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SIMPLICIA ARMSTRONG DE RAMÚ

El Espiritismo de las mujeres puertorriqueñas:  
De las extraordinarias pioneras a sus herederas  
contemporáneas

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## Analysis of "Bouquet of Lilies" by Simplicia Armstrong

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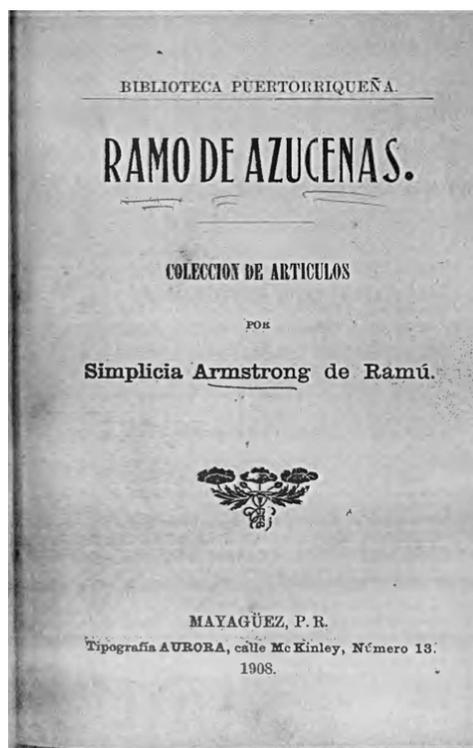
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## *Bouquet of Lilies* by Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú

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In 1908, Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú published *Ramo de azucenas* (*Bouquet of Lilies*), a true defense for free thinking in which the author praises, defends, and justifies the woman's right to freedom of thought.<sup>1</sup> In thirty-four chapters, the author addresses various relevant themes

for spiritists of her time, such as women's rights in regards to domesticity; class and sustainable economies; societal customs; and the relationship between Spiritism and spirituality. The originality of Armstrong de Ramú's arguments deserves careful attention, not only because of the knowledge that they offer, but also because they shed light on the strategies of solidarity used by the spiritists of her generation to promote spiritist knowledge and emancipate women.



In the note to the reader at the beginning of *Ramo de Azucenas*, entitled “A los que lean” (“To Those Who Read This”), the intended audience as well as the objective for the book is identified: “I offer to my sisters, the women, the fruit of my efforts, showing you the path that will guide you to the fulfillment of your duties and to the possession of our rights.”<sup>2</sup> In the same note, the author expresses her gratitude to Amalia Domingo Soler, an internationally recognized Spanish spiritist, from whom she learned a transnational feminine methodology that recognized the global women's struggle and the need to organize in solidarity:

Fig. 1: *Ramo de azucenas*, Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú, 1908.<sup>3</sup>

“To you, Amalia Domingo (\*),

<sup>1</sup> Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú, *Ramo de azucenas. Colección de artículos*, Mayagüez, P.R. Tipografía Aurora, 1908.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> I am deeply grateful for Dr. Gerardo Hernández Aponte for granting me access and use of this photograph.

*that with your light, and from your emanating 'Light,' you have illuminated my brain, and with your eloquent writing you have made me learn that each one in her own sphere can be useful to her neighbors.*"<sup>4</sup>

*La Luz del Porvenir (The Light of the Future)*, led by Amalia Domingo Soler of Spain and founded in 1879, would exclusively publish articles by women authors. It served as a public forum where the spiritists of the world, including Armstrong de Ramú, could write about and debate causes of oppression and forms of emancipation.<sup>5</sup> In 1900, Agustina Guffain followed a similar strategy when she founded *El Iris de Paz (The Iris of Peace)*, a spiritist periodical where many pioneer spiritist writers forged their ideas: Francisca Suárez, Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú, Agustina Guffain, Dolores Baldoni, among other recognized promoters of Spiritism.<sup>6</sup> From this intellectual and human platform, Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú reimagined with powerful originality her own identity and that of all Puerto Rican women. Supported by a strong cohort of spiritist women, she dismantled patriarchal colonial thought and broke down material connections of power and privilege. She did it by building a bridge as well as a border. Indeed, her writing connects and divides, in an effort to transcend the gender barriers that the dominant culture had cemented centuries before in order to dominate women. To this end, she made use of a freethinking spiritist knowledge that sought, above all, to promote the moral and spiritual emancipation of Puerto Rican women.

