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The Politics of Self and Other in Literary and Cultural Studies: The South African Dilemma

Charles Malan

Summary

It is argued that, in post-apartheid South Africa, the entrenched politics of self and other regulate not only the institutional possibilities of adapting to the dramatic socio-political transformation, but it also regulates the social and cultural construction of otherness. Some of these dilemmas are traced to the relationship between construction, reconstruction and deconstruction within cultural and literary studies. Some comparative investigations that indicated the need for transformation are discussed and related to the new government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) as a "master narrative", and to research as "story-telling". It is suggested that the new dilemmas of being othered and the lack of institutional transformation in tertiary education may be countered by new methodologies for comparative and cultural studies.

Opsomming

Daar word geredeneer dat die ingeburgerde politiek van self en ander in 'n post-apartheid Suid-Afrika sowel die institusionele moontlikhede van aanpassing by die dramatiese sosiaal-politieke omwenteling as die sosiale en kulturele konstruksie van andersheid bepaal. Sommige van hierdie dilemmas word herlei na die verhouding tussen konstruksie, herkonstruksie en dekonstruksie in die kultuur- en literatuurstudie. Enkele vergelykende ondersoeke wat die noodsaaklikheid van verandering aangedui het, word in verband gebring met die regering se Heropbou- en Ontwikkelingsprogram (HOP) en met navorsing as "storie vertel". Daar word aan die hand gedoen dat die nuwe dilemmas van "ge-ander" word en die gebrek aan institusionele verandering in tersiêre inrigtings, die hoof gebied kan word met die nuwe metodologieë van vergelykende en kultuurstudies.

Few other national discourses have confronted apartheid as vigorously as South African literature. Yet it is precisely within the discursive field of literary studies that some of the most complex dilemmas relating to the processes of adapting to a post-apartheid situation are encountered. The entrenched politics of self and other, regulate not only the institutional possibilities of adapting to the dramatic socio-political transformation, but it also regulates the social and cultural construction of otherness. In this paper,

some of these dilemmas are traced to the relationship between construction, reconstruction and deconstruction within cultural and literary studies.

It is widely accepted within the present international discourse on culture that notions of self and other, identity and nationhood, are subjective constructions with little claim to empirical bases. Evidently many South African academics and researchers agree in principle with the challenge of "deconstructing the edifice complex" in the country and, concurrently, they support cultural deconstruction.

However, reconstruction, and not deconstruction, has pertinently been declared the name of the new cultural power game. In a situation where tertiary education institutions are now open to all cultural communities and human rights are explicitly recognised in the interim constitution, a revision of cultural canons, curricula, methodologies and courses is portrayed as inevitable.

Moreover, research and policy programmes of the past have consistently indicated the urgency for drastic adaptations. Since I need to situate myself within these endeavours for reasons that will be explained below, I shall refer only to relevant research in which I was involved, namely investigations by my employer, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). In 1985 the HSRC's Investigation into Intergroup Relations (HSRC 1987) drew international attention when it produced "scientific proof" of that which everybody already knew: that otherness had contaminated South African Society to such an extent that no amount of social engineering could hope to restore a semblance of normality. A comparative study of race relations in literature, which formed one of the projects of this investigation, illustrated the effects of stereotyping and isolating the other, in a way few other discourses could equal (Malan 1987). The study indicated how the country's most eminent writers have consistently been involved in a critique of otherness.

Within the field of education, the country's youth were for many years the victims of otherness that was entrenched within the educational system. Comparative research of 1986-1987 (Bosman & Malan 1987) into the teaching of all South African literatures even at that stage indicated to us, the researchers, the imperative for literary education to be less elitist and academic, to be situated within a broader communication context and to be linked to the discursive frameworks surrounding both text and reader. The urgent call for education to move towards addressing basic community and economic needs, has recently been re-emphasized in a report of the National Youth Investigation, which was headed by the well-known reformist Frederick van Zyl Slabbert and managed by myself (Slabbert et al. 1994).

Research thus clearly indicated the need for transformation, and the rest was supposed to be history. Another important text has been added to the long list of planning documents: the new government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) has iconized transformation and presented scholars and researchers of the humanities with new challenges. In the RDP document (ANC 1994) the arts and culture are now recognised as an important part of the government's reconstruction effort, and a new ministry has been established to promote its interests. Reconstruction has officially been sanctioned and is pursued with vigour.

