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A Walk Down Memory Lane: Racial Injustice in Lewis Nkosi's Mating Birds

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ABSTRACT

Using as a stepping stone *Mating Birds* by the late South African novelist Lewis Nkosi, I take a trip down memory lane to grapple with the issue of justice in apartheid era South Africa. The paper argues that the scales of the judiciary under the system of institutionalized racism was heavily weighted in favour of the white minority who ruled the roost in South Africa from 1948 to the early 1990s. Underpinned by a racist ideology that foregrounded the supposed purity of Afrikanerdom, the steamroller of the judicial system under apartheid denied any rights to South African blacks and coloured alike to the point of forefending love across the colour bar. The lead character in *Mating Birds*, to wit Sibiya, knows only too well the strictures of an unfair administration of justice. Sentenced to death by hanging for allegedly raping a white girl, his dogged impassioned denials fails to pack a punch as the laws of his country make it a crime for a black man to even have designs (no matter how sincere) on a white girl. Tapping into a methodology based on philosophical, sociological, psychoanalytic, psychological perspectives, the paper brings to light the multifaceted cruelty of race-spiked injustice as evidenced by Sidiya's plight.

Keywords: *Mating Birds*, Lewis Nkosi, South African novelist, stepping-stone, Sibiya

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to get to grips with the vexed issue of racial oppression in apartheid era South Africa, using a classic of African novel in English as a stepping-stone. Much as the obituary of institutionalized racism in South Africa was written pretty much thirty years ago, its legacy still hauntingly percolates through every aspect of the society.

More to the point, the gruesome murder of a forty-seven-year-old black man on the street of Minneapolis in America (which sent shockwaves across the globe) serves as a disgusting reminder of the glaring topicality of racial injustice in the modern period. So revisiting the past through an analysis of a signal novel the subject matter of which revolves around racial oppression is something of a contribution to raising awareness about the inhumanity of racism with an eye to effecting change of mind-set. That said, a brief review of the definitional scholarly literature on race will, doubtless, grasp the significance of the matter in hand.

I. Theoretical framework

While it would be a bridge too far to pin down with certainty the origins of racism, this much is for sure: it has wreaked untold havoc throughout history. Indeed, Blacks, Jews cum other people of colour have undergone in an agonizingly harrowing way what Homi Bhabha calls the 'sentence of history' due to a misguided perception of difference. But what is race? What is racism? Arguably, race and racism are two sides of the same coin as they are interconnected. Any explanation of racism would necessarily entail substantiating first and foremost race which, incidentally, is a slippery concept.

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines race as '*one of the main groups that humans can be divided into according to the color of their skin and other physical features*' (6th printing, 2012). This definition underscores the significance of physical traits in people's mental representation of race. The American sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant describe it as '*a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different human bodies*' (55), thereby highlighting the obnoxiously self-serving ends that such physical differences as skin colour are put to. Crucial to Omi and Winant's primer on racial dynamics is their position that 'race' is embedded in sociality, and that its meanings have fluctuated over time (56). Also, they hold that, from a purely racial formation vantage point, any analysis of the origins and working of 'race' which overlooks its two-pronged dimension –namely that it is '*a matter both of social structure and cultural representation*'- would be tantamount to scratching the surface of the problem and, accordingly, failing to capture the real purport of 'race' (56). As regards, Kathie Friedman-Kasaba, she defines 'race' as "*attributing a physical distinctiveness to peoplehood*" (13). Interestingly, Rotem Kowner and Walter Demel see fit to make a distinction between 'race' and 'ethnicity' in an endeavour to keep confusion of terms at bay. They write,

> *The concept of ethnicity differs from the closely related term race in that the latter refers to grouping based mostly upon criteria that in the past have been presumed to biological, while the former encompasses additional cultural factors. Ethnicity in this sense not only denotes culturally acquired characteristics but also embodies inherent cultural interpretation of common descent.* (6)

