

Colonial, Postcolonial, Decolonial and Neocolonial Experiences: Rewriting Cultural History

Post/de/colonial Strategies in Latin America's Literary and Cultural Discourses

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Abstract:

Known as one of 20th century currents of thought which greatly contributed to Comparative Literature, Postcolonial Studies caused a rupture in the discipline's main axis when they put into check its ethnocentric character, based on a center/periphery dichotomy that focused on European and non-European productions from an uneven and hierarchic perspective. By refusing to approach the literary and cultural production of European ex-colonies as extensions of what was produced in their metropolises, Postcolonial critics have shaken the basis of Western academy and have raised important questions still present in the agenda of international debates. In this paper, we examine some of these issues, and discuss the role they had in a context as that of Latin America, where the political independence from European matrixes had already occurred since the first half of the 19th century, but cultural and economic dependence is still a heavy burden.

Keywords: Post-Colonial Strategies, Latin America, Literary and Cultural Discourses

Among the twentieth century currents of thought that have contributed to Comparative Literature, Post-Colonial Studies hold a special place, due to the questioning they have developed about the ethnocentric character of the discipline. By refusing to acknowledge the literary and cultural production of European ex-colonies as extensions of what was produced in the metropolises, these studies brought about a new perspective to Comparative Literature, based on the search of a dialogue on equal footing that recognizes the heterogeneity of the subjects involved in the process of comparison and highlights important issues still present in the agenda of international debates. In this paper, we will examine some of these issues and will discuss the role they have had in a universe like Latin America's, where the political independence from European matrixes has already occurred in almost every case since the first half of the nineteenth century, but cultural and economic dependence still is a heavy burden.

In the Introduction to his *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said has affirmed that, although he does not believe "that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic history,... [they are] very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure (1993: XXII). Culture and its aesthetic forms derive, he continues, from historical experience, and stories are "at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world," in addition to being "the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" (XII). Literature constitutes one of the most important ways to express these perceptions and it is through its means that the daily experience of colonized peoples has been most powerfully codified. Thus, the so-called "Postcolonial literatures" have constituted a relevant category within the area of Postcolonial Studies, and such category has usually been employed in relation to literatures in English, or, more precisely, to those literary forms which have accompanied the projection and decline of British Imperialism. Imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree, Said

believes, that it is impossible “to read one without in some way dealing with the other” (84). And several other critics ratify this idea when they point to the existence of a complicity between nineteenth century colonial ideology and the emergence of English literature as an academic discipline in the colonies. As the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* say, for example, “Literature was made as central to the cultural enterprise of Empire as monarchy was to its political formations (Ashcroft et al., 1989, p. 4).

Fearing that direct military action in the colonies might encourage rebellions, the English administrators tried to conceal or disguise their material investments by developing a wide cultural policy which had as one of its major weapons the teaching of English literature. By presenting the English literary production as an example of uncompromised humanism, turned to the perfecting of human formation, the colonizers opposed to the negative image of domination a seductive aesthetic ideal which raised them as a model. The immediate and most hazardous consequence of this strategy was the internalization of the colonizer’s gaze and of the entire world view represented by it. The reactions to this attitude mark the beginning of Postcolonial Literature, which can be characterized exactly by its resistance to colonization and its forms of reification of the subject. Contrary to the colonial writers who exalted the colonizers’ literary and aesthetic production, and conscious of the need to change this situation, writers coming from the English ex-colonies began to produce a highly critical literature turned to deconstruct this view by denouncing the evils of colonization. This body of literature, though named with a prefix that indicated a notion of aftermath, was rather a solid reaction against colonization’s oppression and exploitation, an anti-sort of literature that had as its antagonist the previous production.

The interest this literature raised among intellectuals, both from their own locus of production and from the Western world, gave birth to an entire reflection on the issue of decolonization that has been labeled in Western universities as Postcolonial Theory, that is, in the words of Pramod Nayar, “a set of critical approaches,

ideas and critical methodologies that enable [scholars] to ‘read’ colonial/ colonizing practices and structures,” or, rather, “a complex analytical strategy that foregrounds... *difference* in the relationship – political, social, economic and cultural – between First/Western and Third/Eastern worlds” (2010, p. 4). And just as postcolonial literature challenged the Western world view by criticizing the philosophical presuppositions upon which it was based, like the binary oppositions that disregard alterity, Postcolonial Theory was turned to deconstructing European theories by means of a profound reflection upon the local element and the dialogue established between this element and Western tradition. A theory like Homi Bhabha’s, for example, emerges from a reflection about the nature of postcolonial cultural production and the different types of expressions they present. Be it in Linguistics, Philosophy or Literary Theory, Postcolonial theories always work in a subversive manner, with the aim of dismantling *a priori* formulations present in European thought and of unmasking the complexities hidden behind statements of a monist or universalizing sort, in favor of a plural and non-excluding view. They are, in short, a project turned to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and above all questioning the colonial past.