### **Free Thought and Spiritist Spirituality**

Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú's encounter with free thought and spiritist spirituality is rooted in her orphanhood. The daughter of a Protestant Englishman, who died when she was barely five years old, and a Catholic mother, who orphaned her at thirteen, leaving her in charge of a nine-year-old brother, the young woman discovered, from that experience of physical and emotional pain, Kardecian philosophy and the freedom to think independently.<sup>7</sup> As she explains in Chapter 2 of *Ramo de azucenas*:

Blessed are you, freedom of thought!

You sparked within me my desire to explore so that I could answer the questions that I asked my teachers, to which they only responded with phrases that magnified my doubts.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6. The asterisk (\*) corresponds to a footnote in which Armstrong de Ramú adds: "y Soler, director of the spiritist periodical 'La Luz del Porvenir,' which for many years was published in Barcelona and written by women with freethinking and spiritist beliefs."

<sup>5</sup> Regarding Amalia Domingo Soler, see Amelina Correa Ramón, *Hacia la reescritura del canon finisecular. Nuevos estudios sobre las direcciones del Modernismo*, Universidad de Granada, Granada, España, 2006, pp. 1-37; Ma. Dolores Ramos, "Heterodoxias religiosas, familias espiritistas y apóstolas laicas a finales del s. XIX: Amalia Domingo Soler y Belén Sárraga Hernández", *Historia Social*, No. 53 (2005): pp. 64-83.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Herzig Shannon, *El Iris de Paz: El espiritismo y la mujer en Puerto Rico, 1900-1905*, Río Piedras, P.R.: Ediciones Huracán, 2001, p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú, *Ramo, Op. Cit.*, p. 12.

You, when I lost my mother, when I was not yet fourteen years old and I found myself alone because my thoughts isolated me from the majority of my peers; you gave me the strength to fight without having to surrender to the principles that my reason rejected, and later, after a long struggle, you led me to Kardec's philosophy where I found the faith that my soul needed.

And I absorbed his teachings as if it was cold water and I was dying of thirst, and when I had read and reread his brilliant pages, my transformation was so great, that in a single moment I made peace with society and I permanently engraved my beliefs onto my conscience.<sup>8</sup>

As this passage reveals, Spiritism led Armstrong de Ramú to take ownership of her own conscience and to use free thought in order to achieve a moral emancipation that was not limited by rules, traditions, or customs. Using Kardecian philosophy, Armstrong de Ramú dismantled the social forces that originated in sexist constructions and reduced women to objects of ornamentation or abuse, or labeled them as the primary cause of humanity's ruin. I consider one of the most relevant consequences of her discovery of Spiritism to be that, in Armstrong de Ramú's writing, the Spiritist doctrine, generally known as the science of observation (of the manifestation of the Spirits) and moral philosophy, represents an expansive spirituality that led her to love, God, and social reconciliation.<sup>9</sup> That is why she points out:

A religious feeling, almost asleep in my heart, awoke, and I loved God; not the God who they had described to me as a child, but the Great and Wise Being, about whom the illustrious Kardec speaks in his works. And I adored him; not in the churches, which I have always walked by without stopping except to observe them, but rather in his Creation, in his Work, which grants us new wonders each day.

