

PUERTO RICAN CULTURE AND IDENTITY AS SEEN IN ROSARIO FERRE'S  
THE HOUSE ON THE LAGOON

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University-San Marcos  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

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San Marcos, Texas  
December 2008

PUERTO RICAN CULTURE AND IDENTITY AS SEEN IN ROSARIO FERRE'S  
THE HOUSE ON THE LAGOON

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I want to acknowledge my advisor, Dr. Jaime Mejía, for taking me under his wing, pushing me to do my best, and never accepting anything but perfection. His guidance and supervision have made this thesis journey possible. Thank you for agreeing to direct the thesis of this unknown Puerto Rican. Also, Dr. Sergio Martínez and Nelly Rosario for their advice and for giving me the opportunity to finish this academic journey.

I also want to thank my husband, Rubén, for his patience, understanding, and support. A special Thank you to my friends who encouraged me during the times I needed it the most and never doubted in my ability to write this thesis. I appreciate the help a lot! And finally, I would like to thank my parents because without them I would not be here. They believed in me and always taught to me persevere at whatever I set my mind to.

This thesis was submitted on November 10, 2008.

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**ABSTRACT**

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The main purpose of this study is to analyze how Puerto Rican author Rosario Ferré presents a unique Puerto Rican perspective through the female characters in her novel *The House on the Lagoon*, and how these female characters struggle with issues of race, gender, and class as it unfolds within Puerto Rican culture and history.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION:

#### A PUERTO RICAN PERSPECTIVE

Rosario Ferré's works usually employ women characters who want to break free from a patriarchal society, but her works are also metaphors for the politics of Puerto Rico. The purpose of this study is to look at and provide an in-depth analysis of the manner in which Puerto Rican author Rosario Ferré presents a unique look at Puerto Rican culture and identity in her novel *The House on the Lagoon*. I will analyze how the author presents culture and identity as seen through the eyes of important characters from succeeding generations of the Mendizabal family. This thesis will therefore examine, from a postcolonial and feminist perspective, how Ferré, in *The House on the Lagoon*, constructs and maintains an indigenous Puerto Rican identity through an ironic, witty, yet serious narrative that employs a range of contemporary themes related to history, class, race, violence, and gender.

Also, in 1995, when Ferré published her novel *The House on the Lagoon* in English, instead of in Spanish, Puerto Rican readers and critics had mixed responses to this unprecedented move on the author's part. Before publishing her novel in English, Ferré was a widely known Puerto Rican author writing only in Spanish for her island audience and for other audiences from Latin American countries. Because the national language of Puerto Rico is Spanish, a language Puerto Ricans respect and are very proud



of, Ferré stunned many when she decided to publish in English instead of Spanish. Puerto Ricans felt she had betrayed her “national” language and Puerto Rico itself by writing in what many Puerto Ricans consider to be their current colonizer’s tongue. Her writing and then publishing this novel in English, clearly a bold move on Ferré’s part, thus sparked island-wide attention, for as Bridget Kevane notes, Ferré’s decision “was instantly and ferociously politicized” (105). Moreover, *The House on the Lagoon* is also a controversial literary work because it tells the story of the fictional dynastic and male-dominated upper-class Mendizabal family living on the island of Puerto Rico from 1917 to early 1980s. The novel thus challenges current literary trends in that it presents Puerto Rican culture from the unusual perspective of a bourgeois family dynasty. This perspective, as presented in this novel, is unique because it steps away from the normal “jíbaro” lower-class point of view of Puerto Rico that so many other authors write about and which many readers of Puerto Rican literature are so accustomed to reading.

The years 1917 through early 1980s are also representative of Puerto Rico’s formative evolution into the modern state it is today. However, as Virginia Adán-Lifante notes, Ferré has shown interest in “the process of decay of the upper bourgeois caused by the growing industrialization of the country” (125, translation mine). For not only does the reader of Ferré’s novel witness the decay of the upper class, but the reader also sees how a male-dominated society drives this process of moral degeneration even further, often through aristocratic racism and negative religious measures.

Like many other Latin American countries, Puerto Rico has long been considered an island built on patriarchy where men and women have gender-defined roles: Men are to be the providers and protectors, while women are to be subservient to the men and are

to take care of the children and do the domestic chores. However, in her novel, Ferré challenges and deconstructs patriarchy and provides a more feminist perspective of Puerto Rico's culture, identity, and history. The author's first move in providing a feminist perspective occurs when she includes a female narrator, Isabel Monfort, a Puerto Rican from Ponce, who decides to write the story of her family and that of Quintín Mendizabal, her husband. Ferré's narrator thus conducts a genealogical recuperation of these families' histories, mainly through the point of view of the women of these families.

It is nonetheless just as important to understand the male characters in this novel, as an understanding of the males will also provide a better understanding of the women and their actions. As the novel commences, Quintín and Isabel pledge to look at the history of violence present in their families and avoid it in their own marriage and in their life together. This pledge comes after Quintín, Isabel's fiancé at the time, viciously beats up a lovelorn boy who serenades Isabel. Even though Isabel witnesses and disapproves of the act of violence, she still marries Quintín in 1955 against her grandmother's advice. This act of violence demonstrated by Quintín thus represents just one of the many themes Ferré develops in her novel.

Ferré creates many diverse characters, and it is through these characters' ideas, opinions, and actions that the grand narrative of these two families' histories unfolds and develops. In addition, Ferré uses the conflicts between these diverse characters to provide themes which suggest particular values. For example, Quintín and Isabel together represent the struggles of domesticity in a marriage and how these struggles can lead to marital conflict. The marital conflict between these two main characters, though, is not

the first in the histories of their two families, as both families have histories of domestic violence.

There are also other kinds of conflicts in *Lagoon*. Later in the novel, for instance, the relationship between Quintín and his son Manuel develops into a conflict due to their opposing views over the more recent politics of the island. Ever since Puerto Rico came under the dominion of the United States after the Spanish American War of 1898, Puerto Ricans have argued intensely over the island's U.S. statehood versus its independence. The relationship Ferré casts for this father and son thus reflects the diverse and divisive reactions many Puerto Ricans still have toward colonization and their islander identity and toward independence and autonomy.

Yet another important theme Ferré presents through conflict is that of race coupled with religion, developed most clearly in the relationship Buenaventura Mendizabal, Quintín's father, establishes with Petra, the Afro-Caribbean housemaid. A Spaniard, Buenaventura holds high racist exclusionary standards, believing that pure European races should be kept separated from others due to their racial superiority. However, when he meets Petra, he takes her into his house on the lagoon as a housemaid. Their relationship allows the reader to understand the importance of race in Puerto Rico's economic power struggle. Petra is the oldest of the colored women presented in the novel, and though black, uneducated, and living in the basement of Buenaventura's famous house, she still has a powerful voice in his household. Her power is evident when she is allowed to bring her family to live with her and serve Buenaventura and his family.

Petra is made more compelling because she brings her distinctly Afro-Caribbean religious beliefs into the Mendizabal household. Hers is clearly not a Christian God the

African Orisha saint Elegguá. Despite the religious differences between master and servant, it is quite clear that without Petra's domestic services, the house on the lagoon could not function properly. Ferré also includes a younger generation of mulatas, Coral and Perla. Although they are more educated than Petra and are considered upper class, they face the same racial prejudice still current on the island. As Mary Ann Gosser Esquilín notes about mulatas in Ferré's novel, "many continue to be the object of marginalization, hence their novelistic fate reflects racism and prejudice that are still pervasive in Puerto Rican society" (52).

Given the thematic array of the historical, political, and cultural dynamics operating in Ferré's novel, a study of *The House on the Lagoon* is timely because it reveals an important counter-example to what many think should be considered Puerto Rican literature today. This analysis serves to further demonstrate how Puerto Rican literature might enter the U.S. literary canon, a canon predominated by literature written mainly in English. To engage in a comprehensive analysis of Ferré's unusual Puerto Rican novel, though, one has to apply critical principles from postcolonial and feminist theories.

Literary works produced by writers from countries that have been and continue to be colonized, as is the case with the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico, obviously require a postcolonial theoretical approach. Postcolonial theory brings to light certain critical issues, as part of its analysis of cultural artifact, such as establishing a cultural identity against a colonialist identity and struggling to maintain such an identity. This effort is especially needed when the colonizers and their colonizing effects still affect Puerto Rico. For this thesis, then, I will apply postcolonial theory to Puerto Rican author Rosario

Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* to see how this author negotiates the many important yet divisive dilemmas Puerto Ricans currently face today with their unique form of identity construction. Within this postcolonial perspective, a feminist perspective can also be applied. It is interesting to consider, for instance, how Ferré portrays women coming from a colonized island, women who have been marginalized in their patriarchal culture but who, according to Ferré, are able to rise above it.

An analysis of Ferré's novel, or of any Puerto Rican literary work, cannot be complete without a postcolonial theoretical analysis. For without a doubt, the very identity of all Puerto Ricans and particularly of their beloved island is built upon the realities of colonization and the aftermath of having been colonized twice, once, and for a longer period of time, by the Spanish and then by the United States. The end of the Spanish-American War came in December 1898, resulting in Spain ceding Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico to the United States, thus bringing an end to Spanish colonization. Upon becoming a territory [colony] of the United States, the island of Puerto Rico underwent many political and cultural changes. In 1900, for instance, the Foraker Act was signed and established a popularly elected government on the island, something that had not existed during the time of Spanish colonization. Later, in 1917, with the Jones Act, the United States granted U.S. citizenship to all Puerto Ricans. In addition, this act also adjusted the system of government on the island, thus making it more similar to the one in the United States.

It was not until 1952 that Puerto Rico became known as the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, a political designation which means that Puerto Rico is an associated free state of the United States. The term "associated" solidifies the relationship Puerto Rico

has with the United States, but the political status of the island and those living on it has been a controversial issue ever since. Because of the island's close relationship with the United States, imposed by colonization, and despite being heavily influenced by the United States, Puerto Rico and its people have explored their own cultural and national identity, as they have unequivocally maintained their separate Latino culture. Puerto Ricans obtaining U.S. citizenship in 1917, though, made it much easier for Puerto Ricans to travel to and from the island and the United States. The ensuing Puerto Rican migration to and from the United States has often been called a circular one because many islanders residing in the United States for some time inevitably return to the island, and vice-versa. Having the facility to travel between the island and the mainland has made Puerto Ricans a unique set of migrants because they never have to fully integrate into the American mainstream to maintain their U.S. citizenship, thus allowing them to maintain their unique Latino cultural identity more closely.

Because of this dynamic and fluid arrangement, the relationship between the citizens of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the nation of the United States has always been rather complex, raising many related, yet ambiguous cultural identity issues. Historical events revolving around this unique relationship that Puerto Ricans have with the U.S. have greatly impacted many cultural critics, politicians, and writers. Rosario Ferré, for one, has shown, through her diverse literary works, an inordinate interest in Puerto Rican identity, culture, and history. Ferré's writings usually criticize racial injustice, the upper class in Puerto Rico, and the island's politics while also playing with literary techniques to make these themes viable.

Moreover, many scholars and critics, not only on the island but abroad as well, have long considered Ferré an important Puerto Rican writer. Though *The House on the Lagoon* was nominated for the prestigious National Book Award in 1995, Ferré's literary career began much earlier, in 1970, when she founded the literary magazine, *Zona de Carga y Descarga* (*Zone of Loading and Unloading*). Since then, she has published ten books, all written in different genres which include the novel, short stories, poetry, and essays, many of which have been translated into English. However, as previously stated, she set a precedent in her literary career in 1995 by first writing and publishing *The House on the Lagoon* in English. This precedent therefore calls for more critical attention to the writing and publishing of a novel, which seemingly runs counter to the island's dominant linguistic mode.

For instance, the novel reveals the important issue that is still very much controversial on the island of Puerto Rico today—the relationship Puerto Rico continues to have with the United States. Ferré depicts the opposing views held by Puerto Ricans when it comes to the island's political situation, the political parties, and how islanders feel about the ambiguous status Puerto Rico has as a Commonwealth. The novel divides the island between people who believe in independence and those who believe in statehood, through the political disagreements among the families from different generations, similar to the ones that today divide Puerto Rican society. It is therefore, important to first understand Puerto Rico's historical background in order for the reader to have a better grasp of the contemporary issues on the island.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: Chapter I, not only outlines the thesis, but also introduces the reader to the problems Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* presents and

how the novel critiques Puerto Rican culture, identity, and history. Chapter II gives a brief history of the island of Puerto Rico, including its years under Spanish rule, how and when it became a part of the United States, and the Foraker Act and the Jones Act. Additionally, within the historical overview of Puerto Rico, there is an overview of Puerto Rican literature as well as a discussion on whether or not Puerto Rican literature should be considered part of the United States literary canon.

