



Voices from the Gaps **Vg**

# Rosario Ferré

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*Meager in land but great in heart, generous port, gap, breach, porthole, trapdoor of impossible hopes, ubiquitous as an air mail stamp, ghostly as the snapshot crumpled in a migrant’s pocket when he boards the jet that will take him to the lettuce fields in California, Puerto Rico is the oxymoron of Costa Rica, dollar-licked by North America and language locked with South America, but above and beyond all else: pier, beachhead, anchorage of dreams. The myth of paradise confounds but consoles us. Puerto Ricans are never sure the island exists, precisely because we’re always about to leave it. Our ports defy us, turns us into a population of traveling snails, roaming the world with our home on our back.*

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## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1938
- \* Puerto Rican novelist, teacher, and activist
- \* First published novel in English is *The Youngest Doll* (1991)

## Biography

Rosario Ferré wrote her first short story in 1970, and since that time she has become one of the most prolific female writers to represent her home country of Puerto Rico. She is also one of the strongest feminist voices of the 21st century. Ferré was born in Ponce on the southern coast of Puerto Rico in 1938. She comes from an influential family that was active in both business and politics. Her father, Luis Ferré, was a pro-statehood Governor of the Commonwealth from 1968 to 1972. His views influenced Rosario greatly, especially while she was receiving her education at Manhattanville College, the University of Maryland, and the University of Puerto Rico.

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In school, she and other students interested in politics and publishing founded the attention-grabbing student literary magazine, *Zona de Carga y Descarga*. While working on this magazine, Ferré, who was the publisher and editor, planted the seeds of what would soon blossom into an illustrious career that includes eleven novels, a Guggenheim Fellowship award, numerous essays, books of poetry, and a biography of her father.

Much of the criticism surrounding Ferré's work focuses on her critique of societal politics, particularly the politics of the state and its relationship to the family. Augustus C. Puleo states that, "the legacy of struggle against racism and sexism is a common thread binding much of contemporary Puerto Rican literature" (Puleo 6). This idea is especially present in Ferré's writing.

Ferré "thinks of herself, above all, as a chronicler of her own country's socio-political history" (Gutierrez 2). The general consensus is that through her retelling of history, Ferré uses her feminist writings as a way to undermine "the conceptual apparatus of the dominant group" (Puleo 6). Few scholars have contested this point. There are those, however, who take her writing to have implications outside of feminism. Additionally, there are approaches to Ferré's work that focus on the subjectivity of truth and how it relates to a society that is confining to women and persons of color.

Margarite F. Olmos argues that "social-sexual hierarchies" (Olmos 40) are the result of gender definitions and that race and sex determine social class (42). She believes that Ferré's writing expresses a common experience between women deriving from "the sociosexual arrangements imposed on women in patriarchal societies" (43). It is therefore Ferré's goal to deconstruct patriarchal society by "undermining masculinist values" (43). Ronald D. Morriso agrees, contending that Ferré attempts to transform the capitalistic and patriarchal culture that surrounds her characters (Morriso 1). Ksenjija Bilbija believes that Ferré deconstructs "an everlasting patriarchal yearning" to control females and their "reproductive function" (Bilbija 887).



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Marie Murphy takes a slightly different approach to Ferré's work, suggesting that Ferré ultimately "sets out to rewrite women's myths" (Murphy 3). However, Morriso believes that she does not "rewrite" but rather "recovers" previous literature. Here, recovery is described as not completely rewriting but rather "covering the same ground again" (Morriso 2). In this way Ferré does not simply revisit and update previous women writers but instead supplements what has gone before her, adding to the original message and never eradicating her literary predecessors (8). By connecting with an earlier literary tradition, she is better able to attack patriarchal society.

