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Apartheid Trauma in Lewis Nkosi's *Mating Birds*

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Abstract

*South African literature primarily focused on the apartheid experiences. Segregation and racism were the roots of all apartheid policies that greatly affected the life of South African people. The apartheid policy passed many laws which brought separation in every aspect of African people. According to these laws, if people break the law they will be punished and imprisoned. The system of 'apartheid' as a socio-political state is so painful in itself that brings trauma in the life of people. The South African government with the implementation of these laws exploited the black people and brought much problem in their life. This paper attempts to examine how Lewis Nkosi in the novel *Mating Birds* deals with the apartheid trauma through the life of protagonist Ndi Sibiya who is black African man and has the interracial love relationship with white woman Veronica.*

Keywords: Apartheid, Trauma, segregation, Psychoanalyst etc.

Africa is distinctively unique continent among all continents of the world. South Africa is a developing country with a history characterized by past constitutional racial segregation and exploitation in the form of apartheid that gave way to psychological problems in the lives of South African people. The South African literature has mainly

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focused on the apartheid experience of the people of the country. Apartheid policies were based on segregation and racism. As a result they created the worst impact on the lives of South African people. The writers of South Africa did not remain unaffected by the situation as the apartheid rule restricted almost everything to the black people.

Apartheid policy created a permanent mental disorder in the people of South Africa and hence trauma in their lives. So, it was bound to be reflected in the literature and hence the writers like Alan Paton, Es'kia Mphahlele, Nadine Gordimer, and Lewis Nkosi talk about the heart wrenching history of racism and unjust policies of apartheid rules in the South Africa.

Lewis Nkosi is one of the writers who generally referred as the “Drum writers”. The authors, writers, and critics who worked for ‘Drum’ magazine introduced interracial sexual relationship in their work. The apartheid laws were prominently working during the 1950s and 1960s in the South Africa and the black writers were fascinated with to bring out the fact in their writings about the cruelty of colonialism and apartheid policy. Lewis Nkosi’s novel *Mating Birds* was published in 1983. It depicts the apartheid system and its unending effect on the life of protagonist. The novel deals with various themes like love, rape, seduction, politics but the prominent theme is interracial sexual relationship in apartheid South Africa. In this paper an attempt has been made to investigate how Nkosi is dealing with the apartheid trauma through the life of protagonist Ndi Sibiya who is black, has the interracial love relationship with white woman, Veronica.

Ndi Sibiya is the narrator and protagonist of the novel. Through his narration he gives the real picture of the life of Black people and the inferior treatment they get in the South Africa. He gets attracted to a white woman named Veronica Slater on a segregated beach of Durban. Sibiya is black African person and falls in love with white African woman but apartheid racial laws in the South Africa do not allow him to meet his beloved. He is imprisoned and sentenced to death for the rape of white girl, Veronica Slater. In the prison he recollects all the memories of his childhood, youth, and the society that caused him to be imprisoned. He narrates the whole story to a psychologist Dr. Dufre who comes to find out the real cause of his crime. Dr. Dufre asks many questions repeatedly and encourages Sibiya

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to analyze himself psychologically. He is a victim of apartheid. The socio-economic and political situation have created trauma in his life.

The system of apartheid was originally come into existence in 1948. However, the roots of apartheid can be seen in the Land act that was brought in force between the year 1913 and 1936. Apartheid is a system of racial segregation forced by National Party Government of South Africa between 1948 and 1994. (Lowstedt 21) With the great victory in the election, National Party Government began to implement many segregation laws or so called ‘apartheid acts’ as a state policy. Apartheid policy brought segregation in every aspect of black people’s life including their personal and public life. They were exploited by their race and they cannot live normal life in their own country. This policy passed many laws like the Prohibition of Mixed Marriage Act, the Immorality Amendment Act, the Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, and the Separate Amenities Act. According to these acts the people in the South Africa were classified into different racial groups and the marriages between persons belonging to various racial groups were prohibited by the law. Those who violated this law were sentenced for punishment or imprisonment. Another important factor of this policy was having love and sexual relations with people belonging to other races considered as a crime in the country of South Africa.

Sex and love became subjects of the state with severe restrictions on the personal life of the people. It leads to the assumption that interracial sex and marriage where a black men and white women are involved was not a normal thing in the apartheid South Africa. However, only white men have this right that they have love and sexual relations with white women. The South African Government with the implementation of racial laws seems to have created some psychological problems in the life of the people. The desire for the love is forbidden by the apartheid laws and the personal life of people is controlled by the apartheid policy. This shows that they have to suppress their natural feelings and emotions, love in their own country for the sake of apartheid policy. The system of apartheid seems to establish a kind of fear in the mind of people that normal person can be abnormal due to these laws and hence people suffer from trauma in the apartheid South Africa.