Chapter III begins by addressing the issue of culture and identity, more specifically from a postcolonial point of view. Several definitions of culture from various scholars are provided; however, the definition of culture is narrowed to that which is most pertinent to the special circumstances Puerto Rican culture holds. An explanation of Puerto Rican culture then is given in order to show how this culture has changed through the years. The second part of this chapter focuses on the concept of Puerto Rican identity. The questions to be addressed concerning identity are the following: What is Puerto Rican identity? How is it formed? And more specifically, what constitutes a Puerto Rican identity, and how does it change within a Puerto Rican cultural framework? The third part of this chapter provides an overview of the issues surrounding the politics of language in Puerto Rico and how these issues figure in creating the identity and culture of most Puerto Ricans. Here, the thesis addresses how politics has affected language, so language is then looked at as the vehicle that carries Puerto Rican culture and identity.

Chapter IV reviews articles that have been written about Ferré's works and, more specifically, about *The House on the Lagoon*. As mentioned earlier, the novel initially received mixed reviews. The main focus of this chapter is to look at the chronology of the critical reception the novel received when it was published in English and then when it



was subsequently published in Spanish two years later. How was the novel received in English? And Spanish? How do the scholars and critics view the novel in either language? In addition, I examine how the novel differs from English to Spanish and how these differences affect the text as a whole.

In light of the previous critical reception, Chapter V conducts an analysis of *The House on the Lagoon* from a postcolonial and feminist theoretical perspective. The thesis explores how Ferré constructs the novel as a conduit for knowledge of Puerto Rican history and culture. An analysis of the major characters is done to see how they evolve while being caught between two cultures and two worlds. Among the questions addressed in this chapter is how do the characters change as the island shifts from an agricultural society to an industrial one? Posing such questions will determine if there is a parallel between the relationship between the members of the Mendizábal's family and the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico.

Chapter VI concludes this thesis by speculating on the importance of the unique rhetorical dynamics that Ferré's novel presents to readers unfamiliar with issues relating to Puerto Rican culture and identity. If relations between the U.S. and Puerto Rico are to improve from its current deplorable state, which exists today because of the colonial mentality, more readers will have to know what constitutes the rhetorical dynamics of Puerto Rico's existence. Works of literary art like *The House on the Lagoon* present a unique opportunity for scholars and readers to explore the rhetorical dynamics that characterize such Puerto Rican works of literary art. The study of the languages constructing such literary-based rhetorical efforts informs us of where the future lies with the identity and culture of Puerto Rico and its people.

## CHAPTER II

### BRIEF PUERTO RICAN HISTORY AND LITERATURE

A brief Puerto Rican history is necessary in order to better understand the Puerto Rico in which Ferré's characters develop. The picturesque island is located in the Caribbean, a region often associated with exotic paradises and a temperate climate where people go to escape the cold or just to relax. For as Fernando Picó, "the Caribbean conjures up a cluster of islands, languages and people" (1). The Caribbean is nevertheless made up of several island chains that are divided into three sections: the Lesser Antilles (islands from the Virgin Islands down to Trinidad and Tobago), the Greater Antilles (Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico), and the Bahamian Archipelago (the islands that form a triangle between the Greater Antilles and the Atlantic Ocean). Within this variety of people, language, and cultures though, Puerto Rico stands out among other Caribbean islands.

Christopher Columbus, while traveling with Juan Ponce de León, "discovered" the small island of Puerto Rico on November 19, 1493 and claimed it for Spain. According to Kal Wagenheim, Columbus "named the island San Juan in honor of Saint John the Baptist" (1). Columbus and his journeymen continued their voyage through the Mona Passage and to the island called Hispaniola, which includes the Dominican Republic and Haiti (see figure 1) and became the center of the Spanish government in the "New World."



Figure 1—Map of the Caribbean

While Columbus and his men established their government in Hispaniola in 1493, the inhabitants of Puerto Rico (see figure 2), the Taíno-Arawak Indians, lived peacefully on the island. The Taínos named the island “Boriquén,” later known as Borinquen. Wagenheim notes that the word boriquén meant “land of the noble lord” (40). Because the Taínos gave the island such a name, many researchers have considered them very religious in comparison to other Indian tribes found in the Caribbean. The Taínos had faith in a higher power; they believed that climate changes and events were caused by supernatural forces, and as Irving Rouse notes, “the worship of deities known as zemis” (13) contributed to the Taínos being considered quite religious. Scholars, like Rouse, have also described the Taíno Indians as athletic, strong, brown-colored with straight black hair, and skillful. Rouse has estimated that when the Spaniards arrived there were “as many as 600,000 [Taínos] in both Puerto Rico and Jamaica” (7). The Taínos lived in small villages and in homes constructed out of wood, straw, and thatch called “bohíos.” They had one language, were civil (compared to other tribes in neighboring islands), and

had an agricultural society. According to Rouse, “The inhabitants of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico stand apart because they were the most populous and most advanced culturally” (7). The Taínos had a political and social organization which a “cacique” or a chief governed each village. The members of each village recognized and respected their chief, whose demeanor plus his home and body ornaments would distinguish him in each village. A chief’s duties were to properly dispose of the community’s resources and govern his people. In addition, the Taínos were the first tribe of indigenous people to encounter the Europeans.



Figure 2—Map of Puerto Rico

After being discovered by Europeans, however, Boriquén was forgotten and left alone for fifteen years. All of that changed in 1508 when it was agreed that Juan Ponce de León should establish the first European settlement on the island. Upon arrival, Ponce de León set up the first Spanish settlement named Caparra near the San Juan Bay, marking the beginning of Spanish colonization. According to Picó, shortly after their arrival, “the conquerors soon found rich gold deposits in Boriquén” (36). Since the colonizers lacked men to mine for gold and perform agricultural tasks, they forced the Taínos to work for

them. The Spaniards then created what is known as an “encomienda” or a type of system where a certain number of Indians were placed under a Spanish colonizer to mine the gold and farm in order to provide food for the community. To a certain extent, this “encomienda” was a type of slavery.

The Spaniards’ arrival on the island exposed the Taínos to different diseases, which this native population had no way of fighting. Many of them died. In addition, the Spaniards forced the Taínos into labor and to accept Christian beliefs, as the Spaniards’ goal was to convert the Indians to the Catholic faith. As time passed, the Spaniards managed to also take the Indians’ land and women. The Taínos soon realized they could not coexist with the Spaniards, as the Spaniards abruptly interrupted their way of life and only caused them strife. It is believed that the only reason the Indians did not revolt sooner was because of their belief that the Spaniards were immortal gods. Nonetheless, all that changed in 1511 when, as Wagenheim states, an old chief named Urayoán “decided to test the immortality theory” (43) by drowning a Spaniard. When the Taínos realized the Spaniard was dead, they came to understand that the Spaniards were mortals and decided to rebel. Although they managed to kill some Spaniards, the uprising was unsuccessful. Juan Ponce de León and his men defeated the Taínos, took them as prisoners, and burned down their homes. Those who were not captured fled the island, moved to the mountains, or committed suicide. Although there are some discrepancies as to what really happened to the Taínos, Picó notes that “by the 1520s it was evident that the population the Spaniards had tried to conquer had disappeared” (38).

The island of Puerto Rico was then under Spanish rule for more than three centuries, with Spain holding control over the island’s economy, politics, and religion.

Although the island was not as densely populated as before, it was still very rich in resources, such as gold and fertile soil; however, the Spaniards did not want to perform the hard labor they had subjected upon the Taínos. Once the Spaniards realized gold was limited, agriculture became the means to improve the economy. The Spaniards therefore decided to bring in enslaved African, a race they considered to be stronger and much more capable of working the fields than the Taínos. According to Roberta Ann Johnson, the arrival of the slaves “introduced African strains of music, African ceremonials, African witch doctor medicine, and a new infusion of blood for the island’s ethnic melting pot” (4).

In early 1898, a conflict arose between Spain and the United States. The conflict began when Spain rejected the demands of the United States when it asked Spain to resolve the issue of Cuba fighting for its independence. The end of the war came in mid-1898, resulting in Spain ceding Guam, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico to the United States. Upon becoming a territory of the United States, the island of Puerto Rico underwent many political and cultural changes. In 1900, for instance, the Foraker Act established a popularly elected government on the island. Later, in 1917 with the Jones Act, the United States granted citizenship to all Puerto Ricans. The Jones Act also adjusted the island’s system of government as well as granted civil rights to its citizens. Gradually, as a territory of the U.S., the island began to change economically from an agricultural to a more industrialized society.

It wasn’t until 1952 that Puerto Rico became known as the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, a political designation making the island an “associated free state of the United States.” Although this term solidified the relationship Puerto Rico has with the

United States, the political status of the island has been controversial ever since. In spite of the island's close relationship with the United States and its heavy influence, Puerto Rico has since explored its separate identity and maintained a separate Latino culture. U.S. citizenship made it much easier for Puerto Ricans to travel to and from the mainland in what has been called a circular migration because many islanders reside in the United States for some time but inevitably return to the island, and vice-versa. This facility of travel has made Puerto Ricans unique migrants in that they never have had to fully integrate into mainstream America. In turn, this cultural movement has had an effect on the place of Puerto Rican literature in the U.S. and on the American literary canon.

Making up the American mainstream identity is its literary canon. It could be easily assumed that because Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States, literature by Puerto Rican authors belongs in the American literary canon. However, it is only within the vast world of Latino/a literature, which has been only recently incorporated into the American literary canon, that we find Puerto Rican literature. Because Latino/a writers, like Puerto Ricans, have been only gradually incorporated into the American literary canon, mainstream readers are forced to think about dualities that exist in Latino/a literature and in American society as a whole. Puerto Rican literature is therefore, interesting in that it comes from a country that continues to be a territory of the U.S. It includes all literary genres, such as short stories, novels, theatre, with themes examining identity, culture, and political critique, among others.

According to many scholars, Puerto Rican literature began in the early nineteenth century after the printing press arrived in the early 1800's. However, there are many scholars that date Puerto Rican literature back to the beginning of Spanish colonization

with the letters and reports written by the first governors and travelers describing the newfound land. Such letters and reports reveal an insight into the Caribbean island and its way of life before U.S. colonization and after Spanish colonization. As the works in the Puerto Rican literary canon are composed by authors writing in Spanish, language equals, to a large extent, an integral part of the Puerto Rican identity, thus effectively separating Puerto Ricans from their English colonizers.

There nevertheless exists some debate as to what should be considered Puerto Rican literature. Numerous Puerto Rican authors and critics from the island agree, as Aníbal González points out, that the “language used by a writer determines [his or her] literary tradition” (506), which reflects the belief that language is very much a part of the Puerto Rican identity. Therefore, those critics and authors from the island, and Puerto Rican writers at large, especially those considered Nuyorican, who write in English would belong to the North American literary canon, while those writing in Spanish would belong to the Puerto Rican literary canon. Nevertheless, Puerto Rican literature nowadays includes literature by authors born and raised on the island who write only in Spanish as well as Puerto Rican authors raised in the United States, primarily writing in English—an inclusive grouping that has not always existed. When the Spanish-American War ended in 1898 and the United States invaded the island, there was, as González states, “a cultural readjustment and revalorization” (494) of Puerto Rico from once being a Spanish colony to a U.S. colony, although the literature being produced at this time was still only in Spanish.

Before then, Puerto Rican literature of the nineteenth century expressed a growing national consciousness concerning Puerto Rico’s political status, identity, and culture.



Migration to the U.S. during this century began to increase because of the rigid Spanish authoritative rule on the island, and authors, writers, activists, and scholars migrated to Europe or to the United States, especially to New York. Even though these authors lived outside of Puerto Rico they still maintained a sense of Puerto Rican nationalism. Because of the arrival of these Spanish-speaking people, there was— in New York, at least— cause to create a Spanish-language press and other media outlets. Magazines, journals, and newspapers were used to promote Puerto Rico’s liberation from the tight colonial hold of the Spanish. The works published at that time provide a unique insight into the life of the Puerto Rican community living in the United States. These outlets were also a venue for writers, such as Lola Rodríguez de Tió, Eugenio María de Hostos, Ramón Emeterio Betances, among others, to express their political ideas. According to Edna Acosta-Belén and Carlos Santiago, even the Puerto Ricans in the U.S. from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century constructed their identity in Spanish: “Puerto Rico’s literary canon, for instance, recognizes the writings of a few of these individuals, especially the works written in Spanish” (170). Puerto Rican literature, then, has what is today known as “la generación del treinta,” which was a generation of authors from the 1930s era, marked by an ideology for radical socioeconomic change as the island was changing from a rural economy to an urban one.

