


Migrant literature in Spain: approaches, discourses and analysis

Literatura de la inmigración en España: enfoques, discursos y análisis


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Abstract

This paper analyses the literature on immigration in Spain, based on research conducted in recent decades in the fields of comparative literature and sociology. The aim is to make this sociocultural field visible by framing these narratives within our sociohistorical reality and thus relating them to aspects of social dynamics and change. Special focus will be placed on the institutionalization of a range of discourses on the topic. The proposal is based on the need to construct a broad-based framework for the analysis of such literature, and applies an approach that identifies and interrelates the main agents, social dynamics, and hegemonic discourses involved.

Keywords: Literary criticism; comparative literature; immigration; immigrants; reading interest; sociocultural patterns

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la literatura de la inmigración en España, a partir de los trabajos que, en los dos últimos decenios, han surgido en el campo de la literatura comparada y la sociología. El objetivo consiste en visualizar este campo sociocultural, ubicando dichas narrativas en nuestra realidad sociohistórica y relacionándolas, por tanto, con las dinámicas y cambios sociales. Un especial foco de atención se situará en los procesos de institucionalización de una serie de discursos sobre este tema. Esta propuesta parte de la necesidad de construir un marco amplio para el análisis de esta literatura desde un enfoque que permita avanzar en la identificación e interrelación de sus principales agentes, dinámicas sociales y discursos hegemónicos.

Palabras clave: Crítica literaria; literatura comparada; inmigración; inmigrantes; intereses lectores; patrones socioculturales



Introduction

The interest in the subject matter of this article stems from a series of research carried out by the authors on the various immigration agencies and from the review of studies that have emerged, rather recently, on migrant literature. This type of literature is increasingly present in Spain, and it has even been approached on several occasions by critics, albeit not always considering the social conditioning of its literary process. For this reason, the aim of this article is to carry out a theoretical and systematic review of the approaches developed on the literature on immigrants in Spain. To that end, it focuses on studies that have emerged in the last two decades in the area of comparative literature and sociology. From these reviews, models of the social dynamics involved in the elaboration of their discourses will be extrapolated. All the foregoing falls within the theoretical framework of the socio-cultural field and Sztompka's theory of social change, which allows us to understand reality as a constant social process through the transformations of the networks of social relations. More specifically, the focus will be put on convictions, values, relationships and life opportunities, since several processes are constantly emerging from each of these aspects, namely those of legitimisation or reformulation of ideas, definition and dissolution of ethical codes, constant reformulation of interactive channels, and expansion or reduction of meanings. All these aspects and their corresponding dynamics take place in an inter-individual space, which here will be called, following Sztompka (2002), a socio-cultural field.

As an introduction, it should also be noted that the issue addressed in this article has been made visible under multiple labels and has developed in the shadow of conflicts and hegemonic conventions. Researchers who have tried to define the contents of this migrant literature from the field of social sciences or comparative literature have emphasised - above all - the biographical fact of the writer's migration. The result of these procedures has been the further genre fragmentation of migrant literature. For example, we can distinguish political writers from Asia in Canada (Chae, 2008), or African migrants in contemporary Spanish literature (Faszer-Mcmahon & Ketz, 2015) that account for peculiarities, but not for the truly interesting dimension of this activity: migrating as a key experience of the human condition. First of all, it is also noteworthy that this focus of attention has been the cause for considerable criticism from the same writers who consider such categories to be mutually exclusive. It is only later that alternative terms are taken up: transnational literature (Fortunati 2015, Pereyra, 2016), intercultural literature (Chovancova, 2015), exiled writers (Machover, 2001) or world-literature (Le Bris et al., 2007), all with the aim of overcoming biographical labels and categorisations.

