

Shades of Nkosi: *Still Beating the Drum*

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Review Article

Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi

Edited by Lindy Stiebel and Liz Gunner

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Lewis Nkosi's reputation is largely based on his acute and unflattering analysis of South African cultural production rather than on the short stories and plays that he published in the nineteen sixties. Indeed, hardly any critical commentary on the South African literary scene remains untouched by his 1965 seminal essay, 'Fiction by Black South Africans'. In fact, such has been its impact on the South African literary debate that Lewis Nkosi has had to consistently defend and constantly elaborate on it in his subsequent essays.¹ Yet a section of his readership, in South Africa and elsewhere, maybe oblivious to the fact that after gaining his apprenticeship in journalism Nkosi dabbled with writing short stories and plays. That he has even written some poetry is certainly a revelation to some of us.

Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi (2005) provides its readers with a glimpse of his work via critical essays from commissioned contributors as well as a selection of critical essays by Nkosi himself and, thus, is likely to be welcomed by all researchers interested in

¹ See for example, Nkosi (1985; 1986; and 1987b).

Nkosi' oeuvre. The aim of this first full-length collection of essays on Lewis Nkosi is, according to the editors, to 'provide both a critical perspective on Nkosi and a source-book useful to researchers' ('Preface'). The inclusion of interviews, a timeline on Lewis Nkosi and a detailed bibliography bears testimony to this avowed intention.

The introduction provides useful biographical background on Lewis Nkosi as well as the context and general reception of his writings. It also intimates to the reasons for a somewhat minimal recognition of Nkosi's writing in South Africa during the apartheid era when he was compelled to write from exile. It further alludes to how the publication of his novels, *Mating Birds* (1983) and *Underground People* (2002), has renewed readers' interest in his work as well as further reaffirmed and entrenched his position in the country's literary circles.

The Critic

The first section consists of three essays; the first, 'Lewis Nkosi as Literary Critic' by Annie Gagiano, the second, 'Lewis Nkosi's Early Literary Criticism' by Chris L. Wanjala and the third, 'Lewis Nkosi: A Commentary Piece' by Oyekan Owomoyela. Since Nkosi is primarily known as a literary critic it seems logical to look at this aspect of his career first. Wanjala's essay traces Nkosi's early development as an 'essayist' or literary critic from the time he wrote pieces for *The New African* to the time when his critical essays were collected in *Tasks and Masks Home* (1981) and later in *Exile and Other Selections* (1983,) while Gagiano's essay moves beyond that, even cursorily referring to some of Nkosi's post-apartheid essays.

In his exploration of Nkosi's criticism Wanjala correctly points out how the hallmark of Nkosi's early criticism was 'a kind of detached humour, and an urbane irony verging on nonchalance' and rightly, I think, attributes this to the 'ironic and witty' approach of *Drum* (Stiebel & Gunner 2005:28). Nkosi's aesthetic leanings, according to Wanjala, are to the European critical traditions of critics such as Eliot as well as 'the romantic tradition which celebrated the genius of a writer as an organizing focus of the creation of literature' (36f). Wanjala is deliberately being cautious about putting Nkosi 'in a box' though. This can be discerned from the following statements: 'He is a black literary critic who, in a time of inequity and iniquity, wanted to be

as good as his white contemporaries in the West' although he 'never took race as the benchmark of African literature' (37); and, later, he 'recognized the need for commitment in literature but at the same time foregrounded the supremacy of art in literature. For him, form was as important in the composition of literature as content' (37). Nowhere is Wanjala's attempt to strive for balance in his assessment of Lewis Nkosi's criticism more obvious than in the following statement: '... in general the identity that Nkosi (and those in the 1960s who thought like him) wanted to give our identity was largely mapped by European societies. Perhaps we should take their ideas in the spirit of comparative studies, rather than seeing the Nkosi stance as simply one of servile mimicry' (31). Yet one cannot help but notice that Wanjala's essay is fraught with ambivalence—the tension between his admiration of Nkosi's witticism and tongue in cheek style of writing and candour, on the one hand, and his reservations about Nkosi's leanings toward Western aesthetics, which may not necessarily have been seen as serving the African cause at the time he was writing, on the other hand.

