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It's the other who makes my portrait: Writing self, character and the other

And as Cixous says - many times - 'no I without you' and 'never I without the Other'.

I'm looking at what this other is - sometimes known as 'you other', sometimes as 'that other' - who makes possible what I know as 'I'.

I'm doing this as a novelist; I speak first and foremost as a novelist (rather than that *other*, an academic critic). It was as novelist that I wrote the full-length exegetical work (for my PhD) which examined the writing of my novel *Neem Dreams* (2003), and in that context issues in writing fiction and in representations of India.

As an Australian, a Westerner, choosing Indian settings and themes (feeling, of course, that they chose me), and as a writer who has found her material outside of Australia before, I was familiar with the troubles that arise out of issues of representation and identity.

In this look at the Other-who-makes-me, three themes emerge:

1. Text creates self: the text I write becomes the other who makes [writes] me.
2. Character as self: the character I write can be read as a portrait of the author.
3. Writing the Other: a recognisable, otherized Other as subject of writing underlines current anxieties.

1 Text creates self

...although we usually think of a self who creates text. In the creation of both novel and book-length exegetical work, it became clear to me that my self and my life were shaped - created or written - by what I was writing to at least the same extent that I, or what I could call my 'self', was shaping or creating the text.

So we can say that as much as the writer creates the text, the text she writes creates the writer - not only the part of the writer which writes, but the writer who participates in life, and where and how she does so.

Some of the ways the text - both novel and exegesis - shaped me:

What I chose to read:

I read novels set in India, I read non-fiction from and about India - history, biographies, cultural commentary. I read Indian magazines and newspapers. Thus my thoughts and imagination were engaged to a great extent by these readings; they were adding to the content of my conscious thoughts, my memories and dreams, and they are now part of my experience and references. This also had implications for what I *didn't* read - while I was reading books from India I was reading fewer from elsewhere.

How I read them:

I read Indian novels with an extra alertness, the way you read as a writer, looking for ways others have said what you are seeking to say, how they have represented both the foreigner's and the Indian's experience of India. I read to understand whether, or how, an Indian writer would write of Indian experience in a way a foreigner could not. I read several daily newspapers and weekly newsmagazines regularly when in India, especially alert both to the particular nuances of Indian English and to the treatment of themes I was pursuing - not only the patents on neem-based products and related intellectual property rights contentions, but the rise of hindutva (the hindu right wing), NRIs (non-resident Indians, usually in the West, usually working in well-paid professions), issues in development and the changing culture of cities and of cosmopolitan Indians.

Who I met, what I talked about, cared about:

Over the years of research for *Neem Dreams* I sought out people to talk to about neem, intellectual property, women's traditional healing, small-scale NGOs and village-based development projects, politics, journalism, residence abroad and so on.

And then there was the range of people you meet when travelling, especially alone, and especially when you travel in a range of classes. And then there were the academics and students in Australian Studies as I became more involved in the India-Australia relationship.

Work and life being especially inextricable on these journeys of research, text and self had harmonious needs and so hardly could be other to each other.

What I listened to:

Sometimes at concerts, sometimes in public places, often with the luxury of CDs at home, I listened to a lot of Indian music - Carnatic (the classical music of the South), contemporary film music and popular music such as Bangara, and fusion with Indian influences (much of the latter from the UK). All this music becomes part of the sound-track of my life, part of the author's portrait in mixed media.

Where I travelled:

My travels in India, from my third time in that country in 1995, which was the first research trip for this novel, until my eighth time in September 2003 for the launch of the novel, these travels took place and were shaped by *Neem Dreams*. I spent more time in big cities - Bombay, Delhi, Madras - than I would have otherwise and have come to know them a little and love them a lot and realise that in spite of their famous and spectacular filth and crowds I would if possible spend a lot more of my life in those cities.

I am so obviously a foreigner in India but it's not an experience new to me, I grew up in an Australia where reffos like my family were foreigners, so a sense of foreignness, of parts of myself as essentially Other, had become part of my sense of myself.

And where I had to be while I was writing it:

The novel was written in three main drafts, each identified with where I lived at the time: an island in the Torres Strait, Brisbane and the Gold Coast, and my life in each place was centred on writing the novel, which took place somewhere quite 'other'. The text therefore dictated the life of the self.

2 Character as Self and as Other; creating character

E.M. Foster says:

We can know more about a fictional character than we can know about any of our fellow creatures because his creator and narrator are one. We might exclaim at this point "If God could tell the story of the Universe the Universe would become fictitious". For this is the principle involved.
(Forster 56)

The story of the creation of a novel is also a story of the growth of the characters that create it.

