

The Sentence(d) Story-Teller: Forged and Legitimated Constructions in Nkosi's *Mating Birds* and Pepetela's *Mayombe*

by

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Abstract

In this paper I invoke Paul Gilroy's notions of black Atlantic culture, mimicry and diaspora and also Bhabha's related notions of hybridity and third space. I question how these scholars insert themselves in the discourse of modernity and counter-culture in order to understand how their re-conceptualisations of culture alter our understanding of history and the development of ideas. Simply put, what happens to culture in the contact zones and transitions between Africa, Europe, the Americas and the Middle East? What forms of subjectivity, culture and community emerge? There is a growing need for a reconceptualisation of bicultural politics that draws on an inclusionary and multifaceted identity, an urgent need for a third space that negates the limitations of a dichotomous and essentialised self/other, us/them, liberator/terrorist/ American/Arab, black/white, coloniser/colonised configuration. These adversarial polarities are premised on exclusion and purity and such a bifurcated structure offers little to the emergent relationships where there are multiple subject positions and aspirations. Gender, race, class, ethnicity, geographical location and sexual orientation are some of the many categories that generate vexed interactions and exchanges.

Introduction

Hybridity and third space occupy a central place in postcolonial discourse. Both experiences and locations are privileged, owing to their awareness of the fact that contesting cultures enable one to straddle the two without being bound to one or the other. Cultural hybridity is positioned as an antidote to essentialism and the fixed properties which define the “whatness” of a particular cultural identity tool kit. For Bhabha (Bhabha, 2004) and Gilroy (Gilroy, 1999), it is the spaces in-between that are lauded as the locale of the struggle to displace hegemonic colonial and colonising narratives and essentialist cultural structures. Bhabha posits hybridity as that position, neither inside nor outside, almost-but-not-quite, a marginality which is the cutting edge of “translation and negotiation.”

It is interruptive, enunciative and therefore productive as a space that engenders possibility, as ambivalent as it might be. Primordial unity or fixity (Bhabha, 1994) is no longer possible and Gilroy mocks this realisation when he observes that “there ain’t no Black in the Union Jack”, when in reality, Britain itself displays a remarkably heterogenous multiculturalism. New signs of identity emerge through collaboration and contestation, in addition to the plurality of cultures in contact.

Burman (Burman, 2003) and Tamboukou (Tamboukou, 2003) propose that illuminating analyses of narratives are rooted in the awareness of narrative’s social positioning as critical discourses. Such an approach to narratives demonstrates an awareness of the problematic of subjectivity and story meaning. *Mating Birds* conflates political and psychoanalytic modes into a narrative that resists and distorts chronological or experiential time into a co-presence of the future and the past in the present (Steedman, 1987). The experience-centred approach assumes that narratives are sequential and meaningful. Narratives are also definitely human; they “re-present” experience and reconstitute it. In expressing it, narratives definitively display the transformation of identities across time and space (Squire, 2008, p 42).

This paper proposes a radical, postcolonial reading of two texts, *Mayombe* (Pepetela, 1971/1983) and *Mating Birds* (Nkosi, 1982/2003). It argues initially that the grammatical structure called the sentence communicates a unitary idea by bringing together words that would otherwise not have made sense in complete isolation. The rules of combining these words generate meanings. Equally, in the socio-political and economic establishment that constitutes an imagined nation, specific legislations arbitrate normative behaviours that enable the society to reproduce itself. In many respects, the laws also mete out sentences that proscribe the behaviours of the members of that particular society. The ambivalence between grammatical and legalistic sentence lies in the slippages experienced when the grammatical component attenuates the practices and discourses of the courtroom. The grammatical sentence becomes an instrument to endorse the arbitrariness of the laws governing human behaviours in society. If the narratives of humanity are re-presented and re-constituted in the grammatical sentence, then the ultimate transformation anticipated in the social order through enforcement of the legal sentence implies, ipso facto, the ultimate vulnerability of the human spirit.

