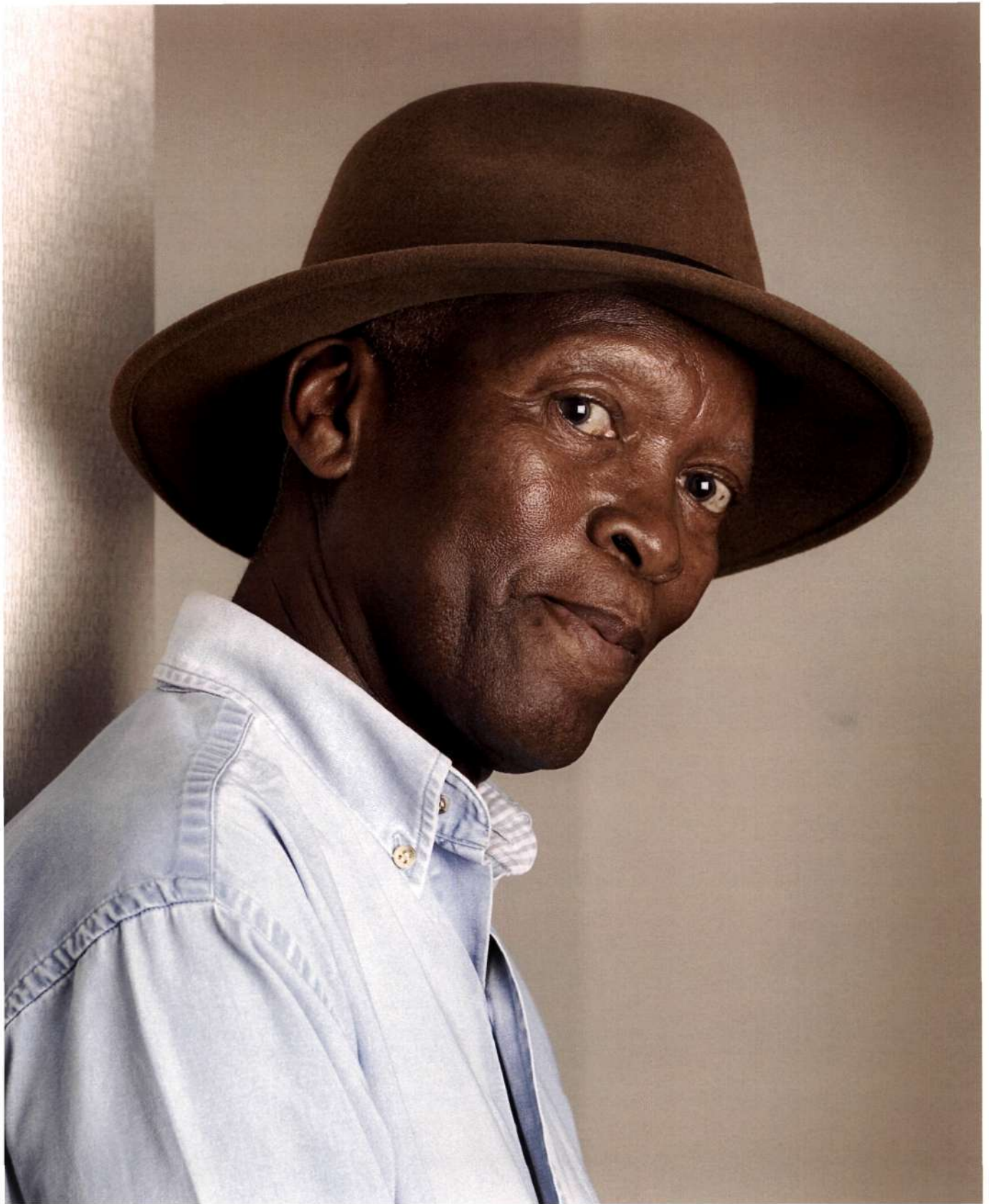
(Rushdie 1981:438)

In recent years there has been significant public and media interest in the life and work of black writers such as Nkosi, who had for the most part remained under-acknowledged in South Africa, being far more renowned for his works abroad as mentioned earlier. A writer and critic for most of his adult life, Nkosi, "has been trapped neither by the geography nor the philosophy of apartheid" (Mackie 2006:15), and his works stand as testimony to the integrity of the individual artist's vision. This thesis has, through its focus on issues of exile, home and identity also brought together much critical thinking by other writers on Nkosi's influence on South African literary culture.

