

Feminine Voice of Puerto Rico: An Analysis of Selected Caribbean Short Stories of Rosario Ferre

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Abstract. The paper attempts to look afresh at the hidden meanings and interpretations of infamous fairy tales from the beginning of times. I have also touched upon the status of women in these tales which contributed to perpetuation of male dominance in society only to be challenged and changed by them in future. The tales are written in an attempt to encode the cultural values of their tellers and their society. While some stories go back hundreds, even thousands of years, the ways those stories are told and the elements presented, emphasised or omitted give us a lot of information about the messages each teller thought important.

Keywords : Slavery; multi-ethnic groups; racism and class difference; marginalization, subjugation and identity crisis.

Puerto Rico holds a peculiar position among the other Caribbean islands due to its unique history of Spanish and American colonies. The island has witnessed a period of slavery spanning for nearly four centuries from 1508 to 1815. During the period of agricultural development in Caribbean islands, Puerto Rico was converted into a “Slave Depot” from where the slaves were imported to other parts of agricultural provinces till the official abolition of slavery in 1834. This island has the multi-ethnic groups of Spanish, Amerindian and African populace. The socio-cultural condition of the island shows a marked history of racism and class difference. In addition to this, Puerto Ricans had suffered identity crisis owing to the anomalous condition of island’s nationality for decades. It is the only commonwealth country in the world which was for long attached to United States. It was neither fully integrated as one of the states of U.S. nor was it bestowed its autonomy. This state of limbo for Puerto Ricans has compelled them to face the unacceptable situations. The incidents like the policies of the island were always directed by the programmes of globalization and modernization in America. There was always a tension between Puerto Rican in the island and living in the main land of United States, based on the validity of their identity till the recent time. Puerto Rico got the Puerto Rican Citizenship in 2007. The people in the island had long felt insecure owing to the question of Puerto Rican nationality, identity and language. The literature of the island shows remarkable shades of this constant conflict and tension ensued in this land for last few centuries. It relates the chronicle of marginalization, subjugation and identity crisis of the people in Puerto Rico owing to their unusual global as well as national position. The writers of the island like Esmeralda Santiago, Mayra

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Santos Febres, Julia De Burgos, Rosario Ferre, Pedro Pietri, Rene Marques and Ana Lydia Vega have successfully established their own literary aesthetics. They have artistically dealt with the issues like glorious colonial rule in the island, the saga of dying colonial power of American and Spanish colonizers, the fear of losing privilege among the white masters which was hitherto afforded to them owing to their aristocratic lineage etc. Puerto Rican Literature, especially written by female writers openly put forth the issues like class conflict, racial and gender segregation in the island. The female authors have brought forth some real life issues like forced and sometimes consensual miscegenation between white masters and black slaves through their literature. The suppressed resentments among the coloured people in the island, the saga of exile of white expatriate mistresses in the alien land of Puerto Rico as has been successfully delineated by the female author's like Rosario Ferre, Oglia Nolla, Ana Lydia Vega etc. The present study will deal with the theme of racial and cultural conflict in the island. Its prime concern will be the cultural silencing of white mistresses especially during the decline of colonial power in the island of Puerto Rico. This research paper proposes to study the above mentioned aspects by restricting its purview to the selected short stories of Rosario Ferre.

Rosario Ferre, a famous Latin American white author was born in an upper class white family. She was brought up in a protective patriarchal set up. In the island of Puerto Rico, she has closely observed the stratification between upper class women and oppressed and marginalized working class women of colour. Ferre started her career as a writer by publishing a journal titled *Zona de Cargo, de Descarge* (1971-76), in which she published some of her original stories. Selected stories from this journal later appeared in the anthology titled *Papeles de Pandora: The Youngest Doll* (1976). Ferre, also published some of her insightful feminist essays in her book named, *Sitio a Eros* (1980) through which she tried to find a connecting link with other feminist thinkers like Virginia Woolf, Anais Nin and Simone de Beauvoir et al. In this book, she gave her own stance as a feminist thinker and a writer, telling her island's story by using vernacular voice. In her works, she gives an artistic expression to the mute racial discrimination in Puerto Rico. Her stories unravel this myth of black and white conflict with great subtlety. The decline of landed aristocrats in the wake of receding colonial power and the struggle to maintain their standing as the white ruling class has become the substance of Ferre's short story titled "The Poisoned Story". The story appeared in her collection of short stories titled *Papeles de Pandora: The Youngest Doll* (1976).