This change caused another migratory wave of Puerto Ricans to the United States. Literature produced during this time reflected a grave concern over the loss of Puerto Rico’s agricultural society and for the industrialization enforced on the island under American rule. The literary works of this era—by authors like René Marqués, Luis Rafael Sánchez, and others—expressed a resistance to change. However, like the island

itself, the literature continued to grow, change, expand so that after 70's and 80's, the Puerto Rican literary canon includes authors like Pedro Pietri, Miguel Algarín, founder of the Nuyorican Poet's Café, and Tato Laviera all of whom lived in New York and wrote in "Spanglish" as well as in English to shed light on the awful conditions Puerto Ricans found themselves upon arriving on the mainland. These poets were part of the Nuyorican literary movement and despite having emerged in New York, as Frances Aparicio notes, their literary works were not always within "the boundaries of both the Puerto Rican and US literary canons" (80). Aparicio further notes that the Nuyorican movement "has not achieved the visibility and recognition comparable to that of African-American or even Chicano/a literature in the US context" (80). Regardless of the language used by these mainland writers, the most important focus of their works has always been Puerto Rico.

Rosario Ferré, like many writers before her, explores the problems and questions of Puerto Rican culture and identity in many of her literary works—*The House on the Lagoon* being no exception. But Ferré has expanded her audience internationally by writing in English, and despite what critics may say, she is still considered an important component of Puerto Rican literature, and began her career by writing her literary works in Spanish, clearly establishing herself as an authentic Puerto Rican author. In 1995 she decided to publish the novel in English, perhaps as a blatant attempt to reach a bigger audience, specifically the American mainstream audience, and by doing so continued to put Puerto Rico on the radar of her American literary colleagues. As Kevane notes, Ferré "wants to immerse her readers, especially her American readers, in the ethnic complexity of Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican experience" (104). So one must understand her attempt to translate into English a Puerto Rican identity. A contemporary author like

Ferré thus differs from older generations of Puerto Rican writers in that she has absorbed, through various means, American traditions. In an interview conducted by Bridget Kevane concerning American and Latino/a literature, Ferré states that Latino/a literature “encompasses both the Northern and the Southern ethos, the Anglo and the Hispanic” (96). Statements like these only help to emphasize that contemporary Puerto Rican authors are perhaps more open than before to being a part of their American literary counterpart.

It is nevertheless important not to forget that Puerto Rican literature has always existed outside its colonizer’s literary canon. Despite the fact that Puerto Rico has been colonized twice, Puerto Rican writers have managed to maintain and represent their own separate sense of culture and identity.

### CHAPTER III

#### PUERTO RICO:

#### CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND LANGUAGE

I'm still in the commonwealth  
stage of my life, wondering  
what to decide, what to conclude,  
what to declare myself  
I'm still in the commonwealth  
stage of my life, not knowing  
which ideology to select.

— Tato Laviera, *AmeRícan*

Puerto Rico Libre' still exists as an ideal, a more  
widespread ideal than many realize.

— Martín Espada, *Zapata's Disciple*

*The Oxford Dictionary of Psychology* defines culture as “the sum total of the ideas, beliefs, customs, values, knowledge and material artifacts that are handed down from one generation to the next in a society” (184). Similarly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* defines culture as “a general term for the symbolic and learned aspects of human society” (133). Culture therefore can be socially transmitted regardless of where one is. It is also important to remember that Puerto Rico’s culture, identity, and language cannot exist outside of its history: Puerto Rican culture is a mixture of all the components of its diverse heritage— Taíno, African, and Spaniard.

Like all cultures, the island of Puerto Rico possesses a uniqueness that is evident in every aspect of its culture. When it comes to music, Puerto Rico has a combination of sounds that comes together to create a distinctive sound. “La bomba y la plena” is folkloric dance and music, still popular today on the island. What makes it popular, as Juan Flores points out, is that “it is the culture of ‘the people,’ the common folk, the poor and the powerless who make up the majority of the society” (17). Although “bomba y plena” are combined, they are actually two different types of music. La bomba comes from the African heritage, the Afro-Puerto Rican population, and dates back to Spanish colonial rule. Plena is a mixture of all heritages and arrived much later, at around the early twentieth century. For this type of music, traditional Puerto Rican instruments, such as el güiro, el cuatro puertorriqueño, congas, and maracas, are used. Other musical genres that come from Puerto Rico are salsa and reggaetón.

Like music, Puerto Rican food is a combination of its different cultural roots, beginning with the Taíno Indians, who cultivated foods like yucca. It has been said that upon their arrival on the island, the Spaniards brought with them garlic and olive oil. With the African slaves also came culinary ideas, such as their use of plátanos (plantains). Some signature food dishes from Puerto Rico are arroz con gandules (rice with peas), mofongo (mashed plantains), pasteles, and lechón asado. Puerto Rico also has, as Ferré mentions, dulces típicos or desserts that include pasta de guayaba (guava paste), pasta de mango (mango paste), ajonjolí (a candy made out of sesame seeds), and coconut candy. Finally, what is Puerto Rican food without the mention of coffee? Coffee has been produced on the island since the nineteenth century and has become one of the island’s major exports along with rum. Many even consider Puerto Rico the rum capital

of the world because it is believed over fifty percent of the rum found in the U.S. comes from Puerto Rico. In her novel, Ferré incorporates some of these aspects of Puerto Rican culture, for example the import/export business run by the men of the Mendizabal family.

Puerto Rico is predominately Catholic, although other religions can be found on the island. One of those other religions practiced in Puerto Rico, which is also found on other Caribbean islands such as Cuba, Dominican Republic and Haiti, is Santería. Santería (developed on islands) combines Catholic ideas with African religious beliefs. Many researchers have shown Santería to have resulted from the fact that slaves, in order to continue to practice their own religion openly and without punishment, incorporated Catholic beliefs and symbols. An important Afro-Caribbean character in the novel named Petra has a religion that closely resembles Santería, which is different from the Mendizabals Christian beliefs.

Cultural and religious traditions in Puerto Rico began to be influenced by American culture as soon as it became a colony of the U.S. For example, Christmas Day is widely celebrated as a religious holiday; nonetheless, Puerto Ricans now celebrate this holiday very differently than Americans. Christmas season on the island begins right after Thanksgiving and ends after January sixth, Three Kings Day (Día de Reyes). Puerto Ricans celebrate with “parrandas,” where a group of friends go on to surprise another friend while playing the guitar, maracas, and panderetas. Although Christmas Day is celebrated in Puerto Rico, it is not the most important holiday: El Día de Reyes. The day before January sixth, children collect grass for the camels and leave a glass of water for the Three Kings. It is also traditional for the children to receive three gifts, one from each king.

Although the island has two official languages, Spanish is the dominant language, the vehicle of culture as well as of identity. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure argues what is common knowledge: language is able to produce cultural and societal meanings. Language is the fundamental way people communicate their experiences, thoughts, distinguish themselves from others, and create meaning for the world around them. Scholars Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf created what is known today as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. According to Claire Kramsch, this hypothesis “makes the claim that the structure of the language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one thinks and behaves” (11). Therefore, language has a relationship to culture because it links people together by allowing them to share the world around them. The language used in a particular culture mainly determines the world each individual knows and comes to understand, and that includes everything from tradition and values to religion and customs. The relationship between culture and language is undeniable to the extent that culture controls language as much as language controls culture. And while language is able to provide a way for individuals to express their culture and world, it can also limit an individual in that one is able only to comprehend the world through the symbols and signs of that particular language, by what his/her language permits him/her. Being able to know another language, a second or third language, opens the doors to different worlds and cultures.

In Puerto Rico, language has been controversial ever since the United States took over the island in 1898. Upon the conquest of Puerto Rico, part of the “Americanization” was to impose English upon the island’s residents. This linguistic imperialism had a tremendous negative effect that can still be found on the island: the people’s resistance to

English. Spanish is now the “native” vernacular on the island, and as Alicia Pousada points out, “it is fervently defended and maintained” (499). Regardless, English is still taught in schools and universities throughout the island, not to mention that English is becoming very important for commerce and professional careers. The goal for Puerto Rico is to become a bilingual island; however, this goal, at times, proves to be easier said than done. According to Judith Algrén de Gutierrez, “language studies continue to reinforce the premise that the question of language in Puerto Rico is a symbol of national identity” (11). Because the island has been colonized twice, there seems to be a never-ending struggle for Puerto Ricans to maintain an identity different than the United States. Thus, English, as Algrén de Gutierrez points out, “became almost synonymous with the displacement of Spanish and Puerto Rican identity” (11). In the fight to resist English, a hybrid language emerged to form what is now known as Spanglish.

Spanglish encompasses the reality that Puerto Ricans exist in dual societies. Ed Morales said it best when he wrote, “There is a need for Latinos to assimilate in the U.S., but we have always searched for a way to do that without losing what we are” (25). For Puerto Ricans, part of losing what we are is losing Spanish. With premises like these, it is understandable why there is resistance to English; however, times are changing, and now more and more people are beginning to speak English, while everyone speaks Spanglish, whether they realize it or not. Nonetheless, there are some who view Spanglish as a corruption of language, while others defend it. In an interview by Rafael Ocasio, writer Judith Ortiz Cofer stated that “people who view Spanish as being corrupted by influences have not really seen the evolution of the language as it stands” (736). Scholars and readers alike should see Spanglish as a beautiful hybrid language born out of necessity



and a society's identity. Identity is what distinguishes an individual from others (personal) but also helps an individual identify with members of a society or a cultural group (national and cultural). What is noteworthy about identity is that it develops and varies over time and is influenced by an individual's life experiences.

Much of the island's identity is undeniably tied to the fact that it has been colonized twice—once for four hundred years by Spain, and second by the United States. According to Flores, this “background of uninterrupted colonial bondage serves to crystallize the search for Puerto Rican national identity” (111). One of the main components of this national identity is the fight and idea to become an independent nation. Anthony D. Smith points out that national identity “involves some sense of political community” (9), which includes social rights and common laws different from the island's colonizers. This political community includes a territory with which members of a society can identify—geography, climate, trees, forest, beaches, and so forth, as well as symbols such as the “jíbaro,” the coquí, the flag, and the national anthem of Puerto Rico.

The jíbaro describes the peasant from the mountains or the in-land of Puerto Rico, who Puerto Ricans associate with their agricultural past. Traditionally, the jíbaro is strong, humble, poor, and uneducated; this does not mean the jíbaro is lacking in mental capabilities, as Puerto Ricans believe the jibaro has great natural wisdom. Also, the jíbaro is known to have had a true sense of national pride. The image of a jíbaro is that of a man wearing a white shirt, dark pants that reached just above the feet, a “pava” or straw hat and a machete in one hand. He encompasses, to many, what it means to be a true Puerto Rican. He represents the struggle of a society that remains strong despite colonization.

Although the “jíbaro” does not physically exist nowadays, the symbol/image still lives today in the hearts of Puerto Ricans, and the use of the term is positive in that it reflects a part of what is considered important to a Puerto Rican national identity.

The relationship with the U.S. also helps shape what is considered Puerto Rican identity, but varies for those who live on the island and those born and raised on the mainland. Gary Gutting points out that French philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault’s suggestion that an individual could have many identities that could come from two dimensions. The different identities an individual can have are directly related to societal labels, such as race, class, and ethnicity (99). A Puerto Rican identity, likewise, seems to be of two types—of island Puerto Ricans and that of mainlanders. According to Jonathan Culler, “the self is determined by its origins and social attributes” (108). Here is where some of the conflict arises in terms of Puerto Rican identity.

After the Jones Act granted Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, they could travel freely from the island to the mainland, which has led to a circular migratory experience for Puerto Ricans and to some degree makes the island a divided nation. New York has been considered a second home to millions of Puerto Ricans, but they have settled in other states as well. As Carmen Teresa Whalen writes, “By the 2000 census, 3,406,178 Puerto Ricans resided in the United States and 3,623,392 resided in Puerto Rico” (1). There is a growing number of island Puerto Ricans on the mainland, but because they are able to travel freely back and forth, they are able to maintain their cultural roots. In comparison to other immigrants, Puerto Rican migration differs in that Puerto Ricans, if they choose to, can return to the island with relative ease. This kind of circular migration therefore brings up the dilemma that what it means to be Puerto Rican differs from one

Puerto Rican to another. Those born on the island argue that one is Puerto Rican by place of birth, while those born in the U.S. argue that being Puerto Rican has to do with the culture learned from their parents. Island-born Puerto Ricans have a harder time accepting cultural aspects that are from the U.S. and are quicker to point out the differences between cultures. They experience the island in a way that U.S. Puerto Ricans cannot, have not, or will not—a Caribbean flavor many say they were born the island, where as many U.S. Puerto Ricans feel the pressure to display their “Puertoricaness” to the world.