In view of such criticism, it should be recalled that a taxonomy of literature based on the exaltation of autobiographical values attached to ethnicity or national origin, as well as social conditioning factors of the author, has been created in opposition to what has traditionally been considered as the category of national literature, i.e. the legitimate and superior one (Declerq, 2011). This results in migrant works being labelled from the outset and placed in an uncomfortably differentiated position (Ghazali, 2008; Gnisci, 2010). This issue, identified in the field of comparative literature as an epistemological problem, has in turn important social consequences, hitherto little visualised in social theory:

[...] by positioning itself before the self-styled or even perverse process of becoming an immigrant, criticism should constantly self-question and constantly redefine its own status and discursive codes in order to avoid being caught in the nets of the dominant canons of criticism. (Filipowicz, 1998, p. 41.)

The problem of this article is situated at this crossroads of opinions about what to call this genre: How do discourses on migrant literature emerge and what are their implications for reality? In order to answer these questions, we will first analyse the socio-historical context in which these discourses emerge, their typology according to the field in which they are developed and their relationship with social conflicts in the evaluative, normative, relational and life opportunity dimensions.

Social and historical contexts of the emergence of immigrant writing in Spain and their impact on the interpretation of these works

Although we have witnessed several processes of immigration or arrival of foreign people or groups in Spain, mass immigration has taken place in the last thirty years. The need to improve initial material situations has been the most decisive factor in the immediate work of migrants. For this reason, the first years were dedicated to obtaining the basics: food, housing, legalisation of residence and documentation, job stability, etc. (Aja & Arango, 2006). In 2001, the first immigrant protests began in Spain (Laubenthal, 2005), initiating the subsequent social movements (Suárez-Navaz et al., 2007) and even their progressive institutionalisation in the form of pro-immigrant associations.

Despite this, the history of immigration in Spain has not been long enough to gather the literary and cultural capital of those newcomers, to develop a character of its own or to carve out a niche for itself in the public sphere. This was - at least - one of the conclusions of the seminar *Imágenes de la inmigración en la literatura y el cine español contemporáneo*, held at the Universidad Carlos III between February and April 2007 (quoted by Sánchez-Mesa, 2008, p.164). A more detailed description of the epistemological basis for such claims in the field of comparative literature and sociology is included hereinafter.

(Im)migrant literature in Spain in comparative literature studies

As far as our subject of interest is concerned, the conclusions of Spanish literary criticism are not very flattering. All of them compare the experiences of countries with an immigration trajectory up to three times longer than Spain's (Sánchez-Mesa, 2008), such as the United Kingdom and France. In addition, they are children, i.e., the second generation of these immigrants, who have the final say in their parents' decisions and who express all the brokenness and insecurities suffered in their writing.

It is often noted that interest in migrant work appears alongside Cultural Studies in the 1970s in the UK (Guthke, 2001, as quoted in Ruiz, 2003, p. 28), although the first European festival of migrant writers was held in Rome in June 2002 (Gnisci, 2010). The discussion on the literature of immigration in Spain began to take shape around this date, running in parallel in academic circles related to literature, newspaper supplements and literary magazines

that devoted monographs to it. Among the most cited are *ABC Cultural* (July 2000) *Lengua, Cultura e Inmigración*. Some specialists in the field of literature have also written the following compilations in this period: *La inmigración en la literatura española contemporánea* (Andrés-Suárez et al., 2002), *Discurso e inmigración. Propuestas para el análisis de un debate social* (Bañón, 2002), and *Literatura y pateras* (coordinated by Soler-Espiauba, 2004). All these works deal with literature on the subject of migration, without distinguishing between national and foreign authors. These analyses are almost exclusively confined to a review of themes and literary resources. Two main features are identified: on the one hand, realism and the aesthetics of compassion, driven by the urgency of telling a story; on the other, imaginaries and personifications that perpetuate prejudices:

The type of immigrant portrayed in most of the novels discussed is not far removed from the prejudices of the host country's citizens and is often reduced to a polarised image that ranges between the victim and the abusive criminal profiteer (Zovko, 2019, p. 198).

In response to this, Spanish philologists have come up with proposals to reinterpret works that delve into the migration issue. Among the approaches that stand out are those that employ the classicist tradition in their analysis, i.e., the symbols and values enshrined in the representative texts of classical culture. This is the case of the work by Andrés-Suárez (2004), who highlights parallels between migrant narratives and religious myths, or Meiss (2010), who analyses the migrant journey narrative through a series of variables recognised within the tradition of travel literature. It should be noted that these efforts have been undertaken in order to dispense with the concept of migrant literature, which has so many inconsistencies and drawbacks.

