Artículo Especial

Homegoing as an identity feature in postcolonial contemporary women's literature

El retorno como rasgo identitario en la literatura poscolonial contemporánea de mujeres.

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Abstract

This paper intends to analyze the role of returning in contemporary postcolonial novels written by women in english. Returning to find identity and completion; to seek one´s name, one´s words, one´s land, both from a literal and a metaphorical point of view. I will perform a comparative analysis of three recently published novels written by contemporary women who all worked on this idea of the need to find their identity and, to do that, the need to return. This text proposes that this return is part of the need to find where one belongs, as the final step of what I will call *post-colonial anxiety*: the feeling of not belonging completely, together with the need to belong, and the deep knowing that there is a home where one belongs.

Key words: postcolonial, women´s literature, comparative literature, identity, homecoming

Resumen

Me propongo analizar en este artículo el rol del retorno a las propias raíces con el objeto de hallarse a una misma, en novelas de escritoras mujeres contemporáneas poscoloniales. El retorno para encontrar completitud e identidad; para buscar el propio nombre, las propias palabras, la propia tierra, tanto desde un punto de vista tanto literal como metafórico. Voy a llevar adelante un análisis contrastivo de tres novelas recientemente publicadas por parte de autoras recientes, quienes trabajaron en la idea de la necesidad de encontrar la identidad y, para lograrlo, la necesidad del regreso. Este texto propone que este regreso es parte de la necesidad de hallar el lugar de pertenencia como último paso a lo que llamaré la ansiedad poscolonial: la sensación de no pertenecer por completo, junto a la necesidad de pertenecer y el profundo conocimiento de que existe un hogar al que pertenecemos.

Palabras clave*: poscolonial, literature de mujeres, literature comparada, identidad, retorno*

The Greek, and Homer especially, created a particular literary genre to describe the *peripetia* of the return: *nostos*, going back, everything that takes to go back: battles, dangers, monsters: the return is full of those, but it is worth it, as the prize is getting home. And home is origin, is country, is oneself. And then it derived in *nostalgia*, longing to be home, missing home. That *nostos* has three moments: separation, initiation, return (J Campbell[1]): the monomyth. So *nostos* gives origin to the return as the moral development of the hero; going back is growing and becoming a mature person.
Now I want to add another concept to this introduction. We have had, for a while, a discrete academic discipline, women's literature, as we understand that the experience of women has been historically shaped by gender: "Their texts emerge from and intervene in conditions usually very different from those which produced most writing by men" [2], not as a matter of political stance or a particular author, but of her gender, i.e. her position as a woman within the literary world.
So let me put both concepts together. Although, as we all know, women have played a subordinated role in literature and especially in ancient epic, we can find traces of women's *nostos* already in *Odyssey*: Helen, in the first place, going home to her husband Menelaus after experiencing the war and a ten-year separation; and Penelope, who stays home, but Odysseus' return is in many ways a challenge for her as it is for him. So Homer portrays both ordeals as a form of heroic *nostos*[3], and they are the direct antecedents for my analysis today: Helen's and Penelope's marginalized roles in the *Odyssey* open a window to contemporary women's writing who pose the new postcolonial *nostos* in the monomyth: already displaced [4] and separated by colonization, with all the diverse feelings that first step showed (wanting to belong, hating the colonizer, loving them, adapting, letting go); initiation (second and third generations in the foreign land, already belonging in some ways, speaking the language, knowing the ways), it is now the time for *nostos*, homecoming, returning to the origin which is home without us even knowing it. And so we can trace in what I call ultra-contemporary literature a recurrence of the topic of returning in women's literature, new postcolonial Helens who need now to go home in order to understand who they are.
And thus, I intend to analyze in this paper the role of returning to one´s roots to find oneself in contemporary postcolonial novels written by women in english. Returning to find identity and completion; to seek one´s name, one´s words, one´s land, both from a literal and a metaphorical point of view.
I have been working on the need to find one´s personal ego since many pages ago[5]; starting from the first postcolonial female authors, going through the silences in Caribbean poets, through the amazement of home returning and family re-finding as a way to complete oneself in recent literature. What I will do now is a comparative analysis of three lately published novels written by contemporary women who all worked on this idea of the need to find their identity and, to do that, the need to return.
This text proposes that this return is part of the need to find where one belongs, as the final step of what I will call *post-colonial anxiety*: the feeling of not belonging completely, together with the need to belong, and the deep knowing that there is a home where one belongs.
I will speak, then of Sadie Smith´s *Swing Time* (2016)*;* Yaa Gyasi´s *Homegoing (2016) and* Arundhati Roy´s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017).
Theoretical framework will be underlying my work, as it always does: postcolonial theory and criticism, and particularly Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Bill Ashcroft; culture in a broader sense, mainly through Cioran and Derrida; and comparative literature, so as to have the possibility to explore the postcolonial women world from a wider view.
Then, this will be an analysis of identity. A grand question that will ask what identity really is, in this intense postcolonial world with quick changes continuously at hand that makes us difficult not to see what we need to see. I like to quote Susheila Nasta´s epigraph of her beautiful