Pennycook (Pennycook, 2006, p 64) contends that governmentality does not primarily focus on intentional state control. He extends this observation and draws attention to the array of technologies of government which exhibit several strategies by which governments enact their overt and covert control and regulatory programmes. The microcosmic programmes mirror the macrocosmic discursive practices. If the sentence expresses a meaning, or a set of possible meanings that are defined by context, this implies that the array of sentences constituting the text move beyond the localised discourse possibilities to promote several other interpretations that emerge from the totality of the text. *Mayombe* and *Mating Birds* are therefore taken as macrocosmic texts that seek to communicate rationales and strategies of meaning-making and, in the process, radically transform our understanding of forged and legitimated identities in the protagonists in each of them.

Identity as Contested Site

Theory, the narrator in *Mayombe*, classifies himself as “coloured.” He is neither black nor white. He is the “maybe,” the in-between, the constellation of possibility. Sibiya, the narrator in *Mating Birds*, is a convict on death-row, sentenced to the gallows for his unacceptable rape of a white woman in a nation that operates on the chromatic differences of its citizens, apartheid South Africa. In both a physical and metaphorical sense, Sibiya and Theory live in an age characterised by transnational identity matrices, including race, origin, desires and subjectivity. Both exhibit a striking “doubleness” that captures their locality, agency and subjectivities within and outside national boundaries. Both project a redemptive circulation of ideas for and about the emergent nation; their cultural, sociological and political experiences trigger a multiplicity of constraints and possibilities.

One principal criterion of narrative is contingency. Phoenix (Phoenix, 2008, p 64) submits that analysis of narratives “allows insights into the dilemmas and troubled subject positions speakers negotiate as they tell their stories.” In attending to the narrative construction of *Mating Birds*, analysis permits the study of identity, focusing on the local practices of a South African prison and its courtrooms through which it is produced. As Gubrium (Gubrium, 2006, p 250) adds, through such analysis, “we glean a more culturally nuanced and narratively active understanding of the protagonist.”

Berger and Luckman (Berger and Luckman, 1966) argue that “story-tellers speak from a moral stance; whether explicit or implicit” and that narratives contain some kind of evaluative orientation. It is logical therefore, for Barham and Hayward (Barham & Hayward, 2008, p 77) to argue that “the social exclusion of schizophrenics is the outcome of their inability to present their lives as socially intelligible narrative projects.” Being accountable to others – to story our actions and experiences in socially and culturally comprehensible ways – is crucial to our standing as recognised members of society. This implies, as Dunn (Dunn, 1990) argues, that “stories serve a vital function in excusing, justifying, blaming or securing hoped for things.”

In *Mating Birds*, story-telling happens relationally. It is a collaborative engagement between speaker and listener, between a story-teller and audience, in a culturally nuanced context where at least some meanings and conventions are shared. This is profoundly what Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1981) implies when he challenges that “to live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to argue.” In Chapter 8 of *Mating Birds*, the narrator, Sibiya, tells us of his paradox:

Dufre, my persistent suitor, my solemn inquisitor, the wrecker of my peace spoke [heavily] accented English but retains the flawless accuracy of a diligently *acquired language*. His phrasing is measured but pleasureless. It is *efficient but devoid of human poetry*; acquired, no doubt, after much painful effort and mental application, his linguistic skill, such as it is, shows (in its lack of suppleness, its poverty of verbal wit) the many hours of grinding toil that made possible its attainment. Doctor Dufre’s English is also the language of the scientist. It is *without a doubt the language of police inquisition and torture*. It has none of the felicity of verbal play, none of the sexual brevity of human speech (Nkosi, 1982/2004, p 37; my emphasis)

In contrast to this contrived language exhibited by Dufre, there is the infinitely exquisite language of biology that Sibiya and Veronica understand, even though they are prohibited by apartheid to enact it:

We could trade no compliments, which, in the normal course of events, make up the unchanging ritual of courtship. Right up to the climax of this affair, which was the union of two bodies, we were technically strangers to each other. *Veronica and I could use no words beyond the primitive language of looks and gestures*, beyond the surreptitious *grunts and murmurs when desire became too insupportable*. In short, we could not declare ourselves (Nkosi, 1982/2004, p 89; my emphasis).