Why then, after all the intense introspection and exciting developments, are all South Africans not rejoicing - particularly academics and researchers? Some possible reasons will be discussed below, but the main reason might well be that in an era of rapid change, academic reconstruction is often a slow and sometimes painful process. In addition to that, there is little correlation between the RDP's insistence on material and institutional reconstruction (restructuring/transformation/action) and fundamental academic deconstruction.

The question of concern here, is: How is the new dispensation going to affect the construction of self and other in teaching and research, given that old paradigms and hierarchies are under severe siege? What are the implications of the shift in paradigms in knowledge production, from resistance to reconstruction? At this stage, one can only rely on personal experience for any meaningful conclusions. "Science" will no longer come to the rescue. Gone are the days of proving the obvious by means of surveys and neat analyses. Rows of reports and academic dissertations on bookshelves have become, at best, historical artifacts.

Already, I find that the project of "studying culture" in the ironically named "New South Africa" is reduced - or rather, reconstructed - to story-telling. What really matters, is to read the world as a text, rather than an experiment, to practise narration as cultural translation. I doubt that the choice of methodology is influenced only by the ethnographic exercise of research as story-telling (see Clifford & Marcus 1986), or by Anthony Giddens's call for the convergence of social and literary theory (discussed within the context of this paper by Hooper (1993: 244)). Rather, I am guided by the simple fact that scientific research is, in itself, fiction.

Within South Africa's "rainbow society", cultural research is a narrative without an ending and without boundaries, even though one is forced to impose many forms of closure onto the text. Research becomes an act of continuous *différance*. The only methodology that might help me understand the text is ethnographic and discourse analysis, provided that it is initially applied to my own story, my own self-fashioning. In the process of posi-

tioning herself as a South African critic, Hooper quotes Clifford:

... every version of an "other", wherever found, is also the construction of a "self", and the making of ethnographic texts ... has always involved a process of "self-fashioning".

(Hooper 1993: 250)

The personal research story that might illustrate the construction of self and other goes like this (and I will "objectify" the self as a white "Afrikaner" male, derogatorily known as WAM). Three months after the first democratic election the white man, who is related to the father of institutional apartheid, Daniel Malan, together with a team of researchers goes to a black "township" outside Pretoria. The HSRC has established an office there to assist in what is called "community capacity building". Situated a short drive from the white researcher's own middle class suburb, Meyerspark, the spreading township has the fine-sounding name of Mamelodi. But, having been established as a "temporary" apartheid structure in the early nineteen-fifties, there still is very little melodious about it. The researchers are here to consult community leaders on a project politically correctly entitled "Cultural Reconstruction and Development", and abbreviated as CURED. It is a time of healing. Yet, all around them in the impoverished townships, wounds fester. The cure is nowhere in sight.

The leaders present, who have been delegated by various organisations, are all male. The white man is amazed by the forthright reactions of the representatives. Politely and attentively they listen to the researchers' tale of reconstruction/reconciliation/redemption. Only when requested to do so, the leaders then tell their own story. To them, the RDP is "something out there". But they are used to "developers" and researchers moving into the townships to make a fast buck that is often directed from overseas into developers' pockets, or to get ideas for a Ph.D. The researchers then leave to pursue their academic projects, without any benefit or feedback to the community. This will no longer be tolerated.

The discourse confirms that we have, after all, entered the mythical New South Africa. The tables have been turned. The crossing of boundaries and their own objectification have brought these communities little joy and they are prepared to assert their own subjectivity in the process of resistance. The albino male remains uncharacteristically quiet, as he has been in many similar meetings since he first heard the confident voices of exiled ANC leaders at a conference with Afrikaans writers held at the Victoria Falls in 1989.

He has been othered to the point of voicelessness. In any case, without

recourse to academic discourse, he has little of significance to explain to these "objects of research" he now faces as "equals" across a table. They have won the freedom struggle and now have the voting power which can determine whether he will retain his relatively well-paid job. But what assurances can he give them that research can in any substantial way contribute to the reconstruction of their daily struggle for existence?

As a willing servant of the RDP he is no longer protected by rows and rows of texts about texts, that he in his study of literature and "culture" has over years inserted between himself and "them" - that is, the others whose subjectivity has been dispersed amongst the same texts to such an extent that they have remained, often conveniently, a faceless mass. It is only by literally facing them that he realizes how they have become the real victims of the postmodernist condition, how their subjectivity has been unfocused, the subject fragmented in an endless field of discursivity.

No longer is he allowed to study culture tranquilly as something out there, in the books, as so many representations of otherness. Even before this meeting, his black researcher colleagues of the project team have already asked the deconstructive/destructive questions: What kind of cultural reconstruction is referred to? Defined by whom? Undertaken by whom for whose benefit? Based on which needs?