The creation of a novel is the coming into being of the characters that increasingly drive it.

They come into being from a writer's fantasies, fed by reading and imagining.

They come into being through the developments and changes they go through, through various drafts.

Pandora in *Neem Dreams* began with another name. Her earlier, not-quite-working, too weak character suddenly transmogrified into blazing life with the name Pandora. Andy began as an American but the novel needed an Englishman and he, the real Andy, easily replaced the try-out American Andy. Jade, however, refused to be made an American and remains an Australian working in the USA.

I travelled on behalf of my characters. I went, for example, to the holy city of Varanasi, famous for its burning ghats where bodies are cremated, because one of the novel's characters, Andy, went there, to take his lover's ashes to the Ganges, and I took a dip in the river because he did and got sick because he did.

To create character, it's as if you let your thoughts and dreams be colonised by them. I have dreams, when I've reached this stage of writing a novel, that are not my own but my character's dreams.

Thus your own readings, travel, arguments are on their behalf.

Are they you?

Are they Other, do they make a portrait of their author?

Are my characters a portrait of myself? Are they a kind of offspring or progeny?

In some sense the character is a portrait not of the author but of writing itself, of imagination, of the possibilities always open to be otherwise, do otherwise, take a different path.

3 Writing the 'Other', writing as another

Writing an Indian character as a non-Indian raises issues that arise out of this cultural moment of anxiety over representation, appropriation, identity politics and so on.

Uh-oh, hang on a minute, she checks herself, am I allowed to think of Jolly as *sweet*? Sweet, that word meaning a gentle, attractive demeanour, you can't call just anyone sweet; sinister meanings are attributed to adjectives applied to identifiable Others. Let's decide, she decides again, that there are sweet people in all the locations of the world and that I mean the same thing by it wherever I am, though that's not the end of it according to the professional perversities of certain pundits, critics keen to crow over forbidden perceptions, and whatever you might say about Others is forbidden. Never mind. (Baranay 56)

This very idea of an identifiable Other is a problem.

People are otherised according to certain categories such as nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on, all of them reflecting, and/or constructed by, particular cultures, and disguising at least as much as they reveal about a person, or indeed, a character, which to a novelist is the same thing. However, I begin to identify the same kind of problems with this kind of taxonomy as I have with the standard categorisations of sexual character as gay, straight or bi.

In *Neem Dreams*, this is Andy:

He knows he is not obvious, he keeps checking. ...If he takes some pride in passing for straight, it has something to do with the fact he would feel a more honest unease being identified as anything else. He just happens to live with a man. He just happens to think even man and woman are categories that conceal suspicions that identity is not contained in them. Let alone that sexuality is not a category that tells the truth about the selection of urges and actions that it, sexuality, is supposed to contain. (Baranay 124)

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, writing on sexuality and pure difference, in her brilliant essay 'Axiomatic', provides a long list of dichotomies that could be substituted for the heterosexual-homosexual one, beginning thus:

*Even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people.

*To some people, the nimbus to "the sexual" seems scarcely to extend beyond the boundaries of discrete genital acts; to others it enfolds them loosely or floats virtually free of them. (Sedgwick 243)

And so on.

Similarly, the dichotomies of western/oriental, Indian/foreigner, etc. seem insufficient and even absurd in many contexts on a planet of NRIs [non-resident Indians], a rising middle-class in the developing world, globalism, globalisation and global souls.

It seems there will be far more revealed about who we are if we say, for example:

*Even identical nationality means very different things to different people.

*To some people the nimbus of 'nationality', 'ethnicity', 'race' [and so on] seems scarcely to extend beyond the boundaries of discrete bureaucratic acts, to others it enfolds them...

If we need dichotomies to understand people, Other people, we could make them more meaningful than the standard national/foreigner, black/white, ethnic/Anglo.

Perhaps: provincial/cosmopolitan, parochial/global, English-speaking/not: these seem to matter more, or matter differently, in today's world.

My novel was always going to have an Indian character, a woman, a Hindu, an English-speaking, perhaps 'westernised' Indian; it was a very early given of the book. Meenakshi, the main Indian character in *Neem Dreams*, is based on many women I met in India and the USA; some I spoke with briefly, some I spent more time with, visited at work and at home, met for meals, observed interacting with others. She and her family are based also on women in novels and memoirs from India; for example Nayantara Sahgal whose beloved uncle was Jawaharlal Nehru (India's first Prime Minister). Sahgal says

The Chinese, European, English and American visitors who came to Anand Bhawan [the family home] did not seem in the least foreign or different from ourselves in any way that mattered, joined as they were to us by a common view and vision of the world. (Sahgal, Introduction [no page number])

This 'common view and vision', of course, is shared, in instances like these, by people whose entrée into the household was a sign of class affiliation.