The phrase 'in the past' in this definition is, to all intents and purposes, suggestive of a shift in definitional paradigm. This hint of a change of perspective respecting the meaning of 'race' is echoed by Indian-born British academic Keenan Malik. In his potent book *The Meaning of race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society*, Malick is at pains to point out that one of the strictures of defining 'race' lies primarily in the fact that it lacks, from a purely scientific standpoint, biological basis. So he looks on 'race' as a social construct. Plainly, the prominence of 'race' in inter-human relationship and its record of havoc

throughout history are mediated by society's acceptance and codification of it: "*The clue to the importance of race in Western thought…lies not in biology but in society. Rather racial theories are an expression of the way that a particular society views humanity, and in particular views the relationship between humanity, nature and society*" (5). Hence Malik's watertight submission that '*In popular language 'race' is usually synonymous with colour*' (2). Key to Keenan's point, however, is the contention that modern interpretation of 'race' is a far cry from what it was in the Enlightenment age, when people sought to put a biological spin on their substantiation of physical differences. From this perspective, nineteenth-century racial theory somewhat moved from a biology-based hue – to wit 'scientific racism – to embrace a cultural colouring (7).

Kowner and Demel are in lockstep with Malik who point to the end of World War II as the ground zero for the cultural construction of racial differences. They contend, building on Robert Young and Kamala Visweswaran's argument, that with the blood-curling toll of Nazism, people felt compelled to jettison the recourse to the term 'race' to designate the 'Other' and, instead, espoused the term 'ethnic group' (6). Nevertheless, Israeli academic Benjamin Isaac challenges the idea that racial hatred originated in modern time (32). Whilst readily acknowledging the hassles of doing potent scientific research on group prejudice in antiquity, he makes a point of attributing it to a dearth or even lack of faithful terminology in Greek and Latin for terms like 'racism', 'prejudice' or 'discrimination.' The occurrence of race-predicated hostility in antiquity, according to Isaac, shone through what he dubs 'proto-racism" (33). The cold comfort resides in his contention that the forms racial attitudes took in antiquity markedly differ from how they manifested themselves in the twentieth and, if I may add, twenty-first centuries: "*Clearly too there was no systematic persecution of any ethnic or presumed racial group by another, let alone the massive excesses to which state-imposed racists doctrine led in the twentieth century*" (33). Even then, he gives credit to the Greeks for providing to this date the most rational analysis of race theory. He extols the Greeks' all-out "*first effort to find a rational and systematic basis for their own sense of superiority and their claim that others are inferior*" (33).

To be sure, race is to racism what imperialism is to colonialism. If anything, the material correlative of racial theory finds expression in racism. Like its twin-concept, racism is a hot political and cultural issue in the modern period. It has spawned quite a lot of insightful scholarly literature. Little wonder that the manifold definitions yielded through dogged scientific research speak volumes about the intricacy and contentiousness of the concept. Benjamin Isaac describes as,

> *an attitude towards individuals and groups of peoples which posit a direct and linear connection between physical and mental qualities. It therefore attributes to those individuals and groups of people collective traits; physical, mental and moral, which are constant and unalterable by human will, because they are caused by hereditary factors or external influences, such as climate or geography.* (34)

The foregoing emphasizes that racism is an ingrained weapon of othering deeply anchored in a warped view of natural differences in terms of physics and intellect. By the same token, Zats and Mann foreground the cultural superciliousness that betrays itself in racism. They submit that racism is a driver of attitudes and practices geared towards assigning intellectual or ontological standing on the basis of race: "*By racism we mean those social practices which (explicitly or implicitly) attribute merits or allocate values to members of racially categorized*

groups, solely because of their race" (3). From the vantage point of racism, ascription of social advantages or privileges or merits is lopsided as it favours one community of human beings to the detriment of another along the lines of racial categorizations. Actually, David T. Wellman in his *The Portraits of Racism* castigates the propensity of contemporary sociology for playing down racism by either flagging up 'structural features such as class' or analysing it through ideological lens whose hallmark lies in its (wilful) ignorance of the organization of advantage that racism encapsulates (5). In a sociology-based approach that takes account of the four modern-day location of racism –to wit, 'institutionally, in history, economics, or culture'-, Wellman views racism as '*a system of exclusion and privilege, and a set of culturally acceptable linguistic or ideological constructions that defend one's location in that system*' (25). So the trope of racism is nothing but an offshoot of a society's warped perception of somatic difference, and, perhaps more significantly, its nefariously stubborn desire to preserve economic and social advantages conferred upon it through misguided racial categorization. That said, I'll attempt a fiction-based analysis of the multifaceted human toll of racism through *Mating Birds*. For, over three decades ago after its publication, the novel enjoys what Bayo Ogunjimi and Abdul-Rahseed Na'Allah term '*universality in art*'[1] as it broaches thorny issues which dog modern societies.