However, even as he listens to the sceptical leaders, he knows that cultural reconstruction is of course taking place; it is there for all to see. The literary tradition of the others has asserted itself dramatically at the very entry into the mythical national space, when two praise poets lauded President Nelson Mandela at his inauguration and another, in traditional skin attire, welcomed him in the hallowed halls of parliament. Moreover, immediately afterwards in his opening address to parliament the President used Afrikaans literature, the epitome of apartheid discourse, for a symbolic gesture of reconciliation that has had tremendous impact. He quoted from the translation of a poem, "The Child" by Ingrid Jonker, who committed suicide. Her father, an eminent Afrikaner member of parliament, had at that stage denounced her.

For Mandela (1994), the child, killed in the struggle for freedom, was the most appropriate metaphor to illustrate the possibilities of transcending otherness: it could cross the boundaries of the Afrikaans language and its literature which played a pivotal role in establishing Afrikaner nationalism; it could reach out to all children and parents, and eventually in its adulthood, could cast its shadow over the entire Africa in its relentless march to freedom:

The child grown to a man treks on through all Africa

the child grown to a giant journeys
over the whole world

without a pass!

(Mandela 1994: 6)

This gesture of cultural translation undoubtedly had such an effect because it was made by the archetypal Other who had for many years been faceless in his own country, his photograph banned from the media. Together with millions of "others", many whites were deeply moved by this wise old man, this icon whose face was the first ever of a black individual to appear on a South African postage stamp. His recognition of even right-wing cultural aspirations has shown the way to overcome otherness, to regain subjectivity, to become a face.

My own little story is of course without an ending. However, enough has been told to illustrate my own process of research as narration. I have to face my construction of self by reading and deconstructing my own fictions. According to Hooper (1993: 249), recognising the process of "self-fashioning" and consequently classifying ourselves as cross-border readers, allows us to build cultural reflexivity into the process of criticism.

Presently, at least, with intercultural contact beyond master/servant relationships becoming more of a daily reality, we are able to start moving away from mass stereotyping of otherness. The "myth of mass culture" (Swingewood 1977) has contributed significantly to the construction of this all-pervading otherness. According to Ang (1982) the ideology of mass culture is based on dividing the field of culture into bad mass culture and good non-mass culture. Yet, as Raymond Williams put it, as early as 1958: "Masses are other people. There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses" (1958: 4).

This view would have done little to allay the fears of those South Africans for whom "people's culture" translated effortlessly into "mass culture". The ideological threat of "people's culture" as opposed to "dominant culture" during the "cultural struggle" has compounded the feeling of beleaguerment of those persons who knew they could never be part of "the people". However, the us/them-stereotyping cuts both ways. Even at the populist 1987 Amsterdam conference on "Culture in Another South Africa", Patrick Fitzgerald warned:

Essentially, the ... perspective of an "evil" capitalist ruling-class culture oppressing an "authentic" peoples' (*sic*) culture, which is temporarily dominated but fundamentally intact, rides roughshod over the painstakingly real historical

processes by which the oppressed have grappled with, transformed and appropriated elements of colonial culture.

(Campschreur & Divendal 1989: 162)

In spite of the RDP's shortcomings, which will be discussed below, it has at least succeeded in reframing the otherness of "the oppressed" in terms that are no longer rooted only in colonial oppositions and a culture of resistance.

At this stage of the cultural discourse in the country, it is widely accepted that binary oppositions such as high/mass, dominant/people's, colonial/post-colonial and Western/African culture have limited value for the process of deconstructing otherness. This has been pointed out by none other than critics who themselves for years have been the victims of otherness: Ndebele, Asvat, Oliphant (Williams 1990: 240).

Indeed, the tables have been turned. Over the past years, a number of white teachers have struggled with and anguished about their own otherness e.g. Williams (1990), Carusi (1991) and Hooper (1993), to mention only one academic forum. As Williams idealistically formulates a shared goal:

We also have a responsibility, as Africans, to ensure that *all* our students are given the opportunity to read and to assess critically, literature which portrays the indigenous African as the subject rather than the "Other".

(Williams 1990: 10)

But of course it is precisely the dilemma that one's own otherness may undermine the best efforts at reconstructive teaching. Carusi explains the trap of biasedness in her discussion of the extensive critiques by Gayatri Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, who are predominantly concerned with the way in which colonial authority has distorted, excluded and "othered" the colonized subject:

Cultural discourse which attempts to reconstitute an original African specificity, experiences the otherness of the colonizer as threatening; the colonizer as "other", is excluded and "othered" in its turn by the closure of African thought.