This story evokes the tale of desolation of sugar plantation owner, a landed aristocrat whose wealth was built on the sweat of the slaves. The story develops with an account of a young forlorn daughter of a lesser cane farmer named Don Lorenzo in Puerto Rico. The character of Rosuara is crafted in a fairy tale model - a miserable bookworm girl, silenced due to the overbearing presence of a wicked Creole step-mother. She is always hidden behind thick shaded creepers of her

balcony. The story is narrated by her nigger mother, in a self-explanatory tone. She seemed to justify her account of ascend in Lorenzo household from a poor nigger seamstress to a noble lady, at the time of downfall and eclipsing of Don Lorenzo's fortune.

Don Lorenzo had once seen days of prosperity and upward rise as colonial cane estate owner in the island, now he senses pitfalls and a need to move back in every step. In the backdrop of declining colonial power in the island, Ferre weaves a yarn of muted resentment and animus between aristocratic maiden Rosuara and an upstart Creole fashionista, Rosa. Rosa, a poor seamstress of Don Lorenzo's dead wife manages to usurp a legitimate position in her white master's life. Lorenzo's act of finding solace in nigger woman's company after his first wife's death fills the girl with remorse. Like a ship-wrecked man anxious to find some support, he stumbles upon this lady far below his stature. Ferre describes his desperation in these word, "...when his first wife died, Don Lorenzo behaved like a drowning man in a shipwreck. He thrashed out desperately in the ocean of loneliness for a while...Rosa offered to keep him afloat, clasped to her broad hips and generous breast." (Ferre 88) Rosa turns out to be a ruthlessly practical woman who sells out all the expensive riches of the villa including exclusive cutlery and draperies which she thought to be an extravagance of a whimsical imperial family. She deprives them of the luxury of tasty Spanish cuisine and serves them Creole dishes; the sight which at once repelled Lorenzo. She exploits every resource of the household to invest in her boutique. This generates resentment for her among the elite wives of other white overseers. I quote, "I can almost hear them whispering, tearing me apart behind their fluttering fans. Whoever would have thought it; from charwoman to a gentlewoman, first wallowing in mud, then wallowing in wealth. But finery does not a lady make." (87) She, too, nurtures an intense hostility for these privileged customers, including Rosura's mother. She names her shop, 'The fall of Bastille' ironically signifying the downfall of white masters and the rise of working class. Rosa is a prototype of a working class Creole woman who apparently mocks at the protected lives of upper-class white counterparts but secretly harbours a desire to invade their space. Although she is reluctant to accept this fact, she had always aspired to enter this hitherto forbidden position of respectability. Her cunning nature is exposed with the instance of her disrespectful treatment of the upper class white women, "The mayor's wife has just entered the room. I'll greet her without getting up, with a slight nod. ...I know she expects me giving a thousand bows...I felt compassion for them...suffocated behind the glass galleries of their mansions with nothing to occupy their minds...who had perished victims of neurosis and depression...salvation through the line and color...cure everything."(88)

She feels hostile towards Rosuara for her looks, her artistic liking for literature and her culinary skill etc. Rosuara gets the golden rimmed leather-covered books from her father as gifts on her birthdays. These books always reprove the fact that Lorenzo holds Rosuara in greater esteem than Rosa in that house. The act

of gifting books is mark of a courteous gesture of a noble father towards his elite daughter. These courtesies were hardly put forth for Rosa. The discriminating act clearly reinforces the fact that the noble Spanish families do not value the hardworking Creoles and would never grant them equal position. Don Lorenzo would always eat the food prepared by Rosuara with greater appetite, ignoring the displeasure on his wife's countenance. Even though Lorenzo is trapped by this utilitarian lady, he passes sardonic remarks exposing extravagance of this Creole lady at the expense of his declining fortune. He remarks, "Although to dress your opulent meat would take several reams of silk more than the one they needed. I would not mind paying them because you are a woman of truth and not a willowy mannequin story."(88). Rosa in Ferre's work represents the pride in both the indigenous and African components of Puerto Rican identity, yet Spaniards never seem to affiliate Blacks with themselves; this eventually relegates them to an inferior and powerless position. Malinda Marie quotes Perez Y. Gonzalez's comment about the insistence on maintaining racial supremacy among the Spaniards in the following manner:

Anything that deviated ever so slightly from what Spaniards deemed worthy of respect-including their standard of beauty and their cultural expression was labeled abnormal, ugly, bad and devoid of any redeeming quality or value. (Williams, 111-112)