Multiple perspectives also play a major role in Ferré's work, enabling her to refute the ideas enforced by a patriarchal society. Ferré asserts that truth is subjective and there are many different versions of it (Ruta 28). Suzanne Ruta argues that "the official version is often imposed by force" (Ruta 28). This idea shapes Ferré's work. For example, in *The House on the Lagoon* she creates two narrators, husband and wife, who have different versions of the same story. This is consistent with Olmos' belief that Ferré is concerned "with Puerto Rican history and social reality" (Olmos 43). The technique of creating various perspectives enables Ferré to criticize the powers that enforce one of many truths.

It is this type of social criticism that Gutierrez says moves Ferré's work beyond feminism. Instead of believing Ferré to be an "angry" writer who, as Kathleen Glenn says, indicts "those who impose confining roles" (Glenn 7), Gutierrez argues that there is a connection between Ferré's portrayal of women and the implications of her work for the politics of Puerto Rico. Gutierrez pushes the commonly held beliefs of Ferré scholars to another level. He argues that the women in her work live "dependent, fragmented lives in a patriarchal state" (Gutierrez 2) that is akin to Puerto Rico's political climate. For example, in *Sweet Diamond Dust*, Ferré intertwines the theme of love with politics. Ferré has said that, in every household, half the family is fanatically pro-statehood while the other half is equally fervent about obtaining political autonomy. Therefore, the struggle between individuals and their desire to create social change is a reflection of Puerto Rico's national identity crisis (3).



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The way in which Ferré's work critiques society is debated among scholars. Most would agree, however, that Ferré's work is ultimately polemical, whether she is criticizing patriarchy or nationalist politics, commenting on identity, or fighting for a version of the truth. Her characters attempt to break free from the social strictures created by male dominated, capitalist society. However, her work has a more far-reaching effect – “it fosters new ways of thinking and beckons all to help achieve full equality in society” (Gutierrez 6).

Ferré's use of multiple perspectives gives her a unique avenue for criticizing the colonialism of her native Puerto Rico. Through the use of multiple characters and perspectives, Ferré is able to highlight the various effects colonialism has had on Puerto Rico and its inhabitants. Her works, *Sweet Diamond Dust*, *The Youngest Doll*, and *The House on the Lagoon* best illustrate this point.

In *Sweet Diamond Dust*, Don Julio is a money-driven creator and owner, or “hacendado,” of the “Diamond Dust” sugar mill. He is extremely successful, leading the family into great wealth and power. However, he becomes “more and more absorbed by the tasks of the sugar mill,” even as his success continues to grow (14). He loses sight of the simpler things in life and soon begins to dedicate his entire existence because he is “visited by a host of troubles” concerning sugar production and the threat of American conglomerates (26). With vividness typical of Ferré's work we learn that, “a number of powerful banks from the north had recently opened branches in Gamaní, and their red granite palaces flanked by white stucco lions were the new sensation in town” (26). The banks “found no difficulty in financing the new sugar corporations that had recently arrived in town” (26). The new financing of huge sugar corporations eventually runs Don Julio's business into the ground. Through the eyes of Don Julio, we are able to see the horrible repercussions of the powerful American corporations and banks moving into the country. Thus, through the use of vivid imagery and the perspective of a money-loving madman who is true to his country, Ferré is able to criticize colonialism.



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In contrast to the perceptions of Don Julio, Ferré shows us the struggles of Titina, the poor, sweet, caring maid of the De La Valle family. Ferré allows readers to experience another view of the De La Valle family and their mill by creating a down-trodden yet ever-optimistic female character whose only concern is for her family and the De La Valles. Titina is privy to the secrets of a successful family. She is told, “you know Dona Laura’s story better than I do, how many times she was betrayed by her husband. And it wasn’t just his sordid love affairs that made her suffer, but his just as sordid political affairs, which had rent her family asunder for decades” (83). Through Titina’s “quiet, ever watchful eyes,” readers see the clear connection between domestic life and politics. Her situation is a metaphor for imposed power, and readers sympathize with Titina, who ends up with nothing. Yet through it all, she represents Puerto Rico -- strong, faithful, and solid.