(Carusi 1991: 142)

In the same way, academics in positions of power are often "othered" by populist democratic discourse.

We will certainly not find our salvation in the RDP. In spite of its lofty ideals and its ability to mobilize thousands of people, the reconstruction programme and document now simply known as "the RDP" (ANC 1994) has ironically become the prime vehicle for othering substantial sectors of the South African community. This new Bible with its technicist discourse

has as its main commandment: "Seek ye first the material kingdom" Although there is no denying the very basic material needs of millions of poor South Africans, Van Zyl in his analysis of nine widely accepted development needs (including creation, identity, freedom and understanding), concludes about the RDP:

In terms of *fundamental* needs it addresses mainly the need for "subsistence". All the others ... which are in principle equally important, are ignored whether serious deprivation exists in these spheres or not.

(Van Zyl 1994: 194)

Even the RDP section dealing with culture emphasizes resources, funds, artifacts. The RDP's frequent references to democratic inclusivity does not mask the fact that its beneficiaries are the previously othered: the marginalized, the disadvantaged - but only those who are part of a mythical construction, "the people". No-one who is excluded from the (huge) inner circle will be allowed to forget that it is the African National Congress's master narrative. Many of us who enthusiastically contribute to the programme, are left with the ironic feeling that we are doing so from a position of "privileged otherness"; even, that we are just being *allowed* to contribute.

Still, we conscientiously persevere. We realize the child has grown into a man. At least, democracy has brought about a major reversal of roles and to a certain extent our guilt as the privileged others, has been appeased. What is even more evident, in our case, is that reconstruction also entails deconstruction. We are its willing victims.

And so, we continue to produce our own stories, our fictions, our little grand narratives that may, or may not, contribute to the new myth. We often passively accept that there is no room for luxuries such as political deconstruction in the post-apartheid dispensation. Rather, we re-construct ourselves in order to reconstruct the country; we do not deconstruct new hegemonies.

We are grateful for those few studies and academic courses that have pointed the way to the kind of reconstruction that Carusi (1991) discusses, which may succeed in avoiding fruitless confrontation and reactive politicking. At least we know where to look for the cure, through the guidance of post-colonial, post-modernist, comparatist, feminist, deconstruction and related discourses.

Even with this guidance, the cure is by no means assured. In the introduction to a special edition of the *Journal of Literary Studies* dealing with university language and literary studies in South Africa, Dovey (1992: 136) concludes that many teachers of literature are threatened by the new ap-

proaches (in particular Cultural Studies) since they assume that these "will encroach upon and swallow up the field of literature which they have identified as their domain". Moreover, the ivory tower has been so well entrenched, that most literary scholars and researchers probably struggle to see the relationship between their own endeavours, and the "others" who are described in the very texts that form the main corpus of their object of study.

Obviously, there are no easy ways to counteract the institutionalization of otherness generated by many years of apartheid. It is not only the universal cultural master codes of race, gender and class that have been used with devastating effect to marginalize, but also codes such as literacy, intellectualism, aestheticism, academic specialization and Eurocentrism. Language departments of previously "white" universities are experiencing a considerable influx of students whose skin colour is not white. However, over the past decade or so most of these departments have not been substantially transformed. Only a few departments have institutionalized Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies. Popular culture and (cultural) literacy receive little attention from teachers of literature. The politics of the "popular" (Bennett 1986) has left academic discourse untouched. Feminist, gay and related subcultural discourses are gradually being introduced into departments of English and even slower into departments of Afrikaans, and are a rarity in departments of African languages. Most language departments have little or no interaction with other departments and disciplines.

Still, in spite of the pressure to "reconstruct" materially, we have to cling to our belief that the texts "out there" have something very important to say to the New South Africa. We may as well face up to the fact that the process of teaching and researching culture will always entail the transmission of values, and that we ascribe a very specific value to literature in an era during which technicist and materialist values predominate. While tertiary institutions are dragging their feet in the process of reconstructing themselves, it will be left to the missionary zeal of individual teachers and researchers to create a new generation of "cross-border readers".

If a generation of "rainbow" students are to be convinced of the value and relevance of literary and cultural discourse, we shall have to focus on interface situations. As Gray emphasizes, Southern Africa, as a result of the contiguity of language resources, has produced

a high degree of polymath writers; the literature itself has thrived most in challenging, some would say incongruous, interface situations. The result has not been absorption and domination, but always response and transformation.