Regardless of the intricate differences, it’s unmistakable that both island and U.S. Puerto Ricans have a strong sense of nationalism marked by a strong desire to differentiate themselves from Americans. It’s a nationalism that is being displayed all over the U.S. As Flores notes, “[t]he Puerto Rican presence in the United States does inject a stream of anti-colonial, Latin American and Caribbean culture into the artery of North American life” (14). In New York City, there is the Puerto Rican Day Parade, the Nuyorican Poet’s Café, and part of Spanish Harlem called “El Barrio.” In Chicago, one can find Roberto Clemente High School, Paseo Boricua in Humboldt Park, which boasts two Puerto Rican flags made out of steel, and an event called Puerto Rican Week. Despite injecting some Caribbean culture into America, Puerto Ricans are still marginalized and discriminated against in the U.S.

Yet another controversy between island and mainland Puerto Ricans is that of language, a very political issue in Puerto Rico, which some argue is attached to the political status of the island. According to Pousada, “the still-unresolved issue of legal status for the island has resulted in a partisan polemic that rages on at all levels of Puerto

Rican society” (499). Perhaps if the political status were resolved, then so would the language issue. Some scholars go further by saying that language issues are strongly tied to the three main political parties on the island: Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party), Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party), and Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican Independence Party).

The New Progressive Party wants statehood for Puerto Rico, and, despite wanting a closer union with the United States, want to keep Spanish the official language of the island. The Popular Democratic Party, which supports Commonwealth status, passed a law that put Spanish as the official language while still recognizing the importance of English. This law was revoked in 1993 when the leader of the New Progressive Party returned Puerto Rico to having two official languages.

The Independence Party wants independence from the United States, views the influence of the U.S. on Puerto Rico as something negative, and would like to remove English as one of the official languages of the island. Those who want independence for the island believe, as Waggenheim states, that “Americanization is more insidious” (154). Politicians from all political the parties usually go back to the past and remember that when the United States took over, Puerto Rico was a poor but happy island. Now they argue that the island, despite being highly industrialized and Americanized, is unhappy and with more problems than before. Those in favor of independence view it as the island’s right to self-government and a reaffirmation of their Puerto Rican nationality and language. The party stipulates that independence will bring forth better economic development and international relations while still guaranteeing human rights. Concerning citizenship, the party postulates that by becoming an independent nation, all

Puerto Ricans would become citizens of the republic of Puerto Rico. Nonetheless, they do emphasize that Puerto Ricans could choose to remain with U.S. citizenship, and in terms of economic advancement, they advocate the convenience of friendly relations with the U.S. in order to maintain an uninterrupted commerce and migration between the island and the mainland.

It should be noted that in 2007 a new electoral party was registered under the name of Puerto Ricans for Puerto Rico Party. The party's main goal is to better Puerto Rico's economy and environment without dealing with the island's political status. The party plans to achieve this goal by creating solidarity between all Puerto Ricans, regardless of sex, race, class, and status preference. Despite the addition of this fourth party to the voting ballot, the first three parties mentioned above remain the most important.

All the political parties have used the language dilemma in order to advance their politics, understanding its significance to national identity. However, there is an erroneous assumption that bilingual Puerto Ricans or those who have complete dominion over English are "less Puerto Rican" and are more likely to lose their native tongue along with their national identity than those who speak Spanish only. Applied to everything from everyday life to scholarly works, this kind of thinking in part explains why Ferré received mixed reviews upon the publication of *The House on the Lagoon*. But such assumptions could not be further from the truth. It is time to break away from thoughts that only limit Puerto Rico and be open to the idea that learning English—or any language, for that matter—is not a step back but a step forward. If language is considered the vehicle for culture, learning another language would only enable Puerto Ricans to

better understand another culture and become more knowledgeable—perhaps even offer a deeper appreciation for its own.

Though many agree that the solution to language issues will solve the political status of the island, Puerto Rico's colonial status has and will always remain an issue. First, there are the politicians of the island, all of whom, regardless of party affiliation, always envision Puerto Rico's future as having a relationship with the U.S., whether substantial or not. It seems that for these politicians the U.S. is always present in their future plans and projections for the island. An unresolved status has been the reality of Puerto Rico for many years, but an even harsher reality comes from the United States. According to Acosta-Belén and Santiago, the U.S. Congress "has historically shown little interest in doing so" (5). It is easier to ignore a problem than to deal with it; Congress has repeatedly said that it is up to Puerto Rico to fix the island's political status, though the U.S. Congress is the one that can actually change the island's status. Artists, writers, and scholars all represent this dilemma in their work, whether they live on the island or not. As Martín Espada wrote, "'Puerto Rico Libre' still exists as an ideal" (57). It shall remain an ideal for many more years to come because the U.S. Congress and Puerto Rico refuse to come to an agreement about the island's political status. The theme of an unresolved political status is one treated by Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon*. Present from the very beginning of the novel, in the year 1917, and all the way through to the end in 1980's.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE REVIEWS OF THE HOUSE ON THE LAGOON

The year 1995 proved to be a special one for Ferré. Having always published in Spanish, Ferré decided it was time for her to venture into the English-language realm with *The House on the Lagoon*. The novel is the author's first work to be written and published in English. Until then, Ferré had only translated some of her previous works to English herself, including *Papeles de Pandora* into *The Youngest Doll* (1991) and *Maldito amor y otros cuentos* into *Sweet Diamond Dust and Other Stories* (1990). Not only have many of Ferré's other literary works been translated to English, but also to Italian, French, German, and Polish. They have been well received in these other countries. According to Víctor Federico Torres, *Sweet Diamond Dust* was published in German and received the Liberatur Prix from Frankfurt's International Book Fair (23, translation mine).

Despite having achieved, such recognitions for her works in Spanish and in other languages, *The House on the Lagoon* received mixed reviews by scholars and critics upon publication. Ferré also, as Eva L. Santos-Phillips points out, "offended and angered many of Puerto Rico's artistic elite" (117). While Puerto Rico's scholars were offended, Mireya Navarro, a critic for *The New York Times*, praised Ferré for her bilingualism and for writing the novel in English, despite the fact that Ferré admitted to struggling while writing in her second language. Also praising Ferré for her work is Edward Rivera, a

critic for *The Washington Post*, who wrote that the novel is “absorbing, often humorous and ironic” (X05), all while still raising important questions about Puerto Rico’s political status. Although Ferré does not provide any answers to these questions, Rivera wrote that Ferré “proves herself one of Latin America’s most gifted novelists” (X05). The critic even went as far as to compare her novel to Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which of course is a great compliment. Thus, Rivera thinks that readers of *The House on the Lagoon* “may well want a sequel” (X05).

In a review of the novel, critic and author Ilán Stavans noted that Ferré “is a perfect embodiment of the Janus-like identity of Puerto Rican literature today” (640), with Ferré being loyal to her two mainlands—Puerto Rico and United States. Stavans praises Ferré for using the English language to bring forth Puerto Rico’s issues to a wider range of audiences, with a plot filled with opposing views concerning Puerto Rico’s political status and language issues. However, that is where the praise stops, as Stavans moves on to point out Ferré’s prose as “simple and unadorned” (640), with a highly predictable novelistic structure. Unlike Rivera’s praise, Stavans points out, Ferré’s main weakness is that her novel imitates that of Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* “to the point of annoyance” (640). While Stavans acknowledges that as a writer Ferré has put great effort into reaching a wider audience by switching to English and simplifying Puerto Rico’s history, he notes that the novel seems to be directed more towards American readers with no real knowledge of the issues concerning Puerto Rico.

Gerald Guinness, a critic for Puerto Rico’s *The San Juan Star*, dislikes the novel for numerous reasons. First, he critiques Ferré’s decision to give certain locations within the novel their real name, while others receive a fictional one. Guinness suggests this



strategy will prove a distraction for readers. Likewise, Ferré's take on the island's history and issues are, as Guinness writes, "good for stateside consumption but less alluring for us locals" (12). But what seems to bother Guinness the most is the language issue. He questions why Ferré writes the novel in English instead of Spanish and whether anyone has "ever heard of a perfectly bilingual writer?" (12). To Guinness, Ferré's use of English "is colorless, at times even flat" (12). He argues that this move on Ferré's part will not please her Puerto Rican admirers who expect her to write in Spanish and for a Puerto Rican audience. Ultimately, Guinness does acknowledge the novel as being "ambitious, wide-ranging, and often gruesomely accurate in its depiction of a certain class" (12), but hopes Ferré will go back to writing about the gender issues of the Puerto Rican upper-class in her native language.

Another critic, William Rodarmor from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, considers Ferré's novel fun to read because she is a good storyteller, but continues by saying, "*The House on the Lagoon* is not a first-class piece of literature" (4). Rodarmor, like Stavans and Guinness, noticed that Ferré's prose in English "can be downright clunky" (4) and wonders if her prose would have sounded better in Spanish.

Contrary to Stavans, Guinness, and Rodarmor is critic Suzanne Ruta with her review of the novel, which appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*. Ruta writes that Ferré's novel is "playful, baroque and stylized" (28) and will change people's ignorance when it comes to the island of Puerto Rico. She praises Ferré's creation of complex and diverse characters that embody Puerto Rican society and enjoys Ferré's feminism and skepticism when it comes to the "history" and "truth" presented in the story's narrators, Isabel and Quintín. Also interesting to Ruta is the novel's

“upstairs/downstairs geography”(29) of the Mendizabal’s mansion. Upstairs reside the Mendizabals, and downstairs one finds the Aviles family headed by Petra. According to Ruta, this is one way in which Ferré depicts the conflict of race and class.

Another critic, Judith Grossman, said “Ferré belongs in the company of those truly bilingual writers (Isak Dinesen was one such, Vladimir Nabokov another) whose irrepressible delight in the play of eloquence and style makes it seem that one language is never enough” (5). She points out that the novel follows the narration mode of Isabel Allende and Gabriel García Márquez, with Petra’s portrayal being similar to Márquez’s mulatto character named Petra Cotes in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Nonetheless, for Grossman, Ferré has “evoked both literary meaning and pleasure from the Puerto Rican predicament of a Latino culture under American domination” (5) because of the novel’s social, racial, and political framework. The critic concludes that the novel provides readers with “a performance of great accomplishment and wit” (5).

Upon looking at several reviews, a pattern seems to emerge. Those in favor of the novel were either female critics, like Ruta, Grossman, and Navarro, or were critics that lived in the United States and could understand Ferré’s decision to write the novel in English—a fact critics tend to focus on the most. However, Ferré defends her decision to island critics by saying that English will never replace her native Spanish tongue, and that her reasons for writing in English were to reach an even bigger audience, outside the island of Puerto Rico. Three years after publishing her novel, Ferré published an editorial in *The New York Times* in which she made clear that she had changed her political views and was now in favor of statehood for Puerto Rico. This statement further shocked many Puerto Ricans, for Ferré had long been a supporter of the island’s independence.

Two years after publishing *Lagoon*, in 1997, Ferré herself translated the work into Spanish, which published as *La casa de la laguna*. Although they are the same narrative technically, as with any translation, the novels differ in certain aspects. Ferré's Spanish literary works are more descriptive and eloquent in her descriptions of locations and characters. Ferré's first language affords her more opportunities to play on words than she is capable of with English. The Spanish version is also at least over twenty pages longer than the English version, proving in part that with Spanish Ferré is able to express herself in a freer manner. There appears to be more emotion in her Spanish narrative, while in English Ferré seems to go straight to the point in some of her descriptions, as if afraid to work the language. In an interview conducted by Gema Castillo, Ferré admits that with English she can control the anecdote and the structure of the novel much better. Ferré even says that through English she has gained an irony that she did not previously have (243, translation mine).

These differences between both versions of the novel are evident from the very beginning. For instance, in the opening of the story, the reader encounters a scene in which Quintín is physically violent towards a boy who serenades Isabel, Quintín's fiancé. In the English version, Ferré writes

I [Isabel] begged the boy to get up and defend himself, but he refused even so much as to look at his attacker. He went on sitting on the ground, singing: Love me always / sweet love of my life. / You know I'll always adore you. / Only the memory of your kisses / will ease my suffering," until he fell unconscious on the sidewalk. (4)

On the other hand, that same paragraph reads with more emotion in the Spanish version; “A pesar de que yo le regoba al joven que se levantara y se defendiera, no quiso hacerlo. Permaneció sentado en la cera, cantando Quiéreme mucho hasta que se desplomó inconsciente sobre el piso de ladrillos salpicado de sangre” (16). In the English version, the boy simply falls unconscious on the floor, while in the Spanish version the boy falls onto a brick floor splashed with blood, a description that makes the entire scene more gruesome than its English counterpart.