Within this field, there are also works that declare the urgent need to “construct a new national identity, capable of reconciling the plurality of regional identities and of integrating (...) the new immigrant population that demands recognition of its difference” (Andrés-Suárez, 2004, p. 23). However, even in the studies of these authors, who advocate openness in the interpretation of immigrants' literary works, the attempt does not correspond to the epistemology used. Indeed, their approach is based on cultural values and symbols coined from Europe. For example, one of the analyses of the Moroccan-born writer Najat de Hadmi, naturalised in Spain and winner of numerous writing awards since 2007, notes that her work “represents an all-too-perfect model of the cultural melting pot of Spain today” (Bueno-Alonso, 2010, p. 12).

Contrary positions defending the development of migrant literature indicate that the visibility of this literature in Spain has been possible thanks to postcolonial studies and a series of institutional openings such as: research projects, doctoral theses and databases such as MIGRAR (Sindze, 2016) or specific portals such as the Miguel de Cervantes Virtual Library (N'gom, 2010).

Therefore, it can be stated that studies dealing with the ways of analysing this type of literary production have emerged in Spain only recently. Therefore, Maroto-Blanco (2019) believes that the forty years of African literature in Spain have been interpreted in an opaque way by literary critics. He also states that critics, by insisting on labels that underline the particular conditions of the authors like their origin or immigrant status, have been the cause of “a profound fragmentation of a literary corpus critical of everyday and institutional racism and its consequent depoliticization” (Maroto-Blanco, 2019, p. 22). This author proposes the term

“literature produced from the colonial wound”, a label that underlines the authors’ political stance towards power.

(Im)migrant literature in sociological studies

From a sociological point of view, the recent emergence of immigration in Spain can be partially explained by the absence of rules, legal and social channels for this group’s access to the cultural production and consumption market (Zapata-Barrero, 2010). Generally speaking, social sciences have noted that literature on the migration phenomenon in Spain reproduces the clichés of the mass media, focusing on immigration from third countries and reinforcing its image of victimhood and poverty (Andrés-Suárez et al., 2002). The most common subject matter in this literary genre focuses on the *pateras*¹ phenomenon, which has given rise to an interesting line of comparative studies with the “Cuban *balseiros*” or “*espaldas mojadas*” (Soler-Espiauba, 2004). The subject of migrant literature was later addressed in the aforementioned seminar, held at the Carlos III University in 2007. Its preliminary conclusions did little more than express hope for the future development of this literature, which - judging by the paucity of discussion - has yet to get off the ground.

If attention is paid to the first reviews of the compilations on the immigration issue in Spain, the scant interest of researchers in the literature that has been generated so far stands out. Thus, in the compendium of migrant literature, published by the Permanent Observatory of Immigration of Spain, where the studies published in Spain from the 1980s until summer 2006 were collected and with over 389 pages in total, only two of these pages cite works related to the culture of immigrants; among these, only six studies related to literature are mentioned (Bardají-Ruiz, 2006).

An example of the newly developed reflexivity in the field of social sciences on migrant literature is reflected in doctoral theses such as those of Séka (2014) and Bellinzis (2018). Bellinzis shows that immigrant women authors, bearers of new signs of otherness, recreate a specific socio-cultural field. Her work develops Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, adding further strata that mark social position based on the personal experience of immigrant women. These new substrata emerge from the hybridisation of several traditional social categories. On the one hand, they are heirs to a double cultural asset; on the other, they live in a transnational space. Hence, its intersectional approach is the most interesting contribution from the point of view of the theme developed. It is a perspective that highlights the authors’ artistic autonomy, allows for a better understanding of internal and external conditions and, above all, reflects how the latter can limit the expression, self-representation, publication and market positioning of immigrant authors.