(Gray 1985: 9)

Within this context, comparative analyses will play an important role in

relating diverse texts to each other as part of the critique of otherness. Canonized texts of J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Athol Fugard, Thomas Mofolo, André Brink, Sol Plaatje, Njabulo Ndebele, Karel Schoeman, Es'kia Mphahlele and others are obviously important in this regard. But so are a range of non-canonized and non-fictional texts. The revolutionary discourse in the fiction of writers such as Mongane Wally Serote, Sipho Sepamla and Miriam Tlali is a valid expression of self and otherness, yet it is only one kind of representation amongst many others.

Comparative studies are needed to focus on topics which all literatures and related cultural texts (English, Afrikaans and the nine African languages) have in common. These topics include manifestations of apartheid, urbanization (the "Jim comes to Jo'burg" theme is found in all literatures), hunting narratives, and links between oral and written traditions. This kind of focus could at least reduce the sense of otherness, and concurrently acknowledge cultural diversity. There is an obvious need for translations from African language literatures.

In addition to, and linked to, comparatism, methodologies developed for Cultural Studies offer possibilities for the analysis of culture as text and the approach of knowledge as dialogical. Since the discursive frame is inclusive rather than exclusive, this might in turn present new and non-threatening approaches towards otherness. Of particular relevance is the fact that Cultural Studies concerns itself with "the subjective forms by which we live" (Johnson 1986: 280) and "the ways 'texts' and 'discourses' (i.e. cultural practices) are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formations" (Grossberg 1989: 415).

Even with such a wealth of texts at one's disposal, the methodologies of comparatism and Cultural Studies can scarcely avoid the many pitfalls of being othered themselves. Conceptually and essentially, the multitude of literatures other than one's own are experienced as discourses of others. Ngugi, in *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) will not let us forget that the African "reality" cannot authentically be evoked by using colonial language. In addition to linguistic otherness, Fokkema (1993: 123) points out that in Western Europe where frontiers are erased and in Eastern Europe where new boundaries have been drawn, cultural identity has received much attention. South Africa is no exception, and in a situation where Afrikaans has lost its privileged status as one of only two official languages, there are even signs of a resuscitated "laager" mentality developing. "Identity" thus becomes a rhetorical instrument for justifying otherness. Even while acknowledging the importance of cultural relativism, it will therefore be "a strategic decision not to overemphasize the importance of cultural identity",

also locally (Fokkema 1993: 124).

Comparative and discursive methodologies can contribute substantially to the subjectification of the objects of study and in giving voice to the voiceless, the subalterns, the marginalized, the "others" - be they blacks, women, illiterates, the poor, gays, street children, prisoners, the homeless, etc. This may well entail broadening the scope of traditional "literary" studies to include oral, visual and a range of non-fictional texts as representations of otherness.

This approach will undoubtedly allow some sceptics to see the ghost of "cultural holism" (Fokkema 1993: 121) lurking. However, the process of facing the dilemmas of divisiveness does not necessarily imply the acceptance of a modernist holistic approach to "South African" literature or culture. The RDP's reference to "national" culture at best is destined to remain a utopian dream, at least in the foreseeable future. At worst, the ideal may be diametrically opposed to democratic culture, as Degenaar (1993: 55) fears. However, a shared situation can be the non-ideologized point of departure, as was indicated by Breyten Breytenbach (who named himself "the albino terrorist") as early as 1974:

First of all it must be said that a *South African literature* in fact doesn't exist - or if it does then it is simply defined by the South African situation. What we writers share is the specific South African *situation*, but we experience its influence in different ways depending on whether we belong to the exploiters or the victims

(Breytenbach 1986: 79)

Gray's linguistic interfacing has the same kind of focus.

The analysis of a shared situation should ideally also relate self to other. This would mean that the teacher's and the student's own construction of identity, their own ideological presuppositions, cannot be isolated from the field of study. Even those high/low distinctions and cultural institutionalization mechanisms which are indispensable to their own privileging, can and should be studied as part of the cultural power game. Clearly, this requires self-exposure for which few players of the game are prepared.

The brief survey has indicated that there are some important areas of academic reconstruction, and particularly deconstruction, left in the New South Africa. Consequently, we will continue our deconstructive endeavours, play our language games, indulge our academic otherness. We will convince ourselves that otherness is part and parcel of the post-modernist condition, that diversity and multiculturalism are conducive to the tender new democracy. If, along the way, we inevitably become alienated, outsiders in our new country - so be it. We will never complain.

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