Characters change as well from one version of the novel to the other. According to Navarro, Ferré has said that in *The House on the Lagoon*, Quintín “is less unpleasant, nicer and more human” while in the Spanish, he is “a scoundrel who is not worthy of forgiveness” (2). Having Quintín be “more human” makes the character more accessible to non-Puerto Ricans readers, thus making them sympathize with Quintín more than with the Spanish version of the same character. Readers’ reaction to Quintín not only affects the story as a whole, but also how readers could view Isabel, Quintín’s wife, especially towards the end of the novel.

Evidently, Spanish is a romance language, bringing with it more words with which the author can express what she is trying to say emotionally—which may also account for the extra pages *Laguna*. It might be more this cultural difference that perplexes the critics used to Ferré’s literary works in Spanish as the language is tied to Latino/a culture and identity. According to Gema Castillo, for Ferré, being able to translate from English to Spanish and vice versa is like translating cultures, which Ferré does confidently because she believes she knows both cultures (244, translation mine).

In face of the public scrutiny she received for her decision to become a supporter of statehood for Puerto Rico as well as the mixed reviews her English novel received, *The House on the Lagoon* was nonetheless selected as a finalist for the National Book Award in 1995. Becoming a finalist for such a prestigious award in the United States solidified Ferré's status as a competent bilingual novelist. Although she did not win the award, the nomination once again helped put Puerto Rican literature on the map. Also noteworthy is that in 2007, Ferré was incorporated into La Academia Puertorriqueña de la Lengua Española as an academic honoree. Being part of this academic institution likewise validates Ferré's work in her native tongue, permitting her to branch out into the English language realm with confidence.

**CHAPTER V**  
**PUERTO RICO:**  
**A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE**

In my case, writing is simultaneously  
a constructive and destructive urge,  
a possibility for growth and change.

—Rosario Ferré, *The Writer's Kitchen*

Looking through the lens of a postcolonial theoretical approach combined with a feminist approach is indispensable for analyzing *The House on the Lagoon*. As a postcolonial feminist, Ferré observes and criticizes through the eyes of a female narrator a Puerto Rican male-dominated society to show how these men control women through violence or socially constructed gender roles. According to Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, postcolonial feminist theory “inserts feminist concerns into conceptualisations of colonialism and postcolonialism” (3). A postcolonial feminist analysis of Ferré’s novel will therefore demonstrate how Puerto Rican social, economic, and political forces affect all women, regardless of race or class. Ferré presents readers with doubly oppressed women who are caught between the island’s patriarchal society and, as Benita Parry states, “a foreign masculinist-imperialist ideology” (36). According to Carmen Lugo-Lugo, “The history of women fighting for social justice in Puerto Rico, as in many other places, has been continuous and relentless” (63). Ferré takes part with other literary figures in

fighting injustices against women by writing a novel like *Lagoon* in which she gives power and voice to the women of the novel and portrays them as capable of overcoming strict patriarchal rules and oppression.

Using a postcolonial feminist approach to analyze Ferré's novel is also fitting because its status remains in a unique political situation under the United States' colonial control, and the term postcolonial is vast enough to include literature produced during colonization. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, "More than three-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism" (1). Though this is certainly the case for Puerto Rico, it is noteworthy to understand that Puerto Rico's colonization is perhaps more subtle than traditional colonialism because the Puerto Rican government today has more political control over the island than before the Americans arrived on the island. According to Philip G. Altbach, "Traditional colonialism involved the direct political domination of one nation over another area, thus enabling the colonial power to control any and all aspects of the internal and external life of the colony" (452). Within colonialism, a new term, emerged: Altbach states that neo-colonialism "does not involve direct political control, leaving substantial leeway to the developing country" (452). Allowing the colony to have some political control means an advanced nation like the U.S. can maintain its influence over Puerto Rico in subtle ways. For instance, since 1948, the governor of Puerto Rico has not been appointed by the President of U.S., but is instead chosen by Puerto Rican popular vote. While neo-colonialism does permit colonial freedom in some respects, domination by the U.S. still remains, and Puerto Rico, for most intents and purpose, still remains a colony.

A postcolonial feminist reading of Ferré's novel is especially fitting in that the reader can understand how Puerto Rico and its inhabitants, particularly its women, have been affected by colonialism and how they have managed to create a separate identity from their U.S. colonizers. A postcolonial feminist approach would help to unveil the issues of identity, gender, race, politics, and resistance, are present in *Lagoon*, a novel about colonized people written by a colonized Puerto Rican woman author. More specifically, *The House on the Lagoon* is a story about a family history that spans from the year 1917 to the 1980s and is written mainly by Isabel Monfort, a white educated woman who decides to write a history about her family and the family of her husband, Quintín Mendizabal.

While Isabel is secretly writing her manuscript, Quintín finds it and believes her portrayal of the families is incorrect, thus prompting him to write his own comments on the side of her manuscript. Ferré's literary strategy of having Isabel and Quintín as narrators with two different perspectives about the island and their individual family's history represents a way for Ferré to question the manner in which history have been traditionally construed, which is typically from a male's perspective. According to Julie Barack, "One of the novel's primary tasks is to (re)construct and relate a good part of the history of Puerto Rico in the twentieth century to the reader" (32). The reader then gets to see Puerto Rican history through the eyes of both Isabel and Quintín, and in spite of having two narrative voices, it is Isabel's point of view that remains dominant and most important. Through Isabel and Quintín, Ferré brings to light the political and social situations of the island by criticizing the Puerto Rican bourgeoisie and denouncing the abuse and oppression of women within a Puerto Rican setting.



As author of her family's history, Isabel Monfort states that the purpose for her story "was to interweave the woof of my memories with the warp of Quintín's recollections, but what I finally wrote was something different" (6). As the novel develops, the story Isabel is writing is much more than what she anticipates and ultimately becomes her way of speaking up against the unfairness of the life she lives. Through Isabel's eyes, Ferré demonstrates both the decay of Isabel's bourgeois family and women's struggles in a Puerto Rican colonialist patriarchal society.

Ferré's *Lagoon* thus begins with Isabel remembering an incident that occurred when she was engaged to Quintín. One evening, while Isabel and Quintín are sitting outside, a sixteen-year-old boy, who is enamored with Isabel, begins to serenade her, and this upsets Quintín. Quintín then proceeds to whip the boy with his belt, despite Isabel and her grandmother's attempt to stop him, until the boy falls unconscious. Shortly after the incident the boy commits suicide and Quintín feels guilty, so he asks Isabel to forgive him. It is then that Isabel and Quintín pledge to look at their respective families' "origins of anger" (5) in order to avoid violence in their life together.

After this introductory scene, the reader encounters "Part I" of the novel, which begins July 4, 1917 when Buenaventura Mendizabal, a twenty-three-year-old Spaniard, arrives in San Juan. This was "the same day President Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones Act, which granted us American citizenship" (5). This date, however, is incorrect. According to Paul Allatson, the Jones Act was "actually signed by President Woodrow Wilson on March 2, 1917" (133). The day Buenaventura arrives on the island, though, the people of San Juan are celebrating their new status as citizens of the U.S. and believe that being part of a powerful nation like U.S. will open new doors for all Puerto Ricans.

Ferré provides detailed descriptions of Buenaventura's newfound surroundings, including the new capitol, which is still under construction, barefoot children who come from the first public school funded by the U.S. government, and the natives who are thin, barefoot, and "wore straw hats on their head" (18). The description of the natives wearing straw hats is a clear allusion to the jíbaro figure, as mentioned in Chapter II, an important image for Puerto Ricans and their identity and has come to represent an ideal that perhaps was more attainable in 1917 than it is today. In addition to the jíbaro, there is also a description of cockfighting, a legal sport in Puerto Rico, as it is part of Puerto Rican culture. The feeling the reader gets in this particular scene is that the people on the island are happy to be U.S. citizens.

Soon after his arrival, Buenaventura builds a small cottage near the Alamares Lagoon, which is near a spring where the residents of Alamares receive their water supply. One day, the caretaker of the spring dies, and Buenaventura moves into the caretaker's house. Soon after, the captains of the ships that dock at the San Juan Bay come to Buenaventura for fresh water from the spring. Buenaventura exchanges fresh water for bottles of wines, and slowly but surely, he begins collecting wines and hams, all of which give way to his future import business.

The same year Buenaventura arrives on the island, the Spanish Casino is holding a lavish carnival where a sixteen-year-old girl named Rebecca is crowned queen of the carnival. It is traditional for the queen to have a suitable king, a young man from an upper-class family who looks good enough to be with Rebecca. After having seen a picture of Buenaventura, Rebecca chooses him as her king for the carnival and eventually marries Buenaventura in 1917. Later, as a merchant, everything is going well for

Buenaventura, who owns two steamships to further expand his business and also sell codfish. After eight years of marriage, business is great, and Buenaventura decides it is time to move from their old house into a new one, a mansion. He commissions Milan Pavel, an emigrant from Prague who was once Frank Lloyd Wright's protégé, to build the mansion for them. At first, Pavel refuses, but after having a talk with Rebecca, he changes his mind because apparently, Pavel falls in love with Rebecca. In 1925, Pavel builds a spectacular mansion with mosaic decorations, surrounding gardens, and boasting a golden terrace where Rebecca and her friends meet for their artistic gatherings. A year after Pavel begins construction, the Mendizabals move in.

Isabel describes Rebecca Arrigoitia as a free-spirited woman who enjoys the arts and, for some time, embodies the complete opposite of what society expects of her. Because her husband is often away at work, she has the day all to herself, so "she wrote poetry in the morning, practiced an improvised style of dance along the lagoon's edge in the afternoon, and invited her friends to dinner almost every evening" (39). Rebecca focuses on her artistic desires, which include dance, talks about poetry, painting, and doesn't even want children, something that would definitely upset the patriarchal belief that a woman's role, as mother of both society and family, is to procreate and care for the offspring. Although Rebecca enjoys this lifestyle for several years, it eventually stops because Buenaventura expects her to fulfill her role as a traditional wife by accompanying him to formal dinners and preparing social gatherings at their house.

When they move into the mansion, Buenaventura is named Spanish consul for Puerto Rico. This position brings new responsibilities and a new reputation and career to uphold, prompting Buenaventura to prohibit Rebecca from meeting with her artistic

friends, with whom he does not deem proper for a diplomat's wife to have contact.

Buenaventura wants his wife to be someone she is not, to follow his rules, and be devoted to him, as his subordinate. As he tells Rebecca, "A man's home is like a rooster's coop: women may speak out when chickens get to pee" (51). Buenaventura's views of women are quite clear; not only is he the boss of his business, but he is the boss at home as well, and Rebecca must do as she is told. For two years Rebecca is the model wife, but once Rebecca realizes that she has lost her identity and voice while being married to Buenaventura, she decides to leave him and moves to Atlanta with her parents. Rebecca thus proves herself to be courageous because she is able to walk away from her husband in her attempt to break free from him and society's conventional patriarchal values.

Once Rebecca leaves, Buenaventura finds himself miserable and lonely, so he decides to get his wife back by going to Atlanta to apologize. The day he arrives, Rebecca discovers she is pregnant and tells Buenaventura the news. Elated he tells her she can have as many artistic gatherings as she pleases, if she returns to Puerto Rico with him. She agrees, and Buenaventura remains true to his word. Despite not having wanted children, Rebecca gives birth to Quintín in 1928 and two weeks later goes back to her artistic gatherings. One evening, Rebecca plans to dance for her friends and act out a play, but Buenaventura informs her that that same night he is going to invite some colleagues to the house. Rebecca nonetheless continues with her plans, and that night, while she is dancing almost naked, Buenaventura arrives with his colleagues. Without saying a word, he walks up to her and beats her with his belt until she falls unconscious. After the beating, Rebecca is a different person and now barely speaks to Buenaventura, is submissive, stops her artistic gatherings, and has three other children, Patria, Libertad,

and Ignacio with Buenaventura. At around this time, during the mid-1930s, Buenaventura decides to demolish the house on the lagoon and builds a house completely different than the first. He builds a new Spanish mansion in 1935 with bare brick floors, a granite stairway and granite turrets (67).

*The House on the Lagoon* takes place within a Puerto Rican social and cultural setting. The house in which the story unfolds can be read as a metaphor for the island. As the novel progresses, the house on the lagoon goes through two reconstructions and one remodeling, each occurring during three different economic stages of Puerto Rico. The construction of the first house occurs in 1925. During the mid-1920s and after becoming a U.S. colony, the island is being transformed in all aspects, including commerce. According to author Gabriel Villaronga, “Monocultural sugar production became the main model of economic growth during the three decades of U.S. control of the island” (8). The first house on the lagoon thus symbolizes not only Buenaventura’s increasing fortune, but likewise a period of prosperity on the island as a result of its new status as a U.S. colony and of its citizens obtaining U.S. citizenship.