Gagiano's coverage of Nkosi's critical work is much wider than Wanjala's, in that she aims to provide an 'evaluative' (5) assessment of a survey of three decades of Nkosi's critical writing. Gagiano is quick to warn us as readers that she will avoid solidarity criticism in her assessment of Nkosi's critical writings because, 'a merely eulogizing approach to his body of work would be inappropriate and unworthy of him' (4), and, thereby showing a clear indication of her reverence for Nkosi's stature. Echoing Wanjala's sentiments, Gagiano points out that although Nkosi is oftentimes 'excessively harsh' in his criticism he 'cannot ... be caught with an ideological or party political thumb on his scale' and that he requires 'both social relevance ... and intellectual skill from the authors and their works that he assesses' (6, 7). Indeed, in line with her promise to avoid solidarity criticism, Gagiano explores (and takes issue with) some of the excesses of Nkosi's criticism of Mphahlele and, to a lesser extent, of Bessie Head's writing. Gagiano sees exile as having sharpened Nkosi's focal lens through his interaction with avant-garde luminaries abroad and strengthened his critical distance in his engagement with African/ South African literature. (It would be interesting in this regard to have known what the dominant theoretical critical tradition was at Sussex at the time Nkosi was a student there and, on this basis, to establish to what extent it impacted on Nkosi's

development as a literary critic). Gagiano's essay is most useful in her extensive reading of, and engagement with, Nkosi's essays in *Tasks and Masks*. Here Gagiano boldly assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Nkosi's essays—this, I would surmise, is the result of her own familiarity with African texts that Nkosi examines. Gagiano's incisive assessment of Nkosi's criticism is best epitomized in the conclusion of her essay: 'Nkosi's critical oeuvre presents us with a robust, provocative but rigorous voice that has immensely enriched South African—and more broadly continental and diasporic African culture(s). His writing is always interesting, even when one disagrees with him ...' (24).

The Dramatist

This section of the collection brings in its wake two aspects of Nkosi's work that most of his readers would be unfamiliar with: his radio drama and his poetry. Liz Gunner's exploration of Nkosi's two radio plays written for the BBC, 'The Trial' and 'We Can't All Be Martin Luther King' is quite illuminating in the manner in which it brings to the fore Nkosi's artistic activities in the 'sixties in Britain. Nkosi's involvement with the BBC is well contextualized by Gunner, who provides an indication of Nkosi's interaction not only with African writers, such as Soyinka and Achebe, through his series of radio interviews, entitled, 'The African Writer in Search of his Audience', but also of his possible weaving of a network in the diaspora 'as cultural broker and interpreter across contending modernities at such a time' (52, 53)². Gunner persuasively and convincingly argues how Nkosi's immer-

² Gunner, as indicated in the footnote 4 (52), has drawn largely on the Transcription Centre Archives from the Humanities Centre at the University of Texas in Austin as a source on Nkosi's activities at the BBC. Incidentally, it has since emerged from Gerald Moore, in a recently published essay in *Research in African Literatures*, that the Transcription Centre, that facilitated the creative activities of African writers and artists such as Nkosi and Soyinka, amongst others, which was supposedly 'the brainchild of Paris-based Congress for Cultural Freedom', was just (unknown to the artists?) one of the numerous CIA fronts in the cold war 'over the soul of Africa'. See Gerald Moore (2002).

sion 'in the diasporic discourse' at that point in time culminates in his writing of 'We Can't All be Martin Luther King', whose appeal to the producers lay in 'poised wit, the irony and insights ...into the complexities of race and class in British society in the 1970s' (62). Gunner's analysis of this play, in particular, taps into the readers' curiosity on the modalities of the interplay (or tension) between politics and aesthetics in Nkosi's fictional world.