[1] Campbell, J. *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton, PUPDM, 2004.
[2] Blain, Virginia et al. *The feminist Companion to Literature in English*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1990.
[3] Pache, C. *Women after war: weaving Nostos in Homeric Epic and in the Twenty First Century.* https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9781137398864_4. 2014
[4] Ashcroft, B. et al. *The Empire Writes back.* London: Routledge, 1989.
[5] Leiton, Gabriela. "Resistance and Liberation in Postcolonial female writers: a comparative reading of Ghana Must Go and Americanah". In: Leiton, Gabriela (ed*). III Jornadas Internacionales Literatura y Medios Audiovisuales en Lenguas Extranjeras: En homenaje a los 95 años de Clarice Lispector*. UNSAM, 2017. 165 p. ISBN:978-987-42-4164-1.

text, *Motherlands*[6]: "*It's not art for art's sake; its vibrancy and immediacy are intended to forge unity and wrench a new identity*". This contemporary postcolonial identity in permanent repositioning, that is making these contemporary authors wonder once again about the origin and to frame a new identity from the discovery of an almost genetic and familiar past, a many times unknown past that nevertheless define each look and each decision. And now we reach the central idea of this paper: female postcolonial identity in contemporary literature changes the view on origin and past, proposing a re-discovery that implies knowing more about oneself, completing oneself, finding oneself, even when one did not know that was lost in some way: what I call the *postcolonial anxiety*. Let us start the analysis with *Swing Time*, a novel that asks how we become who we are, the choices we make, and the choices made for us. A nameless protagonist who will grow from being the black girl in a whites' school, and therefore find the only other black girl-Tracey- with a powerful personality and shared taste for music, for friend; woman with no name who will go through the oppression of that friend, suffer her parent´s separation, and finally find a job as Aimée's -a rock star- assistant, and again-as with Tracey- find herself in a complete second place to serve the other's needs and desires, to West Africa, her ancestors, global charity that does not make real sense, and back to a dying mother and a weak father she never really knew. A main character with no name with powerful friends with names, who needs to find herself, her story, her heritage, but who is compelled by society not to be defined by it, to be "global" and dance to the music of her time, to forget who she is.

> When I was quite young, (…) my father had showed me his birth certificate, and the professions of his grandparents stated upon it (…) was the proof that his tribe had always been defined by their labour, whether they wanted to be or not. (…) And now, lying in the funk of my father's bed, turning the phrase over in my mind, (…) repeating over and over the same curious message, (…) 'I am a duck!', 'I am a duck'"[7] (p 311).

Defining oneself once and again: now I know where I am from, now I know I am nonetheless what I am, at last.