2 February 1990 marked the triumph of civil society in South Africa and was an historically defining moment for the generations of South African exiles scattered across the globe when President FW de Klerk announced that, together with the unbanning of liberation movements such as the Communist Party, the PAC and the African National Congress, Nelson Mandela was to be released from Pollsmoor Prison. Apartheid was finally to be demolished in favour of a democracy for the new 'rainbow' nation. Nkosi was to debate and question at length this transformation of social space in his writings such as the "Republic of Letters after Nelson Mandela" (2002) and his paper presented at the Letters Home Festival in Cambridge, as he had remained keenly aware of his own political situation and that of the black people in South Africa throughout his exile years:

Although I am no visual artist the writer and poet in me responds positively to the representation of South African communities as comprising the colours of the rainbow. At this stage of *our* [my emphasis] nation building this is also undeniably a single instance when a slogan has been coined which obscures rather than illuminates our social and political reality. (Nkosi n.d: "Luster's Lost Quarter": unpublished )

Most South African exiles abroad viewed this auspicious occasion with similar ambivalence as they understood change to mean the re-negotiation of the postcolonial space and the reinventing of a



national identity within this newly reorganized space. Although the demise of apartheid signalled the closing history of the exile moment in South African history, Nkosi and many of his contemporaries elected to remain abroad. Many were wary of their reception at "home" and were cautious as to how they might be received on their return. For some, a return remained inconceivable. Breyten Breytenbach, admitting that he had changed even before he had discarded exile, explains that: "an exile never returns ... the thread is lost. The telling has shaped the story. You made your own history at the cost of not sharing theirs. The eyes, having seen too many different things, now see differently" (Breytenbach 1996:48).

To Nkosi, the new South Africa had become an indeterminate space with an equally obscure future, and the complex issue of exile and its many identities was a process which defied simplistic closure. Once the euphoria had died away, the process of return and the uncertainty of a future life in South Africa became a reality which Nkosi chose not to face, as exile is perhaps finally not about place, but a state of being. The notion of home was closely linked to the deeply scarred identity of the exile, and both constructions exposed anxieties and lesions that would perhaps never heal. Nkosi's own guarded stance blurred the perception that nothing had changed except the direction: "on the surface the new South Africa is like postwar Germany, not a racist to be found. But scratch the surface just a little and the older racist attitudes are still there. What has changed, are the ugly scenes and the ugly signs" (Lombardozzi correspondence 2005). His ambivalence towards the reclaiming of his birthright may be linked to Fanon's observation that although political independence may have been achieved, it is only when cultural, economic and ideological independence is realised that there will be "not only the disappearance of colonialism, but also the disappearance of the colonised man" (in Okere 1996:49).

President Thabo Mbeki's recent statement in his address to the nation on 3 February 2006, 16 years on, that "South Africa has entered its Age of Hope, and we owe these outstanding achievements to the sterling efforts made by our people from all walks of life" has not convinced Nkosi in any way to take up domicile in his place of birth. As exile Nkosi has acknowledged the extent of his changed outlook in his writing - a physical move would prove as daunting as his arrival in the past had proven to be. This inner turmoil is shared by many exiles and Nkosi artistically voices this concern subtextually through the characters in his fiction and drama, this writing often narrated as a parallel to the landscapes and the lives he left behind in South Africa.

For Nkosi, exile has not merely been a description, but an identification, a construction as a result of many divergent issues, however blurred, and his is an identity which will not simply be manipulated at will. As is evident from the timeline which follows, a restlessness marked Nkosi's

life from the beginning of his exile and he continued to move from place to place and from country to country; but wherever he went the politics of apartheid went with him, inscribed on his journeys and remembered in his writing, always making a return to home more difficult and remote. Nkosi expressed his concerns and doubts about the exile identity through his characters in all his later novels and plays, critically aware that dreaming and writing about a romanticised place is not the same as when faced with the stark realities of landlessness, poverty and violence that were still evident in the new South Africa. A typical returning exile's comment is as follows: "I've got friends who just recently went home to check it out and have come out again ... they were in the townships and it was a war zone, an absolute war zone and I couldn't bring young children up there" (Israel 1999:225), and for this reason many exiles with stable jobs and settled families chose not to return.

