

## **Silent Dancing: Importance of Women in the Process of Migration and Assimilation**

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*Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* is a collection of essays and poetry written by Judith Ortiz Cofer. Through the narrations, Ortiz Cofer achieves a vivid account of her childhood and the difficulties in growing up between two very different cultures. Cofer's recollections written through an autobiographical-memoir style reflect her bilingual-bicultural childhood. In her writings, she focuses mainly on themes related to being a female and growing up in a foreign environment. Throughout this research paper, I will focus on two main themes, the role of women in the migration process and the process of assimilation. Although I will utilize the text as the main source of analysis, other sources will be incorporated to illustrate different issues related to these two basic themes.

Although she was born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico in 1952, Ortiz Cofer and her family moved to Paterson, New Jersey because her father had an uncle who lived there, and helped the family when he joined the Navy. They would spend months in Paterson and then move back to the Island during her father's extended tours of duty. She narrates

the experiences of “commuting” between New Jersey and Hormigueros during the 1950’s and early 1960’s. These circumstances provided the setting for her bilingual-bicultural experience.

At the beginning of the narrative we immediately capture the importance and value of women in the author’s life when she dedicates the book to two women, her mother and her daughter. For Judith Ortiz Cofer, the female, mother figure is extremely important as it was to her literary mentor, Virginia Woolf. In Virginia Woolf’s, *Sketches of the Past* she says, “But I turn to my mother, how difficult it is to single her out as she really was; to imagine what she was thinking, to put a single sentence into her mouth”. She accepts the fact that to write about one’s own life it is necessary to begin with the matriarchal figure, her mother. Ortiz Cofer adopts the same technique and focuses on the strong female figures in her life, *Mamá* and her mother. She even quotes Virginia Woolf who says, “A woman writing thinks back through her mothers”.

Ortiz Cofer’s writings are clearly centered on important female characters. Her recollections of her bilingual-bicultural childhood permit her to act as a mediator between two different cultures, her homeland Puerto Rico and her host city, Paterson in New Jersey. She belongs to a group of female Puerto Rican writers who live in the United States and write in English and is part of the genre of the female Puerto Rican Diaspora writers whose writings are mainly autobiographical in nature and deal with the themes of gender and ethnicity. These female writers no longer center their themes on male figures as dominant characters. In the essay, *Women’s History in Puerto Rican Historiography* by Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, there is a clear change in the treatment of women by historians after the 1960’s. He states:

The historical writing about women generated in the early decades of the Twentieth Century was mostly paternalistic and elitist. Women played a secondary and marginal role in the Island's past, usually as shadows of men, who were the real protagonists of history. (Matos 11)

As soon as you begin to read *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*, an important female character is introduced; her grandmother, *Mamá*. She is considered the matriarchal figure of the family that is strong and holds the family together. She passes on wisdom, lessons about life in general, and what was expected of the Puerto Rican woman through an oral tradition. *Mamá* was the central figure in Ortiz Cofer's life every time she returned to Puerto Rico during her father's tours of duty. Each afternoon the women would meet in *Mamás* living room and listen to different stories. Through these stories or *Cuentos*, Ortiz Cofer's grandmother would hand out her ideas about life and what was expected of women. This is clear when Ortiz Cofer says, "It was on these rockers that my mother, her sisters and my grandmother sat on these afternoons of my childhood telling their stories, teaching each other and my cousin and me what it was like to be a woman, more specifically, a Puerto Rican woman" (Ortiz 14).

These teachings were usually passed on through stories about female characters and how their actions affected their lives. Some of the characters were María Sabida, a knowledgeable and wise young girl who "slept with one eye open" and through her wit and wisdom was able to change a cruel and evil man, and María la Loca who was the town eccentric and had been left at the altar when she was young. Finally, her grandmother spoke of Providencia, who had children from different men and was perpetually pregnant. She was an example of an easy woman who was not intelligent or

wise. These characters were used by Mamá to give warnings about astute and cruel men who could ruin the life of a young innocent girl. She implied that women had to be like María Sabida and “sleep with one eye open” which means to be ever vigilant of any evil intentions by men.