I think that the middle classes have a culture that overlaps several other categories of cultural identity such as nationality and ethnicity. This gives me an entrée into a sense of familiarity with some of the dynamics of Meenakshi's family.

Meenakshi is closer to me in some ways than, say, an Australian woman from a very different background and life experience; Meenakshi comes from a middle-class, or bourgeois, family that valued education, conversation and travel abroad, and had long rubbed shoulders with people of various national backgrounds.

In *Neem Dreams* we first see Meenakshi through Pandora's eyes:

This Meenakshi...was expecting someone. Probably a movie producer come to beg her to play the heroic warrior princess in a cinematic action romance...

Meenakshi offered her hand...her handshake firm, the skin silken. Her jeans signified, what, she'd worn jeans before, they were as natural to her as the drapes of a sari, as natural as her elegant youth, the fall of licorice-black hair, her radiant confidence. She lived in a hybrid space, was familiar with the foreign, empathised with the existentially alien. (Baranay 4)

That is near the start of the novel, and tells the reader, as well as Pandora, that she is not about to meet a version of the 'typical' Indian wife. There is no typical Indian wife, it hardly needs to be said - to quote Sahgal again:

[T]here is no "average" in India as there is in the West, because there is not the same degree of uniformity in the way Indians live. There are many different levels of living, not just the simple horizontal divisions of the upper, lower and middle classes. (Saghal 17)

This must be even more true half a century later. Still, you need only ask the next few people you talk to, 'What is a typical Indian wife?' to find this mythical creature is illiterate and bullied. I'm not saying many Indian wives are not. The point is the idea of the Other often relies on stereotypes and ideological constructs, those of post-colonial correctitude as much as those of earlier Orientalising; and a novelist is, I believe, well advised to disengage from any discourse based upon ideas of the Other that prohibit or inhibit the characters that desire to be written.

Thus my own creation of this character did not come from the 'appropriate anything' aesthetic of postmodernism, but what Frank Moorhouse calls

...the cosmopolitan or traditional position about the capacity of the imagination that can go across centuries, genders, ages and cultures with the only limitation being the self-recognised limitations of the writer. Empathy and intimacy are obviously two tools of a type of inquiry into the other...having intimacy...having empathy and having the distance that comes from not being a member of whatever groups can be a powerful tool for observing. (McDonnell 721)

This identifies the position from which I took on the writing of Meenakshi. It was from a sense of wanting to extend the way imagination can reveal the necessary knowledge. It is to what Moorhouse calls 'cosmopolitanism' - being a citizen of the world - finally, that Meenakshi and I give highest value. It was what made her feel at home in the mongrel city of New York; and it was what made me able to imagine her there, and follow her home to India.

Before the novel was published, Australian agents and publishers told me that the India and the characters in *Neem Dreams* were not recognisable to them.

The novel was published in India, to a very positive response from critics and readers, who pointed especially to the authenticity of its Indian themes and voices. Readers said things to me like 'how do you know my family!' and 'you have got the Indian middle classes *down*.'

What's going on here? I am asked by people who have not read the book about being 'allowed' to write an Indian character or what 'they' would think of it. We live in an age of anxiety about representations of the Other: in Australia, Indigenous writers have made clear (understandably, I should say) that non-Indigenous writers need to observe certain protocols, including consultations and permissions, to write Indigenous characters and stories into their works, and they're better off leaving these themes alone. I have come up against the resulting anxiety in seeking funding to complete a small novel of my own, set in the Torres Strait, where I once lived. Although the narrating character is a white Australian, and the protocols of consultation do not apply to my material, it was made clear to me that the setting and the presence of Indigenous characters made the project insupportable.

Well, no such prohibitions have been expressed in India, and in my experience there is both a vigilant and tough-minded resistance to the orientalisising of the foreign gaze, and a generous openness to the evidence that India can inscribe itself on a writer who submits to it. The idea of the 'Other', then, becomes one that can create the 'I' of the writer in many ways, including throwing the very idea into the chaos of unstable ideas out of which unpredictable imaginings and writings emerge.

Text, character, and identifiable but problematically identifiable 'other', then, go towards making a portrait of a writer but all portraits, unless you are Dorian Grey, remain the way they were when created while the writer goes on being shaped and changed by new texts and new characters, both other to and inextricable from, her sense of self.

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TEXT

Vol 8 No 2 October 2004

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

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