

Postcolonial Studies in Spain

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Abstract

This article provides a general overview of the state of Postcolonial Studies in Spain at the present moment. After attempting a definition of the discipline, which is a minefield of ambiguities and contradictions, a brief outline of the history of this new area of studies is provided. Emphasis is given to the pioneers of Postcolonial Studies as, thanks to their efforts, a whole new range of literary studies was made available to Spanish students. During the late eighties and nineties, the former Commonwealth literature, now generally known by its more fashionable name of Postcolonial Studies, really gained momentum in the Spanish academy. Not only previously unknown writers but also postcolonial theory become compulsory reading for anyone working in this area. The article concludes by celebrating the growing enthusiasm for the discipline as the selected bibliography amply demonstrates.

Key words: Postcolonial Studies, academic institutions, Spain.

In little over twenty years, counting from the publication of Edward Said's landmark work, *Orientalism* (1978), which in many ways 'set the ball rolling', as far as the study of colonial and postcolonial discourse is concerned, Postcolonial Studies has become consolidated as a distinct subdiscipline of literary studies, and in the Spanish context, of *Filología Inglesa*. This article will provide a general overview of the state of Postcolonial Studies in Spain at the present moment. Owing to the diversity of the area (practically all the former British colonies — with the notable exception of the United States — and its multiple names: Commonwealth Literature, New Literatures in English, Postcolonial Literature), the article in no way attempts to cover all the Spanish academics and enthusiasts working in the area. In keeping with the editorial policy of *Links & Letters*, the aim is to acquaint the non-specialist with some of the activities and concerns of an increasing number of scholars fascinated by the literature produced in and about previously silenced peoples of the so-called Third World. As, inevitably, somebody somewhere will be left out, I wish to stress that the emphasis is on areas of research rather than on individual scholars.

The tricky area of definition

Before embarking on the main purpose of this article, the survey of Postcolonial Studies in Spain, a few words should be said about what is, should,

or can be understood to be 'Postcolonial' Studies. At first glance, it seems obvious that postcolonial literature is merely a more politically correct, up-to-date name for the old Commonwealth Literature, with its connotations of marginality, exoticism and irrelevance for real, 'quality' literature. It is true that the term 'Commonwealth Literature', because of the foregrounding of the literary influence of Britain inherent in the title, has been dismissed as being somewhat obsolete in the contemporary, more egalitarian world¹ to be replaced by a variety of slightly less unacceptable terms such as 'World Literatures in English' or 'New Literatures in English', themselves generally superseded by the politically charged 'postcolonial.'

'Postcolonial', with or without a hyphen, appears to be the term that has survived the battle of names despite its internal ambiguities. But does the 'post' mean *after* colonialism, that is, only concerning the period subsequent to independence? In this case the literature of Zimbabwe, to give just one example, can only be studied as postcolonial literature after 1980 when the former Southern Rhodesia achieved independence. Or can we take 'post' to contain an element of *resistance to* colonial paradigms and an attempt to challenge preconceived ideologies? In the former case the scope of the area is artificially restricted, the actual date of decolonization varying enormously from one country to another. Thirty-three years separate India's independence from that of Zimbabwe but what we could call *resisting* literature was being produced well before the political independence of either country.² As far as the second definition of *postcolonial* is concerned, the field opens up to cover a much wider area in temporal terms but perhaps inadvertently suggests a rather self-defeating purpose. Writing *back* to the colonial metropolis perpetuates the centrality of, in this case, Britain as the starting point from which postcolonial literatures have emerged and the yardstick by which they should be evaluated.

On another level, the geographical boundaries of postcolonial literature have yet to be established. As mentioned above, the United States, by common consent, tends to be outside the area as, it is argued, they achieved independence centuries before the other countries and, therefore, have had time to build up a literature of their own. The argument is flimsy, as India may have been a British colony until relatively recently (1947) but the literature of the subcontinent dates back three thousand years, unless by *literature* it is taken for granted that only the literature composed *in English* is of interest to Postcolonial Studies.³ The United States apart, therefore, what we

