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*Journal of Artistic
Creation & Literary
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Volume 4 Issue 2 (December 2016) Article 7

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"Love in Times of Crisis. An Approach to Contemporary Romance Novels in Spain"

Recommended Citation

Pérez-Casal, Inmaculada. "Love in Times of Crisis. An Approach to Contemporary Romance Novels in Spain." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 4.2 (2016): 62-70 <<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

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This text has been blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

Volume 4 (2016) coordinated by Ana González-Rivas Fernández. Issue 2 edited by Ana González-Rivas Fernández and José María Mesa Villar. I Selgyc Postgraduate And Early Career Researchers Conference (Sociedad Española de Literatura General y Comparada).

Abstract: In a context of financial crisis and economic recession, American popular romance novels have increased their sales in the international literary marketplace. In Spain the popularity of this genre dates back a few years, but the advent in 2008 of the current crisis fostered for the first time the creation of made-in-Spain narratives, capable of competing with foreign titles. What is more, the presence of Spanish novelists is now consolidated, and their works are widely read inside and outside of our country.

Starting with the traditional *novela rosa*,¹ the present paper traces the origins and development of this national production of romance novels in order to reveal the factors that

¹*Novelarios* in Spanish designates a type of mass-produced literature that focused on the love story of its protagonists, and which was very popular during the second half of the 20th century. The English translation would be romance novel, except for the fact that *novelarios* is used almost exclusively to refer to these cheap and short novels produced between the 1940s and the 1980s.

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made it possible. Ultimately, my intention is that of clarifying the relationship between American and Spanish popular romance fiction attending to different elements, such as their formal and thematic characteristics, or their social impact. On the whole, this essay draws from various resources, including interviews with renowned authors and readings of popular works, so as to shed some light on the current state of the genre in our literary market.

Keywords: Literary marketplace, Romance novels, Economic crisis, Spain.

Inmaculada PÉREZ-CASAL

Love in Times of Crisis. An Approach to Contemporary Romance Novels in Spain.

0. Introduction

In Spain, the recent economic crisis imposed higher prices and taxes on most cultural products. This unpopular decision affected book-selling industries negatively and significantly altered the ways in which literature had been consumed up to that point, boosting electronic reading and piracy. In spite of these circumstances, however, the demand for romance novels continued to grow steadily, and the genre's profits have not stalled or decreased due to the economic hardship. An example of this is the success of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy, which has inspired new titles and cinema productions, parodies, and an important debate on "mommy-porn" fiction, or erotic fiction addressed to middle-aged married women. Obviously, stories about love and courtship have an enormous appeal to the public, and, as E.L. James' novels demonstrate, they can be easily and successfully introduced into new literary markets.

The present paper focuses precisely on the translatability of romance fiction into new literary contexts. More specifically, it aims to discuss the present state of the genre in Spain on account of a very recent phenomenon. Since 2008, Spanish authors have seized the opportunity given by the crisis, and they have started to write and publish romance novels like the ones imported from the United States after 1980. Throughout this paper, I argue that the emergence of Spanish romance fiction needs to be partly understood in this context of economic crisis, when publishing houses resorted to national writers in order to maintain a highly profitable market. I also reflect on the relationship between American and Spanish romances, explaining how at the beginning Spanish writers merely imitated their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, but eventually developed their own romance tradition with a distinctive Spanish air reflected in its characters, setting and motifs. As far as the future is concerned, Spanish romance novels continue to increase their presence in our literary marketplace, with new writers and publishing houses taking their first steps in the industry.

In order to draw the map of contemporary romance fiction in our country, firstly I will explain the reasons behind the introduction of American romances in the 1980s, and point out at their similarities and differences with the Spanish *novela rosa* of the same period. Secondly, I will analyse the appearance of Spanish titles in the midst of the economic crisis, and finally, I will pay attention to the special traits of Spanish romance fiction.