Jean-Roger Essomba offers another viewpoint in terms of the exiled writer embracing his exile status, which may also explain Nkosi's continued preference for his European milieu:

there is a capital reason for their departure, which not only imposes exile but is also the determinant in the outcome and very orientation of a writer's work, I am referring here to the need for recognition. The weight of prejudice is such that an African writer published by an African based publisher is unable to achieve the renown he/she dreams of, and sometimes deserves. There is very little chance of being read and recognised by a majority of people even in the writer's own country, irrespective of the omnipresent censure. The African writer's recognition by Africans and the rest of the world is still too often solely related to his/her overseas reputation which means that to be recognised in Africa you first of all need to be plebiscited by Paris, London or New York. This approbation will come all the more easily if the writer chooses to live in the West and is/or published by a major Western publishing house ... the dream of all writers is to reach the greatest number of readers to achieve planetary renown. What is deplorable is that we are obliged to seduce others to win the recognition of our own. The latter finds himself a bit of the same situation as the footballer who only gains a place in the national team because he has enchanted the football fans abroad. (Essomba 1966:15)

The proverb "no one is a prophet in his own land" takes on all its resonance when applied to this writer. Nkosi made mention of this in his writing: that although he wrote for Africans, he was conscious of the fact that what he wrote was not primarily destined for an African readership, this particularly applicable to the period when he wrote his short stories, as discussed earlier in the thesis. Though Nkosi was a recognised writer in Africa, few actually read him, the reality underpinning this knowledge was the prohibitive level of illiteracy amongst the intended readership. It was hence imperative that he ignited the Western imagination, lest he became relegated to obscurity, particularly

as he was already erased in his place of birth for political reasons. Perhaps the following by Mbembe may assist in explaining Nkosi's relative obscurity as a writer in South African literature. He believes that writers are often more concerned with stating what African literature should be, rather than describing what it actually is. "The composition of new African identities is inseparable from ways of imagining the world. Indeed the world as a category [of place] is one of the most impoverished concepts of African reflection" (Mbembe 2001:4). He concludes that the confinement of Africa to area studies and the inability of African criticism to think globally in terms of the 'world' may explain why the study of African literature has had such a feeble impact on other disciplines. Hence Nkosi's Western education, the receptivity of the European public and the language shared with this public determined the market for his works. In his article "At the Crossroads Hour"(1998), Nkosi describes the hardships of the South African writer in his quest for recognition as a "drama of becoming," he acknowledges that he "was a lone voice writing about urban black writing and I paid the price, but it had to be done" (Mackie 2006:15):

There are times when the act of writing becomes a burden, a fate, even a retribution for the need to be recognised or honoured; when at first the joy of creation and self-realisation turns into an affliction; when in Africa especially the vocation of writing takes its revenge on those who have tasted the thrill of representing the drama of a vast unwieldy and refractory continent. (Nkosi 1998:13)

Nkosi continues to examine the complexities of the political history of his country through his fiction even after having lived in exile for some years. As Nkosi has said on more than one occasion, but perhaps in different words, that "when you leave your own country to live elsewhere you discover certain things about your own country which you didn't know or have suppressed. Being of the country, but also already outside of the country, you are able to see the country from a distance" (Lombardozi 2003:332).

Nkosi elected to remain abroad also as there was little in a material sense to return to after an absence of more than thirty years from South Africa. He candidly admits that "everybody misses their roots, but I can't see myself thinking ... I'd like to go back to living in a hut in the middle of all this bush" (Lombardozi 2003:327). The South Africa he had left behind and the one that he would return to would not be the same; many of his friends had passed on, many landmarks to which his memories were anchored were no longer in existence. He also was aware of his own changed views and position - he had left as a young journalist, he would return as an academic and critic. He was not sure that he would adapt to the changes and even hardships that the new South Africa would present, nor was he sure that he could offer much to this newly transformed country. As is evident from the



preceding chapters, Nkosi was not prepared to transplant his heart yet again; he was no longer the young and angry journalist with a political dream to realise, and his identification with exile had long dimmed the passion of a return.