It is in this sense that Postcolonial theories have as a basic trait an eminently political character. In their endeavor to develop a reflection that might account for the differences of postcolonial literary and cultural production and might approach European tradition from a critical view that would put into check the ethnocentric nature of the traditional perspective, these theories aim at establishing a dialogue on equal footing between previously antagonistic voices and at deconstructing the hierarchic dichotomy disguised under the myth of aesthetic sacredness. The supposed neutrality of literary studies, so much stressed by Arnold in the nineteenth century and still resonant nowadays in works like Harold Bloom’s, is unveiled as a clearly ideological proposal of maintenance of the integrity and sovereignty of Europe in the face of its multiple and barbarous Others, and the dichotomic constructions like center

vs. periphery or metropolitan vs. colonized, supported by this view, are challenged on their bases, giving way to a different logic according to which the alternative, excluding element of cartesian rationalism is replaced by the possibility of an addition.

Inasmuch as the political neutrality of traditional literary studies is revealed as fallacious, so is the claim for universality which has accompanied Western thought throughout the entire modern era. In their attempt to define categories that could be generalized to all places and times, what Europeans did, consciously or not, was to extend to the whole world the categories of their own culture, thus transforming a peculiar and historical aspect into norms to be observed. As a result of this view Africa was seen by Hegel as a continent “outside history” and African literature was considered as non-existing by the European *intelligentsia* (Aschcroft et al., 1989, p. 159). The forms of African art challenged so much European aesthetic conceptions, that critics could not recognize them as art objects, thus classifying them as “exotic.” It was as a reaction to this difficulty of recognizing the Other, or rather, of dealing with alterity, proper of the colonizing project, that a Postcolonial writer such as Achebe has declared that he would like to see the word “universal” banned from any discussion about African literature “until such a time as people ceased to use it as a synonym for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe (1975, p. 13), and that a writer like Chakrabarty has affirmed that it was necessary to “provincialize” the knowledge claims of “the Europe” that modern imperialism and nationalism have made universal (1990, p. 228-47).

It was with this purpose of “provincializing”, or rather, relativizing, contextualizing, European *episteme*, associated with the violence of colonization, that Postcolonial theories took on the charge of subverting and transforming European currents of thought critically. Hence the pertinence of a remark like Leela Gandhi’s that Postcolonial Studies constituted a kind of “meeting point” or “battleground” for a variety of disciplines and theories, sometimes even antagonistic as Marxism and Poststructuralism or Post-

modernism (1998, p. 150). Postcolonial writers and critics developed a real battle for the control of the word, which initially took the form of a search for the authentic or even the autochthonous element and came to the point of rejecting the colonizer's language, but later evolved into a movement of appropriation of his language and culture. This shift from an abrogation to the appropriation of the colonizer's language, which can be represented in the British context by the well-known passage from *The Tempest*, in which Caliban switches from "unlearning English" to the project of "learning how to curse in the master's tongue" (Shakespeare, 1881, I, ii), is what marks the most recent and affirmative phase of Postcolonial production. Now, instead of the previous nostalgic and acritical perspective of wishing to return to a utopian pre-colonial past, what is searched for is a kind of creative appropriation, an intersection of colonial languages with local themes, which Homi Bhabha very adequately designated as "mimicry" (1994, p. 86).

For this Postcolonial critic, "mimicry" is the sly weapon of colonial civility, an ambivalent mixture of deference and disobedience. By making use of this device, the colonized gives the impression that he is observing the political and semantic imperatives of colonial discourse, but at the same time he distorts the basis of such a discourse by articulating it, as he himself says, "syntagmatically with a range of differential knowledges and positionalities that both estrange its 'identity' and produce new forms of knowledge, new modes of differentiation, new sites of power" (1998, p. 120). "Mimicry" inheres in the necessary and multiple acts of translation which oversee the passage from colonial vocabulary to its anti-colonial usage, and as such it inaugurates, as Leela Gandhi affirms, "the process of anti-colonial self-differentiation through the logic of inappropriate appropriation" (1998, p. 150). The most significant anti-colonial writers are "mimic men," for, by mixing the European novel with local aspects, or by introducing a polyphony of local voices into the colonizer's language, they transgress the orthodox boundaries of "literariness," based on European patterns, and give birth to irrelevant and inquiring new forms.