Thus, in a text that profoundly speaks about identity, we read: "The body of the message was a single sentence: Now everyone knows who you really are." [8](p 5). That early sentence points to what will be the textual path: seeking identity to know who one is, to make everyone know who one is. "A truth was being revealed to me: that I had always tried to attach myself to the light of other people, that I had never had any light of my own. I experienced myself as a kind of shadow" [9](p4). That one seems to be a true postcolonial experience, losing one's own matter, de-personalizing and losing our distinctive features. This textual path begins then by pointing out, from the very beginning, the search that will be the text's main theme, and this analysis' main proposition: the need for finding oneself in our own ideas, in love, in one's own body and context. This alterity in a world that becomes Other turns to be dense, and you must escape from that density to be yourself.

> In my dream we were all elegant and none of us knew pain, we had never graced the sad pages of the history books my mother bought for me, never been called ugly or stupid, never entered theatres by the back door, drank from separate water fountains or taken our seats at the back of any bus[10].

This dream will give account for the protagonist´s growth: from childhood when her *alter ego* Tracey has *the* personality and character, to youth when Aimée has fame and money, the main character never leads her life and her roles; her mother and father, two opposite ways of seeing life, and growing up in such a difficult environment; dreams where pain does not exist, and then awakening to life as awakening to pain, to a life of resistance, of encounters, of understanding.

And so the central question in the text will be: how do we become what we are? Can we run from our origins?

To try to answer, the text skips moments and scenarios: childhood, youth, friends and *alter egos*- Tracey, Aimée- Africa, New York, London; decisions, consequences, changes, possible futures.

Knowing the future will be growing up and finding a hotspot in the path towards self-knowledge. Pain will be in the text the stepping stone towards life and time: "Power had preyed on weakness here: all kind of power-local, racial, tribal,

[6] Nasta, Susheila. *Motherlands: Black women writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992.
[7] Smith, Sadie. *Swing Time*. London: Penguin, 2016.
[8] ibidem
[9] ibidem
[10] ibidem

royal, national, global, economic-on all kind of weakness, stopping at nothing, not even at the smallest girl child. But power does that everywhere. The world is saturated in blood. Every tribe has their blood-soaked legacy: here was mine."[11]
Thus, pain and power will be obliged steps towards self-knowledge. Pain for those who were and power of those who are in the way towards a postcolonial identity of a nameless protagonist whose being -shadow, contrast facing others with a name, matter, children, blood- needs to understand her origin and context. Helen fighting herself, fighting battles to find her own self.

> The importance of labour was a view (my father) held so strong as my mother held her belief that the definitions that really mattered were culture and colour. Our people, our people. [12]

What defines us is what we are. What we are can be seen from different angles -work, place, culture, colour of skin- but it will define what we are, no matter what. Origins will be part of who we are, and we need to acknowledge that just to be.
"Now everyone knows who you really are"[13]
Swing Time is a text about how we become who we really are, and about if we can truly escape our origins. Zadie Smith's prose is rhythmical and true to form. Her style interweaves contemporary and historical themes together, taking art, race and origins as its main questions. We become who we are because we are a long line of events that take us to the beginning, always. The novel begins and ends with the mother, the root. Understanding is understanding from where we come from.
And this central topic will link *Swing Time* with *Homegoing*, Yaa Gyasi's masterpiece about going home. The story is in a deep way, circular: from the terrible African slavery period, where both Americans and British and some cruel African traitors plotted against people, to today and the understanding of history deep inside, old stories that live in us even without knowing it.
This Helen is an inter-generational one; starts her journey in Africa, is sold as a slave and goes though many generations until finding herself in the same castle she was sold to understand freedom and the attraction to the sea. She is not one character but many; and, at the same time, one.
This black Helen goes from the proud villages in Africa, to the brutal ill treatment given to women trapped and sold as slaves, the cruel slavery period, the beatings, the whipping, and then freedom without peace, with no money, war in USA between the north and the South, black people hunted and killed; to the modern ghettos, discrimination, poverty; and a trip to Africa to see where everything began and finding home after nearly two centuries.
So it is Effia in the beginning, with child, alone, dying father who will ask the big Shakespearean question: "'You are nothing from nowhere. No mother and now no father'. (Fiifi) looked at Effia's stomach and smiled. 'What can grow from nothing?'"[14](p27)
That would be the beginning of the pain. Shakespeare, Cordelia, would say a big truth: nothing will come from nothing.[15] But there will be lots, lots of pain still to come.