Despite his perceived 'otherness' in apartheid South Africa, Nkosi has succeeded in becoming one of the most erudite, uncompromising and accomplished writers and critics of South African literature, and the sobriquet 'iconoclast of South African letters' is more than deserved. The defining spirit of 'home' has eluded Nkosi from an early age and the desire to be heard and resist the marginality imposed on him by exile is evident in his statement: "... if I can't write then I have no subjective life, and if I don't have any subjective life I can't be any good to anybody - it's as simple as that" (Goddard 1992:36). Marginality, however debilitating, is often a source for social differentiation, but in Nkosi's case it in some ways was an asset, as it served as inspiration for his later individualism and productivity. His stubborn desire to actualise his full potential as a critical writer and independent critic indirectly also pioneered a discursive cultural space for the African writer.

As discussed in Chapter One, the experience of home and exile is never uniform, as exiles come from many different political, racial and class backgrounds, having varying skills and commitments. Moreover, to many like Nkosi, their immediate physical environment was no longer an encumbrance, as many exiles became prodigious travellers: "it is my home where ever I am ... that is what exile has meant to me. My world has become the whole world, and everywhere I am a citizen" (Bernstein 1994: xxv). Nkosi recognised that what he had gained did not invalidate the realities of his loss but he had been enriched in ways that would not have been, had he remained within the confines of his own country. He left South Africa with nothing other than the mental baggage of his past, and he still masks the pain of his departure with urbane and cynical humour: "as long as you can show that you have no business assets ... a black boy, I mean, what capital has *he* got to take out of the country" (Lombardozzi 2003:325). But, as Madondo in an amiable summary of Nkosi's life, points out:

That was over 50 years ago. Now, all but three of the original staffers have gone the way of all flesh. Only the bookish Mphahlele, the rather English-mannered Maimane and the bottle-swigging Doc Bikitsha - then a journo on *Drum's* sister tabloid, *Golden City Post*- and Nkosi remain. In their different ways they keep the written word, and by extension the *Drum* myth, intact and galloping. These wordsmiths are occasionally seen at cultural events, mostly tributes thrown by corporations who like to be seen supporting the arts while pumping up their 'buy black, buy heritage' cultural capital. The thing about Nkosi's youthful spirit is that it has almost nothing to do with age but everything with attitude and slant - at 70 he's young enough to move from this coffee shop to that bar, from this exhibition to that literary reading, and still be a sharp observer of the new urban cultural set.

Madondo 2005:16

Through his 'home' in writing and language Nkosi has maintained a strong link with his African roots. He has remained committed to his youthful determination to excel as an African writer and thinker and has constantly sought to restore the dignity of those marginalised by apartheid and procure a proper place for the African writer. Writing from a Western perspective and arguing for an African context, Nkosi is determined that African writing should not become an extension of Eurocentric writing but should reflect the realities of the African history and experience. The words of Koku Amuzu serve to emphasise Nkosi's own lifelong ambition as a critic: "for us as critics, the way out, consists in two activities: to confront the truth and try to discover the creative vision ... and to determine the relevance that creative vision has to the aspirations of Africa"(1993:77).

Nkosi's writing and literary career has played a pivotal role in exposing the many ills of apartheid, often providing new ways to address difference. His literary contribution has resulted in a spatial map of both Africa and the world, yet against this broad canvas, his involvement in writing has been restricted to specific themes. Nkosi is a writer whose strength is his confinement to the themes he knows best and thus he has seldom strayed far from the landscapes of South Africa. The generic term landscape as referent differs from place and space as it is predicted on the geographic world itself, describing the natural contours as perceived both from a distance and subject to the observer's ideologies, emotions and aesthetic perception. Thus the perception of place in Nkosi's writing is often as much a fact of geography as it is an act of the imagination, and remains closely linked to the early formation of Nkosi's identity as a writer, as this thesis has tried to prove. This is evident throughout his fiction which offers powerful constructions of characters who are able to interrogate both change and absence. It is from his homeplace in writing that he interprets and defines his African self in terms of his experiences, his history and his cultural heritage.