1. The romance novel in Spain

Popular romance fiction as it is now understood began to take form in the late 1960s in the United States, where reputed critics of the form such as Tania Modleski considered these novels to be rewritings of a universal and very lucrative "formula" (36). Its history, nevertheless, also comprises examples of sentimental novels and domestic fiction as a consequence of the definition given by Pamela Regis, in which romance novels focus above all "on the courtship and betrothal [process] of one or more heroines" (22). The romance genre has proven resilient enough to survive the many transformations of the publishing

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industry, and it has adapted to social and political revolutions as well. In this changing context, the love relationship that constitutes the core of the genre allows romances to be easily and successfully transferred to other cultures. Everything else can be modified; the setting, the secondary plots, even the characters' features, offer endless possibilities for writers as long as they maintain the courtship process as the centre of the narrative. This versatility was already noticed by Janice Radway in the pages of *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, where she exposed the complex and endless process of negotiation that takes place between readers and authors, and which determines to a large extent the characteristics of a successful romance.

Throughout the 1970s, romance fiction left its traditional conservative tone behind and embraced new social, moral and ideological codes. Carolina Sánchez-Palencia notes the advent of a new erotic subgenre, with renovated characters whose sexuality, especially in the case of the female protagonist, was perceived as "more comprehensive, diverse and uninhibited, visibly separated from patriarchal morality" (my translation) (84). Such change is credited to the ideological demands that second wave feminism pushed in those years, and which emphasised equal professional and economic opportunities, plus more sexual freedom for women. Sánchez-Palencia, concludes that these new American romances were exported to fill an existing vacuum in places like the UK, but also, I would argue, in countries like Spain, where the popular literature of the time did not openly address these issues.

In the Spanish literary landscape, love and courtship stories had been around for a long time, disguised as *folletines*, *fotonovelas*,² and *novelas rosas*. The two last types were intended, as most critics argue, to educate women on the right behaviour and morality, or, as González Lejárraga expressed it, "to keep Spanish women on the right track" (my translation) (11). Due to its characteristics, the *novela rosa* becomes a close antecedent but not the primary source of today's national romance novels. These *novelas rosas*, according to González Lejárraga, resembled the French *romans roses* that were published in Spain during the 1920s and 1930s, in both form and ideology. The Spanish writers who adopted the French model soon became popular, since they "narrated stories whose daily nature, familiar names and settings were easily recognised by readers, and as a result, these writers ended up displacing the foreign ones" (my translation) (González Lejárraga 32). Eventually, however, the term *novela rosa* came to designate an entirely different literature. In the work of writers such as Corín Tellado, the finest example of the genre, González Lejárraga affirms the *novela rosa* lost its literary quality as well as its didactic purpose, thus becoming "a carelessly written subspecies, packed with sentimental and erotic novels that sometimes verged on pornography" (my translation) (36).

Corín Tellado's novels still epitomize the genre of Spanish *novela rosa*. Apart from the eroticism that González Lejárraga so openly condemns, Tellado was accused by Andrés Amorós in 1968 of an excessive reliance on foreign settings, characters and plotlines that did not correspond to the Spanish social, political and economic situation of the time. In other words, this renovated genre regressed to the foreign settings and plotlines that characterised the early manifestations of *novela rosa* in Spain. In addition, according to Amorós' *Sociología de Una Novela Rosa*, Tellado's novels exhibited a condemnable "aprobmatismo" or untroubled standpoint (73), for they took place in London or New York, and dealt with wealthy protagonists who lived by problematical moral codes that promoted, among other things, a sexual double standard for men and women. This apparent lack of political commitment generally characterises *novelas rosas*, and it differentiates them from the new romance that was brought to Spain soon after the dictatorship was over. In fact, this newly-

²*Folletines* were a type of serialised novels that originally accompanied newspapers, but later on gained importance and became a well-established literary subgenre, with western stories, detective stories, etc. *Fotonovelas* in turn are characterised by the combination of images and text, quite similar to today's comics, and they also deal with stories full of mystery, romance, etc. Both subgenres resemble the *penny dreadfuls* or the *dime novels*, popular in the UK and the US during the earlier part of the 20th century.