> They took them out into the light. (…) The soldiers marched them down to an open door that led to sand and water, and they all began to walk onto it. Before Esi left, the one called the Governor looked at her and smiled. It was a kind smile, pitying, yet true. But for the rest of her life Esi would see a smile on a white face and remember the one the soldier gave her before taking her to his quarters, how white men smiling just meant more evil was coming with the next wave (p 49)[16].

The path went far, far away before the return was possible. The text proposes a hard learning through suffering and pain; to endure is to be brave, as you are your people, not only one single being alone and unique. A people that survived thanks to that terrible learning endured.

> Ness looked at the woman. She tried to smile, but she had been born during the years of Esi unsmiling, and she had never learnt how to do it quite right. The corners of her lips always seemed to twitch upward, unwillingly, then fall within trilliseconds, as though attached to that sadness that had once anchored her own mother's heart. 'Ain't we all done lost someone?' Ness asked. (p 72)[17]

Grammar will be writing back to the empire, as Ashcroft said long ago.[18] This is a text disrespectful of grammar rules. This

[11] ibidem
[12] ibidem
[13] ibidem
[14] Gyasi, Yaa. Homegoing. London: Penguin Random House, 2017.
[15] Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. London: Wordsword Classics, 2004.
[16] Gyasi, Yaa. Op cit.
[17] Ibidem.
[18] Aschcroft, Bill. The Empire writes back. Op. cit.

multiple Helen that goes through generations until she can find home will learn the conqueror's language only to be able to tell her story. But Helen's battles really lasted long.

> Maybe Baulah was seeing something more clearly in the nights she had these dreams, a little black child fighting in her sleep against an opponent she couldn't name come around her. Intangible evil. Unspeakable unfairness. Beulah ran in her sleep, ran as if she had stolen something, when really she had done nothing other than expect the peace, the clarity, that came with dreaming. Yes, Jo thought, this was where it started, but when, where, did it end? (p 120)[19]

This is already the USA. This is the times of the white hunting black people and killing them just because of their colour. The text describes the moment with beautiful prose: carefully chosen adjectives, true to life scenes. Violence is what surrounds these characters all through the novel but still prose resists. The tale is well told as it should be. Shakespeare again, tell my story, as the rest is silence.[20]

> 'Somebody gotta know you free now. Somebody in this world need to know at least that.'
>
> 'With all due respect, ma'am. I got myself, and that's all I ever needed' (p 168)[21]

So after prison again, for no reason, after generations of suffering, the characters in the novel experience a profound solitude when trying to find themselves. Pain has erased contact and love; one other battle to win.

Name will also be a feature to regain. "My mama named me Mary, and ain't nobody gonna hit it with a name like Mary. And I ain't into all that Nation of Islam and Back to Africa business, but I saw Amani and I felt like it was mine. So I took it" (p 255)[22] Helen is already in her way home. The novel proposes that there is something inside us that speaks about who we are and, once again, our origin completes our identity.

"We can´t go back, can we?" "We can't go back to something we ain't never been to in the first place. It ain't ours anymore. This is." (p255)[23] Something that is not our own yet still we feel it is our own. As language is. This received english that will be used as a way of writing back. This novel is an *ars poetica* about post-colonial anxiety. This need to belong together with the certainty of not belonging.

Marjorie, the last Helen, will solve the riddle.

> In my dreams I kept seeing this castle, but I did not know why. One day, I came to these waters and I could feel the spirits of our ancestors calling to me. Some were free, and they spoke to me from the sand, but some others were trapped deep, deep, deep, in the water so that I had to wade out to hear their voices (…) When they were living they had not known where they came from, and so dead, they did not know how to get to dry land. I put you in here so that if your spirit ever wandered, you would know where home was" (p 268)[24].