Litzi Lombardoizzi's essay, appropriately entitled 'An Introduction to the Poetry of Lewis Nkosi', introduces those of us who were not hitherto aware to this aspect of Nkosi's career. The aim of Lombardoizzi's essay, she tells us, is not 'to unmask, expose or deconstruct Nkosi's poetic discourse, but rather to allow the poems to speak for themselves' (127). Lombardoizzi, I would argue, is at her best when she reads Nkosi's personal or love poems such as 'Spanish Roses (For Teresa)', 'Jealousy' and, especially, 'To Astrid for Her 59th Birthday'. She convincingly points out how these are 'personal poems with a lyrical quality in celebration of women and the body, revealing a poetic voice which is *both* spectator and participant' (136). Lombardoizzi is here at pains to defend Nkosi from those critics such as James Booth who 'has accused Nkosi of being exclusively masculinist, particularly in his descriptions of women' (136), arguing that 'there is more depth to Nkosi than being relegated to the ranks of a male chauvinist ...'. Instead, she bestows accolades on Nkosi's love poems which, she proffers, 'abound with sensual imagery of all that constitutes woman in the physical and emotional sense.'

Arguably the most useful aspect of Lombardoizzi's essay is her reading of 'To Astrid for Her 59th Birthday: *An imitation of an image in Chagall's painting 'Lilies of the Valley 1916''* in which I found both analysis and contextualization illuminating. The interface between the painting of the French surrealist painter, Marc Chagall, apparently used as a backdrop to Nkosi's inspiration, and the poem, is succinctly delineated. In the case of the poem, 'What makes Poetry Not Prose' I would, however, argue that there is more to the poem than Lombardoizzi tells us here and that, perhaps more obviously, this poem renders more visible, if you like, Nkosi's bias against the realist tradition of writing. This is what the critic has overlooked despite the repetition in the poem of phrases such as 'one-eyed monster /named Realism'; 'life's thorough beating/ by a fellow named/Realism'; 'Sweaty with struggles/ of Everyday named Realism'.

To 'allow poems to speak for themselves' (whatever that means) in

accordance with Lombardozi's objective in this essay, I would argue, does not, and should not, preclude one from providing a proper contextualization of a poem as part of its reading, however. A bit of reading on Dhlomo's poetry would have revealed some affinities between Nkosi's poem, 'To Hebert Dhlomo', and Dhlomo's own poem, 'Renunciation', in terms of content, style, syntax and rhetoric as part of a counter-discourse of colonialism. This would have thereby confirmed Nkosi's admiration of, and a sense of loss that he felt for, his mentor in his stint with the *Ilanga Lase Natal* newspaper.

Incidentally, I just had no idea what to make of the statement in relation to this poem that it 'derives its primary material from [Nkosi's] own rural boyhood and manhood in South Africa'. People who grew up in Cato Manor and Chesterville in Durban would never refer to their upbringing as a 'rural' one.

In a different vein, it would have helped Lombardozi's cause to make a point about the nature of Sechaba as a publication and use that to explain the militant stance in Nkosi's two poems 'Images of a Nation Yet to Be' (hereafter 'Images') and 'Refugee Woman' as being in sync with the then radical politics adopted by the ANC. Leaving that aside though, it is to Lombardozi's reading of 'Images' that I will now turn my attention.

Despite the fact that there is an indication in the title of the poem that it was written in commemoration of Amandla's visit to Lusaka in December 1981, Lombardozi glosses over this in her contextualization of the poem. Amandla was part of the cultural wing of the ANC which provided entertainment to the people in exile in the form of music, poetry, drama and, generally, kept their cultural heritage alive. Nkosi here is commemorating one of those visits. Lombardozi's failure to acknowledge this and to follow it through unfortunately results in a number of problems, one of which is to resort to dry generalizations on the poem, as can be seen in her assertion that the theme of the poem is 'the political situation in South Africa at the time', a theme vague enough to apply to any anthologized poem in South African poetry or even to a whole anthology of poems.³ Granted,

³ I have in mind here, for example, Barry Feinberg's *Poets to the People* ([1974] 1980), an anthology avowedly aimed at poems reflecting the politics of the time it was published.