Her ideas about men were of mistrust and vigilance towards their actions and motives. A young, innocent vulnerable girl could easily be deceived by an astute, conniving man. She spoke directly to the young girls and would often frighten them with her warnings and stories especially about *María La Loca* and how she was left at the altar. This experience had destroyed the young beautiful María. *Mamá* warned, “There was no way to know. And there were men who did this. *Hombres* with the devil in their flesh who would come to a pueblo, like this one, take a job at one of the haciendas, never meaning to stay, only to have a good time and seduce the women” (Ortiz 16).

The grandmother was the matriarch and provider of wisdom who possessed great influence and power in the family. The reader can also get a clear idea of what was expected of a proper Puerto Rican woman when the author writes: “Every day Mamá would rise at five to work around the house. She had done housework since she could walk, and like an automation programmed for life, she followed a routine of labor and self-sacrifice into her old age. She believes to this day that a woman’s life is redeemed mainly by work: hands busy all the time, doing, doing, doing for others” (Ortiz 141).

The belief in sacrifice and caring for the family was a typical characteristic of most Puerto Rican women of that period and even to this day. *Mamá* was the typical self-sacrificing mother who was subjected to the needs of her family, which increased with each additional birth. The lack of effective birth control of the 1940’s and 50’s is clear

when she says, “*Papá* was benevolent dictator of her body and her life who had to be banished from her bed so that *Mamá* could better serve her family...*Mamá* discovered the only means of birth control available to a Catholic woman of her time: sacrifice. She gave up the comfort of *Papá*’s sexual love for something she deemed greater: the right to own and control her body” (Ortiz 28).

It is apparent that the teachings of her grandmother and mother are essential in her development as a Puerto Rican woman and we get a clear view of the problems in her transnational existence as she goes back to New Jersey when her father returns from his tours of duty. At one point in her story, she describes a crush that she has for one of the boys in school and how she follows him around just to get a glimpse of him. During a school activity the boy sees her in the hall and kisses her. She is shocked and ashamed to find that he ignores her the next day at school. It’s pathetically obvious that she is not clear about the rules of courtship in the American school. She is awkward and unprepared to deal with boys with the lessons acquired from her grandmother and mother. Evidently, the rules and ideas about boys in New Jersey were very different from the Puerto Rican ones. This clash makes her become a shy, insecure young girl who seeks refuge in the world of books. As an adult, she finds middle ground in her shaping of womanhood by borrowing some Puerto Rican traits and adopting traits from her American environment.

This caring and sacrificing for the family is explained in the essay, *Labor Migrants or Submissive Wives: Competing Narratives of Puerto Rican Women in the Post-World War II Era* by Carmen Teresa Whalen when she explains the role of the woman in the migration process, “Although the contexts and the tasks changed with migration, they emphasized the continuity in caring for their families. Domestic

responsibilities were theirs, and at the same time, paid employment within or outside the household was a very real and constant possibility as well as an economic necessity” (Whalen 207). This need to work hard and nurture their families was present on the Island and later in the migration process.

The importance and self-sacrifice of motherhood is also evident in the reading when Mamá says, “Children are made in the night and steal your days” (Ortiz 27). Interestingly, the women are left to themselves while the men are working in the cane fields, fighting a war in Korea or looking for a better life in *Los Nuyores*. The atmosphere is cozy and appropriate for storytelling to dispense practical ideas about life. The author describes this setting when she says, “Then *Mamás* house belonged to women. The aroma of coffee perking in the kitchen, the mesmerizing creaks and groans of the rockers, and the women telling their lives in *cuentos* are forever woven into the fabric of my imagination, braided like my hair that day I felt my grandmother’s hands teaching me about strength, her voice convincing me of the power of story-telling” (Ortiz 19).