That is a new turn: you can try to deny that postcolonial anxiety, but your spirit will know that you do not belong and will try to find home if you did not.

The novel ends with Marjorie in the Castle where everything began, at last, with the stone given to women through generations finally thrown to the waters, and the words "welcome home". (p 300)[25]

Our last novel is Arundhati Roy's masterpiece, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, where homecoming will imply, first, finding out who we are. And as we are mortals, home is the cemetery where a baby will be taken to live. As if, after Cioran[26], Roy would think that life is the image of a woman giving birth astride a grave. As Samuel Beckett would put it, "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more"[27]. This novel will search for that instant desperately.

Postcolonial anxiety begins in this text with a character born in a gender oppressed postcolonial world, obliged to be a she, discovered as a he, turned then to a hijra with double voice and at home with her double gender. With the fierce desire to be a mother. With exile, and the need to find a home that will be completing her identity as she wants it: hijra, mother, leader of a community of the different. Home is acceptance of oneself and that is only possible in the graveyard.

Gender is part of one´s identity and is home. This is a strong

[19] Gyasi, Yaa. Op cit

[20] Shakespeare William. *Hamlet*. London: Downtown Press, 1992

[21] Gyasi, Yaa. Op cit

[22] ibidem

[23] ibidem

[24] ibidem

[25] Ibidem p 300

[26] Cioran, EM. *Desgarradura*. Buenos Aires, Tusquets, 2005. (My translation.)

[27] Beckett, Samuel. Waiting for Godot. London: Grove Press, 2011.

point Roy makes in her novel.

> At first people were amused and even encouraging, but soon the snickering and teasing from other children began: He's a She. He's not a He or a She. He's a He and a She. She-He. He-She. Hee! Hee! Hee! (p 12)[28]

So this Helen will need to fight the battle of gender as a strong feature of identity before finding her home.

> And so, at the age of fifteen, only a few hundred yard from where his family had lived for centuries, Aftab stepped through an ordinary doorway into another universe. (…) The next night at a small ceremony he was presented with a green Khwabgah dupatta and initiated into the rules and rituals that formally made him a member of the Hijra community. Aftab became Anjum. (p 25)[29]

It is now a matter of universes. The novel will present several of them: terrorism, politics, manifestations, families, the graveyard. Anjum will build her home in that graveyard and will receive those who are displaced anywhere else: the dead accept all of us with no discrimination. "Anjum never forgot she was only Butcher's Luck. For the rest of her life, even when it appeared otherwise, her relation with the Rest-of-her-Life remained precarious and reckless" (p66)

Existence becomes chance; death is again everywhere, waiting: becoming home.

But life is too. And from nowhere, a baby comes up.

> The Mothers of the Dissapeared did not know what to do with a baby that had Appeared.
>
> Especially not a *black* one.
>
> *Kruhun kaal.*
>
> Especially not a black *girl*
>
> *Kruhun kaal hish*.
>
> Especially not one that was swaddled in litter.
>
> *Shikas ladh.*(p 117)[30]

Origin in this novel is challenged from several angles, in several ways. "I only have one language. It isn't mine" says Derrida loudly[31]. But Roy will make us clear that language is home, that english is a way to reach others. "Is language in possession, ever a possessing or possessed possession? Possessed or possessing in exclusive possession, like a piece of personal property? What of this being-at-home (etre-chez-soi) in language toward which we never cease returning?"[32]

So, this Helen will be going back to gender, to language, to be able to go home.

> We have no protection. We don´t go anywhere, we have no outings or happy life. If we go out we don´t know if we will come home alive. All the time we feel we are watched by the terrorists. With every noise I think I am going to die. I get scared easily with loud noises. (…) I hurt myself badly on my head, chest and legs while I was running. I thought I was going to die even though he was only verbally disciplining the children. My heartbeat goes so fast I feel like a crazy woman (p201)[33]

Peripeteia will then also have to do in this novel with identity, the power of I can, of *ipseity*, where the *pse* not longer allowes itself to be dissociated from the sovereignty of the *hospes*, from power[34].