Although Postcolonial Studies have originated in the Anglo-Saxon academic and intellectual milieu and have been devoted at the beginning to the English language world, they are no longer restricted to this context, having on the contrary produced important fruits in linguistic circuits as the francophonic, the Hispanic and the lusophonic ones. However, in each one of these spheres there are historical specificities which must always be considered. In the Anglo-Saxon context itself, there is a distinction frequently made between settler colonies, like Canada and Australia, and colonies of intervention, such as India, which express very different concerns as regards the trauma of colonization. And still within the same sphere one cannot treat on equal terms the case of the Commonwealth countries and that of the United States, which changes from a subaltern position to one of domination and comes to identify its literature in the twentieth century with the canon of European production. Moreover, within the United States, one cannot disregard the differences between the canonic production and that of the unprivileged groups that have been fighting a real battle for the conquest of the right to speak.

But the point does not stop here. There is a factor of complication in the core of Postcolonial relations which is often left aside in the discussions about the subject: it is that which Slemon has denominated as the “modern theater of neocolonialist international relations” (in Childs & Williams, 1997, p. 5). Although the critics mostly preoccupied with the issue have turned their discussion to those contexts neocolonized by the former colonizers, as it is the case of India and most of the modern African nations, cultural and economic neocolonialism has become a common trait of international relations in the twentieth century; hence Gayatri Spivak’s remark that “we live in a post-colonial neocolonized world” (1990, 166). And it is only when we take these questions into account that we can understand in its complexity a case as that of Latin America in which most of the countries have acquired independence from their European matrixes since the first half of the nineteenth cen-

ture, yet, they have transferred their process of subordination on the cultural and economic levels to other colonizing nations.

Although Postcolonial Theory had as its point of departure the reaction against colonial discourse emanated in the English-speaking world named as Postcolonial literature, it was extended in the academic milieu to include any type of discourse aimed at deconstructing relations of domination and abuse or any type of reflection that might not recognize heterogeneity or alterity, and it is in this sense that it has played a relevant role in several different contexts and areas of knowledge. Yet, due to this wider perspective, a need to distinguish or specify contextual differences has also been made evident. Thus, in Latin America, scholars who studied the long process of colonization that the continent had undergone, developed a theory which they named as Decolonialization, that is, a process whereby non-white nations and ethnic groups strive to secure freedom from their European masters. Postcoloniality as well as decolonization are used, especially in Postcolonial Theory, to describe resistance. Yet, decolonization seeks freedom from colonial forms of thinking, to revive native, local, and vernacular forms of knowledge by questioning and overturning European categories and epistemologies. For Enrique Dussel, modernity has begun in the fifteenth century with the discovery of America, and for Aníbal Quijano, European colonial domination was accompanied by an entire cultural complex known as European modernity and rationality that was established as a universal paradigm of knowledge. Thus, the most important aspect of decolonization for him is to liberate the production of knowledge, of communication and of reflection from the ties of European ideas of modernity and rationality.

This claim made by Quijano, and later endorsed by other critics like Walter Dignolo, Zulma Palermo, Rita Segato and María Lugones, among others, is present in one way or another in the strategies employed by Decolonial Theory to develop a way of thinking or a reflection that, rather than incorporating European ideas and conceptualizations, may establish a dialogue on equal footing with them. The consciousness of the need for this dialogue

comes from the old times of colonization, but it gradually gains its strength, and is expressed through different forms along the centuries, as for example when they range from abrogation to appropriation. In the field of Language and Literature, let us recall the polemics, coming from Romanticism, about the existence of an American Spanish or a Brazilian Portuguese, or the discussions about the permanence of an American baroque style which has become a kind of *modus vivendi* in the continent, and has constantly reappeared in movements such as the so-called narrative “boom” of the mid-twentieth century. Here, by way of exemplification, we will mention a few cases in which its appropriation has been particularly prominent, generating debates that are very close to those found today in the arena of Post- and Decolonial Studies.

It is well known that Brazilian Modernism had its origins in the assimilation of distinct contributions from the several European Vanguards of the early twentieth century, yet, in their process of assimilation these contributions went through a rigorous critical filter which not only mixed them together, but also modified them considerably, giving birth to a new product that kept visible traits of its former identities, but carried at the same time other elements which granted it with a different profile. Moreover, in this process, the Modernist writers also cast a critical look at the Brazilian tradition, mainly from the Romantic period – the first movement that had attempted to construct a national literary canon – and incorporated many of its aspects too, adding them to the ones above mentioned, and consequently stressing the heterogeneity of the new product. The result was an aesthetic movement with a highly distinct profile which, though marked by a preoccupation of defining an ontological identity (the notion of Brazilianess), had plurality as its basic trait. Brazil was not to them a mere Indian nation, as the Romantic writers who had portrayed the native as a symbol of nationality had idealized it to be, but rather the product of the fusion of distinct ethnic and cultural groups that coexisted in a constant tension, and this tension could usually be detected in the main works of the time. Anthropophagy, the central image of the

movement, pointed not only to the ingestion of European contributions and to the importance of the autochthonous element – it was perhaps the aspect of indigenous cultural mostly criticized by Europeans – but also to the critical assimilation of the local tradition itself, which resurged again, yet with a different face, in the new sign (Coutinho, 2000).