Mating Birds: a synopsis

A novel that makes an excellent read, *Mating Birds* came out in 1987- that is, in the twilight years of institutionalized racism in South Africa. Told from the point of view of the narrator, the story revolves around the life and times of Sibiya in a society where racial determinism stood as a key hallmark of identity. A young African of outstanding promise, Sibiya's dream of becoming -"*the first truly great South African writer my country has ever produced*" (4) - was quite unexpectedly dashed when he was charged with raping a white girl, and sentenced to death by hanging. Going forward, Sibiya goes through a nail-biting wait for his execution in prison where he - "*sit* [s] *for hours under a dim light reading, writing, and reflecting on the human condition*" (36). . Although he adamantly denies infringing the singeing apartheid laws by wandering on a beach earmarked for 'Whites Only', the juggernaut of the judicial machinery isn't having any of it. In what is seemingly a trial of sorts, the judicial system in apartheid era South Africa, with its blinding racial hue, displayed the full reach of its anti-black bias. Hence Sibiya's construction of the trial as 'a game' in which he is "*the eternal goat being prepared for a sacrificial slaughter*" (36). Meanwhile the accused has become, despite himself, something of a celebrity because of his slanted portrayal in the newspapers as a sex maniac who makes so bold as to kind of defile the sanctity of a white girl.

[1] Top-flight Nigerian academics Boyo Ogunjimi and Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah in a signal book titled Introduction to African Oral Literature and Performance speaks of '*universality of art' as referring to "the ability to identify common denominators in the literature of any age and social setting*." They go on to submit that "*such denominators may be in terms of themes, characters, events, settings and even artistic formations*" (13). To put it differently, in order for a work of art to sort of enjoy 'universality of art' its topicality must cut across time and space. Ogunjimi and Na'Alla takes the example of Animal Farm by George Orwell to buttress their point: "*Animal farm was written many years ago, but the issues raised by the novelist are those that plague contemporary society*" ()On top of Animal Farm, quite a number of literary works could be cited as exemplifying universality of art, that is, Frantz Fanon's The Wreched of the Earth, Black Skin, White Mask, Chinua Achebe's The Man of the People, or what not.

II. Race-predicated social inequity

Mating Birds oozes with the crass race-injustice that blacks and people of colour were at the receiving end during the apartheid era. With a jaw-droppingly lyrical prose coupled with a consummate skill in plot crafting, Lewis Nkosi grittily depicts the manifold human ravages of institutionalized racism in the former South Africa. The authorial no-nonsense call to espouse the first person as a technique of narration speaks to his desire to lend verisimilitude to the story with an eye to better spotlighting the inhumanity of racial oppression. Lewis Nkosi's fictional mouthpiece is a young African who has his freedom of movement and expression as well as his choice of life stifled by a regime which uses the trope of race as an ideological weapon to assert the supposed white supremacy over black folks. To get a sense of the gruesome wantonness of the trials and tribulations that the likes of Sibiya have undergone under apartheid, it might be no bad things to get Christopher Merrett's perspective on what institutionalized means: "*Apartheid was an ideology of division and exploitation, an authoritarian doctrine which through law, administrative process and brute forced governed people's lives on the basis of race and, latterly, class*" (4). The claims of white supremacy over non-white people in South Africa, which translate, inter alia, into racial injustice of the blackest dye, means that Sibiya has gone through the gamut of humiliation and deprivation.

The racialized life in the world of *Mating Birds* flies in the face of human dignity and freedom. Prior to settling in the city of Durban, and to him being sentenced to death by hanging for allegedly raping a young white woman, Sibiya lived in the country, viz., a village called Manzimhlophe. He has experienced first-hand what it feels like being black in a country where race laws pigeonhole black folks as inferior beings. The denizens of Manzimhlophe's first brush with the rough end of racial oppression occurs in the final year of Sibiya at the Lutheran Seminary, when they learn with raving dismay that their village is to be moved to another location fifty miles inland to make way for a new white settlement (60). Haphazard attempts to put up pushback on what they view as glaring injustice soon fizzle out since the decision has juridical grounding. Here's how the narrator describes the sense of panic and anger that gripped the villagers upon the arrival of bulldozers, as well as the mayhem they left in their wake: "*The day the soldiers came with their bulldozers, people were standing around in knots, watching with disbelief their cats and cattle enclosures razed to the ground, the little they owned being loaded on military trucks*" (61). In a move calculated to nip in the bud any sign of rebellion the soldiers charge into them. The ensuing chaos bear testimony:

> *In a show of force that was entirely unprovoked, they* [the soldiers] *went about breaking up clusters of individuals who watched silently the remorseless destruction of their ancient village…A few faces were slapped, and it was not long before the people were forced to scatter at the sound of shots being fired repeatedly above their heads in an obvious attempt to frighten them.* (61)

This quotation may be long, yet it is a measure of the depth of the psychological cum physical blow wrought by heavy-handed tactics of a state whose political, social and economic praxis is driven by racial hatred. With what happened to the villagers of Manzimhlophe, the government hit a raw nerve. Land is, indeed, is the be all and end all of life in the countryside. The gut-punch meted out to the people of Manzimhlophe is two-pronged: emotional and physical. The destruction of homes touch onquestions of identity, culture and memory over and above its attendant pains-induced displacement. Sibiya's

father's passing a few days following the soldier's violent orgy reflects an inability to come to terms with the anguish of an injury to what Hernandez et al. call 'place attachment.' They write that place-attachment "*an affective bond that people establish with specific areas they prefer to remain and where they feel comfortable and safe*" (312). Thanks to the sense of safety and belonging as well as personal identity that it provides, home merges into what Harold Proshansky terms 'place identity,' which he elaborates upon as referring to "*those dimensions of the self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills, and behavioural tendencies relevant to a specific environment*" (155). Hernandez et al.'s view of place-identity captures the profundity of the bond between person and place: "*Place-identity has been defined as a component of personal identity, a process, which, through interaction with places, people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a place*" (312). Quite a number of images, feelings, and events are associated with home which, consequently, serves as a site of family memory. When you are compelled to shake the dust off your home or birth place, it is, doubtless, a part of yourself that is destroyed.

The anguish born out of racial inequality that the likes of Sibiya experience on a regular basis is once excruciating and unbearable, the more so since it is race-based. Race, to be sure, is a dimension of 'othering,' described as "*a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group*". Injustice tinged with racism, and marginality as well as exclusion are woven into the fabric of social cum political life in the world of *Mating Birds*. The mediation of exclusionary practices is through the projection of the white race and the cultural ethos that go with it as the centre of the universe. Through what Kenyan top-flight thinker Ngũgĩ wa Thing'o calls the 'cultural bomb,' indigenous Africans buy into the mythic belief that sees the white man as a smart alec without whose help and agency the black man does not have it in him to extricate himself out of the cultural and social backwater that he finds himself in. As a result, the black man wraps up internalizing the inferiority complex vis-à-vis the white man. Sibiya's father exemplifies the internalisation his inferiority. His shot across the bow to young natives respecting white women is revealing:

> *'Never lust after a white woman, my child…With her painted lips and soft and, shining skin, a white woman is a bait put there to destroy our men. Our ways are not the ways of white people, their speech is not ours. White people are as smooth as eels, but they devour us like sharks.'* (52)

Indeed, the ideology of racism works flat out to cause the native to accept his supposed subaltern status. The pervasiveness of anti-black discourse, and the structural pillars that bolster it up invariably wraps up coercing the native into espousing a *Weltanschauung* commensurate with the mental representation white man's perception of the black man as a non-being. What with the heartache of reification attempts and excruciating feeling of 'un-belongingness,' the indigenous African is driven to desperately develop coping strategies with a view to currying favour with the white man. Frantz Fanon's captures well the ins and outs of the inferiority complex that grips the black man: "*If he is overwhelmed to such a degree by the wish to be white, it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race*" (74). No stone is left unturned to steer

clear of black heritage. Thus, the sheer prospect of her son getting a Western education has Nonkanyesi jumping up and down. That is, Sibiya's mother goes to great lengths to successfully talk her husband into allowing her young son to be sent to school. Western education, in the colonized's mind-set, represents a sure-fire pathway to success. Witness how Sibiya's mother pictures herself, through the narrator, the significance of western education:

> *She spoke glowingly, persuasively of the opportunities opening up for learning. She conjured up vast empires to be conquered with nothing more powerful than a pen and tutored mind. Respect, ease of life, and influence were the likely prizes. … To read and write, to communicate messages over long distances, that was part of the magic of the white man everyone wished to acquire.* (49)

In a society as divided along racial lines as apartheid era South Africa, the enrolment of a black child in a white school is a zero sum game, for "*the white missionaries extracted a price for imparting knowledge to the children of the pagan race*." To put it differently, "*Before the new pupils could be taught, they had also to embrace the new faith*" (50). Despite swallowing her pride to accept her son to be christened as a prerequisite to him accessing western education, Nonkanyensi got her fingers burnt over her naively sanguine perception of western education. Indeed, she didn't contend with the far-reaching straitjacket of racial inequality which loads the dice against people of colour, and, as a result, stifles their creative potentials as well as thwarting their dream of making something of themselves. Col. A. C. Van Rooyen's uncharitable words about indigenous Africans say a mouthful. Dishing the dirt on the natives, he contends that his fellow whites are shooting themselves in the foot by easing the path for them to have access to an education. The narrator recounts that the superintendent of Durban Central Prison has given interviews in which he,

> *concluded by observing that the natives, left to their tribal environment, were all right, their morals were even superior to some whites, but given a smattering of education, they became spoiled and thought of themselves as equals of white men. He concluded by citing as an example the rapid increase of incidents of assault on white women. This, van Rooyen said, was the necessary and tragic consequence of the ill-conceived projects of social uplift, which some white liberals fondly hoped would transform natives into something like white men.* (82)

On top of the nefarious disdain of the Africans and their characterization as savages encapsulated in the colonel's pronouncement, the foregoing quotation invites another reading from a sociological and cultural theory perspective. Van Rooyen's uncharitable view of the blacks fit neatly into a discourse that displays the might of the white race at the same time that it reifies no end those people making up what Stuart Halls calls the 'Rest,' namely those regarded as different and inferior. Indeed, the late Jamaican-born British top-flight sociologist and cultural theorist uses the term 'the Rest' instead of 'the other' in order the better to highlight how, through discursive formation anchored in history, culture, and economics, non-western peoples have been ostracized (188). From this vantage point, it goes without saying that the relationship between the 'West' and the 'Rest' cannot help but be heavily weighted in favour of the former due to its supercilious mind-set. Colonel Rooyen speaks from a position of privilege and authority. Understandably, his voice packs a punch as the natives are deprived of a voice that can push back on the unconscionable narrative of white supremacy. Stuart Hall submits that a discourse is anything but innocent: "*the discourse of 'the West and the Rest' could not be innocent because it did not represent an encounter*

between equals" (205). The Colonel's racist slur vindicates David Wellmanin's point that the be-all and end-all of racism is to protect white privilege: '*…racism continues to be a defense of racial privilege, not a psychological abnormality or the product of ideological manipulation*' (24). Racism is tapped into as a tool of exclusion for social enhancement. As a praxis mediated through a warped understanding of difference woven into a self-serving need to safeguard privilege, racism packs a punch in terms of mental, physical and social toll.

Although 'the West and the Rest' discourse is analysed through the prism of the colonial enterprise, it still remains that it has resonance in the world of *Mating Birds*. Slavery and colonization as well as apartheid are undergirded by the same ideology: racism. Frantz Fanon (a leading postcolonial theory pundit) pushes back against those scholars like M. Mannoni who marks colonial racism off from other forms of racism, saying in no uncertain terms that, '*All forms of racism resemble one another … All forms of racism are identical because all of them are applied against the same 'object man:' man*' (65). Racism is the handmaiden of an ideology intended to negate the humanity in the 'subaltern.' The latter is, to be sure, mired in what the late Frantz Fanon calls the 'zone of nonbeing,' viz., "*an extraordinary sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born*" (2). From the perspective of apartheid apologists, black folks represent the scum of the earth.