Ferré’s *The House on the Lagoon* may be the best of Ferré’s illustration of what can be accomplished by using multiple narrative voices. In this novel, Ferré once again comments on the struggle of domesticity versus politics and, consequently, the Puerto Rican reaction to colonialism in establishing a national identity.

In *The House on the Lagoon*, Ferré uses two distinct narrative voices. The reader is not aware of this structure until a few chapters into the book where italicized print breaks the retelling of history and describes Quintín Mendizabal discovery of a novel that his wife, Isabel, is writing. It turns out that this novel is entitled *The House on the Lagoon*, the very text we have been reading. In addition to the narrative voice Isabel uses when writing her novel, the book also switches narrations between Quintín and Isabel, highlighting their respective views on their current marital dispute (Quintín is determined to prevent Isabel from publishing the novel, which he feels disgraces his family).

Quintín is of Spanish decent. He is part of a long line of Mendizabals, who combine the racial pickiness of Spanish culture with the every-man-for-himself attitude of American capitalists. He is also the inheritor of a violent patriarchal tradition. Ferré is not shy about bringing this to the forefront immediately. The story begins with a pledge made between Isabel and her husband, though it might better be called a reconciliation, as Quintín must apologize for a violent outburst. As Isabel sits on her porch, a young boy with an innocent crush serenades her with his guitar.



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Quintín, who is at this point Isabel's fiancé, enters a jealous rage and beats the boy with his belt. The image is made even worse because the "boy went on sitting on the ground singing: /Love me always/sweet love of my life/until he fell unconscious on the sidewalk" (4). It is this kind of imagery that gives us a clear picture of who the characters are. Scenes like this illustrate Quintín's desire for power over his wife, and this is similar to the American presence in Puerto Rico.

The dual-narrative allows us to follow the story-in-progress, discovering it alongside Quintín, and allowing us to hear his condescending comments and Isabel's reactions. But it is not long before we are thrown back into the stories that begin to fill in the details of Isabel and Quintín's conflict. The two versions of reality begin to emerge, animating the conflict and giving it depth with the back and forth "he said/she said" arguments that frame the story.

The structure of the novel also illustrates the nature of truth. Quintín has a history degree from Columbia, and, consequently, "there was true and a false, a right and a wrong in his mind" (106). He is angry when he first reads Isabel's manuscript, embarrassed by the way she portrays his family and irked by her historical sloppiness and misrepresentation of the facts. However, we learn that, to Isabel, this is not the point of the book. One of her favorite sayings is "Nothing is true, nothing is false, everything is the color of the glass you're looking through" (106). She is writing a novel embellishing aspects of the stories to make a literary rather than an historical point. Ferré is in agreement with Isabel. Her book, with its back and forth narratives, constantly casts doubt on the possibility of objective truth. As we read Isabel's novel and then reread it with Quintín, we see the existence of as many truths as there are perspectives.

Ultimately, the book is concerned with the nature of truth and the social conflicts that are mirrored in domestic life, such as Puerto Rico's debate over whether to be independent or to become a U.S. state. By doing so, she is able to argue against the truth imposed by the dominant powers in Puerto Rican society.





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The dual-narrative is, therefore, a metaphor for colonialism. Quintín is the American government that overpowers Puerto Rican culture. Conversely, Isabel represents Puerto Rico. Through her use of multiple perspective, she, like the country, is on a quest for identity. Therefore, Ferré's use of multiple perspectives emphasizes Puerto Rico's constant struggle against colonialism and its desire to ultimately obtain a national identity. Ferré believes that Puerto Rico deserves its own identity. Unlike the nuns who teach Quintín's grandfather, Aristídes, that the island has no history, the goal of the Independistas is to maintain their unique sense of identity. Yet there is no doubt that the conveniences of American citizenship are very appealing. Isabel's grandmother, an unwavering Independista, would sit with the family and look at the Sears catalogue, showing that, whether you are for statehood or not, having a General Electric refrigerator is a good thing. The struggle to obtain a national identity is most powerfully present in the stories of the individuals.