As well as Brazilian Modernism's concept of Anthropophagy, Spanish-American Indigenism of the mid-twentieth century, represented by figures such as José María Arguedas and Miguel Ángel Asturias, also played a significant role in relation to the appropriation of European forms and their transformation into something new, which maintained, however, several aspects of the appropriated form. Not to speak of the language alone of the novels – a mixed sort of Spanish characterized by words and expressions coming from indigenous cultures, by a special rhythm and a cadence proper of those cultures and by a very peculiar type of syntax – the form itself of these works was very different from the ones from which they had derived. And it suffices to recall as evidence the lyricism of these authors' novels, often marked by poetic constructions in indigenous languages, their circular narrative structure that breaks up with traditional linearity, and their multiple and ambivalent world view, which constantly oscillates between the Spanish and the indigenous cultural framework and is marked precisely by the unresolved tension between these two worlds. Here also the authors effected a selective assimilation not only of the language and of the various forms of European literature, but also of the very Indigenist production of previous Spanish American generations – such as that of the 1920's – which criticized the system of domination that oppressed the native peoples but did not manage to deal deeply with their culture. In the case of Arguedas and Asturias, the indigenous universe was represented from within; hence Ángel Rama's use of the term "narrative transculturation" to refer to their works (Rama, 1982).

Another clear example of this phenomenon of appropriation of European forms by Latin American writers is what happened in

the mid-twentieth century with the so-called “marvelous realism.” Having incorporated on the one hand different aspects from the European realist tradition, and on the other hand the pure magical element of fairy tales and of the Euro-North American fantastic tradition, the writers of magical realism effected a critical filter of all these contributions, and gave origin to a new expression, to a kind of plural syntagm marked exactly by the non-excluding character of the elements which compose it. Unlike what happens in the sphere of the fantastic, in which the reader is forced to choose between two incompatible systems, in marvelous realism the natural coexists with the supernatural element, and the contradiction between the two terms is no longer incompatible: on the contrary, both the realist and the marvelous codes are affirmed (Chiampi, 1980, p. 145). Thus, realist scenes like those found in the traditional Realist novels of the nineteenth century are narrated side by side with supernatural passages, and the result is a multiple, plural, and contradictory universe in which the coexistence of previously excluding elements is made possible. The dichotomic logic of alternation, proper of Western metaphysics is therefore put into check and the possibility of a different, hybrid or paradoxical logic, based on the element of addition (“and,” rather than “or”) is proposed.

The forms of appropriation have always been frequent in the literatures of Latin America to the point of justifying the statement that it is one of their most prominent traits, but it is undeniable that the Postcolonial and Decolonial theories developed from the 1970’s on had a relevant role not only in making these forms more visible, but also in calling attention to the importance of encouraging such procedures and of extending them to every type of production that has remained until then at the margin of official recognition. Moreover, they brought about a consciousness of the need to constantly contextualize such procedures to make clear the differences between the two terms of the process. Afro-Brazilian or Afro-Cuban literary production, for instance, have assimilated a series of traits from the production of similar groups in the United States; yet, they have often expressed their authors’ concern with registering their

differences, and the same can be observed if we trace a comparison between other ethnic groups in the two contexts. In the Neocolonial Latin American context, issues as that of the social class are so significant that they appear in almost every case and are frequently shown as inseparable from the marks of ethnocultural identities.

And as well as in literary production, in the field of the discourses on literature the same phenomenon may be observed. It is true that since the nineteenth century there already existed a great preoccupation with the constitution of a critical discourse based on a reflection upon Latin American literary production and with the emergence of theories that might establish a dialogue with those coming from Europe, as it is evidenced by the solid tradition of essay writing that took place in Latin America. Yet, this preoccupation has always existed side by side with the dominant practice of importing in an acritical manner the European, and more recently also North American, currents of thought and of reflecting about Latin American production with a gaze internalized from the neocolonial metropolises. It is only from the mid-twentieth century on that this ethnocentric attitude begins to lose its space, due in great part to the Postmodern *episteme*, and it is then that the role of Postcolonial and Decolonial theories become more significant. Meeting with similar preoccupations in the context of Latin America, these theories have offered great support to the tradition therein existing and have been stimulating the development of an instigating kind of “decolonized” comparativism, which, having abandoned its traditional hierarchic structure, is now in search of a dialogue on equal footing at the international level (Coutinho, 2000, p. 201-14).

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