The demolishing and subsequent construction of the second house on the lagoon occurs in 1935 and coincides with the economic crisis of the 1930’s. The Great Depression impacted Puerto Rico because of the island’s colonial status and dependency on the U.S. economy. According to Villaronga, “After the start of the Great Depression, the situation on the island deteriorated rapidly” (8). It is during the decade of the 1930s that the island undergoes serious economic difficulties: as Villaronga points out, “...workers suffered from seasonal employment, low pay, and harsh working conditions...” and “The standard living of the majority of Puerto Ricans worsened as the

price of basic necessities increased relative to wages” (80). Clearly, the economic changes on the island are drastic; nonetheless, it is during this time that Buenaventura is able to demolish and rebuild the house on the lagoon, thus showing how prosperous he had become under U.S. colonialism.

In 1964, the house is not rebuilt; it is instead simply remodeled by Quintín. Prior to 1964, during the late 1940s, the island experienced an accelerated industrial development. According to Edgardo Meléndez, the decade of the 1940’s was one of transition economically changing from a capitalistic agricultural model to a capitalistic industrial one (76, translation mine). This change brought extensive transformations. For example, during the 1960s, Meléndez stipulates that the industrialization program was refocused to attract investments from U.S. industries and created an economically marginalized group in urban areas (5, translation mine). This suggests that such groups originated from an internal migration on the island of people from the mountains to the cities. Throughout the changes that both the house and Puerto Rico experience, the Mendizabals, along with the rest of the elite upper class, remain racist and discriminatory towards people of color. Petra, for instance, and the servants still live in the cellar and women are still inferior to men. Therefore, what Ferré further criticizes, through the house and the Mendizabal men, is that while the island changes in some respects, racism and machismo still remain.

Such attitudes continue through the life of Buenaventura and Rebecca’s first son, Quintín Mendizabal, who marries Isabel Monfort. Isabel and Quintín, as children of the elite class, are both educated in the U.S; Isabel obtains a degree from Vassar College and Quintín obtains his Master’s degree from Colombia University. Isabel recalls that during

their courtship, she would meet up with Quintín in New York for secret rendezvous at the Roosevelt Hotel. What is telling about such rendezvous is that Isabel arrives at the hotel through an underground tunnel connected to Grand Central Station. The reason for this is, as Isabel points out, “Getting her reputation compromised was just about the worst crime a girl from a good family could commit back then, and I remember trembling at the thought of meeting someone from home in the hotel lobby” (80). Even an educated white woman from the upper class, like Isabel, has to comply with society’s conventional values, and Isabel is well aware of it. Isabel continues her romance with Quintín despite her grandmother Abby’s reservations about him. Abby has reservations about Quintín ever since he beat up the young sixteen-year-old boy who once serenaded Isabel. Abby advises Isabel not to marry Quintín, to which Isabel says, “Unfortunately, I did not mind Abby’s advice” (5). In June 1955, Isabel and Quintín marry in a lavish wedding in Old San Juan. Through Abby’s reservations about Quintín Ferré makes the reader suspicious of Quintín and, of course, lets the reader know that somehow Isabel’s grandmother is right about Quintín. Abby obviously did not approve of Quintín’s macho personality and violent temper.

In the early stages of their marriage, Isabel and Quintín are very much in love, and Isabel promises to help Quintín overcome the violent disposition typical of the Mendizabal men. Initially, Quintín’s intention is to avoid becoming like his father, Buenaventura. Unfortunately, as the story unfolds, the reader realizes that Quintín is unable to reach such a goal. Regardless, Isabel and Quintín go on to have one child, Manuel, adopt another named Willie, and were married for almost thirty years.

Throughout the entire novel, Quintín is an intolerable character because of his actions, opinions, and beliefs. As Buenaventura and Rebecca's first son, he in some respects takes after his father's views on life. Quintín's prejudices and closed-mindedness are seen in all aspects of his life, including politics. A fierce advocate for statehood Quintín wants his son Manuel to be the same. When Quintín finds a Puerto Rican flag, and not an American flag hanging above Manuel's bed, he urges his son to remove it. However, when Manuel does not comply to his father's wishes, Quintín gives his son a speech regarding nationalism and independence, even going as far as to blame independentistas for some of the family's tragedies. As Quintín tells his son:

“Nationalism has always been a curse in our family, Manuel,” he explained patiently. “It was because your grandfather Aristides Arrigoitia was forced to take part in a Nationalist shootout that he fell ill and left. It was your Uncle Ignacio's preference for Puerto Rican products that first made me worry about his abilities as a businessman. Independentistas are not to be trusted. That's the reason why, when we interview someone for a job at Gourmet Imports, the first thing we do is ask his political affiliation. If he says he's for independence, we have no work for him. I think you'd better take that flag down.” (343)

Manuel does not comply. Soon, Manuel finds out that he no longer has a desk in his office and is removed from being chief accountant of his father's company. It is clear that Quintín's stubborn belief for statehood and his prejudice against anyone who thinks differently know no boundaries, not even with his family. Quintín best exemplifies the



typical patriarch/machista who believes everyone around him should agree with his beliefs and ideas or be punished.

When it comes to women, Quintín also believes they are inferior to men. For instance, when he finds his wife's manuscript, he immediately thinks the history is wrong and is amazed and concerned by what she is revealing about their families; this concern is heightened by Quintín's preoccupation with what people would say if Isabel's manuscript is ever published. He then goes as far as to say, "Feminism was the curse of the twentieth century" (108). What Quintín represents is a man who feels threatened by his wife's risky move of writing a family history about their families without his knowledge or consent. Having the character of Quintín comment on such issues as feminism, literary technique, and the overall veracity of the details in the story represents a good rhetorical move by Ferré. It appears as if Ferré anticipates all kinds of reactions from her critics and thus portrays and addresses them through the character of Quintín. Not only that, but through Quintín, Ferré continues to further criticize men who feel threatened by smart, successful women like herself and Isabel.

Reading through the Quintín sections of the novel, the reader can sense his jealousy over Isabel's work. He resents her for not seeking his help while writing the manuscript, yet he points out that her work is quite good and well-written, something that surprises him. As mentioned before, Quintín believes in his superiority, including the intellectual superiority of men over women, even over his wife. Furthermore, he is jealous because he could not contribute anything to Isabel's history. Quintín explains that his reason for not being able to create a work of art is because of his own work obligations. He then criticizes Isabel for not doing the same, which is quite ironic for

Quintín, since he firmly believes in the patriarchal system of society in which a woman's place is in the home.

Quintín is a character who at times is filled with contradictions, but ultimately, the reader understands that there exists no room for people like Quintín whom, despite the constant changes the island experiences, remain as prejudiced and close-minded as ever. Ferré shows how people like Quintín impede the growth of the island and, if anything, only promote a state of stagnation. At the end of the novel, it is Quintín who suffers one of the worst outcomes of all the characters; even worse than his father, Buenaventura, who dies from complications after his surgery due to a broken hip. Quintín dies at the end of the novel when Isabel strikes him in the back of his head with an iron beam and he falls into the mangroves. Once he falls into the mangroves, Isabel leaves him for dead.

Many critics consider Ferré's novel to be very political, and throughout the novel the issue of politics is undoubtedly tied to language and vice versa. Many of the characters' political views differ, even within the Mendizabal family. Some, like Quintín and his grandfather Arístides, want statehood, while others, like Buenaventura, want independence. Quintín, in particular while reading Isabel's manuscript, begins to think back on politics by stating, "Commonwealth status, which had come into existence in 1952, didn't really count. Voting for commonwealth wasn't going to solve anything; it would be perpetuating the status quo. Becoming a state would be the only way to put the lid on Nationalist and Independentista terrorism" (150). Typically, those who favor statehood for the island are usually in favor of the English language, and like so many others on the island, Quintín believes English paved the way into a modern world and was an advantage over Spanish-speaking nations (150).

Isabel's grandmother Abby, on the other hand, believes in independence for the island—a special type of independence, as Isabel informs the reader, for her grandmother likes to sit and look through the Sears catalogue, which contradicts independentista beliefs that devalue anything American. Abby represents a portion of the Puerto Rican population that wants independence for the island, but somehow acknowledges and accepts the island's inseparable relationship with the U.S. They want Puerto Rico to be free from the U.S., but at the same time like the progress that has been made on the island because of the U.S., along with the fact that Puerto Ricans can travel anywhere with their U.S. passport, a privilege Abby treasures “as if it were a jewel” (183).

When it comes to Isabel's political inclinations, the reader cannot be quite certain where exactly she stands. At one point she says, “I felt a great deal of sympathy for independence in my youth, perhaps because I was so close to Abby” (183). But even still, she is confused because of Abby's own contradictory political views: “I like to think of myself as apolitical, and when election time comes around, I don't' like to take a stand” (183). Despite calling herself “apolitical,” Isabel's political stand at some point becomes clear. Isabel recognizes that Puerto Rico's Commonwealth status is a fitting status for the island, but knows that the day will come when Puerto Ricans will have to decide on a more definitive status. It is through her ideas about the English language that her political status becomes more evident:

The way I see it, our island is like a betrothed, always on the verge of marriage. If one day Puerto Rico becomes a state, it will have to accept English—the language of her future husband—as its official language, not just because it's the language of modernity and of progress but also

because it's the language of authority. If the island decides to remain single, on the other hand, it will probably mean backwardness and poverty. (184)

One cannot help but wonder if Isabel Monfort mirrors Ferré herself. Having once been an advocate for the island's independence, Ferré herself changed her views, and in 1998 published an article in the *New York Times* in which she advocates statehood, and with that change of mind comes a different perspective when it comes to language. Evidently, there are certain similarities between both the real and fictional women: both are educated, white, upper-class women and are writers whose purpose for writing is to attain a change in society. As the passage in the chapter's epigraph says, for Ferré, writing provides "a possibility for growth and change" (227), much like Isabel's initial purpose for writing the novel, which is to explore the family's violent tendencies and avoid that violence in her marriage and future family with Quintín. Of course, the novel evolves into something much larger than that of providing both women (Ferré and Isabel) the freedom to write the novel in order to seek change in their society while finding an identity and voice of their own. With Ferré, her change comes by simply writing the novel in English—in turn upsetting the literary discourse in Puerto Rico. In the actual novel, Quintín also questions Isabel's decision to write in English and then comes to the conclusion that if "she published in the United States, thousands would read it" (151). This is one of Ferré's many goals—to reach a wider audience while being able to write about women's issues and struggles in Puerto Rico.

Even though Ferré's novel addresses gender inequalities found in a patriarchal society, the issue of race cannot be overlooked, as it is an important component of the

novel. Race relations in the novel are a direct criticism of the strict racial power structures found in the Mendizabal family, as some members of the family exhibit racial prejudice towards people of color. The most obvious example is seen in the relationship between Petra Avilés with her family and the Mendizabal family. Petra, along with her poor black family, lives in the cellar of the Mendizabal house, while the (white) rich Mendizabals live upstairs. This living arrangement is symbolic of the race hierarchy that exists in Puerto Rican society, where lower-class and/or colored people are at the bottom of the proverbial class barrel.

Petra Avilés is brought into the house on the lagoon by Buenaventura after he is on a business trip in the town of Guayama, “a town famous for its sorcerers and medicine men” (58). During the trip, Buenaventura stops along the road to stretch his legs, and when he steps out of the car, he twists his foot, which quickly begins to swell. Buenaventura walks towards a stream to bathe his foot, and while doing so, Petra appears, wraps his foot in “yaraná leaves,” (63), dips the foot back into the stream, and walks away. Shortly after, Buenaventura’s foot heals, and he goes back to San Juan. The day after the incident, Buenaventura sends his driver to find Petra and bring her to him. Petra then becomes Buenaventura’s servant; she cleans, cooks, and takes care of the house. Quintín points out that “From the moment she arrived at the house Petra had wielded an inexplicable power over Buenaventura” (74). It is through Petra that order is maintained in the house on the lagoon because she is the one that carries out Buenaventura’s commands and all the servants respect her.