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arrived romance was no longer labelled *novela rosa*, but *novela romántica*, a calque from the English that conspicuously indicates the extent to which this foreign romance type was different from the one existing in Spain.

In this way, American popular romance entered the Spanish literary market as part of the process of opening up and modernisation that started in the 1980s, and it did so through translations from the English originals. Among these first writers were Nora Roberts, Johanna Lindsey or Jude Deveraux, and the publication was shared by well-known publishing houses like Vergara, Ediciones B, RBA Coleccionables, Plaza & Janés or Harlequin Ibérica. Regarding the characteristics of these novels, they all possessed the defining romance plot (a courtship process and the promise of betrothal) and the overtly-political features I have mentioned before: more appealing protagonists, more freedom of action for heroines, and an overtly sexual component that was lacking in the Spanish context. Thus, following Amber Botts's hypothesis, these new romance novels provided Spanish women readers with a "place for expression" (72) in which they could discuss elements and situations they encountered in their every-day lives, such as work, sexuality, family and social relationships. All these features are still present in the type of romance novels that are published today, both in North America and in Spain.

As far as the volume of this new market was concerned, the records of the Spanish ISBN agency illustrate the growth in publications of different Anglo-Saxon authors. It transpires from these figures that foreign names such as Jayne Ann Krentz, Jude Deveraux and Nora Roberts monopolised the Spanish romance publishing industry, endorsed by their success in the US literary marketplace. But this data also shows the almost dramatic decrease in publication rates that many American writers suffered after 2008. If an author in the likes of Jude Deveraux is considered, for example, the effects of the economic crisis become noticeable. Deveraux's work was first translated into Spanish in 1989; the amount of novels available from this writer (new editions, reprintings, new titles, etc.) increased throughout the 1990s, reaching its peak in the 2000-2008 period with 75 books, falling back to 38 titles since 2009. The economic crisis as a rule endangered the whole publishing business with many budget cuts, but in all likelihood, the profits generated by selling romance fiction were too good to be abandoned.

2. Spanish romance fiction: emergence and characteristics

In November 2014, at the first conference organised by El Rincón de la Novela Romántica in Madrid, several Spanish authors participated in a panel session entitled "La novela romántica en la actualidad", where they shared their opinions about the genre, as well as their personal experience in publishing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all of them related their success with the arrival of today's crisis, when economic adjustments made it easier for their works to be taken seriously by editors and publishers alike. The advantages of publishing national writers are straightforward. The costs of producing made in Spain romances are lower at different levels: on the one hand, it eliminates steps in the publication process, such as translation. The anonymity of these writers, on the other hand, allowed publishers to make advantageous and profitable contracts, negotiating reduced advanced payments in copyrights. The widespread use of electronic books constituted a further advantage, because it freed publishers from unwanted stock, and they could also have more competitive prices for these new titles. In fact, e-books have contributed enormously to the market's expansion, and self-publishing constitutes an attractive alternative for new writers.

Apart from economic reasons, other writers in the previously mentioned conference pointed out the high quality of the first romance novels created in Spain, and the good disposition of romance readers. This does not sufficiently explain, however, why publishers decided to vary their long-established practices in such a short period of time. What is more, in the years before the crisis, publishers had timidly produced novels from national writers

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without much success, as it is the case of *Al llegar la noche*,³ Jezz Burning's debut novel and winner of the I Premio Terciopelo de Novela Romántica in 2006. The plot of the book, focusing on the adventures of an American archaeologist in Mexico, and the English penname used by Raquel Barco are indicative of how Anglo-Saxon romances were still favoured by the industry. All things considered, then, economic factors have certainly played an important part in the emergence of a national market of romance novels.