Harking back to *Mating Birds*, Sibiya knows only too well what it feels like running through the gauntlet of racism. Despite his intellectual brightness and his dogged determination to weather the storm of his racism-induced travails, Sibiya barely got to first base with his studies. After passing with flying colours his Senior Certificate, the Luthering Fathers, in acknowledgement of his glowing results, manage to get him a scholarship to further his education at the University of Natal. But Sibiya soon comes to the stark realization that the ingrained, pervasive racialization of life in his country means that no black man, however deserving and single-minded he may be, can make something of himself:

> *For most classes, we black students were segregated, of course. We received our lectures in a barnlike lecture hall on the grounds of the Indian technical college. For a few courses, however, we were allowed to invade the sanctity of the "Whites Only" campus, where we shared classes with resentful white students.* (102-103)

The ideological structure of institutionalized racism paves the way for the dice to be loaded against the black man. From the white perspective, the multifaceted privileges yielded by racial categorisations means that any move geared towards righting a trifle the wrongs of racial injustice is regarded as the thin end of the wedge. The perpetuation of the bondage of the black man is what makes the white man tick. The sting of racism is compounded by its being underpinned by structural pillars that are meant to nip in the bud any native endeavour to effect change. As Fanon rightly puts it in *Towards the African Revolution*: '*Racism is not the whole but the most visible, the most day-to-day and, not to mince matters, the crudest element of a given structure*' (32). The scope of its devastation is once jaw-dropping and manifold. Its havoc works on an individual level and on a social level alike.

Interestingly, the language of racism is entwined with that of 'othering' (Omi and Winant, 105). John A. Powell and Stephen Menindian view 'othering' as an outlet for racism, describing it "*as a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities*" (14). People are at the receiving of racist practices owing to their construction as 'other,' that is, as folks who are thought to live on the fringes of humankind. What Gayatri

Spivak terms 'epistemic violence,' to wit violence embedded in knowledge that oppressed persons or groups have suffered so much for centuries, is inscribed writ large in the marginalized subject's plight as a sub-human. In light of this, needless to explain why Sibiya finds himself on the ropes. Throughout the narrative, this young black South African of Zulu stock adamantly points to his blackness as having given rise to his woes. Granted, he arguably tempted fate by having wildly strong designs on a white woman to the point of 'raping' her, but in an ideal world love across the colour bar should be a given. Racism rests on a hegemonic discourse that demonizes, dehumanizes and ultimately reifies the black man. Sympathy which, from a Schopenhaurian standpoint, dismantles the wall between self and non-self (7), takes a backseat to hate and rejection in a racist setting. There is no such thing as a symmetry in terms of dignity and respect between the white man and the black man. The miseries of Sibiya serve as a gruesome reminder of the racist's capacity for evil.

III. Race-spiked judiciary

Sibiya rots in prison awaiting death by hanging for sort of de-sanctifying the supposed purity of the white race by allegedly raping a white woman, gone by the name of Veronica Slatter. In spite of his unwavering denials, he is brought to book, and sentenced to death by hanging: "*For the despicable crime you have committed, I command that you should be taken to a place of execution, there to be hanged by the neck until you are dead, and may God have mercy on your soul*" (5). These '*Hard words*! *Bloodcurdling words*!' represent a gut punch to the accused as well as speaking volumes about the crass absence of inner feelings of judges in trials with a man of colour on the dock. The slanted nature of the judiciary is writ large in the prosecutor's mien and discourse. Being prejudiced against the accused owing to his skin colour, Kakmekaar stops at nothing to twist the judges' arm in favour of a speedy trial, thereby registering his nefarious intent to deprive Sibiya of due process. What Alan Burn calls 'Colour Prejudice'[2] decidedly stands in the way of a fair judicial system. Notwithstanding the trappings of a regular trial, the travesty of justice that he is being subjected to is not lost upon him; he knows only too well, indeed, that the prosecutor and judges are going through the motions. Hence his equation of the whole process with 'a game.' (34). Sibiya, it bears stressing, can't bring himself to feel sanguine about the outcome of the trial in that the judiciary serves sectional interests, namely those of the white minority that ride roughshod over the black majority. His submission that '*I am the eternal goat being prepared for sacrificial slaughter*' (36) says a mouthful.