Petra’s ancestors are from Angola, and her parents had once been slaves, but she is born on the island in the town of Guayama. Her strong African is in her “deep onyx

black” skin and the “brightly colored seed necklaces around her neck and steel bracelets on her wrists, and she went barefoot” (58). According to Mary Ann Gosser Esquilín, Petra is “a transmitter of Afro-Puerto Rican traditions” (57). Petra, for instance, tells the story of her grandfather, Bernabé Avilés, who is a chieftain from Angola, brought to Puerto Rico in the nineteenth century as a slave by the Spaniards. In spite of such coercion, Bernabé prays to “Yemayá, Ogún, and Elegguá” and speaks Bantu with the other slaves though not allowed (59). To emphasize the importance of language, Ferré writes, “One’s tongue was so deeply ingrained, more so even than one’s religion or tribal pride; it was like a root that went deep into one’s body” (60). Recognizing the importance of one’s native tongue, Ferré uses Bernabé as an example to demonstrate that despite efforts to impose the colonizer’s tongue on the colonized—the Spaniards with Bernabé and the Americans with Puerto Ricans—the notion of removing a language or replacing it with another is almost impossible. Through Bernabé, Ferré alludes to the time when the Americans arrive on the island and want to force Puerto Ricans to speak English. In order to achieve this goal, as Algrén de Gutiérrez explains, “The American military government moved to establish a public school system as quickly as possible, using English as the medium of instruction in all grades” (9). However, despite American efforts to implement such a language policy on the island, there was resistance from Puerto Ricans, and ultimately, as Algrén de Gutiérrez points out, “Spanish is the medium of instruction at all levels of the public school system with English taught as a preferred subject” (10).

Despite Bernabé’s tribulations, he maintains his religion and language, as does Petra, who in the cellar of the house sets an altar to her saint. Elegguá “looked like a

peeled coconut; with a coconut's dark brown skin, two knobs in place of eyes, and a small stem at the top of the head, which Petra rubbed with her finger whenever she asked him to do something for her" (64). Although the saint's description might sound silly to those accustomed to the worship of Christ, Elegguá is still considered a very important figure among the black population throughout the world, including Puerto Rico. When it is time for Rebecca to give birth to Quintín, Petra rubs Elegguá's head, then returns to rub coconut oil over Rebecca's belly, while chanting "Olorún, ka kó koi bé" (64) until Rebecca gives birth. Petra's religion is not Christian; it is more aligned with Santería, which came from Africa and is still practiced in Puerto Rico. Despite religious differences and skin color, Petra is an important component of the house on the lagoon, and Buenaventura gradually allows Petra's family to move into the cellar and work for him, and they all did until Petra dies.

Petra's importance as a female character, however, is often tarnished because she is a black servant and speaks so little throughout the novel, yet Petra is still a very important character. It is through Petra, her family, and the relationship they have with the Mendizabals that Ferré challenges the elite, white Puerto Rican population to embrace their African roots as part of the identity of Puerto Ricans. David Akbar Gilliam points out that Ferré "attempts to reveal, explore and resolve the contradictory ideas of national and cultural identity" (58) among both elite white and mulatto Puerto Ricans of course, who often deny their African roots as part of their Puerto Rican identity. However, Petra is not the only black character of the novel, as Ferré presents her readers with several mulata women. There is Esmeralda Márquez, a close friend of Isabel and daughter of another mulata, Doña Ermelinda Quiñones, and also Coral and Perla, daughters of

Esmeralda. All of these women upset the social norm of society because each is successful in their own right yet are still subject to racial discrimination.

Doña Ermelina Quiñones is described as “a famous dressmaker from Ponce” (217) and mistress to a well-known lawyer, Don Bolívar Márquez. She has light cinnamon skin with “corkscrew curls that grew on top of her head, so wild and thick and spirited there was no way to comb them into a civilized hairdo” (219). The description of her hair symbolizes her African ancestry, and the fact that she always covers it under a turban means that she has to hide it when out in public so as not to be further discriminated against by society. During a party at the Mendizabal’s house, Rebecca knocks Doña Ermelinda’s turban and exposes her curly hair, causing people to “laugh, pointing to the thick mat of hair that rose from her head, and some began to make unkind comments” (231). Before she becomes a dressmaker, Ermelinda sews nightgowns with her mother and sisters at their house, and then they would sell them at the garment factory for a few cents. But after having seen one of the garments she sews selling for fifty dollars in a magazine when Ermelinda and her mother were paid fifty cents for making it, she decides to stop working for the factory. The narrator points out that during the 1920s, many women were employed at needle factories, but were always underpaid, as was the case with Ermelinda, who decides to take part in the needle workers’ strike, rallies at the plazas, and urges women to join the strike (219). Ermelinda portrays a woman unwilling to succumb to society’s unfair treatment of women and is willing to fight against it, even by going to jail for it. Don Bolívar bails Ermelinda out of jail and thus begins their love affair, and eventually they have three daughters, despite not being married and the oldest one was Esmeralda.



Esmeralda Márquez is a beautiful mulata with “green eyes and fair hair, which fell in waves of honey over her dark shoulders” (223). She is intelligent, studies at the New York Fashion Institute, and is also Ignacio Mendizabal’s inamorata. His parents disapprove of the relationship simply because of Esmeralda’s racially-mixed background, as she was partly black. Because of the turban incident the relationship between Ignacio, Buenaventura and Rebecca’s youngest son, and Esmeralda ends. She later marries Ernesto Ustariz, moves to New York, and has two daughters, Coral and Perla Ustariz. Coral and Perla Ustariz are educated women who speak both Spanish and English, with Coral working for an English-language newspaper on the island and Perla aspiring to be a nurse. Coral’s skin is light gold, while Perla’s has “a pearl-white complexion” (339). Coral has a romantic relationship with Manuel, and Perla has one with Willie.

All of the mulata characters are educated and come from the middle or upper class, but more than that, according to Alan West-Durán, “The mulata embodies the [Puerto Rican] nation (in all senses), and mediates between the bio-natural realm (racial mixing), the collective sublime (nationhood), the religious (Spiritualism, the orishas Oshún-Yemayá), the musical (bomba y plena), the cultural (a transcultured-hybrid society), and even the culinary (sancocho)” (58)—exactly what Ferré wants to get at, the importance of the mulata in Puerto Rican society.

Despite being discriminated against, the mulatas’ role as seductresses in the popular racial imagination attracts the young men from upper-class society. Manuel and Willie became involved with Coral and Perla, while a generation before, Ignacio falls in love with Esmeralda. It seems the younger generation is more open in terms of interracial dating than older generations like Quintín and Buenaventura, who, despite their racial

prejudices against mulatas, are still secretly attracted to them, and of course, admitting to such an attraction brings shame to them and their families. One day, for instance, Quintín decides to have a picnic at Lucumí Beach with his family, Petra, her husband, and Petra's granddaughter Carmelina. During the picnic, Isabel informs the reader that Carmelina goes swimming into the mangroves, and Quintín follows her. Once the picnic is over and everyone returns to the house, Carmelina packs her belongings and leaves the house, only to return nine months later and give birth to a baby boy whose "skin wasn't light, but it wasn't black, either; it was closer to buckwheat honey" (319).

After the birth, Carmelina leaves the baby behind. During this episode, the reader, along with Isabel, learns about the day of the picnic when Quintín rapes Carmelina. Akbar Gilliam seems to buy into the stereotype of the seductress mulata when he calls it "the rape/seduction" (63). Regardless of how one looks at it, the only person to blame for such incident is Quintín. He rapes Carmelina, and even if Quintín says Carmelina is to blame because she supposedly seduced him, he is still at fault because he is unfaithful to his wife. When Isabel confronts Quintín about the baby, he admits to fathering the child but frames this as a situation entirely out of his control: "The devil put Carmelina before me. She asked me to swim out to the mangroves and I couldn't resist the temptation" (321). Clearly, this is Quintín's way to absolve himself of any wrongdoing, and in spite of such claims, it is evident that the incident is indeed rape. Isabel becomes disgusted with her husband and tells him that the only way she'll stay in the marriage is if Quintín adopts the boy, later named Willie. He accepts responsibility, and Willie is raised as a Mendizabal. Episodes like the one where Quintín rapes Carmelina are very important in Ferré's criticisms of the elite because Ferré lets her readers know that the rape incident is

not an isolated one, as Isabel mentions that the last time she was at Lucumí Beach, she “had discovered the Mendizabal Elementary School full of blue-eyed black children” (315).

Having to raise Willie as his own is ironic for Quintín, who believes in a pure Spanish bloodline. According to Akbar Gilliam, Ferré, with scenes like these, sheds light on a “complex phenomenon that has played a significant role in the creation of the Americas” (69), which is the mixing of the races. In the novel, the mix occurs through rape, as it has in history during slavery. Mixed race is nevertheless part of Puerto Rican racial identity, a mix of Spanish, African, and Taíno. Having Isabel force Quintín to raise Willie as his own represents her as a modern woman—liberal, educated, and unwilling to stand for the inequalities found in Puerto Rican society when it comes to women and race. On the other hand, this may also be read as a complicity with Quintín’s sins.

As previously mentioned, the novel employs two narrators; however, it is Isabel’s point of view which remains the dominant perspective, while Quintín’s is always secondary. So not only is the main narrative voice a woman’s, but it is the women who pass on the stories Isabel recounts throughout the novel. For instance, Petra’s mother told Petra the story about her grandfather, Bernabé; it was Petra who told Willie and Manuel about her grandfather; and finally it was Rebecca, Buenaventura’s wife and Quintín’s mother, who told both Isabel and Quintín the stories about the Mendizabal family. Ferré rewrites the past solely through the eyes of the women in the novel, in order to consider and bring to light women’s issues and struggles on the island throughout time. Isabel is but one of the characters that represent such struggles, and she presents different ways for dealing with such struggles.

However, there are critics who argue that Isabel is still unsuccessful in dealing with the struggles she endures. Critic Beatriz Urraca, for instance, argues that during the end of the novel, Isabel suffers the “loss of family and country” (230). For Urraca, the end of the novel is disturbing because “up to this point she [Isabel] had presented the imagination—art, writing, music—as a strategy to overcome repression, but it didn’t work for her” (230). However, Isabel does manage to escape repression. In the end, due to Quintín’s actions, Isabel decides to finally leave him. She sells his art collection in order to gather enough money to move to Florida with Willie, a goal she does accomplish. While Isabel does miss her country, she says, “I had no desire to go back to the island” (380). She therefore does not “lose,” her country as she could have always gone back if she wanted to.

As for her family, she had already decided to leave Quintín, Manuel had already left, and the only way he will talk to her is if she moves out of the house and far away from Quintín. For Isabel, the only family left, ironically, is Willie, and he moves to Florida with her and becomes an accomplished artist. Ultimately, Isabel represents a woman who is able to gain independence from her marriage and the island’s patriarchal structure, thus overcoming her struggles. More than that, she encompasses Ferré’s purpose: to criticize the bourgeois family while denouncing women’s oppression. By portraying such oppression in a white upper-class family, Ferré takes a unique perspective because Puerto Rican writers tend to portray Puerto Rico from a middle- or lower-class one. While it can be said that women from the upper class might experience less oppression than those who are from the lower class, what Ferré is trying to demonstrate is that all women are oppressed in Puerto Rico’s very patriarchal society. For

this reason, all women, one way or another, can relate to the characters Ferré has created in her novel.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION:

#### TOWARDS A NEW PUERTO RICO

Racism in Puerto Rico is a result of colonization beginning when the Spaniards arrived on the island and claimed racial superiority over the inhabitants of Puerto Rico, the Taíno Indians, in order to establish their colonial power. As Joseph Barndt explains, “European colonizers presumed the right to appropriate the land, the people, and the resources of any and all places defined by them as available real estate” (68). Racism determines the discriminatory attitude towards specific groups and creates a very visible divisive line in society—a division between white and black and male and female. According to Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, “Racism is both overt and covert. It takes two, closely related forms: individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community” (112). These authors make a clear distinction between individual racism and institutional racism and argue that “institutional racism has another name: colonialism” (112). In the case of Puerto Rico, not only do blacks form part of the island as a colony which is separate from the U.S., but blacks are also a colony separate from white society, in *The House on the Lagoon*’s case, the Mendizabals.

Ferré depicts the Avilés family as a separate colony from the Mendizabals because of their place of origin. Not only is there a distinction between the color of their skin, but there is also a very clear distinction between the places from which both families come. Petra's family, the Avilés family, lives in Las Minas while the Mendizabals live in the metropolitan city of San Juan. Ferré presents racism first, in terms of skin color, and second, in terms of gender with the rape of Carmelina. Quintín and Buenaventura Mendizabal consistently exhibit racism because they believe their European blood should be kept pure and separate from mixed blood. Now, within racial superiority, there is also racial hierarchy which Ferré presents through the actual house on the lagoon. For this reason, Petra and her family, who work for the Mendizabals, live down in the cellar, so the Mendizabals are both literally and figuratively above the black Avilés family. As mentioned before, if the house on the lagoon mirrors the island of Puerto Rico, then the racial hierarchy seen in the Mendizabal's house is representative of the racial hierarchy in Puerto Rico society.

