

ROSARIO FERRÉ: THE VANGUARD OF PUERTO RICAN FEMINIST LITERATURE

Since Rosario Ferré began her writing career in 1970, she has actively promoted the participation of women in the fields of writing and literary criticism. A writer herself, she is familiar with the difficulties women writers encounter in the areas of publishing, literary criticism, and general acceptance by the reading public. All of these obstacles are exacerbated in Puerto Rico where the traditional societal role for women is more rigidly delineated than in other societies in the northern hemisphere. Through her literary magazine, *Zona de Carga y Descarga*, through her own publications such as *Sitio a Eros*, and in her most recent book *El Coloquio de las Perras*, Rosario Ferré expresses her own beliefs concerning Puerto Rican feminist literature. She speaks with a respected and resonant voice in the wilderness of feminist literary criticism as she combats not only the treatment which women authors receive at the hands of the male literary critics but also as she battles against the segregation of literary criticism into opposing camps of male criticism versus female criticism.

Rosario Ferré was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, in 1938. She is the daughter of Lorenza Ramírez de Arellano and industrialist and former governor Luis Ferré. Ferré grew up in what she describes as an isolated environment where books became her escape from the loneliness of her childhood. Reading was an important part of her life because it represented her hegira from the reality of the absurd and eminently cruel world (Ferré *Sonatinas* 10).

While she was a student at the University of Puerto Rico, Rosario Ferré joined forces with other student friends to publish the magazine *Zona de Carga y Descarga*, and she served as its co-editor. The first edition of the magazine was published in 1970, and nine issues were published before its demise in 1972. The purpose of the magazine was literary—to publish young Puerto Rican authors. Ferré herself published her first short story “La muñeca menor” in the first issue. In the two-year life span of the literary magazine every one of the fourteen stories and six poems in Ferré’s first collection *Papeles de Pandora* (1976) had been published originally in *Zona de Carga y Descarga*.

During the twenty years of her writing career Rosario Ferré has published multiple collections of short stories, a book of poetry, a novel and three books on literary criticism. Ferré also translates her own work into English. She has documented oral Puerto Rican folklore and published these stories in her collections of fairy tales and fables for children.

Rosario Ferré has developed a personal philosophy about her writing. She labels herself a “storyteller” rather than a “writer” because in Spanish the word for storyteller, **cuentista**, has only one form with no reference to gender, whereas the

word for writer has both a masculine and feminine form, **escritor** versus **escritora**. She believes that there exists unequal treatment of men and women in the world of literature, and she does not want to be labeled with a specifically feminine referent (Zapata 133-4).

Ferré also believes that “. . . tiene que haber una identificación absoluta entre la experiencia del personaje y del escritor para que esto sirva como punto de partida para luego poder escribir un cuento, una novela” (Gould Levine 192). [there should be an absolute identification between the individual’s experience and the writer’s so that [experience] serves as the starting point for being able to write a short story or a novel later on].¹ This experience for a woman author delineates the themes which she addresses in her writing. Women engender and give birth to children; they also take care of them and guide them as they grow. Because these are the natural roles of women, their experiences come from within.

Rosario Ferré does not agree with other literary critics about the distinction between feminine and masculine literature. Many critics both male and female feel that there are no similarities between the two and that masculine and feminine literature should be treated as two separate entities. Ferré states:

. . . no existe un estilo femenino, diferente al de los hombres, porque la literatura, como lenguaje y como forma, no tiene sexo. . . . La literatura femenina difiere de la literatura masculina en cuanto a los temas que la obseden. . . . La literatura femenina es mucho más subversiva que la literatura de los hombres, porque a menudo se atreve a bucear en zonas prohibidas, vecinas a lo irracional, a la locura, al amor o a la muerte; zonas que en nuestra sociedad racional, productiva y utilitaria resulta peligroso reconocer que existen (Heinrich 98-99).

[A feminine style of writing does not exist as a different style from the men because literature, as language and as form, has no sex. . . . Feminine literature differs from masculine literature in the themes that obsess it. . . . Feminine literature is much more subversive than the literature of the men because women often dare to delve into prohibited areas bordering the irrational and the mad, areas dealing with love and death, areas which in our rational, productive, and utilitarian society become dangerous when one acknowledges their existence.]