Ferre ends the story mysteriously, with an account of Don Lorenzo's demise. Rosa wears her exclusive funeral cloak reserved for that occasion. She grabs the last book that Don Lorenzo had gifted Rosuara and lives through it. Surprisingly, a story written with a sticky guava coloured ink attracts Rosa's attention. She reads the most arresting tale of Rosuara, the character in the story and finds herself completely engrossed in reading. The process of reading the pages after pages make her feel uneasy. Yet she can't resist reading it further, finally the bitter taste in her throat chokes her forever. In the 'Foreword' section of her book *Papeles de Pandora: The Youngest Doll*, the motif of the author is slightly hinted at. Jean Franco reveals the author's aim behind this portrayal of apparent mother-daughter hostility in 'The Poisoned Story'. She writes:

The lower-class seamstress in this story had married a widower... whose daughter, Rosaura, she greatly resents and who is always reading. Rosa's insistent self-justifying voice and her suspicions of Rosaura stridently begin to dominate the story but because she is answering her accusers, the story inevitably includes what she would like to be silenced. Rosaura's resentment, on the other hand, is silent. She has withdrawn into the magic of literature and when Rosa tries to lay hold of her "poisoned book," she finds herself drawn into its plot. Not only does

the story suggest that women live the plots of the stories that are told about them, but it also reveals the double meaning of plotting itself. (Franco, Foreword)

Ferre also emulates different social roles assigned to women by patriarchal hegemony. She gives multiple accounts of gender and social roles assigned to women in Spanish speaking country of Puerto Rico. Ferre creates the character of a crippled aunt from aristocrat sugarcane estate owner's family in her story "The Youngest Daughter". The aunt in the story once led a free spirited and libertine life who swam in the river. She would pour her hair into ocean and let them mingle with the waves' salty foam. During one of her regular water sports, a river prawn cuts her calf and nestles into the soft portion of her leg. A doctor was called to her rescue but his treatment fails to save her; on the contrary, it perpetuates her sore. The lady is resigned to live with the prawn permanently curled up in her calf, smelling like an oozing sweetsop. The young aunt starts leading a miserable life of isolation, now she is devoid of all her earlier vanity. She declines all her suitors and decides to devote herself to the care of her sister's nine beautiful daughters. As the nieces grew up, the aunt starts making dolls for them to play. Soon she refines her craft and prepares dolls of all shapes and size, resembling her beautiful niece and sets them aside in a room which looks like a dovecote or a ball room. These dolls were dear to her heart and helped her indulge in her maternal instinct. Ferre poignantly describes her emotions, "By cradling them in her arm, she would measure out each year of their lives against the hollow that they left in her arms." (Ferre, 2)

Ferre's portrayal of aunt as a free spirited woman from upper class white family seems to be a threat to phallocentric social system. This libertine behaviour of the aunt has to be curtailed to fit into the phallocentric parameters. The angry river prawn which finds its way into the aunt's calf and the doctor who comes with a utilitarian purpose act as patriarchal agents who put a halt to the aspiring spirit of the lady. The duplicitous doctor does not help in curing the wound; instead he let the parasitic prawn be embedded in her calf which ultimately cripples her. As a result, the aunt is compelled to remain passive which indirectly conforms to the patriarchal social structure. Patriarchy resists critical as well as creative activity of a woman. A woman is expected to lead a stereotypical role assigned to her in the confined space. The aunt in the story tactfully resists this controlling force by creating dolls. She uses her creative as well as critical faculties to replicate her niece's growing age and successfully treasures her filial feelings for them.

When each one of these niece grew up and started getting married, the aunt begins to craft human size dolls, in the image of that particular niece in the most mysterious way. The face of the niece was replicated with a plaster of a wax mask. Transparent porcelain was used to prepare delicate hands and face of the doll; the glossy guards in her garden were dried to prepare the frame of the dolls.

Imported glass eyeballs made from glossy gems were used for its eye-balls. She dressed them all uniformly in their Swiss embroidered frocks and white ribbons to tie their hair, which make them, resemble the nieces. These dolls were carried to their respective houses by the nieces to be kept near the piano for display. When the youngest niece was about to be married the doctor comes along with his son. After inspecting the wound, the son is puzzled. He questions his father, "You could have cured this from the start; he told him, "That's true." his father answered, "but I just want you to come and see the prawn that has been paying for your education for these twenty years." (244) When the doctor's son starts wooing the youngest niece with regular gifts and flowers, the aunt starts preparing the youngest doll for the girl's anticipated wedding with this young lad. She pours wax between two 'dead masks' in order to create the doll's countenance in the perfect imitation of the youngest niece. Ferre uses figurative language to indicate the fact that just as the wax is poured in between two 'dead masks' to create the expected image of the niece; a married woman must conform to a mold or a pattern into which she is socially inserted. In her article, Rossario Ferre's "La muñeca menor: Fantastic Gendered Space", Angela Martin rightly points out a woman's social position in the domestic space as a stagnant dead-end situation, if she accepts it as the norm.