As stated before, racism can be seen in individual practices and in society's structure and values or what Barndt calls institutional racism, so at the root of racism is discrimination, and from discrimination comes oppression. Part of what constitutes Puerto Rico's society is that it is patriarchal, and patriarchy oppresses women. Therefore, Ferré's notion of racism in the novel also includes gender discrimination, not only towards those of color, but also towards women. If racism is an ideology where some people are deemed better or superior to others, then women are subjected to sexism as well, regardless of skin color. Through the characters of Isabel and Rebecca, Ferré points out that white women are oppressed too because of the patriarchal society which they live

in and because of the men they choose to marry (Quintín and Buenaventura, respectively). However, as researcher Vron Ware argues, “It is no longer sufficient to argue that all white women are born into a racially divided and patriarchal world that they have not helped to create” (69). Ferré presents this idea through Buenaventura’s wife, Rebecca.

Rebecca is a perfect example of white colonial power (individual racism) because while she, as a woman, does experience sexist oppression, she too is racist against women of color. For instance, she did not get along with Petra, the house servant, and when Doña Ermelinda was a guest at her house, Rebecca purposely knocks down Doña Ermelinda’s turban to reveal her curly black hair, thus exposing what Rebecca believes is Doña Ermelinda’s, and consequently her daughter Esmeralda’s racial disadvantage. Rebecca symbolizes white colonizing women who are themselves oppressed because of the patriarchal society in which they live, but who also participate in racist and oppressive behavior towards colored people. While Ferré’s main objective is to expose the oppression women are subjected to, she also recognizes that white women participate in racist behavior. This is where Ferré takes aim at the Puerto Rican elite for their hypocrisy, first, for discriminating against blacks and thus denying their Afro-Puerto Rican roots, and second, Ferré denounces (white) women who oppress and discriminate against (colored) women, as is the case with Rebecca. Perhaps, Ferré does so in an attempt to have women realize that the only way to combat women’s oppression and discrimination is to have all women unite against it. Ultimately, the purpose of racism is to maintain the dominant group dominant and defend and justify the elite’s privileged lifestyle. So in the end what the Mendizabal family, emphasis on the men, represents is



the anti-black mentality present in the elite Puerto Rican society.

While racism in Puerto Rico represents a major theme, *The House on the Lagoon* nevertheless presents a unique Puerto Rican perspective for a number of reasons. First, the story unfolds within an elite Puerto Rican setting, second, an upper-class educated woman narrates the story, and finally, it is the author's first novel to be published in English, thus presenting a panorama of Puerto Rico and its people in a language other than Spanish. As mentioned in Chapter IV of this work, Ferré's decision to have her novel published in English first angered many of her critics, with some even going as far as calling her a traitor to her country for not publishing the novel in Spanish, the island's "native" language. Despite harsh criticism, Ferré justified her decision to write in English. In an interview with Castillo, Ferré says that, at first, the decision to write in English was a practical and utilitarian one that would enable her to reach a wider audience. Ferré later says that writing in English became much more than a practical idea, and it became a way for her to show her readers her Puerto Rican culture (243, translation mine). Nonetheless, Ferré's decision to write in English is perhaps more closely related to politics than she lets on.

Throughout the novel, Ferré presents an array of characters who have opposing views about the island's political status. In the novel, Isabel claims to be apolitical, but her decision to move to the U.S. has implications that correspond with Ferré's decision to support statehood. Part of Puerto Rico's history is the constant debate about politics and the island's political status. Ferré is no stranger to such debates; after all, she is the daughter of one time New Progressive Party governor Luis A. Ferré. By talking about politics in her novel through the characters' opposing political views, Ferré manages to

capture an aspect of Puerto Rican reality, which is that of the island's political indecisiveness.

But more than that, by having Isabel move to the U.S., Ferré foreshadows her own change in regards to politics. Three years after the publication of her novel, Ferré publicly changed her political views in an editorial she wrote for the *New York Times* in 1998. Since advocating the island's independence since the 1970s, Ferré writes, "That's why I'm going to support statehood in the next plebiscite" (A21). While this admission surprised many of her critics and colleagues, perhaps what surprised them the most was Ferré's justification for such move. Ferré justifies her reason for changing political views by saying that Puerto Rico's language and culture would no longer be threatened because of the growing number of Hispanics in the U.S. However, Ferré's justification might be one that not many island Puerto Ricans could accept.

To further complicate her justification, Ferré believes that being Puerto Rican encompasses being Puerto Rican and American. As Ferré says in her article, "To be Puerto Rican is to be a hybrid. Our two halves are inseparable; we cannot give up either without feeling maimed" (A21). Regardless, one can speculate that, at least, island Puerto Ricans do not see themselves as hybrid or as having two halves of anything—they simply see themselves as Puerto Ricans as a whole. There are plenty of Puerto Ricans who change their political inclinations, at one point or another, and Ferré certainly is no exception, but what this proves is that Puerto Rico's political status will remain unsolved, or at least, will remain with its commonwealth status, because people are continually changing their political views and are unable to make up their mind.

But politics aside, the novel carries a message much stronger than that over political party the author supports. That said, it is important to acknowledge and recognize that, as Margarite Fernández Olmos states, “Ferré is a self-declared feminist author and critic” (43), ready to expose her views about her beloved island and its patriarchal society. Combine Ferré’s feminism with postcolonialism, and the reader understands that Ferré attempts to not only highlight, but also, as Lewis and Mills argue, “change the oppressive power relations encoded in the name of race, nation, and empire, as well as those of gender, class, and sexuality” (2). Thus, Ferré’s novel can be read as a feminist postcolonial discourse within the Puerto Rican literary canon. Although some critics argue that because Ferré published her book in English, that her work cannot be considered part of the Puerto Rican literary canon; however, one must not forget that the island currently has two official languages—Spanish and English. Of the two languages, Spanish is and will always be considered the main vernacular on the island.

Since its U.S. colonization in 1898, though, Puerto Rico continues to be in quite an interesting political and cultural/social situation. The island still remains a U.S. colony, but it has practiced a different colonial experience than most other colonies. Puerto Rico is a neo-colonial island because its government is allowed some political control, yet it is still a colony subject to U.S. rule and domination. In terms of culture, indeed, Puerto Rico has its own very distinct culture, but it is still Americanized in certain aspects—take a look at the many fast food joints that continue to be established throughout the island. Puerto Rico’s peculiar situation is, at times, best expressed in the literature produced by Puerto Rican writers both on the island and on the mainland. Depending on their gender, class, and/or race, as different authors have different views

and opinions on the subject of Puerto Rico and what it means to be Puerto Rican. As mentioned above, Ferré believes in this so-called Puerto Rican hybridity which she represents by publishing her novel in English first, rather than Spanish, like she had done up until 1995. Yet, in spite of accepting such hybridity and changing her political views, Ferré's focus remains the same. As Ferré and Vélez states in their essay, "The Writer's Kitchen," "My view of the world has inevitably much to do with the inequality that women still suffer from our modern age" (234). Her focus is still Puerto Rico, with Puerto Rican women struggling with the island's patriarchal society, thus bringing Puerto Rico's issues to light from a female perspective in order to bring forth some change and establishing herself as a female Puerto Rican author in a predominantly male-dominated Puerto Rican literary canon.

When it comes to feminist postcolonial discourses, authors Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin argue, in *The Empire Writes Back*, "Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant" (173). Reinstating the marginalized, that is, Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rican women, is what Ferré attempts to do with a novel like *Lagoon*. Ferré reinterprets Puerto Rican history through the eyes of her female narrator, Isabel, and gives power and voice to Isabel because, as previously mentioned, it is her perspective that remains dominant, even when her husband, Quintín, tries to impose his views on her manuscript, that is to say, on her perspective. Isabel is a strong and brave character because she continues to write her manuscript despite the fact that she was well aware that her husband was reading and commenting on it. Not only that, but Isabel, in comparison to her husband Quintín, has very liberal views on life. For example, unlike her husband, she accepts Manuel and Willie's relationship with Coral

and Perla, despite the girls' mixed heritage. In addition to liberal views, Isabel begins to accept and believe in Petra's saint, Elegguá, to the point where she trusts Elegguá to keep her sons safe.

Alongside Isabel, the reader encounters other strong female characters, such as Abby, Isabel's grandmother, Coral, Perla, Rebecca, and Doña Ermelinda Quiñones. With so many strong-minded female characters, Ferré puts forth the idea that such women are necessary to stand against the injustices of a male-dominated society. For instance, Rebecca rebelled during her first years of marriage to Buenaventura, as she only focuses on her artistic endeavors, and Isabel had the courage to leave her husband once she was tired of his dominant ways. And having Isabel as the main narrator, commenting on her husband's family as well as on important Puerto Rican historical details, indicates, as Adán-Lifante argues, a break in the silence women have traditionally been subjected to (130, translation mine). In Puerto Rican society, women are the ones who have been resisting and fighting the longest, not only from their U.S. colonizers, but also from the patriarchal society that exists on the island, thus making the situation concerning Puerto Rican women far more complicated than one would at first assume. As Lugo-Lugo explains, "...it includes the struggle with colonial structures interacting with and informing the patriarchal structures that keep traditional expectations of gender roles in place" (58).

Furthermore, Ferré, as a female Puerto Rican writer, reforms the traditionally male-dominated literary canon by interpreting the history of Puerto Rico's patriarchal society through a women's perspective and by writing such a perspective in English. Traditionally, Puerto Rico's culture and identity were seen through the eyes of the male

authors, and as previously mentioned in Chapter III, Puerto Rican literary works are predominantly Spanish texts. By breaking these gender specific barriers, Ferré continues to pave the way for other Puerto Rican women writers to do the same. Furthermore, writing the novel in English opened the door to a wider audience, an audience who might have been oblivious to Puerto Rico and its relationship with the U.S and exposing them to the origins of a subculture (Puerto Ricans, Nuyoricans) that was already established in the U.S. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, postcolonial feminist discourses, such as Ferré's, "...are oriented towards the future, positing societies in which social and political hegemonic shifts have occurred" (175). One of the social shifts Ferré would like to see is the end of female oppression and gender inequalities and have women understand that they are capable of resisting and overcoming such oppression.

When Puerto Rico became a territory of the U.S., some changes were inevitably brought to the island. In the novel, for instance, Ferré describes men from the upper class who "began to eye the bare arms and shoulders of the beautiful mulatto girls, who, following the American custom, went everywhere unaccompanied and worked where they please" (23). But even though women could work, they were underpaid, expected to work long hours, and still expected to take care of the household. Despite slight social changes in the role of women, their representation in literature did not change too much. Hilda E. Quintana, María C. Rodríguez, and Gladys Vila Barnés point out that feminine figures in Puerto Rican narratives of the 1960s did not reach the heroism of their masculine characters. Generally, fictionalized women were portrayed as either male antagonists or victims. Yet, there were literary figures, such as René Marqués, Olga Nolla and Ana Lydia Vega, who wrote about the importance of women in Puerto Rican

narratives, and presented women as being capable of overcoming strict Puerto Rican patriarchal values (74, translation mine). In her novel *Lagoon*, Ferré advances the idea of overcoming patriarchal oppression as well by having a narrator like Isabel Monfort.

As mentioned in Chapter V, Ferré's novel develops within a Puerto Rican framework and she cleverly mirrors Puerto Rico through the house on the lagoon. The house is reconstructed twice and remodeled one time through the course of the novel. Each change mirrors a change in Puerto Rico's economy and as an island as a whole. In her novel, Ferré depicts some Puerto Rican historical events, but what is most fascinating is that she manages to incorporate a great deal of Puerto Rican history through the years. As the island changes through the years, the reader can appreciate the changes the Mendizabal family goes through. Because much of the novel takes place within the house, it's important to recognize that the issues the Mendizabal family deals with, such as racism, machismo, and political disagreements, are issues that are prevalent in Puerto Rican society, and that is what Ferré wants to present to her readers. The house/island encompasses diverse characters with equally diverse opinions about race, gender, class, and politics. But for Ferré, the most important characters are the females.

In order to have the reader better understand Ferré's feminist point of view, a postcolonial feminist literary approach was needed for this thesis. However, this is not to say that other literary approaches, such as structuralism, for example, cannot be applied to Ferré's novel. It would be interesting to compare this novel with the structure of other feminist Puerto Rican novelists. But with postcolonial feminism, the novel unveils women's issues on the island of Puerto Rico and also provides its audience with a picture of Puerto Rico and quite possibly could spark an interest in the island itself. It is great to

see a Puerto Rican author such as Ferré take on the task of wanting to change how women are treated and portrayed in literature as well as in life, or at least in Puerto Rico. Moreover, Ferré's novel serves to present her readers, especially those in the U.S., with the opportunity to become familiarized with the island of Puerto Rico and its many issues concerning politics, class, race, and gender. Ultimately, a novel like *The House on the Lagoon* gives Ferré the opportunity to continue to place Puerto Rico on the map, reach a wider audience, and continue to establish herself as a bilingual writer fighting for women's causes.



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