There is no doubt that these remarkable openings, both in the works of Maroto-Blanco and Bellinzis, arise from the confluences between sociological theories and comparative literature. Nevertheless, it is worth noting two issues that remain to be introduced into this promising analytical field. Firstly, the contributions developed in the field of migration studies, which have recognised the need to analyse more densely the symbolic load between the people who study this field and those who are studied, are conspicuous by their absence (Laraña,

1993; Santamaría, 2002a, b). The contribution of these perspectives defines a series of methodological constraints on social thinking on the immigration issue. Concepts such as “state-centric model” (Wallerstein, 1974) or “methodological nationalism” (Beck, 2004; Wimmer & Glick-Schiller, 2003; Glick-Schiller, 2010) help to understand how processes of naturalisation of the nation-state emerge and how they become the key to understanding the social, political and economic life of those who reside in it. From this point of view, the constant use of hegemonic values and norms in such analyses undermines intersectionality, even when it focuses on social categories such as gender, class and background/culture/ethnicity, as these have been defined from a European/Western point of view.

Secondly, and as a contribution of the authors of this article, it is worth noting that the studies reviewed in these pages focus their attention on the subjectification of migrant writers, leaving the analysis of the external structures that drive it behind. From an analytical point of view, there is certain imbalance between the repeated declarations on the urgency of articulating new channels of interpretative openness and the scant evidence of new meanings in the works analysed. Both Bellinzis' study of the processes of subjectification of migrant authors and the interposition of the political discourses of Maroto-Blanco (2019) need to cover more factors that reflect more details about their social realities. This task seems perfectly feasible if one turns to Sztompka's concept of the socio-cultural field. In fact, such interpretations are possible, according to the same works mentioned above. According to Sztompka (2002), the socio-cultural field represents a synthesis of the characteristics of the individual and the structural context, i.e. historical conditions, institutions and values. It emerges and develops through interpersonal relationships, thus creating a space between the private, the intimate and the public. Hence, the concept of socio-cultural field is often synonymous of socio-individual field. The social relations dealt with by Sztompka are of an abstract order, but they are actually easily interpretable. It is about the ideas, values, norms, relationships and life opportunities that are created from them. Encounters between unique people and the exchanges of ideas that arise in these moments reach out and connect to a myriad of new recipients, thus opening up the possibilities for the development of thought and action. Therefore, relationships become enrichments or limitations of a range of meanings. We will now point out some of the most marked elements, which have to do with values, political conditions, social position and access to the public.

Socio-cultural dynamics, actors and networks of (im)migrant literature

In order to describe the socio-cultural field of migrant literature more precisely, it is useful to look for other agents and social relations involved in this field. Almost all of these elements can be extracted by reading the above-mentioned works. In order to begin the description of this extended socio-cultural field, let us note that the entry of immigrants into the social sphere takes place through the discourse of the media, both in Spain and in any other country. In other words, from the beginning we are already talking about a presence diminished by an approach that is not only alarmist and by statements centred on misery, violence, threat, but, above all, we conform to the fact that we are not only a threat, but also a threat: “(...) the social imaginary of immigration is constructed in the interplay of relations between the elites of origin and destination, the sender and the recipient” (Hernández-Rodríguez, 2008, p. 6). Social relations around immigration develop with this type of presence, identified as underlying from the

beginning. However, in addition to the media, other actors such as pro-immigrant organisations are also emerging. These institutions are created to manage immigration or other institutions attached to them, such as schools, which have recently become interested in incorporating other cultural productions. The emergence of these new agents has an impact on the broadening of relations and expansion of opportunities, as their main role is accessing to audiences or, in general, to forms of promotion of immigrant work. It is therefore not surprising that works by immigrants in Spain began to triumph when the idea of integration became established in social discourse, given that their authors are perfect examples of a new, but already legitimised, social imperative.