Nkosi is currently in his 70th year, and one of the last survivors of the exile generation and the Sophiatown Renaissance. He is a writer who was amongst the first African intellectuals to participate in the historic shift from tradition to modernity, embracing the rigours and complexities of urban Johannesburg and the vibrant *Drum* era. Academically he has outpaced many others who had the advantage of time and opportunity, and the cultural space he historically has occupied to date is complex, his literary history one shared with literary greats such as HIE Dhlomo, BW Vilakazi, E'skia Mphahlele, Mazisi Kunene and others. Nkosi is an important literary figure whose scholarly voice has been heard since the beginning of his journalism career in 1956, a voice which has generated much acclaim and controversy alike, albeit heard from another continent. His academic and literary criticism has brought writers and readers together, as communicating ideas on writing and language has been one of Nkosi most empowering activities - as travellers would collect

souvenirs of their travels, Nkosi collected words and literature, firm in his knowledge that his consciousness resides in his memories of home, and that language is the crucial denominator in all things literary. He has through his writing encouraged mutual exchange and academic debate, bringing together people of different cultures and generations, perspectives and disciplines, an astute and creative writer whose exploration of ideas on African literature through writing and debate has been influential.

It is not a simple matter to assess whether Nkosi has in fact become a major literary critic since he began his literary career in the early 60s. As Masilela points out, irrespective of Nkosi's position in literature, what is fundamentally relevant about this writer is the fact that "as a member of the Sophiatown Renaissance, the last intellectual and literary generation of the New African Movement, Lewis Nkosi is the culminating point of a South African critical tradition within modernity" and "it is this critical heritage that explains the cultural richness of Lewis Nkosi's critical imagination". Masilela furthermore refers to the many parallels existing between the writing of HIE Dhlomo and Nkosi, and the true measure of his intellectual development, according to Masilela "is to be found in the articles, essays and revues which appeared in the Liberal Party newspaper *Contact*, which were clear indications that he was determined to inherit the intellectual mantle of HIE Dhlomo, thereby becoming a brilliant literary critic"(Masilela: online at <http://pzadmin.pitzer.edu/masilele/sophia/nkosiS.htm>:2004).

Nkosi's brief visits to South Africa since 1990 may have alerted him to how close he has remained to the country that has been his overarching source of creative inspiration. To insist that one is an African purely because of a geographical accident of birth is not sufficient, to admire and love the African landscape and its natural beauty is also not in itself a marker of Africanity. But to speak of and include in this love for the African landscape, the African people as is evident in Nkosi's writing, that is the true measure of belonging. Out of the fragmentation of exile, not only has Nkosi built a strong and coherent structure in literature for himself, but he has also preserved an important piece of South African history, particularly through his fiction.

Nkosi has intimated that he would like to write his memoirs after his novel *Mandela's Ego* (2006), and is considering a title loosely based on a spiritual song, "Motherless Child". His orphaned status has left a lasting scar on his psyche, as references to this appear often in his writing and interviews. As an exile he has a need to place his life on record, to indulge in this self-revelatory discourse if only to reinsert himself on the erasure imposed upon him by apartheid, and to *re-inscribe* his name

on the erased spaces that have been the official South African version of his life. Apartheid deprived South Africa of many gifted writers and artists of all races, and certainly in writing his memoirs he will be filling a lacuna in South African literary history. This thesis in some small way is also intended to contribute to filling the critical lacuna about Nkosi's work within the South African literary academy. I conclude this thesis with the thoughts of Ngugi wa Thiong'o on writers who have made their home in writing:

we are all involved in how best to build a true communal home for all Africans.  
Then all the black people, all the African masses can truthfully say: we have come  
home. (Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Loflin 1998:24)

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### Timeline for Lewis Nkosi

- 1936 Born 5 December in Durban South Africa, the only child of Samson and Christine Margaret (Makatini) Nkosi.
- 1944 Orphaned and goes to live with his grandmother Esther Makatini in Hillcrest, then Embo, then Hammarsdale, then Chesterville, then Cato Manor.
- 1945 Attends primary schools in Durban.
- 1947 Attends Loram High School and Chesterville Secondary School, Durban.
- 1952 - 54 Attends the Zulu Lutheran High School, a boarding school run by missionaries in Eshowe, Natal.
- 1954 - 55 Works for a construction company in Durban, a fertilizer company in Durban-South and a paint factory in Umbilo while studying at the same time.
- 1955 Studies at ML Sultan Technical College in Durban for the Matric certificate.
- 1955 Joins as full-time member of staff *Ilanga lase Natal* and pens his first poem "To Herbert Dhlomo".
- 1956 Resigns from *Ilanga lase Natal* and leaves for Johannesburg.
- 1956 - 58 Resident of Sophiatown until 1958.
- 1957 Joins *Drum Magazine* and *Golden City Post*.
- 1958 Assists in the production of Athol Fugard's play *No-Good Friday* at the Brookes Theatre and the Bantu Men's Social Centre, Johannesburg.
- 1959 Co-writes screenplay for *Come Back, Africa* with Lionel Rogosin and Bloke Modisane.
- 1960 Awarded a Nieman Fellowship; banned under the Suppression of Communism Act and granted an exit permit from South Africa; leaves for the UK in December.
- 1961 Arrives January 1961 in New York.
- 1961 Writes play *The Rhythm of Violence* while studying at Harvard University Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 1962 *The Rhythm of Violence* staged in London.
- 1962 "The Alien Corn" (short story).
- 1962 Settles in London.
- 1962 Attends the seminal African Writers of English-Speaking Africa Conference at