Another important role of women in the migration process was that women were considered the links between their country of origin and their country of settlement. The first generation immigrant women had been raised in Puerto Rico and retained their language, culture, and customs. It is apparent that gender played an important role in the migration process. The women were often the communicators of information of ideas and the providers of comfort. The article, *The Role of Gender in the Migration Process* gives the example of Concha who lives in Puerto Rico and writes to her fiancé, Jesús Colón who had migrated to New York. “In a few personal letters we read how Concha kept Colón abreast of daily life on the island and passed along information from New York

City to other relatives and friends on the island, and in doing so kept him grounded in the roots of the people back home” (Concepción 175). In these letters there is also a clear view between Old World traditions and those changing as a result of the new society that they were immersed in. Sánchez Korrol has documented this idea when she writes:

Women held a special place in the early Puerto Rican settlements of New York City, often providing links between the island and the mainland. Pivotal in retaining ethnicity through the transmission of language, customs, and cultural traditions within family settings women also functioned as part of an informal information network... This network helped newly arrived immigrants by providing information on housing, jobs, shopping, and schools. But their most important role was contributing to the creation of a Puerto Rican community rooted on traditional family units. (Korrol 85)

The idea of women as transmitters of the culture is expressed by Catherine Den Tandt in her book, *Virgins and Fleurs de Lys: Nation and Gender in Québec and Puerto Rico*. In her writings she emphasizes the importance of women who are considered the providers and transmitters of cultural baggage. To her, this role is equally important in Québec and Puerto Rico since Québec coexists with an English speaking Canada and in the case of Puerto Rico, is greatly influenced by the United States. She conveys her idea clearly when she says,

Québec’s only chance of survival in an English North America, according to the ruling Catholic clergy and other ideologies, was the *revenge of the cradle*. As mothers the Québécois woman became the repository of the

French language and culture and the medium through which these would be passed on to progressively more numerous resisting sons. (Den Tandt 16)

In *Silent Dancing*, Judith Ortiz's mother is the link between the old and the new, mainly retaining the culture, language and love for her homeland, Puerto Rico. This is apparent when the author says, "And she kept her fantasy alive by recounting her early years to my brother and me until we felt that we had shared her childhood" (Ortiz 44). Her mother never adopted the United States as her new home and she did not adapt to life anywhere but in Puerto Rico. Although she followed her husband back and forth from the Island to the U.S. for nearly twenty-five years, she always expected to return to *casa de Mamá*-- Hormigueros, her birthplace.

Another important theme in *Silent Dancing* is the process of assimilation into North American society. There are two clear opposite views presented in the book. On one side Judith Ortiz's father is in favor of assimilating as quickly as possible, while her mother refuses and insists on retaining her "cultural purity". Even physically they were completely different. He was fair skinned, quiet and used correct English, while she was a voluptuous Latin beauty with thick black long hair down to her waist. She would wear bright loud colors and spike heels that would cause men to turn their heads. There is an example of their physical differences when he looks for an apartment outside *El Barrio* and doesn't take his wife along for fear that they would be rejected because of her Puerto Rican appearance.

Her father selected an apartment where he and Ortiz's mother and brother were the only Puerto Ricans in their building. He was constantly trying to prove to the Jewish



landlord that they were different from the other Puerto Ricans in *El Barrio*. They were told not to speak loudly; they had to take off their shoes and walk quietly, and not make any noise. This change of apartment was heartache to her mother who longed for sounds, sights and smells of *El Building* back in *El Barrio*. In *El Building* her mother “felt surrounded by her language: the walls were thin, and voices speaking and arguing in Spanish could be heard all day. *Salsas* blasted out of radios turned on early in the morning and left on for company. Women seemed to cook rice and beans perpetually” (Ortiz 90). When they moved out of *El Barrio* it was as if they had moved to Park Avenue for her father, but to her mother it was as if she had been sent into exile. In the new neighborhood they were the only Puerto Ricans so Ortiz’s father had to constantly prove that their family was different. They were told to speak correct English and avoid speaking Spanish. He felt that by assimilating into American society they would have a better chance for a better life and never lived with the idea of returning to his past life in Puerto Rico.