1. The Association of Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies (ACLALS) preserves the 'old' title for economic rather than political reasons as the Commonwealth Institute is the source of most of its funding.
2. Southern Rhodesia was the childhood home of Doris Lessing who criticized the ideology of colonialism in many of her novels. In India the 'Big Three', Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, were publishing their early novels in the 1930s.
3. While few people working in postcolonial studies nowadays would subscribe to Thomas Macaulay's unfortunate comment in 1835 that «a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia», it is true that Indian or

could call the postcolonial world covers all those countries which were once colonized by a European power, mainly British, French, Spanish or Portuguese, in other words between a quarter and a third of the globe, a large area of study by any criterion. Within the discipline there are scholars who argue for the exclusion of the so-called white settler countries, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, from the category of postcolonial as they argue that race (that is non-whiteness) was the defining category of all social and political interaction in the colonies.⁴

A short history of the discipline in Spain

Without a doubt the pioneer of Commonwealth Literature studies in Spain was Professor Doireann Macdermott, who, in the late seventies, drew comparisons between the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers in America with the early white settlers in Australia. Professor Macdermott's work opened up a whole new range of literary studies, which at this early stage, tended to focus on the settler colonies of Australia and Canada. In 1978 she set up a course on the literature of early explorations in the University of Barcelona, the first of its kind in a Spanish university. She visited Australia in 1980, which would be the first of many trips to Commonwealth countries during which she made valuable contacts with writers and academics. Currently retired from the University of Barcelona, Prof. Doireann Macdermott was responsible for the organization of several significant conferences, among which we must highlight the EACLALS (European Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies) conference held in Sitges in 1984.

The work of Prof. Macdermott to encourage the study of postcolonial literature in the Spanish context should not be underestimated, particularly when we think about the situation of Commonwealth Literature in the United Kingdom in the fifties and sixties. In those days writers from the former colonies, especially Africa, the West Indies and India, were not always taken seriously as artists. They were often seen as spokespeople for their countries and their work was often regarded in a somewhat patronising fashion. Before the establishment of Heinemann's African Writers Series, they had difficulty in getting their work published as there appeared to be no obvious market for it. This may seem hard to believe nowadays when one thinks about the apparent ease with which the names of non-white writers are connected with some of the most prestigious publishing houses in the UK and the USA. Gradually writers like V.S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (then known as James Ngugi) and R.K. Narayan crept onto university syl-

African literature written in languages other than English receives scant, if any, critical attention on the part of Western academics.

4. For further discussion of the problematics of the terminology, readers are referred to Theo D'haen's «What is Post/Colonial Literature, and why are they saying such terrible things about it?» in issue N° 4 of *Links & Letters*.

labi and came to be taught as 'Commonwealth Literature'. Slowly but surely interest grew for this kind of writing, proof of which was the formation in 1964 of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) and the subsequent establishment of regional branches including all of the English-speaking world.

As interest in this 'new' literature grew in those countries where English is the native language or where it is the medium of education, ('new' from the point of view of geography, content, use of the English language, social, political and artistic intent), teachers and scholars in other countries where English Studies were quickly catching on also discovered the richness and diversity of the poems, novels and plays written by non-British and non-American authors. In the seventies and even early eighties, the Commonwealth authors introduced in Spanish university classes tended to be the already established writers who inevitably came to represent their part of the world to the students – V.S. Naipaul (Trinidad), Patrick White (Australia), Margaret Laurence (Canada), R.K. Narayan (India) and Chinua Achebe (Nigeria) – there being no time or space to introduce more than one writer from each particular area. However, the groundwork had been done and the field of English Studies was widening to accommodate other styles of writing and other worldviews despite the fact that at this stage very few English departments in Spain could offer even the token Commonwealth Literature subject. Bearing this in mind the *Festschrift from Lleida for Professor Doireann Macdermott*, which was published by the Estudio General de Lleida in 1990 must be seen as a well-deserved tribute to the pioneering efforts of a person who believed in the future of a marginal area of study. Many of her former students, now leading scholars in their own right, contributed to this volume.

The boom of Postcolonial Studies

It was during the late eighties and nineties when Commonwealth Literature studies, now generally known by its more up-to-date name of Postcolonial Studies, really gained momentum in the Spanish academy. In part this was due to its becoming a fashionable discipline within the Anglo-Saxon world. In particular the avalanche of jargon, otherwise known as Postcolonial Theory, which has been generated around the basic idea that western discourse has repressed and silenced three-quarters of the world's population has become compulsory reading for anyone working in the area. Although in many cases Postcolonial Theory is a useful tool for analyzing non-Western texts, the opacity of the writings of some of the acknowledged leaders in the field, for example Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, makes interpretation of the theory a far more daunting exercise than coming to terms with the social, political and cultural background of the literary text itself.

