



**Villar-Argáiz, Pilar. *The Poetry of Eavan Boland – A Postcolonial Reading*. Dublin: Maunsel & Company; Academica Press, 2008. ISBN-13: 978-1-933146-23-2.**

“After the wolves and before the elms/ the Bardic Order ended  
in Ireland// A few remained to continue/ a dead art in a dying  
land”

(“My Country in Darkness” Eavan Boland)

## Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação

Should I have been requested to define Pilar Villar-Argáiz’s book in a single line, I would most certainly have chosen Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin’s “her history is a blank sheet”. To my way of thinking, this line is quite precise to characterise the critic’s work due to the fact that she puts a great deal of effort into trying to prove that Eavan Boland’s mature oeuvre is the product of a constant *self-conscious mimicry*, which makes an unsettling attempt to articulate women’s silence in Irish history. Not only does the author appropriately scrutinize the poet’s main achievements in terms of subject and theme, but also rigorously recaptures the most fundamental theoretical premises of post colonial criticism. In order to place the author in a minority, feminist and subaltern discourse, the author reserves almost a hundred pages of her study to give precise and accurate details about the main debates in postcolonial criticism. Seldom does her analysis fall back on run of the mill appreciation on Eavan Boland’s poetry, what enables her to produce unique and innovative insights.

As I want to take the reader on a quick trip through this book, I would like to start with the table of contents which already points out the main qualities of the book: organisation and clarity of thought. If on the one hand the author unequivocally exposes her methodological procedure by taking on board in its titles a number of terms which belong to the post colonial idiolect, on the other hand, she makes it clear that there are two opposing forces leading the field in Eavan Boland’s outlook. While the poet wishes to get rid of the burden of history by rewriting and subverting Irish past zeitgeist according to her female and exiled experience, she also desires to break free from Ireland’s border and confer on her poems a sense of hybridity and openness. Such attempt does not come without pain, mainly because she has to come to terms with an *anxiety of authorship*, which constantly requires of her to *adulterate*<sup>1</sup> traditional tropes of women in traditional nationalistic literature. In order to accomplish such intricate task, she challenges the masculine discourse from within, rediscovering the past anew.

In addition to giving a sneak preview of the main points to be developed in the course of the book, the table of contents offers the readers the possibility of reading each of the eight chapters separately, since they are divided into subsections of the same theme, and present a brief conclusion on the topic. The first three chapters are dedicated to specifying the author's methodological *locus of enunciation*, or the epistemological approach with which she interprets Boland's art. In this sense, the introduction is followed by a detailed chapter in which Villar-Argáiz examines and positions Boland in colonial discourse. Interestingly enough is that the ones who are not fully acquainted with this kind of criticism are able to understand its main trends and considerations. As far as I am concerned, one of the main points she touches on is the distinction between postcolonial theory and postcolonial criticism. After explaining the central theoretical framework posed by the pioneers Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri C. Spivak, she sheds light on the fact that the present criticism plumbs the depths of the legacy left by this *holy trinity* in the light of new challenges. The chief names mentioned by the critic are Aijaz Ahmad and Wa Thiong'o Ngugi, certainly owing to the fact that while the former proposes a revision in postcolonial reason by adopting a revolutionary Marxist standpoint, the latter does that by putting forward a decolonisation of the mind through the adoption of native languages.

No sooner does Villar-Argáiz sum up her discussion on the critique made by postcolonial criticism, than she takes up the theme of minority and feminine discourse. Invested with as much authority as in the other sections, in the second chapter, the critic embarks on the enterprise of envisaging Eavan Boland's poetry according to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *deterritorialisation*. In her words, with a view to "identify[ing] writers exile and displacement in terms of language and literature... 'deterritorialisation is... negative because it involves estrangement... [also] positive, for it allows subversion of the major language" (Villar-Argáiz 63). Likewise, such concept helps the author to comprehend how Boland creates a literature of resistance that "is political in nature... in the sense that each of its individual concerns is connected immediately to politics. The minor writer, just by raising his/her voice and demanding his/ her right to be heard and recognised as an agentive subject, defies the established system which confines him/her to the margins" (*Op. cit.*). With the purpose of scrutinising critically the relationship between colony and metropolis, the poet revitalises the English language through the incorporation of forgotten (hi)stories, specially the ones lived by the women who, in the national literature, were nothing but *fictive queens or national sibyls*<sup>2</sup>. Thus, these passive subjects, that were once represented as Kathleen Ni Houlihan, Shan Van Vocht and Roisin Dubh are turned into contemporary agents, such as mothers whose tasks are as ordinary as bringing up the children and doing the household chores.