The looks and gestures, grunts and murmurs of the “primitive language” of sex express release and “human poetry” as opposed to the mechanistic, scientific efficiency of English which is “the language of police inquisition and torture.” The scientism of precision dries avenues for other possibilities of reading and making alternative interpretations of the world.

Sibiya, the narrator in *Mating Birds*, is constrained by sentences throughout his twenty-five years. The one severely tattooed on his mind is when he witnesses his mother, Nonkanyezi, in an embarrassing sexual knot with Big Joe. He witnesses their orgy as “they moved and moved and moved together while the world seemed to whirl around me like a gigantic spinning wheel” (Nkosi, 1982, p 80). Here the grammar embedded in the umbilical attachment he has to his mother is wrenched apart and the world whirls in a numbing senselessness. In this numbing witness of his mother’s sexual orgy, Sibiya is sentenced to trauma – an indelible experience.

Secondly, he is, in a sentence, expelled from university for “leading a protest against segregated classes” (Nkosi, 1982, p 81). To accept segregated classes is to acquiesce to second-class citizenship; to lead the protest as Sibiya does is also to forfeit a “contaminated” education.

The third, and the most significant of sentences, is the thematic construct of the novel: the death sentence for “rape.” In one of the most intense moments in the novel, Sibiya reflects on his literary encounters with a famous French poet and he sums up the predicament carved by all these sentences in his life in apartheid South Africa: “To be born is to have commenced to die” (Nkosi, 1982, p 59). This is both a testament and an epigram.

One of the most memorable episodes in the trial of Sibiya is the moment when the lauded efficacy and efficiency of the English language is tested in the juxtaposition with Sibiya’s native Zulu. The untranslatability of the word “orgy” into Zulu stares back at the prosecution as a moment of damning and inadequate evidence where the legalistic sentencing can only be arbitrary. The crucial evidence, allowing for impartiality, is lost in this etic moment.

Although I had adequate knowledge of English, it was the unalterable law of South African courts that whenever a native stood trial, an interpreter had to be provided in order to translate into an African language the minutest details of the proceedings, but in this instance the African brother who made the most valiant attempts to render into my native Zulu tongue all that was being said in English soon experienced difficulties. The tangled web of erotic perversion woven into the evidence soon became too much for him to comprehend, let alone translate into another language. ‘Orgies’? the interpreter repeated uncertainly. ‘Your Lordship, there is no word for orgies in the Zulu language.’

This is a provocative moment of indictment on the surveillance practices of sentencing, the judicial system and the precision of its language. Sibiya interrupts the procedures of the courtroom by offering a multi-dimensional interpretation of this elusive term: ‘*Ama – orgies, mos, kulapha bedlana khona abelungu, beganga bonke! Bephuzana nangemlomo njengezinja!*’ (Nkosi, 1983, p 123).

His translation of the untranslatable is an extension, as provocative as it is vivid. It suggests the estranging reality of languages and cultures in contact, implying to Justice de Klerk that [Sibiya’s people] had *never* heard of orgies before the white men came to this continent” (Nkosi, 1983, p 123). In the extension of this translation, Ndi is able to quip on the dog-like and revolting substance of “orgies” – “*bephuzana nangemlomo njengezinja*” (literally, lustfully eating and licking each other like dogs).