Makerere University, Uganda.

- 1962 - 65      Producer of the radio series "Africa Abroad" at the Transcription Centre in London.
- 1962 - 65      Moderator and interviewer for the NET radio series "African Writers Today USA."
- 1962 - 68      Editor of the South African Information Bulletin.
- 1962 - 68      Literary Editor for the *New African* in London.
- 1963            Visits Breyten Breytenbach in Paris.
- 1963            "The Promise" (short story).
- 1963            "The Hotel Room" (short story).
- 1963            Returns to Africa to interview several African writers.
- 1964            Publishes play *The Rhythm of Violence* (Oxford University Press).
- 1964            "Potgieter's Castle" (short story).
- 1965            Publishes *Home and Exile: Critical Essays* (London: Longman).
- 1965            Writes two poems "Jealousy" and "Spanish Roses (for Theresa)."
- 1965            "Come Back Alicia" (short story).
- 1965            In September, attends the Conference on Race and Colour at Copenhagen.
- 1966            In September, visits Paris accompanied by his wife, Bronwyn Ollernshaw.
- 1966            Receives the Dakar World Festival of Negro Arts Prize.
- 1966            "As For Living" (short story).
- 1967            "The Prisoner" (short story).
- 1967            Granted British citizenship.
- 1967            Speaker at the University of Denmark on apartheid issues.
- 1967            Arrested in Cameroon for not having a passport and jailed for a day before permitted to continue to Biafra.
- 1968            "Holiday Song" (short story).
- 1968            "Muzi: A Short Story" (short story).
- 1969            Broadcasting of his radio short story "The Trial" on BBC Radio.
- 1969            Dramatic sketch "The Minister of Heart Transplants" presented at the Lyceum, London as part of the Sharpeville Memorial Concert on 22 March.
- 1970            Embarks on a four-year diploma in English Literature at the University of London.
- 1970            "Virgin Malcolm Look Not So Pale: A Play" (unpublished) produced under the

auspices of the Institute for Contemporary Arts in September.

- 1971 Twin daughters Joy and Louise, born.
- 1971 Appointed Visiting Regents Professor for African Literature at the University of California (Irvine). In April, stops over in New York.
- 1971 "We Can't All Be Martin Luther King" broadcast on BBC Radio.
- 1971 *The Chameleon and the Lizard* (Libretto in Zulu): performed by the London Bach Society, Goldsmith College.
- 1972 Translation of "We Can't All Be Martin Luther King" broadcast on Norwegian National Radio 12 April.
- 1972 Participates in the BBC programme "Second Look" speaks on English literature from a South African perspective.
- 1975 Obtains a Diploma in English Literature from the University of London.
- 1975 Publishes *The Transplanted Heart: Essays on South Africa* (Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation).
- 1976 "Malcolm" (revised title) produced on British TV.
- 1976 Presents a paper at the "Art Contra Apartheid" workshop held at the De Populier Cultural Centre in Amsterdam.
- 1976 *The Chameleon and the Lizard* performed at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London.
- 1976 "The Red Rooster" (unfinished play) broadcast on NOS Holland radio.
- 1977 Awarded MA Degree from the University of Sussex with a thesis on "Daniel Defoe and the Rise of the Middle Class." Begins writing *Underground People*.
- 1977 "Lalela Zulu" (*The Street Songs*), a cycle of Zulu songs for the King's Singers performed at the Royal Festival Hall, London.
- 1979 Participant at the "Horizonte '79" Festival in Berlin.
- 1979 Returns to Africa as senior lecturer at the University of Zambia; resides in Lusaka.
- 1979 "The Hold-Up" (short story).
- 1980 Attends the Frankfurt Book Fair.
- 1981 Publishes *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles in African Literature* (Harlow, Essex: Longman).
- 1982 "Images of a Nation Yet to Be" (poem).
- 1983 "Refugee Woman" (poem).