Lombardozi makes a valid point about ‘the rigid and almost militaristic precision of the linear form of the poem’ and the tone of anger that characterizes the poem and, finally, in her observation that the poem ‘exhibits an exuberance and energy unparalleled in other poems of this nature’. It is precisely the ‘exuberance’ of the songs and dances of the Amandla performers that Nkosi is celebrating here. However, it is by virtue of missing this point about Amandla, that Lombardozi’s analysis results in a misreading of the poem, something which the readers of the contributions to the critical essays could have easily picked up. For example, despite Nkosi’s obvious reference to Spear (read: Umkhonto weSizwe, sometimes referred to as ‘The Spear of the Nation’), Lombardozi insists that Nkosi is invoking ‘the powerful images of the African warrior of old’ and that he ‘draws on his childhood impressions and memories of the fighting warrior ...’. The impression created here is that Nkosi mythically evokes the heroism reminiscent of traditional wars of resistance, when he is clearly valorizing a contemporary army that has superseded that elementary stage of warfare. Lombardozi harps on in her reading of the poem.

Sikhumbuzo Mngadi subjects Nkosi’s play, *The Rhythm of Violence* to what he calls ‘the rigours of the ‘new left’’ by, first, engaging convincingly with Soyinka’s reading of *Rhythm of Violence*. Where Soyinka is of the view that *Rhythm of Violence* advocates a multi-racial society, Mngadi argues, again convincingly, by way of a number of examples, that it envisages inter-racialism rather than multiracialism. Not only does Mngadi’s alternative reading of Nkosi’s play challenge Soyinka’s version but it can also be read as an indictment on the dominant logic of Nkosi’s text which, Mngadi proffers, ‘is shot through with a ‘left wing’ optimism that misses the point of operation of apartheid power that it targets, and, as a consequence of it, takes its power for granted’ (87). Could it not have been, though, that, at the time Nkosi was writing, that sense of optimism was prevalent to the marginalized sectors of the population, in which case Nkosi’s text could be seen as rooted in the socio-historical realities of the time and therefore that the critic here providing a critique of Nkosi’s play in post-apartheid South Africa has the benefit of hindsight? Be that as it may, Mngadi’s reading of this play is provocative and will undoubtedly generate an interesting debate on this text.

The Novelist

For me at least, the most interesting section of the collection is one on Nkosi as a novelist. I'll focus on two of the articles here which seem to me to be more useful, that is, Lucy Graham's and Andries Oliphant's, both of which I consider to be forthwith the starting points of any one interested in research on Nkosi's novels. Graham's essay entitled, 'Bathing Area—For Whites Only': Reading the prohibitive signs and 'Black Peril' in Lewis Nkosi's *Mating Birds* provides the most comprehensive analysis of the reception of Nkosi's novel to date. Graham argues that *Mating Birds* seems to have been well received abroad than it was in South Africa where it was regarded as 'an interloper in the historically 'whites only' territories of the avant-gardism and erotic writing' (149). Providing examples that range from Louis Gates Jnr. who admires the novel's 'lyrical intensity' and 'compelling narrative power' to Alan Ryan who refers to the novel as 'very possibly the finest novel by a South African, black or white, about the distortion of love in South Africa ...' (150) Graham outlines the accolades accorded to Nkosi's text abroad. She then engages with South African critics whose opinions on this novel range from it being an 'anachronism' (Jacobs, Brink, Scholtz), or reinforcing the myth of rapists ('she wanted it'), as in Dodd and Brink, and sexist or tantamount to 'soft porn' (Jacobs description of the novel as 'nothing so much as the elaborate strip-tease with which the girl seduced the narrator' is illuminating in this regard). Graham specifically takes Brink to task for his double standards on this score:

So how is it that, when Brink [in his novel, *Cape of Storms*] uses the image of an outsized black penis, he is being postmodern and 'ironic', but when Nkosi's protagonist makes a playful reference to his 'somewhat ... oversized penis' the author is, according to Brink, exploiting the image of the black male whose awareness of the body obtrudes on every page (including even the assertion of one of the crudest myths of sexist racism, the size of the black penis) (158).