Ferré also feels that all writing is autobiographical. In a seminar which she gave at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, in the spring of 1990 she said that while she finds writing in first person extremely difficult, she either consciously or subconsciously develops her fictional characters with her own traits or traits of others she has known. Writing must come from experience; thus, writing is autobiographical because the ideas come from the experiences the author has had. The characters, or the plots, or the descriptions may not be overtly autobiographical, but the images come from somewhere within the author’s existence.

Rosario Ferré also stated that she tries to write didactic concepts in the form of

¹ All of the translations are the author’s, unless otherwise noted.

narrative fiction instead of creating essays which tend to bore the reader. “. . . mis ensayos tienen siempre un hilo narrativo que resulta más interesante que el análisis técnico” (Zapata 133). [My essays always have a narrative thread that makes them more interesting than technical analysis alone.] Her most recent essays treating the subject of feminist literary criticism embodies such a fashion. *El coloquio de las perras* or *The Colloquy of the Female Dogs* includes a short story with the same title which is narrative fiction about feminist literary criticism. The essay-short story is a parody of Miguel de Cervantes’s exemplar novel *El Coloquio de los perros* or *The Colloquy of the Male Dogs* written over three hundred years ago. Cervantes used mimetic narrative style to create a conversation between his two canine protagonists Cipión and Berganza. The two dogs discussed the social and political problems of seventeenth century Spain, relating to the reader Cervantes’s own opinions of the difficulties in which his native country was wallowing. Ferré employs the same stylistic concept of a conversation between two canines to discuss opinions which are her own, but here the similarities end.

Ferré’s colloquy is a skillful combination of mimetic and diegetic narrative which presents the theme of the intricacies of Latin American feminist literature and feminist literary criticism. Ferré stated that she often wrote for friends and people who are close to her (Gazarian Gautier 86). Thus, “The Colloquy of the Female Dogs” is dedicated to two of her friends and compatriots in literary criticism, Ani Fernández and Jean Franco. The protagonists of Ferré’s colloquy are Fina and Franca. Ferré has even linked the dedication of the essay to the names of the protagonists, for Fina is an anagram of the first letter of the surname Fernández and the reverse of Fernández’s first name—i, n, a. Franca is the feminine form of the second surname Franco.

Fina is a pure-bred dog who grew up in a home in Ponce. One day she was lured away from home by the town’s knife-sharpener who later sold her as a breeding dog. Over the years Fina led a hard life, changing owners many times until one day she ran away determined to remain free and unattached for the rest of her life. Her best friend Franca is a mongrel who had only known one owner, a young female professor of Latin American and Spanish literature. Both dogs had the opportunity of reading from various, extensive libraries on the subject of Latin American literature and literary criticism. Thus both are educated enough to carry on an erudite conversation on the two topics.

The setting for the colloquy is the fortress of San Felipe del Morro in Old San Juan. Like the human residents of San Juan, Fina and Franca wander to the old fortress to escape the heat of the urban afternoon and to feel the cool breezes blowing off the Atlantic. While they are discussing Latin American literature, they find their mid-evening snack in the refuse of the Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant in the vicinity. The dogs take part in a typical, if not traditional, hispanic passtime—that of meeting with friends to discuss on whatever issue may be topical at the moment.

The first topic of discussion between these two canine friends is the misleading

image that male Latin American novelists project of their female characters. The question addressed is: Is it possible for a male Latin American dog to speak like a female dog, and vice versa? Fina believes that few Latin American writers are able to capture the true image of the female character in what they write. She cites various examples of problematic areas. She also feels that other authors do nothing more than present their female characters in a negative light. José Lezama Lima, Juan Carlos Onetti, and José Donoso create female characters in either a negative or a limited stereotype. Fina does feel that Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez have presented women in a positive societal role—one in which the woman can accomplish the same thing as the man. She also feels that in some of his works Carlos Fuentes has achieved the same role for woman.