- 1983 Publishes *Mating Birds* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House).
- 1983 *The Black Psychiatrist* premiers at the Theatre Playhouse, Lusaka.
- 1983 Enlarged collection of critical essays published as *Home and Exile and Other Selections* (London and New York: Longman).
- 1984 - 87 Appointed Associate Professor of Literature at the University of Zambia.
- 1985 - 86 Professor of Literature, University of Zambia.
- 1986 *Mating Birds* published outside Africa (London: Constable and New York: St Martin's Press).
- 1986 Attends the Conference on African Literature at the Commonwealth Institute in London.
- 1987 - 91 Moves to Warsaw and lectures on African Literature at the University of Warsaw, Poland and works on his PhD on Joseph Conrad (registered at the University of Sussex).
- 1987 Receives the MacMillan Silver PEN Award for *Mating Birds*.
- 1987 Attends "Third Conference on South African Literature and Resistance" Bad Boll, Germany.
- 1987 Appointed to the UNICEF Dakar Planning Committee and prepares for a symposium to be held in Harare in 1988 designed to encourage African writers and artists to promote the early inoculation of African children.
- 1988 Honoured in Montpellier France for his contribution to the criticism of African literature.
- 1988 Marries Jadwiga Lukanty and resides in the Targowek District, Warsaw.
- 1988 Presents the keynote address at the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies in German-Speaking Countries.
- 1988 "Under the Shadow of the Guns" (short story).
- 1990 Keynote speaker at the Oxford Conference "Literature in Another South Africa".
- 1990 Participant at the ANC Writers Workshop in Harare, Zimbabwe.
- 1990 Visits Windhoek, Namibia to conduct a Writers' Workshop for young writers.
- 1991 - 99 Tenured professor in the English Department, University of Wyoming, Rocky Mountains, Laramie, USA.
- 1991 "Hour with Literature" - speaker at the University of Wyoming



- 1991 Returns to South Africa in December for the first time since his exile to attend the 'New Nation Writers' Conference held in Johannesburg as featured speaker.
- 1992 Discussant at the Pacific Lutheran University, Seattle.
- 1992 Presenter at the African Studies Association Annual Convention.
- 1993 Speaker at the Bumbershoot Arts Festival: Seattle - round table on "oral narratives in the third and first world communities".
- 1993 Participates as adviser : *In Darkest Africa: Cinema and Apartheid*
- 1993: Institute of World Affairs: featured speaker at the Iowa State University.
- 1993 Ambo publishes *De Vermissing* , the Dutch translation of *Underground People*.
- 1994 *The Black Psychiatrist* (play) published in *Weber Studies* 11(2).
- 1994 Visiting Professor of English Literature at the University of Cape Town.
- 1995 Visiting Professor and Fannie Hurst Writer-in-Residence at Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.
- 1995 Attends the British Festival of Literature 'Under the Veld' as a key speaker.
- 1996 Visiting John Deaver Drinko Professor, Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia.
- 1997 - 98 Visiting Leverhulme Professor at Queen Mary and Westfield College, London.
- 1999 Resigns from his post at the University of Wyoming.
- 2000 Moves to Basel where he continues to write.
- 2000 Presents paper "South African Writing after the Mandela Republic" at the University of Basel and the University of Zürich.
- 2000 Invited speaker at the University of Frankfurt.
- 2000 Invited speaker at Humboldt University, Berlin.
- 2001 Visits South Africa as Visiting Professor where he teaches a course in African Modernism at the University of Cape Town, and attends a conference at the University of Durban-Westville as keynote speaker.
- 2001 Attends readings from *The Black Psychiatrist* and "Flying Home" at the University of Cape Town and the Cape Town Centre for Books, in celebration of the UNESCO Day of the Book.
- 2001 Reading at the Festival of Writers, Basel.