The aunt's words "Aquí tienes tu Pascua de Resurrección" (MM, 5) pronounced when she gives the final dolls to her marrying nieces, are central to the implied reader's interpretation. This utterance refers to the rebirth of each niece's self, her "I," and not a doll. It is a resurrection "from the death-like stagnant existence dominated by patriarchy. The aunt's gift to each niece is the knowledge of patriarchy's manipulation of woman and this knowledge gives woman the possibility of changing her life... The niece now has the knowledge of what threatens her but it is in her hands to make the change/resurrection occur". (Martin, 52)

Soon after her wedding, the youngest niece becomes aware of her husband's greedy and deceitful nature. When the husband steals the diamond studded in the doll's eye and pawns them for 'a fancy gold pocket watch with a long, embossed chain', the young niece is taken aback. One night, when the young doctor finds the doll missing, he questions his wife. The niece excuses herself by explaining, "that the ants had at last discovered the doll was filled with honey and, streaming over the piano, had devoured it in a single night." (Velez, 248) The husband digs out the entire house but cannot find the doll. After many years, the doctor becomes a millionaire. His reputed clientele would pay him exorbitant fees just to see a genuine member of the extinct sugarcane aristocracy seated in the balcony. The young doctor treats his wife as 'a silent relic of dying landed nobility'. The youngest went on sitting in her rocking chair in her balcony, motionless and with her eyes lowered. The husband was intrigued to find that even after so many years the youngest still has the same firm porcelain skin. At night he stealthily enters the lady's bed-chamber. When he checks the lady's heart beats, he could

only hear 'a distant swish of water'. Then the doll lifted her eye lids and from her empty sockets numerous antennas of frenzied prawns come out. The story ends with an uncanny twist and leaves the readers to guess whether the doll in replica possesses the niece or the girl becomes the doll. About the use of supernatural and uncanny elements in the creative writer's text Sigmund Freud comments, "...the uncanny is a tool in writer's box of tricks, a building block that heightens the plot's tension." (43-44)

Ferre, in her short stories, depicts the conditioning of white expatriate Spanish women in a state of cultural silencing. They are subjected to this condition owing to the norms of decency levied on them by their noble heritage in the island of Puerto Rico. They were silenced due to stringent code of conduct laid down by the strong patriarchal social system. The rise of Black and Creole power in the land that proclaimed their legitimacy gradually diminished the monopoly of the white masters. Social elevation of Nigger and Creole women led to slipping of the hitherto dominant position of the white mistresses. Yet the protagonists in Ferre's stories choose not to remain silent or weak. They revert back in the most unexpected way. The racial contestation is eloquently depicted by Ferre through the characterization of Rosuara and Rosa in 'The Poisoned Story'. Rosuara's silent resentment for her manipulative Creole step-mother compels her to write a poisoned story. She avenges the wrong done to her father and herself by mysteriously poisoning this wicked seamstress. Rosa's professional rise as a renowned fashionista of the island, costs Don Lorenzo and his daughter all the essential luxuries of their life. This muted antagonism leads to plotting against Rosa and the final silencing of her diabolic self-explanatory voice. The decrepit aunt in "The Youngest Doll" is a member of a declining sugarcane aristocracy. She is condemned to lead a life of passivity and non-creation due to patriarchal stranglehold. The aunt wages a silent war against the manipulating patriarchal power which is instrumental in crippling her physically. She starts creating dolls replicating her nine nieces and day by day finishes her art. The dolls gifted to the nieces at the time of their wedding covertly expose the fact that the patriarchal institution of marriage reduces a woman into a doll like existence. Human sized adult dolls dressed up like kids show how the married girls are compelled to lead a dwarfish existence. They are prohibited from critical as well as creative thinking. To combat such untoward situation, the crippled aunt mutely conjures up the supernatural power and indirectly empowers her niece to confront the exploitative monopoly of patriarchy. Both these stories of Ferre leave an unsettling impact on the psyche of the readers due to weird twists at the end. As Freud has rightly pointed out, "the story teller can represent reality or depart from it in any ways he fancies... The uncanny intensified the reader's doubts about the text, making them oscillate like a pendulum between what is real and what is supernatural." (43-44)

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