From this picture, the first ideas about the values that underpin social relations can also be drawn. While cutting across disputes over postcolonialism and transnationality, they have deeper roots that link literary creation to the age-old need to create enemies and rivals:

In the 1980s, the literature of exile was welcomed by the West because it coincided with the worldview of those years, facilitating the intelligible. Two poets, Poland's Czeslaw Milosz and Russia's Joseph Brodsky, were awarded the Nobel Prize, in 1980 and 1987 respectively, because their work had contested the Cold War and the bipolar world. Today, new diaspora writers, especially those from the former colonies, are not as fortunate, and therefore their exile is not understood in positive terms (Waberi, 2008, p. 31).

From this perspective, reinterpretations of the other relate both to the contestation of those who feel threatened by the cultural values of a fortress Europe (equality, secularism, etc.), and those who advocate for the extension of migrants' rights and an intercultural society. It is a social field where actors align themselves with highly polarised cultural and political currents, developing relations of cooperation or competition. Long before defining these discourses, the media have thus done the groundwork of creating perceptions about the superiority/barbarity of one or the other, calibrating the canons of aesthetics and outlining the imaginaries. Hence, interpretations of the migrant work remain suspended in this *us-others* dialectic and at the level of a spurious effort of a becoming towards a diverse society. The truth is that it is necessary to create interpretations of immigration with the capacity to legitimise its multiple difference for this to be reborn. In this sense, it is striking that one of the literary critics of immigrant works in Spain, who shows the most subtlety in his reading, develops his studies outside Spain:

It is here where I find it gratifying and it gives a renewing spirit to Spanish literature that a new fictional discourse is created about the West, the East itself and, essentially, about that interstitial space that is given geographically and mythologically by the Mediterranean, Andalusia and northern Morocco (Ricci, 2010, p. 50).

We can add Bellinzis' (2018) argument regarding structural opportunities within this framework of external conditions. Indeed, as this author describes, migrant female writers moving between two poles - heteronomous and autonomous - exploit the resource of an assigned identity, otherness, as an attraction in the recent market of migrant literature in Spain.

Conclusions

As shown in this theoretical review, we can confirm that studies on migrant literature have barely begun in Spain (Bortoli, 2019). In line with the development of the objective of this article, which consists in presenting the need to develop a sufficiently flexible theoretical corpus, capable of dealing not only with the other but also with the other's way of writing and, above all,

capable of interpreting the original contribution of this writing, further observations can be added. One of the most obvious ones is that the analytical field of migrant literature in our country hardly addresses these issues, due to the recent history of immigration in Spain. Most of the studies dealing with it come from the field of comparative literature and sociology, while multidisciplinary approaches to analysis are very recent.

These pioneering studies on migrant literature coincide in a number of clichés about immigration and, in parallel, reinforce the dynamics of hegemonic thought. Therefore, by avoiding talking about the original elements of these works, disregarding the political and social perspective of the creative process and its insertion in the social space, they reproduce negative stereotypes about immigration. Stereotypes which - again - have been created from a clearly European cultural canon. The proposal of the authors of this paper argues that openness in the interpretation of migrant literature requires incorporating the reflections developed in advance by the social disciplines. Sociology of migration, among others, offers theoretical frameworks that allow us to approach this issue from a number of very different dimensions. Among these, the concept of methodological nationalism reveals that interpretations of migrant literature are created from European canons or from the politicisation of the migration issue.

Another initiative is to map out a broadened social field of migrant literature that overcomes long-standing disputes between approaches that deepen the vulnerability of immigration on the one hand, and those that accuse the former of practising neo-colonialism on the other. It is not our wish to depoliticise a social and political issue of the first order, the inclusion of the notion of socio-cultural field is intended to open up perspectives on these studies. On the one hand, the suggested extensions show the need to take more agents involved in this literary field into account and, on the other hand, the existence of other social dynamics such as those centred on the expansion of different relationships, values and social imaginaries between those who write, those who publish and those who analyse. From this perspective, it is worth noting that the epistemological limitations, addressed so briefly in this article, in turn have very important social consequences, turning studies of migrant literature into studies of the agents involved in legitimising the ways of writing and the meanings of life of others.

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Notes

- 1 Flat-bottomed boat normally used in the main migration routes to Spain.