Other factors, nonetheless, have helped as well to popularise and consolidate the Spanish authors. Their success, for instance, owes much to other simultaneous actions such as the increasing number of social events addressed at the readership. The relevance that extra-textual elements possess within the romance reading phenomenon was already hinted at in Janice Radway's study, but its implications have yet to be completely investigated. As far as Spain is concerned, annual romance conferences like those of Galicia (Congreso de Literatura Romántica Ciudad de A Coruña), Madrid (Encuentros RA) or Barcelona (Encuentros B'Radíc) attract many fans because they provide a space in which opinions can be freely and safely exchanged. Furthermore, these forums have become indispensable for the promotion of new authors and publishing houses, as they constitute platforms where the latter can advertise their work and communicate directly with one another. Therefore, these coincidental elements have undoubtedly fostered the nascent creativity of Spanish writers, so that both the economic situation and these parallel events should be understood as interdependent parts within the same process of literary creation; a process where the different agents involved help to develop one another.

Of course, the creative boom in Spanish romance fiction is not exclusive of the genre or even literature. Television, for instance, is another media in which foreign (especially US) and Spanish products compete for the greatest rates. Remakes, adaptations and ideas in general are constantly flowing in both directions. But as Concepción Cascajosa Virino observes when discussing the influence of American television series in our homemade fiction, whenever a foreign element is translated to the Spanish context, it needs to be "necessarily altered and adapted to the Spanish audience" (my translation) (63).

A similar process of adaptation seems to have taken place in the case of romance literature. The form and style of American novels have influenced from the beginning, and continue to influence, the Spanish productions. Just as Radway reported in 1984, many romance writers are voracious readers themselves, and it is only logical to assume that Spanish writers will be, to a certain extent, informed by their own readings of foreign romances.

With regards to form, romance novels are constrained by the genre's rules; as a result, Spanish and American romances are quite the same in this respect: a narration comprising plenty of descriptive passages, witty dialogues between the main protagonists, and many insights into the psychological barriers that keep the lovers apart. In addition, the writing style is also very similar: Spanish works use a language akin to the one existing in previous translations of romances. Notice how in the following passages, for example, the writers resort to similar adjectives and metaphors to describe the hero of the book:

Las mujeres tenemos formas curiosas de reaccionar ante la presencia de cierto tipo de espécimen masculino. Me estoy refiriendo concretamente a ese hombre que hace que se te descuelgue la mandíbula, se te aflojen las rodillas y se te fundan las neuronas. Y todo eso a pesar de que el tío en cuestión tenga, como en este caso, aspecto de no haber dormido en veinticuatro horas, barba de tres días y unos vaqueros zarrapastrosos combinados con una camiseta desteñida por todo atuendo. Claro que cuando bajo tan cutre embalaje, se encuentra el cuerpo glorioso de un dios griego y un rostro que

³ Since most of the romance novels mentioned throughout the paper are Spanish in origin, their titles are presented in their original form. Regarding the examples of American romances cited throughout the text, their title is provided both in Spanish and in English.

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haría palidecer a Hugh Jackman, con diez años menos, quizás empieces a comprender por qué una oficina llena de mujeres jóvenes, inteligentes e independientes, se llega a alborotar como un gallinero ante la llegada de "él".⁴ (Cameselle2)

Con la mirada puesta en el sillón que él había ocupado, pensó en el aspecto de St. Vincent a la luz de la chimenea. Alto y delgado, con un cuerpo que era la percha perfecta para la ropa elegantemente sencilla que complementaba su atractivo leonado. Pelo del dorado viejo de un icono medieval, abundante y un poco rizado, salpicado de mechones ámbar pálido. Ojos que brillaban como diamantes azules en el collar de una antigua emperatriz, y que no reflejaban ninguna emoción cuando sonreía. Sin embargo, su sonrisa bastaba para dejar a una mujer sin aliento. Boca sensual y cínica; dientes blancos destellantes... Oh, St. Vincent era deslumbrante.⁵(Kleypas 9)