If the truth must be told, from the point of view of theory, Spanish academics tend to draw on already established, dare I say fashionable, theories and theorists, rather than venture to try out a theory of their own, which

means that Spanish scholars are rarely cited in the work of other academics. In all fairness, this is the result of a somewhat pathological obsession with Postcolonial Theory which in part reflects the sad truth that any paper submitted for publication which does not cite at least one member of the 'Holy Trinity' of Postcolonial Theory (Said, Spivak and Bhabha) is automatically rejected. Thus a self-perpetuating discourse discourages scholars who are not working in English-speaking countries from proposing new ways of reading and discussing *postcolonial* literature.

One of the benefits of the reform of the Spanish university curricula that took place at various stages during the nineties was the inclusion of post-colonial literature as an optional subject in many centres. By this time the University of Barcelona was no longer the sole promoter of Postcolonial Studies in Spain as scholars from the Universities of Oviedo, Tarragona, Lleida and Santiago de Compostela among others, were offering courses on South African, Canadian and Caribbean writers. The last ten to fifteen years has witnessed the elaboration of doctoral theses on postcolonial writers and themes, which in turn has allowed aspirants to tenured posts, albeit a small number, to opt for a specialised profile in this area of *Filología Inglesa*, as opposed to the more traditional profiles of 'English' literature. As shown in the bibliography at the end of this article, in recent years there has been a spate of research on numerous writers and works with a colonial background. Spanish academics have tended to concentrate their research on individual writers and/or texts rather than on strictly theoretical issues. It must be said, however, that writers from all over the British Commonwealth are represented showing the diversity of interests of people working in the field.

As far as conferences are concerned, recent years show the growing enthusiasm for the discipline as more and more conferences are being organized by Spanish universities in the area of Postcolonial Studies. To mention just a few recent events:

- the University of Oviedo hosted the EACLALS Conference in 1996. EACLALS, the European branch of the Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies, holds its triennial conference in one of the European countries where it has a substantial membership. EACLALS boasts a very high Spanish membership with colleagues regularly presenting papers at the triennial conferences of both EACLALS (the regional association) and ACLALS (the world association).
- the Universidade de Vigo held its 2nd International Conference on Postcolonial Studies in 2001.
- the Universitat de Barcelona and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona jointly commemorated India's 50th anniversary of independence in 1997.
- the University of Valladolid organized the First International Conference on India in 2000 and in October 2001 hosted the second edition.
- among the new research centres that have been founded in recent years, in particular we should like to highlight the new Australian Studies Cen-

tre in the Universitat de Barcelona, directed by Susan Ballyn. In February 2000 the UB hosted the First Australian Conference *Changing Geographies*.

These more specialized conferences have been an attempt to bring together scholars and enthusiasts from various disciplines working within Postcolonial Studies in Spain.

As far as graduate courses are concerned, the Universitat de Barcelona has been offering a post-graduate course in Postcolonial Cultures since 1995, also offered on line as from the academic year 2001-2002. Among the academic journals published in Spain, most of which are obliged to cover a wide range of topics within English studies, the *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* has devoted two special issues to postcolonial themes, thanks to the efforts of Juan Ignacio Oliva (see bibliography).

Individual practitioners rather than institutions have encouraged the growth of scholarly interest in the literature and culture of the former colonized countries. Doireann Macdermott was the first convenor of the panel on 'New Literatures in English' in AEDEAN, the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies, and her passion for these 'other' literatures inspired many to follow in her wake. Dolors Collellmir took over from Macdermott and successfully ran the panel for four years during which time it was well attended and supported in the annual conferences. At the moment Isabel Carrera is the convenor of the panel.

To conclude, the present situation of Postcolonial Studies in Spain seems to be a very healthy state of affairs, with an increasing number of scholars willing and determined to specialize in this area. That anything remotely related to this field of inquiry (and to be honest, it is difficult not to find some connection) allows academics of all tendencies and ideologies to clamber onto the postcolonial bandwagon does not invalidate it as a powerful and stimulating area of research and a highly rewarding course(s) to teach. The number of books and articles that are being published by Spanish academics, and the indefatigable endeavours behind the organization of seminars and conferences all over the country prove that Postcolonial Studies have caught on in a big way.

Further Reading

NOTE: The author would like to point out that the following bibliography does not by any means include all the work being done in the field of Postcolonial Studies in Spain. It has been designed merely to show the variety and scope of the research of Spanish scholars.

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