- 2002 Completes "Flying Home" (unpublished play) sequel to *The Black Psychiatrist*.
- 2002 Publishes *Underground People* (Cape Town: Kwela).
- 2002 Visits South Africa as Visiting Professor at the University of Durban-Westville.
- 2002 Granted first South African passport.
- 2002 Panelist at the Basel Festival of Literature.
- 2002 Invited by the Centre Pompidou in Paris to participate in a discussion on South African literature.
- 2003 Visits South Africa: Speaker at the "Time of the Writer Festival" in Durban, University of Natal.
- 2003 Writes poem "What Makes Poetry not Prose" for the Berlin International Literature Festival 16-17 September.
- 2003 Writes poem "To Astrid for her 59<sup>th</sup> Birthday - In imitation of an image in Chagall's painting 'Lilies of the Valley 1916'".
- 2003 Panelist at the Berlin International Festival of Literature.
- 2003 Attends the "Letters Home" Festival in March at Trinity College, Cambridge as guest speaker.
- 2003 Invited to the Writers Conference (Writers Festival) in Uppsala, Helsinki.
- 2003 Invited to read at Berlin's Gasenbohm Literary Salon.
- 2004 Reissue of *Mating Birds* (Cape Town: Kwela).
- 2004 Participates in the "Letters Home" Festival at Cambridge University.
- 2004 Discussant at the Festival of South African Arts, Bern, Switzerland.
- 2004 Attends the Bern Festival screening of *Come Back, Africa*.
- 2004 Speaker at the Nordic Afrika Institute, Uppsala on "Cultural Images In And Of Africa".
- 2004 Signs contract with Rafford Films Company for the filming of *Mating Birds*.
- 2004 Visits Durban and presents a paper "Lost Identities" at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- 2004 Visits South Africa; speaks at Rand Afrikaans University and at Boekehuis; interviewed on South African television.
- 2004 Panelist at the Festival of South African Arts in Bern on "The Development of Arts

and Literature in Post Apartheid South Africa”.

- 2005      Invited to the University of Uppsala - gives a talk on writer JM Coetzee.
- 2005      Travels to Lucerne Switzerland for a reading of *Mating Birds* on invitation from the African Cultural Association.
- 2005      Visits Johannesburg on invitation of STE Publishers and participates in a documentary which retraces the making of *Come Back, Africa* and the hardships encountered in making this film.
- 2005      Attends a screening of *Come Back, Africa* at the Bologna Festival.
- 2005      *NRFtalk* - Invited as guest speaker together with Achille Mbembe at Wits University.
- 2006      Attends the African Languages Association (ALA) Annual Conference in Accra as plenary speaker on panel convened in celebration of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday and literary career.
- 2006      Attends the first Cape Town International Book Fair 17-20 June.
- 2006      In July attends launches of the book *Still Beating the Drum*, a full-length assessment on his works to date in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg.
- 2006      Publishes *Mandela's Ego* (Cape Town: Umuzi).
- 2006      Attends the launches of *Mandela's Ego* (Umuzi) in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban.
- 2006      Attends the *Sunday Times* Literary Awards in Cape Town.
- 2006      Interviewed on 17 September by Victor Dlamini of SAfm Literature on his novel *Mandela's Ego*.
- 2006      Visits Martinique in October on invitation from Centre Martiniquais d'Action Culturelle and attends the French production of *The Black Psychiatrist* by the Compagnie l'Autre Souffle. Gives an interview on Martinique TV on *The Black Psychiatrist* and meets Aimé Césaire on his 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday.
- 2006      Visits Amsterdam to attend the celebration of the Anti-apartheid Movement.
- 2006      Invited by the SA Embassy at Kafigturm, Bern to a reading of *Mandela's Ego*.
- 2006      On 5 December attends his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration organised by Basler Afrika Bibliographien (Namibia Resource Centre & Southern Africa Library) in conjunction with The Bird's Eye Jazz Nightclub.
- 2006      Visits South Africa on 9 December to receive the South African Literary Lifetime

Achievement Award in Bloemfontein.

- 2006      Attends a reception sponsored by the South African Embassy in Bern and signs copies of *Mandela's Ego*.
- 2006      Invited by editor of *Transition* ( journal of African-American Studies, Harvard ) to become a regular contributor on African writers.
- 2007      Begins writing on his memoirs.

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- 1981. *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature*. Harlow, Essex: Longman.
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<sup>18</sup> The exact date of publication is unknown as this short story is not available.

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