Mating Birds shows, in this episode of confrontation, that a dystopian fissure is embedded in Roman-Dutch Law that is culturally decontextualised and applied globally to a different culture. There are “negative, constraining, and unjust aspects of surveillance that exaggerate the negative by only seeing one side of surveillance” (Lyon, 1994, p 204). It could be argued, convincingly, that even the ultimate death sentence of Sibiya is built around the re-construction of a “narrative of the hegemonic orders of the law and Sibiya’s counter-narrative of resistance (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, p 5). The legal sentence is a fraud, the scrutiny of Sibiya’s personal and cultural data is fraught with stereotypical inconsistency. The polyglot language embedded in translation unravels a complicated contest between identity, history and authority to the extent that the sentence becomes, ipso facto, a truncated (in)version driven by the desire for apartheid rigidity.

In *Mayombe*, the narratives of the guerrillas in the Cabinda region about their commitment to the liberation of Angola remind the readers that there are no easy answers to questions of identity, passion, belonging and the incandescent fears of life. Theory, one of the voices that propels this narrative, commits himself to the struggle for liberation, choosing life in the wilderness rather than living a non-partisan life with his wife, Manuela, and their unborn child. He argues, in a Fanonian fashion, that

My story is one of an alienated man who alienates himself in the hope of finding freedom. When I was still a child, I wanted to be white, so that the whites would not call me black. As a man, I wanted to be black, so that the blacks would not hate me. Where do I stand then? The others can equivocate. How could I do that, when I bear in me the original sin of a white father? (Pepetela, 1972/1995, p 4).

The “others” that he refers to include Fearless, Truth, Muatiamvua, Pangu-Akitina, Ekuikui, Ops, New World and Miracle, all adopted *noms de guerre* that the combatants use in the struggle. The onomastic implications of these names point to the range of dreams that the combatants hope for in the new nation. Each name is a sentence, expressive of the combatants’ intentions to dislodge the colonial sentence of servitude and marginalisation apportioned to the black citizens of Angola. As a black chromatic group, they can “equivocate”, but Theory is circumscribed by his difference which sentences him to difficult choices between black and white. Allegiance, military honour and a nationalist zeitgeist are nurtured on the hybridity of his identity, the liminality of the space in-between where freedom and meaning reside. The sentence of coloured-ness becomes an irrevocable determinant of his allegiance to a nationalist movement that seeks to re-place one chromatic and ethnicised configuration of governance with another.

Fearless, one of the principal combatants in *Mayombe* clarifies the genesis of his revolutionary journey in a seminary. Sentenced to a life of misery and chastity “invented” by the priests, Fearless revels in the “carnal delights and joyous vengeance” that he discovered in his first woman in the annexe to the seminary. Like Sibiya in *Mating Birds*, he is expelled from the seminary for “striking a white priest who practised overt racism” (Nkosi, 1995:21). He proudly declares that at that moment when his sentence of expulsion is handed down, “I slew God, slew Hell and slew the fear of Hell. That is where I learned that enemies must be confronted; it is the only way to find inner peace” (Nkosi, 1995, p 21).

Later in *Mayombe*, Pepetela offers another intriguing character in the voice of Muatiamvua. He queries his identity in the following questions:

[They] want me to be a tribalist...from what tribe, I ask? I am from all tribes, not only of Angola but of Africa too. Do I not speak Swahili, did I not learn Hausa like a Nigerian? *What is my language, I, who do not say a sentence without using words from different languages?* And now, what do I use to talk to the comrades, to be understood by them? Portuguese? *To what Angolan tribes does Portuguese belong?* I am the one pushed aside, because I do not follow the blood of my Kimbundu mother, or the blood of my Umbundu father...My strength comes from the margin of everything...the margin of the route of the great liners... (Pepetela, 1995, p 87; my emphasis).