Come to think of it, Sibiya's trials and tribulations in the aftermath of his sexual encounter with Veronica Slatter hit a raw nerve. Not only does it serve to debunk the myth of the black man as a non-being incapable of agency to push back against white supremacy in any shape or form, but it is also an embodiment of the native's desire to assert a power of sorts. What Frantz Fanon calls the 'sexual myth'- to wit, the native's all-out drive to have sex with a white woman in order to prove his worth and, perhaps more significantly, assuage his lust for revenge- bespeaks a defence mechanism anchored in a wounded self-esteem. To buttress his

[2] Alan Burns defines *"Colour Prejudice' as 'more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and richer peoples for those whom they consider inferior to themselves, and the bitter resentment of those who are kept in subjection and so frequently insulted*" (Qtd. In Fanon 89). The sting of the insult is compounded by the fact that it stems from race, which is "The most obvious outward manifestation of race" (89).

point that there is more to the sexual preoccupation of the Negro with a white woman than sheer desire, the late Martinican-born thinker quotes a character in a novel by René Maran. Jean Veneuse, that is, goes out of his way to feelingly provide the rationale behind his compulsive need to tie the knot with a white woman. Talking to his would-be wife, he wonders,

> *whether, by marrying you, who are a European, I may not be making a show of contempt for the women of my own race and, above all, to be drawn on by desire for that white flesh that has been forbidden to us Negroes as long as white men have ruled the world, so that without my knowledge I am attempting to revenge myself on a European woman for everything that her ancestors have inflicted on mine throughout the centuries.* (Qtd. in Fanon 50)

Unlike the white racist who regards the black person's lust for sex with a white woman as pathological, Fanon feels that there is more to that than sheer desire. Rather, it reflects, in his estimation, an obdurate stomach for revenge. When you think about it, the native has gone through so much in terms of deprivation, humiliation and the like at the hands of the white man that, in his mental universe, the only way for him to have his back or to prove his worth is through sex with a white woman. Interestingly, this Fanonian theory is borne out by Sibiya. Although he confesses to his lust for Veronica Slater, he is at pains to emphasize that there are other reasons for his "*wholly inappropriate desire for a white woman in a country…which loses no time in hanging black boys who poach in hunting grounds reserved for whites only*" (111). To drive his point home, he adds:

> *I am certain what I felt for was not exactly sexual desire for a body I must have known I could never possess, the race laws being what they are in South Africa; no, it was something more, something vaster, sadder, more profound than simple desire. Mingled with that feeling was another emotion: anger*. (7)

To reject hook, line and sinker any idea that he prefers white women to black ones, he says:

> *…so many things were involved in my own choice of arena for rebelling against the narrow straitjacket in which society was determined to imprison me. Lust was one of them? I admit, but why lust for a white woman? There are plenty of black girls on whom I could have vented my lust-if lust and nothing but lust was what I suffered from. May it not have something to do with my expulsion from the university, my loss of anchorage or sense of direction, my final despair?* (111)

Against a background of racial oppression, sexuality may be used to make a statement. At several points in the narrative, Sibiya beats himself up on being labelled a 'sex maniac,' for his sexual encounter with Veronica Slater is for sure devoid of love. Rather, it rested on a stubborn need to sort of go public about an ingrained animus for the white people owing to their racial categorization of the blacks as 'non-beings.' His insistence that his intercourse with Veronica Slater must not be looked on as the sexual offence of a native unable to check his drives in front of a white woman bears testimony.

In the final analysis, suffice to say that *Mating Birds* is a blistering indictment of institutionalized racism and its multifaceted human toll. Going by the travails of the protagonist, racial inequality packs a punch at three levels: the psychological, the social and the judicial. Lewis Nkosi delivers a gut-wrenching cautionary tale about the treacherousness

of bogus claims to authenticity spawned by a warped reading of history. A warped reading of history facilitated by such sanctimonious racial lapdogs as Colonel van Rooyen, Prosecutor Kakmekar and the history professor Van Niekerk. The straitjacket of racism is, over and above the crass disregard for human dignity and the glaring injustice that betray themselves in it, feeds on an ideology which negates the humanity in the other with unintended consequences. Like any form of racism, apartheid was driven by an unconscionable determinism with its distinct hallmark of supposed racial purity and hegemony the endgame of which was, inter alia, to preclude forging human relationships across the racial divide. The death of Sibiya caps the level of rot and corruption as well as cruelty of a society torn apart by hatred.

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