(...) Since then all my free time has been devoted to studying, and my heart now beats with the sweet feeling of love, and I love humanity.<sup>10</sup>

Armstrong de Ramú's spiritist spirituality constituted a form of inner healing that, as we will see in our analysis of *Ramo de azucenas*, allowed her to analyze the experience of the oppressed and generate social justice for women, the dispossessed, and the marginalized. The thirst for everlasting life that Spiritism produced in her, as well as her free thought, led her to affirm that Spiritism, "without being a religion, makes us religious; without being a science, leads us in search of science. It is, if you will, *the soul of the created looking for its Creator*."<sup>11</sup> That is to say, it is a "spirituality" that, in an essential or basic sense, does not seek something esoteric, exotic, or pious, but rather emerges from ordinary life and therefore promotes the integration of the self with others. Still devoid of any explicitly religious dimension, Ronald Rolihieser explains that such spirituality is defined by how we shape our most meaningful actions and desires, and

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> For a historical account within Western philosophy of the relationship between Spiritism and the idea of spirituality prior to Allan Kardec, see "Espiritismo y Espiritualismo" in Jon Aizpúrua, *Los fundamentos del Espiritismo*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Dunken, 2016, pp. 35-89.

<sup>10</sup> Armstrong de Ramú, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

how these actions and desires lead us to personal and social integration or disintegration, to live in community or in solitude, to be in harmony with Mother Nature or to be alienated from her.<sup>12</sup> This desire, nostalgia, appetite, and hope for the sacred that appears in Armstrong de Ramú's writing passionately seeks to be integrated with the "Great and Wise Being" of whom Kardec speaks, with the human community, and with Mother Nature. For this reason, regarding the spiritist doctrine, she summarizes:

Spiritism, in short, does not teach us anything new: what it does is show us the spaces that the religious institutions kept us out of and that science monopolized by telling us "do not walk here, because only the chosen ones arrive here."

Spiritism says to humanity:

Work, love, and study so that all of your paths lead to God.<sup>13</sup>

The originality of this turn towards a spiritist spirituality is so relevant that even today, in the twenty-first century, many discuss the relationship between Spiritism and spirituality.<sup>14</sup> However, Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú's contributions have remained on the margins of history. Probably due to class and gender prejudices, *Ramo de azucenas* has not received the attention it deserves. Even so, as will be seen below, Armstrong de Ramú uses her spiritist spirituality to reconcile what, until now, seemed to be an irreconcilable dichotomy; I am referring to the tense paradox between women's rights and domesticity.

### **Women's Rights and Domesticity**

There was a unique relationship between women's rights and domesticity in Puerto Rico during the nineteenth century. Its particular characteristics come to light when approaching the issue of women's education. As María de Fátima Barceló Miller has shown in her compilation of historical documents published in the nineteenth century press, the education of Puerto Rican women at the time was virtually non-existent.<sup>15</sup> At the beginning of the century, only a handful of young women from San Juan received Christian reading and writing instruction and indoctrination. It was not until 1856 that the government passed a law that permitted girls to be educated in the homes of literate women.<sup>16</sup> In 1860, Colegio Asilo San Ildefonso (St. Ildefonso Sanctuary School) was founded in San Juan, directed by Hermanas de la Caridad (the Sisters of Charity) and attended by girls from all over the Island. Reading, writing, and Christian doctrine were taught, and in 1870 the curriculum expanded to include arithmetic and other trades, such as

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald Rolhieser, *Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*, NY: Doubleday, 1999, pp. 6-7.

<sup>13</sup> Armstrong de Ramú, *Op. Cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> See Dora Incontri's speech, *Kardec for the Twenty-First Century (Kardec para el siglo XXI)*, educator, journalist, poet, and general coordinator of the Brazilian Association of Spiritist Pedagogy (la Asociación Brasileira de Pedagogia Espírita) (ABPE), accessed on October 15, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BE6dCTmHhs8&t=5048s>.