Ortiz’s mother on the other hand, lived in a perpetual limbo of nostalgia while living in New Jersey and lived with the illusion that this was a temporary situation.

My mother carried the island of Puerto Rico over her head like the mantilla she wore to church on Sunday. She was “doing time” in the U.S. She did not know how long her sentence would last, or why she was being punished with exile, but she was only doing it for her children. She kept herself pure for her eventual return to the island by denying herself a social life (which would have connected her with the place) and by her ability to create an environment in our home that was a comfort to her, but

a shock to my senses...having to enter and exit this twilight zone of sights and smells that meant *casa* to her. (Ortiz 127)

Her mother listened to Daniel Santos records, made rice and beans with *adobo* and spoke only Spanish. That's why whenever her husband was away on a tour of duty in the Navy, the mother and her children would return to her beloved island of Puerto Rico and *la casa de Mamá*. She never learned the language and although her husband promoted assimilation, his wife outwardly resisted.

There were clear differences in the need to assimilate according to Ortiz's father and the refusal to assimilate by her mother. When her husband was away she would visit *La Tienda, El Bazar, La Bodega* and *La Botánica*. When the father was present, they would visit Sears and JC Penney and then eat lunch at Woolworth's. Her mother's life in the U.S. can be summed up in the following lines, "During the twenty years she spent in exile in the U.S. often alone with two children, waiting for my father, she dedicated her time and energy to creating a reasonable facsimile of a Puerto Rican home."(Ortiz 152).

The attitude of resistance to assimilation was considered typical of many Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. In *The Role of Gender in the Migration Process*, the author reaffirms this idea.

While Puerto Ricans have been heavily researched, they are one of the least understood people in the United States. They do not conform to the generally accepted definition of assimilation nor the melting pot model, which predicted that over time and generations they would gradually assimilate into the dominant culture and the seemingly monolithic solidarity of their ethnic community would erode. (Concepción 177)

Ortiz's mother's resistance to assimilate was typical of many Puerto Ricans who viewed migration as a temporary situation, and that in the long run would return to their beloved Puerto Rico. Many did not see the need to assimilate and contrary to Judith Ortiz's father, who never wanted to go back, they didn't feel the emotional closeness to the host country. Her father wanted his family to assimilate, but at the same time wanted the process to be as painless as possible. "But he did his best to make our "assimilation" painless. I can still see him carrying a Christmas tree up several flights of stairs to our apartment, leaving a trail of aromatic pine. We were the only ones who got presents on both Christmas Day and on *Día de Reyes*" (Ortiz 91).

The children went through periods of adapting and re-adapting with every trip to the Island and eventual return to Patterson. In their travels back and forth she felt rejected and confused. She was considered an outsider in New Jersey and an oddball when she returned to the Island. She describes herself as being a "cultural chameleon" that had to change according to her location. To her, this duality of cultures could be described as a "cultural schizophrenia". She described this duality as "Every day I crossed the border of two countries. I would spend the day in the pine-scented parochial school building where exquisitely proper behavior was the rule and return home to our apartment where we spoke Spanish" (Ortiz 127).

The rules of being a smart, decent Puerto Rican woman were appropriate for a girl being raised on the Island, but a clash to a teenage girl living in the city of New Jersey. Interestingly, even the Puerto Rican immigrants recognized the danger of "Americanization" of Puerto Rican women. While describing a scene in a silent home

movie that had been taken during a family activity, she asks questions about one of the girl's in the movie. Her mother explains:

See, she lowers her eyes as she approaches the camera like she's supposed to. Decent girls never look you directly in the face. *Humilde*, humble, a girl should express humility in all her actions. She will make a good wife for your cousin... If he marries her quickly, she will make him a good Puerto Rican style wife; but if he waits too long, she will be corrupted by the city. (Ortiz 96)