It is worth mentioning that each fragment belongs to a different subgenre of romance. *No soy la bella durmiente* is an example of contemporary romance, which means that characters and plotline are situated in recent times. The second fragment, from *El diablo en invierno* (*The Devil in winter*, in the English original), exemplifies the historical romance category: the love story develops in past times, when equal rights for women had not yet been demanded. In this case, Kleypas' novel uses 19th century England as the setting for Evie and St. Vincent's story. As a result, the first fragment sounds more informal, and familiar allusions such as "Hugh Jackman" echo in readers' minds. In the second, the style is more refined and elaborated, with no recognizable references for readers. Despite these differences, however, the portrayal of the male protagonists is quite similar: both passages pay attention to clothing as an important introductory element, and then move on to describe the hero's physical characteristics. Furthermore, the effect that the heroes have on the female protagonists is basically the same. Hence, it can be affirmed that the plot, the structure, and even the language used in Spanish romance fiction resembles that of American novels, even in different subgenres.

By contrast, other features in Spanish romances have matured over the last years. The setting, for example, used to be distant or exotic, as in the case of Mexico in Jezz Burning's *Al llegar la noche*; and most characters were stereotypically English or American. Nieves Hidalgo's 2008 *Lo que dure la eternidad* combined, in a remarkable case of hybridization, a foreign Irish setting and hero with a Spanish heroine, along with a great deal of supernatural elements like ghosts and medieval haunted castles. In this novel, the heroine Cristina Ríos, travels to Ireland as an appraiser to evaluate and classify the antiques of Kilmarnock castle. There is not much about Cristina, except for her quoting the Spanish poet Espronceda, that indicates her true origins and distinguishes her from the other characters in the story. In fact, Cristina accepts the job in Ireland in order to escape her hometown and her situation there, with an arranged and loveless marriage ahead of her. In this respect, Ireland, and above all Dargo, the hero, provide Cristina with a way out from her situation

⁴We women react in curious ways when we find ourselves in the presence of a very specific type of man. By this I am referring to that sort of breathtaking guy who throws you off balance, and leaves you speechless and astounded; all in spite of looking like a sleepless and unshaven man, dressed in shabby jeans and a faded t-shirt. But of course, underneath this unattractive package there is a glorious, god-like body and a countenance so handsome that it would make a younger Hugh Jackman pale in comparison. So perhaps now you might understand why an office full of young, intelligent and independent women makes such a fuss about "his" arrival. (My translation).

⁵Staring at the empty chair where he had sat, Evie thought of how St. Vincent had looked in the firelight. He was tall and lean, his body a perfect frame for elegantly simple clothes that provided a minimum of distraction from his tawny handsomeness. His hair, the antique gold of a medieval icon, was thick and slightly curly, with streaks of pale amber caught in the rich locks. His pale blue eyes glittered like rare diamonds from the necklace of an ancient empress. Beautiful eyes that showed no emotion when he smiled. The smile itself was enough to steal the breath from one's body...the sensual, cynical mouth, the flash of white teeth...Oh, St. Vincent was a dazzling man. (Kleypas' original) (8)

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and implicitly, they present a foreign setting and circumstances as the only place for her to experience everlasting happiness.

Nowadays, settings, characters, themes, and many other elements can be, and are usually domestic. Behind this, there are many voices that vindicate romance as a global genre, and not the exclusive property of American writers. Influential writers such as Nieves Hidalgo, Luz Gabás or Mencía Yano explicitly discuss the translatability of the romance love story, and defend their right to utilise and even transform it. Thus, the current development of romance novels that pay attention exclusively to Spain and its socioeconomic and political context can be understood as an act of self-awareness and empowerment. In other words, these writers are validating their non-Anglo-Saxon experiences by using, paradoxically, a prototypical Anglo-Saxon form.

Taking into account all of the above said, Spanish romance consciously addresses diversity in a way that its American counterpart does not. It opposes uniformity by resorting to the specificities of Spanish culture and socioeconomic circumstances. For example, books like *¿Suave como la seda*, by Noelia Amarillo, deal with unemployment and economic hardships; others, such as Mencía Yano's *El amor siempre llama dos veces*, focus on problems like divorce, child custody, abortion, and the fallacy of flexible working hours for parents. These are only examples, but most writers directly address the problems that affect contemporary Spain.