Muatiamvua is the acme of the multilingualist, one who cannot say a sentence without using words from other languages. In speaking, the pan-African Muatiamvua selects, consciously or unconsciously, the most apt words from his wide language repertoire for the occasion. He exhibits knowledge across languages and engages in the multiple processing that translation alone allows. Portuguese, the language of the coloniser, has become the imposed language of commerce, education and the law, though, ironically, it does not belong to any of the tribal and ethnic groups that make up Angola. This irony brings back the idea of governmentality that was mooted previously. Muatiamvua discredits the tribal compartments and identities proffered by Kimbundu or Umbundu: he selects marginality as a strategic location; the in-between suggested by Paul Gilroy when he argues that “there aint no black in the Union Jack.”

The Cabinda forest in Angola in the novel *Mayombe* is a theatre of struggle on a militaristic and ideological level, as much as the courtroom in *Mating Birds* provides space for enquiry and reflexivity on issues of forged and legitimated identities. Pepetela offers readers a complex character called Theory. He is a coloured liberation fighter, engaged in combat with the colonial Portuguese. Theory argues that in a Manichaeian world of black and white, good and evil, correct and wrong, he stands on the margins, in-between the two extremes and quintessentially echoes the views expressed by Muatiamvua. He says:

I was born in Gabela, in coffee country. From the land I received the dark colour of coffee, from my mother's side, mixed with off-white from my father, a Portuguese trader. I carry in me the irreconcilable and that is my driving force. In a universe of yes or no, white or black, *I represent the maybe*. Maybe says no for someone who wants to hear yes and yes for someone who wants to hear no. *Is it my fault if men insist on purity and reject compounds?* (Pepetela, 1983, p 2).

Throughout the novel, the characteristic feature is tension, tension that is generated by the fact that the group of guerrillas in the forest come from different ethnicities and the only elusive thing that keeps holding them together is the desire for the total liberation of Angola. Struggle, for instance, is driven into battle because he has to prove to his own people what he is worth and also by the fact that he has to prove to his fellow combatants that he has shed the shibboleths of ethnic loyalties. Identities are forged on the anvil of struggle and legitimated by the fearless determination in all to overcome the strictures of arbitrary death sentences that would be meted on those who demonstrate scepticism and loyalties to alternative agendas.

Liminality, Gazing and Borders of Space

Mayombe, the forest in Pepetela's novel, and the beach in Nkosi's, are the cartographical spaces that allow for the enactment of both drama and narrative. Ethnic loyalties are allowed to play themselves out in the dramaturgical possibilities of *Mayombe*, inasmuch as the beach in *Mating Birds* is a site of conflict, gazing and interaction between black and white nomads. I argue here that the beach is differentiated from the fluid mass of water that makes up the sea, and it is also distinguished from the permanence and solidity of the land. This observation is highlighted in Mayombe, where Pepetela confirms, quizzically, that "the beach is a margin" (Pepetela, 1983/1995, p 87). The beach is perceived as a generative space, neither the land nor the sea but a spatial configuration in-between, the space where black and white can gaze at each other without the strictures of prohibition that are enforced in the courtroom. The beach is thus the space that actively produces the interface between physical, mental and socio-political phenomena. It is open to all and is owned by all South Africans, unlike the partitioned homelands that are exclusively for blacks. It is a form of spatiality that engenders desire and rupture, allure and deference of satiation between Veronica and Ndi. As Veronica self-consciously bares herself for Ndi to gaze at, she is libidinally aware of the erotic dimensions embedded in her act.

The beach is cartographical space that contains meanings; Veronica's body and actions also constitute a site that she fallaciously but deliberately projects for *both the genesis and the erasure* of Ndi's instinctive reactions. Feminists would read this scene in different ways and suggest that Ndi should immediately curtail his desires for Veronica, but sentencing his libidinal desires is aggression against "the natural language and poetry...of grunts and groans." Ndi clearly privileges his desire for the body over the disciplinary and inevitable court polemic: he romantically suspends judgment under the illusion that Veronica would accommodate him as human rather than as a black man.