> I don't know where to stop, or how to go on. I stop when I shouldn't. I go on when I should stop. There is weariness. But there is also defiance. Together they define me these days. Together they steal my sleep, and together they restore my soul. There are plenty of problems with no solutions in sight. Friends turn into foes. If not vocal ones, then silent, reticent ones. But I've yet to see a foe turning into a friend. There seems to be no hope. But pretending to be hopeful is the only grace we have… (p268)[35]

Identity is defined by these contradictions. Election of who we want to be can bring along battles to fight that will leave us changed and tired. To go back home, Roy says, implies first knowing exactly where home is.

> Long ago she had thought of Musa as 'her people'. They had been a strange country together for a while, an island republic that had seceded from the rest of the world. Since the day they decided to go their own ways, she had had no 'people'.

[28] Roy, Arundhati. The Ministry of Upmost Happiness. London: Penguin Random House, 2017.

[29] ibidem

[30] ibidem

[31] Derrida, J. Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin. New York: Stanford, 1996.

[32] Ibidem p 17

[33] Roy, A. *Op. Cit.*

[34] For this concept and the concept of language and belonging see Derrida, *op cit*

[35] Roy, A. *Op cit*

> 'We were fighting and dying in our thousands for Azadi, and at the same time we were trying to secure cheap loans from the very government we were fighting. We are a valley of idiots and schizophrenics, and we are fighting for the freedom to be idiotic and –´(p 359)[36]

Cioran would say, "as soon as we were thrown out of passivity that was our home, where we felt like home, we threw ourselves to the abyss of the act, without possibility of escape or recovering our true fatherland"[37]

So Helen decides. The graveyard, this "Cioranic" place where death and live coexist, will be home. This postcolonial anxiety shown in its contemporary political context in this novel searches for a complex gender-political-socio-cultural identity that will finally create home. Next to ancestors and chosen as a place to build a heritage.

> On the morning of Saddam Hussain's father's second funeral, Tilo put something else on the table. Literally. She brought out the little pot that contained her mother's ashes and said she would like her mother to be buried in the old graveyard too. It was decided that there would be a double funeral that day. (p 413)[38]

The return in this novel meant building a history first. Derrida says, "Today, in this esarth of humans, certain people must yield to the homo-hegemony of dominant languages. They must learn the language of the capital and machines; they must lose their idiom in order to survive or live better. A tragic economy."[39] Anjum will never lose herself. With her double voice, he-she voice, she is finally a mother, has a home where she returns, creates a family.

> When Miss Udaya Jebeen said, 'Mummy, soo-soo!' Anjum sat her down under a street light. With her eyes fixed on her mother she peed, and then lifted her bottom to marvel at the night sky and the stars and the one-thousand-year-old city reflected in the puddle she had made. Anjum gathered her up and kissed her and took her home. (p 438)[40]

We have worked with *nostos* and the reborn Helena in three contemporary novels, and proposed a new line of analysis, the postcolonial anxiety of return, to pose that we seem to be in the third stage of the monomyth: after separation in the early postcolonial texts[41], to initiation in the early XXI century[42], we are now in the stage of homecoming, homegoing actually, of returning to find a new identity that has our roots, our language, our own monsters and our name.[43] And, as Roy does, devote our fight to the Unconsoled…

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[36] Ibidem
[37] Cioran. Op Cit
[38] Ibidem
[39] Derrida, op cit
[40] Ibidem

[41] Leiton, Gabriela. "Reading postcolonial women through postcolonial eyes". In: Gabriela Leiton(ed). *I Jornadas Internacionales de Literatura y Cine en Lenguas Extranjeras.* UNSAM , 2009. 120 p. ISBN:9789874218674.
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