SARGASSO Interview

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WOMEN AND WRITING: JUXTAPOSITIONS

Responses to Questions

Rosario Ferré
Magali García Ramis

(Magali García Ramis and Rosario Ferré are two of Puerto Rico's most important contemporary writers. Ferré is well known for being the editor of the literary magazine Zona: Carga y descarga in the 1970s, for the collections Papeles de Pandora (stories; 1976), El medio pollito, La mona que le pisaron la cola, and Los cuentos de Juan Bobo (three volumes of stories for grown-up children published in the late 1970s and early 1980s), Sitio a Eros (essays; 1980), and Fábulas de la garza desangraída (prose poems; 1982). She published her first novel, Maldito Amor, in 1986. Rosario Ferré currently lives in the United States, where she is finishing doctoral studies at the University of Maryland.

Magali García Ramis is best known as a short story writer and her first collection, La familia de todos nosotros, was published in 1976. Her first novel, Felices días, Tío Sergio (1986), received highly favorable critical response and has been one of the best-selling Puerto Rican novels of recent years. Magali teaches in the School of Public Communication at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus.

Both writers share concerns about the role of women in contemporary society, feminist themes in literature, and the nature of writing as it reflects questions of gender, ideology, and culture. There are other more coincidental points of departure: although they write in Spanish, both published their first book in 1976—collections of stories written up to that point; and both, exactly a decade later, published their first novel.

Unlike previous Sargasso "interviews," the following is an edited composite of the writers' responses to similar and/or related questions. The order and sequence has been established by the editors, and each writer responded without knowing the answers of the other, or even that the other would be asked the same or similar questions. Thus

the responses are "juxtaposed" here for the first time.)

Question: Is there a "feminine writing" that can be characterized by a particular style or by a choice of themes?

Rosario Ferré: I don't think there is a feminine style that differs from a masculine style of writing. A writer's style responds to vital, literary experience. An example is Felices días, Tío Sergio [Happy Times, Uncle Sergio] by Magali García Ramis, a novel which records the influence of J. D. Salinger. I believe she knows very well, and she writes about this in her novel, contemporary North American narrative as well as contemporary European fiction. Her work is nourished by these writers. I must point out that no woman is mentioned by the narrator of the novel; all the writers are men. Knowledge and acquaintance with contemporary writers has given Magali the workshop experience which I believe defines the style of both men and women writers.

What does exist is a different vision. I think that the problems, which are always the same problems, if they are focused by a woman, usually, although not always, reflect a different vision. An example of a woman writer whose vision is not different from a masculine view is Isabel Allende. She is a woman who writes from the point of view of a woman, since women narrate the story and they are the ones who move the plot. Yet, in ideological terms, it is a reactionary novel, even if she attacks the disintegration of agricultural structures. This same attack is made in my novel, Maldito amor [Damned Love], and in One Hundred Years of Solitude [by Gabriel García Márquez]. The same process of disintegration of social and economic order and the evolution to the modern state in Latin America is depicted. But I think that in Allende's novel [La casa de los espíritus (The House of Spirits)] there is a nostalgic longing for that social order that she describes as in the process of disintegration.

Allende is an example of a woman who writes from a feminine viewpoint that is tinged by a
masculine vision. It is a novel that deep down is saying that fascism is right. It is a reactionary novel in spite of its ending and the references to Salvador Allende. There is an evocation of the patriarchal figure who is always presented in an ambivalent way. There are other women who are more feminine in their vision just as there are men, such as Proust, who seem to be nourished by a feminine vision. In Latin America, all men write from a masculine point of view, even José Donoso—in his novels women participate actively in the development of plot, but his characters are negative. The only Latin American writer who attempts to use a feminine vision in some of his short stories is Julio Cortázar. But that does not happen in his novels, where he is terribly machista and a sadist with women. In Cortázar's stories, women take the initiative and try to set things right.

Question: Is there a "feminine writing"?

Magali García Ramis: When I read something I usually know if it's a man or a woman writing. But for me that is harder to see in literature than it is in movies. The "text" (in the sense of el texto), the pattern is very apparent for me if it is a woman director because of the way she focuses on women. If you see Pretty Baby by Louis Malle, taking place in a brothel of prostitutes, it's a man's point of view. When you see a film like Love and Anarchy by Lina Wertmüller—that's when I first discovered that: the way this woman chooses the leisure hours of the prostitutes, when they are helping each other, washing each other's hair, playing the guitar, just happily—if that's correct—at least they're in a tranquil place at 6:00 before the first customers come. It's a convent-like relationship: a very intense, intimate, tender, loving relationship between at least some of these women, and that really blew my mind when I realized that— it was so beautiful, and I realized why: it was the first time that I directly felt that a woman was portraying something in art that I especially understood as a woman.