There are a number of aspects in Graham's essay that are worth noting. Firstly, she points out that although J.M. Coetzee, amongst others, has set some of his novels 'in the past or in unrecognizable eras' and got away with it unscathed, so to say, in the case of Nkosi, this is construed as an

anachronism. Perhaps more importantly, is her observation that most critics have read Nkosi's novel through the lens of traditional realism when it is obviously self-reflexive and parodic. It is, as Graham correctly observes, precisely in its 'self-reflexivity, experimentalism and intertextuality' that the 'innovative and transgressive' (52) power of *Mating Birds* lies. Graham proffers that by 'virtue of its central indeterminacy the novel engages with an avant-garde tradition and avoids reductive positioning'. Without any doubt, Graham's reading of the novel is innovative and will inevitably determine or even become seminal in future readings of Nkosi's novel for that matter.

It is curious though that while a number of essays which touch on *Mating Birds*, *Rhythm of Violence* or 'The Black Psychiatrist' allude to Fanon or highlight the need to employ a Fanonist analysis to these texts, none of the critics is prepared to take this to its logical conclusion.⁴ This is even more surprising in the case of *Mating Birds*, in particular, which seems to invite a Fanonist reading in its handling of interracial sexual relations. Foremost in such an analysis would be whether Nkosi is reinforcing the myths that Fanon so extensively brings to the fore in *Black Skins, White Masks* or debunking them. This would, of course, include the modalities of how he does this and whether he succeeds in his attempt to do so. Obviously, such an analysis would have to be attentive to narrative seduction in Lewis Nkosi's text.

Andries Oliphant is attentive to a more or less similar strategy of narrative seduction in *Underground People* which is underpinned by irony. The bulk of Oliphant's essay deals with the multi-dimensionality of Nkosi's narrative, its strategies of eschewing realism, as well as its ironic twists, all of which are meant to elicit a different response from a more perceptive reader. Prior to this, Oliphant draws the attention of the reader to the parallels between Nkosi's critical views and his writing, showing how these two are indissolubly linked in some meta-fictional tapestry or web that needs some deconstruction. In his engagement with Nkosi, Oliphant brings into

⁴ The two essays by Stark-Adler and Steffen, whose main thrust is on Nkosi's 'Black Psychiatrist' but refer to *Mating Birds*, albeit fleetingly, allude to psychoanalysis or/and Fanon but their focus is on the role of the psychiatrist in these texts.

sharp focus the pros and cons of Nkosi's aesthetics and points out what no one else has never dared to mention, for example, by referring to Nkosi's labeling of Black writing as 'primitive' in his 1965 essay as 'a slippage which suggests the uncritical acceptance of the cultural hierarchies of colonialism.' (190) Turning his attention to the text, Oliphant offers an interesting and perceptive reading of *Underground People* as 'a novel of ironic laughter' (190), arguing that:

In its ironic play with appearance and reality and the imaginative energy which drives the narrative, it dramatizes the release of the literary signifier from the shocking grip of history and social reality to suggest a space where meaning is neither given nor transparent, but constructed and perilously made (195).

For this reason, Oliphant finds the novel consistent with Nkosi's avowed aesthetic considerations in which irony is the cornerstone of imaginative ambience.

On the whole, this is a useful collection for anyone interested in reading Nkosi's work. What is missing from this collection though is an essay on Nkosi's journalism which may throw more light on his development as a writer. The editors could have commissioned an academic in the journalism field to do this. Alternatively, another possible project could be to collect Nkosi's journalistic pieces and edit them in the same way that this has been done in the case of his colleagues in *Drum* such as Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Casey Motsitsi, as well as, fairly recently, Alex la Guma, who came from a different tradition of journalism. It would be interesting, for example, to find out more about Nkosi's beat in *Drum*, the news angles he would take, his style of writing and whether this had anything to do with his development as a writer he has become. Incidentally, despite the fact that Nkosi started venturing into fiction by first writing short stories in such publications as *Fighting Talk*, this collection glosses over this aspect of his career, not only in the essays that, albeit glibly, provide his biographical details, but also in interviews which otherwise throw some light on one's understanding of Nkosi's development as a writer. Would it not be useful, for example, to explore if there is any possible progression in Nkosi's short stories from a realist tradition to a more experimentalist modernism as

seen in his novels? Finally, it is a pity that the collection pre-dated the publication of Nkosi's latest novel, *Mandela's Ego* (2006).

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