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In “Studies on Hysteria” (1895), Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer explained the concept of trauma. According to them any negative experience such as a fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain that generates disturbing emotions can be called ‘trauma’. (6) Sigmund Freud’s trauma theory reveals that trauma causes sudden and unexpected emotional shock to a person. As a result the person has to undergo a lot of pain and frightening kind of experience. Further Freud says that the person has to talk to therapist to recover from traumatic situation. His theory focuses on talking about the experience of trauma to others. Cathy Caruth is a leading figure of trauma studies. She describes trauma as, “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which response to the event occurs in often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination and other intrusive phenomena”. (Caruth 11) Different trauma theorists like Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Kai Erikson talk about different views of trauma in their works. They assumed that trauma experience is not known in the first instance and it causes irreversible damage to the human psyche.

In this context of South African racial conflicts Lewis Nkosi describes how the system of apartheid has brought trauma in the life the protagonist of novel. In the beginning of the novel, the protagonist of the novel Ndi Sibiyi is in the prison cell, waiting for the death execution for a rape of white girl. In the prison he is narrating the story of his own life as if he is an observer of other’s life. Through his narration of events that led him into prison, he is trying to tell the truth of South African life where people cannot live happy and normal life due to these apartheid laws. The court has appointed a Swiss-German psychoanalyst Dr. Emile Dufre who plays a very important role in Sibiyi’s documenting fragmented and scattered memories. The questions that Dr. Dufre asks to Sibiyi are in an attempt to find out a psychoanalytical conclusion of his imprisonment.

Ndi Sibiyi’s childhood is very happy and he enjoyed it in the rural area. Later, as he grows up he comes to the city of Durban where he experiences racial conflicts in the context of socio-political condition. He narrates the village Manzimhlophe where he use to live. He sees that his village moved to the inland because new white settlers want to settle themselves in this area. The implementation of ‘Group Areas Act’ separates the living locations of the

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whites and blacks. The blacks are not allowed to live in the areas reserved for the whites. They have to leave their own land where they have been living for years. Lewis Nkosi argues that, Zulu people were living there for many generations and they saw the destruction of their village in front of their eyes. The people could not sustain this destruction and implementation of cruel laws. In effect, Sibiya sees his father's untimely death and his mother blames the laws and the system of apartheid for his death. The family of Sibiya is destroyed so he writes,

“ At a Stroke, everything fell apart” (Nkosi 62)

By his narration, Nkosi is trying to illustrate the view that apartheid law segregated South African people. Prominently, the aim of this segregation was to keep people apart from different races for the development of white people. However, when the laws implemented in the society, the people of the same race also segregated from each other. This affected greatly on the personal and psychological life of South African people.

Sibiya's narration simply reveals the incidents that show white people have dominated the black people and overturned their basic rights in order to establish white supremacy. He narrates that he spends three years in the University and then he is expelled from University for leading a strike against segregated class. Van Niekerk, the history professor who is solely racist believer usually takes the lecture by excluding black students. Though black students are allowed to attend a few lectures with white students, they are continuously tortured by their colour, accent, race etc. Sibiya called this Professor as a “racist pig” because whenever he takes a combined lecture, he calls all black students as “unexpected visitors”. Sibiya reminds his sentences while delivering the lecture,

“These are the fortunate few students who have come from other national groups that make up the population of this our happy, sunny South Africa! Their presence among us will arouse in you different emotions and different sensations. You may see this as a small but significant drift towards eventual amalgamation of races”. (Nkosi 102)

It is clearly evidential that people in the South Africa are not only excluded in public and social places but in education system also apartheid policy has affected greatly. The

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students like Sibiya get tortured by the teachers and white students and in this way some prejudices against the other races are created.

His narration of the incident on the beach of Durban indicates the inhuman implementation of various apartheid acts. When he goes to Durban beach and sees a white girl, he gets attracted and falls in love with her. As he thinks about romantic love, he reads a board: BATHING AREA- FOR WHITES ONLY! (Nkosi 6) This shows how apartheid policies have divided public facilities. It means that black people cannot enter the place reserved for the whites. This kind of segregation and highlighting boards forbid Sibiya from expressing his mental and physical desires which creates a kind of problem to (black people) Ndi Sibiya.

Through the character of Ndi Sibiya, the novelist tries to convey that all black people are going through the same mind set. The most part of the story of the novel takes place on Durban Beach. Ndi Sibiya and Veronica usually come to the beach and without violating the rules of apartheid they enter their segregated areas. They gaze at each other and get attracted but there is no verbal communication between them. They even do not touch each other but they start to have a kind of love affair between them. These all things result into a Sibiya's following of Veronica to her bungalow. He does not control his sexual desires and enters her room and both have sexual intercourse. In this way both have broken the apartheid laws

Sibiya narrates how day-to-day life of South African people is restricted from every sphere of society. In one of the incidents he tells us that while going towards beach area he has to travel by bus. Once the bus reaches the beach, he has to go through the police checking and show the identity pass to enter in the city. According to the "Population Registration Act", Sibiya has to carry with him a passbook to identify his racial group. It means that non-whites people have to carry identity proof with them to enter at public places. Through this depiction Nkosi throws light on the reality that apartheid policy attacks on their basic rights of living as the citizens of their own country.