In fact, Veronica's muted confession to a rape in the courtroom and the lack of internal cohesion in her statement testifies to a rapture within the socio-political fabric of apartheid South Africa. It is a blatant and indicting testimony that allows the magistrate to exercise power and social control in the final sentencing of Ndi: the Manichaeian universe of black and white is perpetuated as the storyteller is sentenced. The nuances of a totalitarian and supremacist government that finds recourse in the courts for its vindication are inescapable at the end of *Mating Birds*.

Isabel Hofmeyer argues that:

Warfare is ...one of the processes which lead often disparate peoples to call themselves a nation and war consequently lies at the heart of most bodies of writing that we commonly designate national literatures (Hofmeyer, 1996, p 61).

Her point solidly confirms the aspirations of the diverse guerrilla motivations in the novel: to serve ideological contingency, to usurp power, to contest identities and to forge a new nation, borne out of war. The combatants come together from different ethnic groups – Kikongo, Kimbundu and Umbundu - in this narrative of nation and nationhood (Hungwe and Hungwe, 2010, p 2). What makes them coherent as a group is a nationalist ideology that seeks to transform colonised space and transcend tribalism. It is critical to indicate that nationalism without tribalism is an artificial construct and that this construct is problematised throughout the narrative voices of the combatants. Furthermore, *Mayombe* evokes the temporality of this nationalism through apportioning voice to each of the combatants in order to express their motivations for joining the struggle. Their secretive meetings with the different ethnic groups of Angola reveal pervasive and vexed notions of belonging as ethnicity continues to define loyalties. The forest therefore becomes both a site of rehearsing old identities and a forge for new ones.

Pepetela confronts the reality of "Othering" by suggesting that even though the combatants in the forest confront and tackle tribalism, the European outsider who gazes at the conflagrations borne out of this schism never allows the perception of Europe itself as divided on ethnic loyalties. He states: Europeans like to throw tribalism in our faces...For them, what happens in Europe is not tribalism...[But what happens there] is a very similar phenomenon (Pepetela, 1983/1995, p 112).

Thus, the Stores Chief is able to contest this stereotypical conception of Africa pitted against Europe by declaring that:

It is a lie to say that it is the Kikongos, or the Kimbundus or the Umbundus or the mulattos who are traitors. I have seen them in all languages and all colours...I have learned that words have value *only when they correspond to what is done in practice*. (Pepetela, 1983/1995, p 138, my emphasis).

Stereotypes such as East and West, Black and White, male and female only extend the misconceptions of possibilities of a new world order, as the guerrillas realise in *Mayombe*.

Conclusions

Stereotypes have a lasting and debilitating effect on cultural, economic and political relationships in both *Mayombe* and *Mating Birds*. It is thus logical for the novel *Mayombe* to proffer new horizons of possibilities in the penultimate page. The Commander and Struggle have died in the war, and in their different ethnicities, they are buried in one grave under the mulberry tree. The mulberry tree is both literal and symbolic, a grave site and a part of the forest:

The trunk is distinguished from the forest's syncretism, but if I let my eyes follow the trunk up, its foliage merges in the general foliage and is again part of the syncretism. Only the trunk is distinct, is individual. Such is *Mayombe*, the giants are such only in part, at the level of the trunk, the rest is lost in the mass. Such is man. Visual impressions are less clear and the predominantly green tint gradually shades the giant mulberry's trunk (1983/1995, p 182).

Fearless, one of the principal combatants, declares to Ondine, the only female prototype, that "*We are all acculturated, corrupted, much more alienated*" (Pepetela, 1985/1995, p 144). One grouping, black or white, never tells the whole story. Each complements the other for a full version if one sidedness is to be expunged from the discourse over contact zones, such as sexuality, war, and the beach. Inclusionary and multifaceted identities have emerged from the "third space" as Gilroy argues. It is these emergent relationships that display multiple subject positions and aspirations: Veronica's gratuitous and almost vindictive retreat from her body's desires to allow the strictures of the court yield tortured sentences, in as much as the blind tribalism of the Commander and struggle necessitate their death and ultimate burial in one grave.

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