Franca plays the devil's advocate in the discussion, pointing out to Fina that women writers have treated male characters no differently in their own works. Franca cites an equal number of female Latin American authors who have done the same as the male authors. Among them she names Isabel Allende, Ángeles Mastreta, Elena Poniatowska, Luisa Valenzuela, Marta Lynch, Clarisse Lispector, Inés Arredondo and Rosario Castellanos who create weak and bumbling male characters. Franca concludes her exposition by saying:

Los personajes masculinos . . . se encuentran en fin, . . . tan ausentes de los textos de nuestras perras escritoras como lo están las féminas de los textos de nuestros perros escritores, y lo que leemos . . . es la dramatización de unos roles culturales desgraciadamente todavía demasiado vigentes en nuestros países. . . . Los personajes masculinos son casi siempre huecos, ausencias irónicas alrededor de las cuales se desarrollan los conflictos femeninos (Ferré *Coloquio* 43-44).

[In the end the masculine characters are found to be just as absent from the texts of our female writers as the feminine characters are from the tests of our male writers, and what we read is the dramatization of some cultural roles which are unfortunately still too powerful in our countries. . . . [T]he masculine characters are almost always hollow, ironic absences about which feminine conflicts are developed.]

Franca next recounts her research in the fields of literary history and literary criticism. She proceeds to name three histories and anthologies, and five texts on critical analysis which have all been written by men and in which a maximum of 25% of the authors included were women. More often than not, no women authors were included in the texts. Fina agrees with Franca in that male critics have overlooked women authors, and she cites a female critic who will publish a bibliography in which over 5000 authors' names are included, every one of them women. Franca returns to the role of mediator, and she states:

. . . no se trata de dividir la literatura en campos enemigos, haciendo de ella una Lisistrata en lugar de un arte universal. Nuestro fin ha de ser lograr que las antologías hechas por hombres, así como las hechas por mujeres, reconozcan e incluyan a los artistas de ambos géneros (Ferré *Coloquio* 46).

[It has nothing to do with dividing literature into enemy camps, making it into a Lisistrata

instead of a universal art. Our end must be the assurance that anthologies done by men, just like anthologies done by women, recognize and include artists from both sexes.]

Fina and Franca conclude their colloquy agreeing to the fact that readers have created an awakening interest in Latin American feminist literature. The increased attention to works of women authors has caused critics to take more than a cursory look at what is being written today. While not everyone agrees on the quality of feminist literature, the mere circumstance that it is being discussed attests to the reality that Latin American feminist literature is more important today than it was yesterday. Franca ends the colloquy with her friend Fina by saying:

. . . La calle nos ha enseñado que es necesario amar a la libertad más que a la propia vida y por ello necesitamos defender ante todo nuestro libre albedrío, el tuyo para contar lo que se te venga en gana y el mío para criticar lo que cuentes. Que cuando la literatura femenina se predica como un credo, lo que comienza como ideal termina inevitablemente en pócima para purgar fanáticos y exterminar lombrices (Ferré *Coloquio* 59).

[The street has taught us that one must love liberty more than one's own life and that because of that we need to defend our liberty before all else, yours to say whatever you feel like, and mine to criticize what you say. That when feminine literature is preached as a credo, what begins as an ideal inevitably ends as a potion for purging fanatics and exterminating worms.]

Rosario Ferré, through the voices of Fina and Franca, clearly states her belief that themes are the only difference between masculine and feminine literature. "Literature has no gender because both sexes use the word as their basic building block. . . . There is [no] type of female writing separate and distinct from male writing" (Gazarian Gautier 85). The pendulum swung to the extreme, placing emphasis on masculine literature only. Now the pendulum swings through a complete arc to the other extreme, emphasizing feminine literature only. When the pendulum reaches the midpoint of its arc, there will be no distinction between masculine and feminine literature, only a distinction between superior and inferior literature. Rosario Ferré is the vanguard in Puerto Rican feminist literature because she is the lone voice in a crowd of both male and female critics who wish to divide the literary world rather than to unite it into a more exemplary and tolerant medium of communication.

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