Rosario Ferré: Women have more contact with everyday life and that is why they take their themes from the concrete reality of everyday life. But that doesn't mean that if they dedicate their lives to studying philosophy or science they can't write in another way, the way most men writers have written. Women have not had the opportunity to dedicate themselves to abstract studies because they have been more determined by the intricacies of everyday life.

Question: Are problems you face as a writer connected to ideology and gender? How?

Magali García Ramis: I don't believe that a writer has to be chained to an ideology...I don't think you have to make a political statement every time you write. But that problem affects what you do. How? Because sometimes in depicting an idea—the idea for a character, for a situation—all of this political background that is present in you seeps into what you are doing, even if you don't want it to.

I see that very clearly in things having to do with gender, with being female or male. I'll give two examples. When I was writing Felices días, Tío Sergio, for a while I considered the possibility of this uncle having an incestuous relationship with his niece. I thought about it, and I tried to solve the issue from a strictly literary point of view. That was fortunate; because I realized that the way I had described this man he would not be capable of doing that; not because he wouldn't find her attractive but because of his own convictions. He would never violate his own values by seducing a thirteen or fourteen-year-old girl. It was not in his being. But on top of that, I was very aware that if I decided that it would be good—in "literary" terms—for the novel, it would be very bad for Puerto Rican women—because in this country the abuse of young girls by their fathers and uncles is so common that I would be condoning something just because it was fun or pretty, which is exactly
what happened and why I am so aghast at the last part of García Márquez's last novel [Amor en los tiempos de cólera (Love in Times of Cholera)]. I like the novel; it's very good and the best thing by García Márquez since he wrote One Hundred Years of Solitude; and the whole idea of the guy with all kinds of women is fine. But the moment that he seduces a girl who is his ward and that is presented as something funny and delightful . . . a typical old guy. . . .she dies and he goes off with his love. There's no sense of responsibility. The whole idea that it's fun to play with the emotions and sexual impulses of adolescents is very sick. There's a social responsibility not to show it like that. You can show it, but not like that, not as something funny, especially since it adds nothing to the story. You don't have to seduce a fifteen-year-old girl to end the story of a man who really enjoys his life and has all the relationships he wants with adult women.

And there I see something determining what I want to do--and I don't think it opposes what I write or produce or whatever any other writer or artist produces--but there has to be a consciousness that those things simply are not worth it.

... . . . . .

Question: How do your thoughts on writing relate to other women writers?

Rosario Ferré: If I were to rewrite what I wrote on Jean Rhys, I would make a re-evaluation of her work. Rhys functions under the cloud of a masculine vision. She is so negative about women's relations with men that women always end up in disasters and never establish lasting relationships with men. I define a feminine optic as the writer who presents relationships between men and women as a possibility. By denying this possibility, a writer is then siding with men's view of women. There can be a feminine perspective with a negative vision, but it belongs to another generation of female writers.
The latest women writers provide a combination in their feminine optical vision: to give testimony about what happened but also to leave a door open. I think Jean Rhys is so negative because she belongs to a different generation. In her time, she couldn't do anything else. She was already breaking so many barriers.

Marguerite Duras is something different. I think she has a more positive vision of women, even though she also describes all the negativity involved in a relationship. There is a vitality that indicates that her statement is not that there is no solution to the problem. With a few exceptions, Virginia Woolf leaves doors open for women in her novels as well.

**Magali García Ramis:** This links us to the idea of whether my writing, or any woman's writing, should have a distinct consciousness of being feminist-oriented. I think so, even if it is not always obvious—which may be the best way. I think there's an undercurrent of very profound feminist social conscience in all Puerto Rican women writers right now. Carmen Lugo Filippi's stories are filled with frustrated women, but she's not telling you to "go out and liberate yourself." She's showing you that these people are really missing out on life. And you don't have to be a genius to realize why, it's there. That's why they're so effective; that's why I think that when her first book came out with Ana Lydia [Vega]—*Virgenes y mártires* [Virgins and Martyrs]—so many women identified with it. When they went to give lectures and talks, women asked them questions about their own lives as if they were Ann Landers and Dear Abby. All of a sudden women saw other women portraying them with all their own frustrations and limitations.

**Rosario Ferré:** Ana Lydia Vega and Luis Rafael Sánchez use the same popular street language, but she is positive while he is negative. I see Luis Rafael
Sánchez as an actor who uses black humor, while through her language, Ana Lydia Vega has a very affirmative quality that is very positive.

Magali García Ramí: In my particular case, I think the idea of defining what it means to be a woman has been present from the very moment I began to write. I wasn't always conscious of it, and that may be why my first novel deals with that definition. Also, I'm told that first novels are almost always autobiographical. I didn't know that until I was very far into the writing of Felices días, Tío Sergio. But it seemed appropriate: "Oh, no wonder I'm doing it this way."