The forth and fifth chapters are dedicated to the task of proving how Eavan Boland *reterritorialises* Irish female poetry at the moment she challenges and disrupts the authoritarian discourse, giving raise to a revisionary stance on motherland. Nevertheless, as an artist that comes from a land whose past has been, by and large,

revisited and rewritten by generations of writers from various literary affiliations, the poet's stance relies on two contrasting motivations: if on the one hand she wishes to move beyond nativism, acknowledging not only Ireland's lost culture in the colonial process by its Other subaltern histories, on the other hand, she also desires to depict her own subjectivity as a hybrid entity, whose essences are lost within the numerous psychological and geographical dislocations undergone by her. Consequently, the main target of her initial outlook is *critical nationalism*, which means Boland will articulate both culture and politics in her poetry. As a paradigm of the manner in which she breaks the nationalistic ideology, Villar-Argáiz analyses the poems "Mise Eire" and "Mother Ireland", asserting the use of *I*, instead of *she* in the representation of the land suggests the subject matter woman became the subject, however unsure of her place in Irish nationalism.

The following section, "To a Third Space: Boland's Imposed Exile as a Young Child", perhaps the most important of the book, touches on a crucial point: the formation of such subjectivity. In relation to that, Villar-Argáiz reinforces the view that Eavan Boland's sense of displacement stems from her experience of living in London when she was a little girl due to her father's professional duties. As regards the theme of exile, the author presents a general account on what has been theorized on the theme: notions such as dispossession, displacement, ruptures and discontinuity serve as a springboard for her main argument that, in search for an identity, the poet relies on a threefold basis whose main function is to decentralise essentialist ideals, such as the main motifs concerning women. In this fashion, relying in Stuart Hall's *strategic politics of position*, the critic confirms for us that, as an Irish citizen, as a woman and as a poet, Eavan Boland perceives the authoritarianism in the politics of identity, along with its restrictive boundaries to the imaginative creation of a versatile and fluid identity. In the detailed scrutiny of the poems "The Pomegranate" and "Heroic" Villar-Argáiz shows how the necessity of exile and dislocation shed light on a new interpretation of Irish history. By the same token, the poet forges a third space where hybridity and psychological tensions bring to the surface an anti-fundamentalist poetics.

Continuing with her line of thought, in the two final chapters, the criticism hinges on the theme of subalternity and spontaneous exile, as the titles suggest: "The Subaltern in Boland's Poetry" and "Boland's Mature Exile in the US: an 'Orientalist' Writer?". Both chapters seek to prove how the subjectivity, as a literary device, when constructed on the grounds of no-essences and hybridism, is powerful enough to "reconstruct the history of female literary marginalization" (Freadman and Miller *apud* Villar-Argáiz 205). Rather than focusing on the defeats of Irish women, or even Irish history, Boland proposes, as the critic suggests, an *irreducible difference*, which forces both poet and reader to acknowledge the fact the "Other" cannot be fully grasped, be "It" a woman, an event in the past or even a memory. Poems such as "The Achill Woman", "Outside History", and "We are always too late", at the outset, rehearse an apparent connection with the past that ends up in failure due to the epistemological fragmentation

of his native land and feminine discourse. To Villar-Argáiz mind, this is highly subversive for it criticises hegemonic powers and inserts her poetics in the realm of the *in-between space* where she can identify with not only Irish stories, but also other stories hidden by the colonial repression on native culture.

As a conclusion, the book presents a conscious analysis of the main debates regarding Eavan Boland's work, while giving a general idea of the main trends of post colonial criticism. Throughout the book, the reader is invited to go beyond the Western binary thought and understand a new *sense of place*, which pertains to a continuous search for identity and space in an interconnected world of multiple identities. One of the features which seems highly extraordinary is the fact that these concepts and conclusions can be also observed in other Irish poets, which also highlights the quality of the book, since it has captured a contemporary search for a new world view.

## Notes

- 1 According to Pilar Villar-Argáiz, "adulteration" is a concept developed by the cultural critic David Lloyd to refer to "a strategy employed by those who have found themselves on the margins of power and which is resistant to colonialist discourse as well as dominant forms of nationalism" (Villar-Argáiz 80).
- 2 The female poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill quotes Eavan Boland in order to support her position that, since the beginning of Irish literary canon, women have not been allowed to take part in it, except for being idealized allegories of the country. In her words, "Nowhere in the Irish poetic tradition can I find anything but confirmation... that women have been nothing else but 'the fictive queen and national sibyls'". (Villar-Argáiz 95).