Sibiya remembers, being a student of University when he involves in agitations and strike against racial discrimination how harshly he and other students were arrested and brutally beaten by the police force. By his narration it is clear that apartheid system

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continuously disturbs the native people. The life in the apartheid South Africa seems to be similar with colonial life in which white people were given all kind of freedom and superiority over black. The same situation is presented by Lewis Nkosi in the present novel as the black characters are not able to live normal kind of life. They are continuously exploited and tortured by white people so they are made slaves under the white people's control.

These all incidents that he narrates in the prison cell make an impact on his mind that causes his psychological disturbed state of mind. These incidents give him a real awareness about black people's life that they cannot fight for their own right, their freedom as they are prohibited by apartheid law. By his narration it is evident that Sibiya is not adjusted with the changes that occur due to apartheid policy. He feels uncomfortable in his own country. He is not able to accept the socio political condition of apartheid system and at the same time he cannot take the revenge of all the sufferings that they experienced during the implementation of laws. Generally, when a person cannot cope with his surrounding situations and experiences shocking, unexpected events by employing all his or her capacities, it is said that he/she suffers from trauma. Similarly, the protagonist of the present novel Ndi Sibiya suffers from this type of trauma experiences in his life. He lives in the apartheid society. Since the childhood he witnesses all racial laws and its violent effect on life. As he experiences the implementation of these laws in his life he feels a lot of anger for white authority. Though he is aware of law and apartheid rules, sometimes he disobeys the law as it brings feeling of revenge in his mind and he gets punishment.

When Sibiya is imprisoned for his crime i.e. interracial love relationship with white girl, the court declares the punishment of death execution. This was the frightening and shocking thing for Sibiya and he is not able to sustain this situation. Sibiya is continuously haunted by apartheid memories in the prison and becomes psychologically abnormal person. The way he speaks with his relatives that come to meet him in the prison, indicates that he is not emotionally stable man. Sometimes he speaks so fast and sometimes he leaves the sentences incomplete. This is called the linguistic dissociation which is one of the characteristics of the trauma survivor.

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According to the psychologists the role of listener is very crucial while dealing with the trauma survivor. Sigmund Freud says that, the person has to talk with a psychologist to recover from trauma. In case of Sibiya, Dr. Dufre, a psychoanalyst, has come to find out the real cause behind this crime. Generally the prisoners in the prison cell are starved, beaten and tortured whereas Sibiya's case is different as he is provided with the authority of pen and paper and psychoanalyst. This is an attempt to resolve the mysteries of the unconscious mind of Sibiya.

Sibiya describes, 'My own case is different' (Nkosi 15) reveals that Sibiya is not a normal prisoner like others. He is suffering from depression, a frightening kind of feeling, everyday forgetfulness, flashback, nightmare, memory loss and inability to recall the events chronologically are the prominent symptoms of 'trauma'. From his writing it becomes clear that he prefers to write his story in flashback mode rather than sequentially.

Sibiya while narrating his experiences confesses that his mind is diseased mind that is unable to remember the events chronologically. He writes,

"I write the story of my life. I write of my first encounter with the English girl, of my subsequent arrest, of my trial and conviction. I write not in an orderly fashion, not even in chronologically, but randomly, setting down what memory thrusts to the forefront of my diseased mind, with a hasty if confined feeling of relief". (Nkosi 24)

By his confession, one can infer that Sibiya is traumatic survivor whose mental state is disturbed due to political system of apartheid South Africa. Another notable aspect is whenever Sibiya tries to remember the incidents with Dr. Dufre, he realizes the kind of fear, a destroying force that might be a risk for his life predicament. So he narrates,

"A psychic wound so permanently opened that when it comes to telling my story to Dr. Emile Dufre". (59)

Here 'psychic wound' means trauma, indicating the abnormal condition of his mind. While writing he remembers the crime done by him and punishment of death. Sibiya becomes aware that he would soon depart from the world. All these contributed negativity to his life. He becomes traumatic as he recalls the incidents of his life because these memories

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are related to apartheid laws only. When trauma occurs in the life of person, he /she feels helpless to face the situation. Finally, the case of Sibiya and Veronica is presented before the court which is headed by the white judge. Throughout the trial, Sibiya instead of defending himself he just watches the proceedings of a court as an observer. On the other hand Veronica denies all the charges imposed by the court. Sibiya is unable to handle the situation. As he tries to respond to the court, he finds himself in the state of confusion. The power of white people is so dominant that Veronica escapes easily and Sibiya gets punished.

According to psychologist traumatized people are not able to find a flexible and adaptive solution. Trauma keeps them rigidly fixated on the past that repeats in the present. All these observations suggest that Ndi Sibiya is suffering from trauma. These memories of his life revisit him as he tries to narrate it. Lewis Nkosi through this novel throws light on the socio-political situation that results into the psychological problem and through the character of Nidi Sibiya it is evident that he is trauma survivor due to apartheid system in the South Africa.

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