Similarly, these writers portray the particularities of the different cultures in our country. In this respect, I would like to mention the case of Galician romance writers, who go one step forward and overtly vindicate the presence of traditionally marginalised areas. Galicia becomes an exotic place in the work of writers like Teresa Cameselle, Mencía Yano or Silvia Barbeito, and the emphasis they put on gastronomy, cultural idiosyncrasy and language is greater than in the case of those writers from the centre of the Peninsula. A novel I have mentioned before, *No soy la bella durmiente*, by Teresa Cameselle, begins as follows:

Érase una vez...

En una tierra muy, muy lejana, donde se alimentan a base de percebes, empanadas, cerdos domésticos y caña destilada en los galpones traseros; donde no hay fiesta completa si no se dedica a algún manjar autóctono y donde las escaleras no sirven sólo para subir y bajar, sino que depende de la hora, el momento y otro sinfín de circunstancias; en este extraño lugar, en el que los romanos descubrieron el fin del mundo conocido, Finisterre, y bautizaron como Gallaecia, lugar casi desconocido para los que nunca han estado en él, y al que siempre vuelven quienes lo conocen, se celebra un día grande, entre todos los días grandes, que vienen siendo todos los santos conocidos y por conocer.⁶(1)

This passage describes Galicia paying attention to local features, such as popular traditions or the ambiguity of its people, and provides it with a mythic and ancient aura derived from the country's association with the Romans. On top of that, the initial "Once upon a time" formula establishes a connection between Galicia and fairy tales, suggesting magical creatures and extraordinary situations. Cameselle's text illustrates the emphasis that Galician writers of romance put on their own culture and country of origin, presenting it as a valid alternative to more mainstream settings, for example. Thus, the Spanish contemporary romance genre, behind its apparent uniformity, conveys an important multicultural component that significantly enriches it.

⁶Once upon a time... In a land far, far away, where people feed on barnacles, pies, domestic swine and homemade liquor; where all parties must be consecrated to some local delicatessen; where stairs do not simply go up and down, but depend also on the hour, the moment and other circumstances... In this strange place, which the Romans dubbed Gallaecia, and where they met the end of the known world in Finisterre; a place unknown to many, but to which visitors always return... In this place a special holiday is celebrated, a Saint's Day, which is by far more important than any of the others. (My translation).

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3. Conclusion

To summarize, I have analysed the past and present state of contemporary romance fiction in Spain. It has been demonstrated how the arrival of American romance novels during the 1980s meant a new type of fiction in Spain, which overtly addressed women's concerns on different areas of their lives. The presence of American romance in our literary marketplace increased in the following decades, only to be reduced due to the current economic crisis. However, this in a way promoted the appearance of a distinctive Spanish romance, whose writers have shaped and adapted the genre for their own purposes and needs. After a first stage in which American novels were accepted as a model, contemporary Spanish romance manifests an important vindicatory and nationalistic inclination. As a result, these novels not only discuss issues related to women, but they also comment on social and economic problems that affect Spain directly, such as education or politics. On the whole, it is possible to affirm that the romance genre is a place for self-awareness and self-expression, which allows other voices to be heard and taken into account. I would like to finish by saying that we should not overlook the political significance of this genre, as well as the importance of its cultural component, as contemporary Spanish romance so clearly demonstrates.

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After graduating in English Language and Literature in 2013, I specialised in English Studies at the University of Santiago de Compostela, where I presented a master's dissertation on the contemporary American popular romance novel. Gender studies and cultural studies are some of my interests, as well as popular literature and literature by women. Currently, I am working on a PhD thesis at the University of Santiago de Compostela. In a way, this work departs from my master's dissertation, combining genre and gender studies in order to investigate the romance novel in English.

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