The last time the author lived in Puerto Rico was in 1967 when she was fifteen years old, and by then it is clear that she had adapted and accepted her American home. As she becomes older and enters adolescence, readers sense that she has finally become accustomed to her life in the United States. She no longer wants to return to live on the Island during her father's extended tours. Her connection with Puerto Rico from now on will be as a visitor. In this section, the reader feels that she has finally come to terms with her bicultural-bilingual existence. She chooses to become part of the American society while retaining that part of her which is truly Puerto Rican. She becomes a hybrid that retains her Puerto Rican roots, but has assimilated much of the culture of the host country. She becomes a unique individual capable of retaining her ancestral baggage and capable of adapting to a new language, culture, and environment. It is clear that this duality of cultures and ultimate transformation had a profound effect on Judith Ortiz Cofer as well as the millions of other Puerto Ricans who have chosen to live outside of Puerto Rico.

Many years later, after the death of her father, she returns to the island to visit her mother. Although they have a good relationship, her mother cannot understand how she can pursue a career and be a wife and mother all at the same time. Ortiz sums up their differences in the following lines.

These yearly pilgrimages to my mother's town where I had been born also, but which I had left at an early age, were for me symbolic of the clash of cultures and generations that she and I represent. I grew up in the social flux of the sixties in New Jersey, and although I was kept on a steady diet of fantasies about life in the tropics, I liberated myself from her plans for me, got a scholarship to college married a man who supported my need to work, to create, to travel and to experience life as an individual.  
(Ortiz 152)

Although she had received the essence of her Puerto Rican heritage, she had become immensely different from her mother and grandmother. The idea that a woman's sole purpose in life was to serve their families had changed and had been outgrown by Ortiz Cofer. She became a unique woman, a hybrid that carries her ancestral baggage proudly but who has emerged as an independent, strong woman. Through the different essays in the book the reader witnesses and shares the transformation from a confused, insecure little girl to become a secure woman that accepts her gendered-hybrid identity.

The essays and poems in *Silent Dancing: A Childhood Remembered* offer a personal glimpse at what it's like to be a child of the Diaspora. Any person who has lived between Puerto Rico and the U.S. can clearly identify with the stories. To the second and

third generation Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora, there are no longer clear, defined characteristics of Puerto Ricanness. Some of these Puerto Ricans can barely speak Spanish, yet they proudly feel Puerto Rican. Perhaps it's historically plausible to have distinct Puerto Rican people with different characteristics who feel part of the Puerto Rican Nation (Duany 2002). It's time to reevaluate and accept the possibilities of "hybrid identities". With a population of over three million Puerto Ricans living off the Island, it is fitting and necessary to accept and recognize their existence as an integral part of the Puerto Rican Nation (Morris 1982). They can no longer be ignored or shunned as being inferior Puerto Ricans. Like Judith Ortiz Cofer, most Puerto Ricans who live off the Island retain and love their cultural heritage.

The author chooses gender and the process of assimilation to convey her experiences in the migration process. Some experiences are humorous and other; especially experiences with prejudice and discrimination will evoke a sense of sadness and anger. To those who have not lived these experiences, they provide a glimpse at the difficulties and injustices committed against immigrants and perhaps the retelling of these experiences will create an awareness that will lead to tolerance and acceptance.

Ortiz Cofer writes in fluid, clear prose, and the poems that she includes to highlight the major themes are vivid and enjoyable. Her writings use simple language in such a clear manner that we can imagine the events. She is definitely a major contemporary writer in the tradition of the great storytellers. She has been awarded the PEN/Martha Albrand Special Citation in non-fiction for *Silent Dancing* and has received fellowships from NEA and the Witter Bynner Foundation for poetry and many awards and distinctions from distinguished universities. She is a member of a new generation of Puerto Rican

women writers in the United States whose themes are mostly about growing up between two distinct cultures that are both Puerto Rican- the island and the mainland.

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