Multiple perspective also plays a major role in "Sleeping Beauty," a short story that is part of a collection titled *The Youngest Doll*. Here, Ferré juxtaposes correspondence and news articles to give the reader a myriad of views of a young woman in crisis. She comments on the society that entraps a young ballerina and bride of a business tycoon by writing from the perspective of the woman, of her father, and of a Reverend mother of the church.

We are introduced to this style of narrative with the first letter by the protagonist, written from the perspective of an anonymous "friend and admirer" and sent to her own husband to confess her feelings of entrapment by the society that defines her. The woman, like Ferré herself, uses the third person voice to express her frustrations and her hope for change.

The story continues with articles from local columns published in the paper, *El Mundo*. In the articles, the ballerina, Maria de los Angeles Fernandez, is described, along with the "beautiful people" who attend her performances. We are immediately given a sense of the beliefs and values of the articles' authors and audience as we learn the details of the wardrobe and hair styles of the audience. The articles also drop the names of American celebrities in attendance before their brief critiques of the ballet itself. Here, again, we are introduced to the powerful effects of American influence on Puerto Rican culture. The *El Mundo* articles show an extreme view, often highlighting the shallow and materialistic aspects of American culture.



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Later, we meet Maria's father by way of his correspondence with the Reverend Mother of the Catholic school she attends. Through letters concerning Maria's future, Ferré reveals the oppressive forces of religious dogma and patriarchy. Both the father and the Reverend Mother write about Maria as if she has no choices of her own. They discuss their concern for her desire to pursue a career in dance. The Reverend Mother asks, "Are you prepared to see your daughter become a part of a world so full of dangers for the body and soul? What good would it do her if, to gain fame in the world of entertainment, she lost her soul?" (94). We see no evidence of her father or Reverend Mother talking with Maria about the convent, marriage, or her love of dance. Therefore, Maria can be seen as the archetype of oppressed women; there is no room for her voice in a world dominated by men and oppressive religion. Stories such as that of Maria give a personal account of what is reflected in a society that is debating the fate of Puerto Rico without serious consultation of its citizens.

Ultimately Maria submits to the dream others have for her by marrying a local business tycoon. She becomes pregnant and delivers a baby boy. Maria subsequently dies in an "accident," with the implication that she is actually killed by her husband. After her death, the father writes the Reverend mother regarding their relief and joy that she had a boy and explains, "we buried Maria de los Angeles in her Jay Thorpe bridal gown" (117). This is a clear example of the male tendency to see women as inferior. After the loss of a daughter, the father finds comfort in the fact that he has a new grandson. Maria's life is reduced to the price of her designer gown. However, Maria's death is more than a physical death. It symbolizes the potential death of an entire gender if Puerto Rican society resists progression.

This problem is made more extreme by Maria's acceptance of her father's religion. She repeatedly invokes God and looks towards Heaven, saying, "This world is a veil of tears it's the next one that counts." She has internalized the teachings of her father and her church, and one could argue that this contributes to her downfall. Ferré's imagery expertly ties together these shocking versions of reality to show Maria's struggle to be free of religious forces, materialism, and patriarchal oppression.





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A discussion of three of Ferré's more popular novels does not do justice to the depth with which she explores the many aspects of Puerto Rican culture. She is an author who uses so many characters that she often puts family trees at the beginning of her novels, and each character represents a different aspect or problem within society. Her ability to combine so many issues into a meaningful whole is quite remarkable. We have seen that Ferré uses the particular experiences of her characters to point us towards a bigger picture – whether it is colonialism, gender issues, or issues of the family. The above discussion not only illustrates the ways in which she comments on Puerto Rican society, but also the possibility of interpreting her work in ways that transcend any particular social argument.

Ferré is married to Agustín Costa, has three children from a previous marriage, and currently resides in San Juan. She is a professor of Latin American Literature and has taught at the University of California, Berkeley, Harvard University, Rutgers University, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras.

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