<sup>15</sup> María de Fátima Barceló Miller, "Los pinceles del universo: El tema de la instrucción femenina en la prensa puertorriqueña del siglo XIX (Documento para estudio)", Centro de Investigaciones Académicas, Universidad del Sagrado Corazón, Santurce, P.R. 1995, pp. 1-45.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

manual labor and primary education.<sup>17</sup> In 1880, Colegio de las Madres del Sagrado Corazón (Mothers of the Sacred Heart School) was established in Santurce to educate young women from the aristocracy of San Juan and of the entire Island. The school provided a classical education based on theology and offered courses on philosophy, literature, and history, integrating science and practical knowledge with the aesthetic arts. In 1897, the Mothers of the Sacred Heart School had a low enrollment of 120 students.<sup>18</sup> Starting in 1880, both the colonial government and some liberal Creole intellectuals, influenced by Krausism, showed a greater interest in female education. For the Krausists, women had to be educated with three main objectives: 1) to make them assistants to their husband in their public function; 2) to make them good educators for their children, developing their abilities in order to raise good citizens; 3) to influence society through good manners and civility, so as to neutralize masculine rudeness.<sup>19</sup> As Barceló Miller points out, the aim was to train women as mothers, educators, and transmitters of values, but not as “participants in the production of those values.”<sup>20</sup> The profession considered most appropriate for women was teaching. In 1891, the Escuelas Normales (The Normal Schools), some for men and others for women, were founded; by 1898, the School for Women had a sparse enrollment of 50 students. The other option for women was to become a midwife. In 1892, the Instituto de Enseñanza Superior del Ateneo (Athenaeum Institute of Higher Education) established the Escuela de Parteras (School of Midwifery), from which only 12 students graduated in 1895.<sup>21</sup> As demonstrated by this brief summary of the history of women’s education in nineteenth century Puerto Rico, the education of women was not only extremely limited, but also sexist in function.

Women’s press, for its part, perpetuated the traditional gender roles of mother and wife. For example, the newspaper *Guirnalda Puertorriqueña: Periódico de amena literatura y moda. Dedicado al Bello Sexo (The Puerto Rican Wreath: A Newspaper for Enjoyable Literature and Fashion, Dedicated to the Beautiful Sex)*, first published in 1856, warns:

May God save you (men) from the beautiful or wealthy women who do not know how to hold a needle, stitch a sheet, inspect a dress shirt, or knit a cap for their little ones, spending their nights and days eating, sleeping, chatting, and walking! Beauty without kindness or homemaking skills will likely lead to marital distress.<sup>22</sup>

As this passage shows, *Guirnalda* essentialized the female sex through domesticity (manual labor) and motherhood: “Look for the woman in the brightest state of her life: motherhood. Let us always see her as sweet and sensitive, carrying out her honorable ministry.”<sup>23</sup> It also pronounced religion as the foundation and guarantee of good customs, establishing that religious doctrine had to occupy the first place in a woman’s education: “Religion is the best guarantee of good customs; that is to say, with religion, customs are more than pure and therefore society is the happiest... This is why religion should occupy the first place in education, and especially in

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

women's education."<sup>24</sup> Thus, inextricably linked to domestic and religious contexts, the education of the Puerto Rican woman was instrumental, not for her, but for the benefit of men and society. The notion of women's rights did not exist within this historical framework. However, as Barceló Miller's work shows, beginning in 1900, women's educational landscape was transformed. Two factors drove this transformation. On the one hand, the U.S. regime, driven by economic and political interests, introduced fundamental changes in public education, such as increasing the number of schools and teachers, imposing English as the official language, and expanding the home economics program.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the intellectual men and women of the country established specific strategies to incorporate Puerto Rican women into the fight for women's rights.

Paternalistic attitudes gradually shifted, thanks to men and women who changed the dominant discourse and argued that the general progress of women did not hinder their performance as mothers and wives. As early as 1870, the father of Puerto Rican literature Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, concluded in his article "El aprecio a la mujer es barómetro de civilización" ("Regard for Women is the Barometer of Civilization"), published in the newspaper *La azucena* (*The Lily*), that women's natural position in society was that of a citizen: "The woman has passed through the sphere of slavery and emancipation, she has sat on the throne of the goddess; but that is not her purpose, that is not her path; the woman rises higher, she walks better as a citizen, her natural state; which is one of the problems that the nineteenth century has to solve."<sup>26</sup> More directly, Patria Tió Rodríguez introduced the issue of women's rights in his "Discurso pronunciado en San Germán el 15 de mayo de 1892" ("Speech Delivered in San Germán on May 15, 1892"). Having earned a Doctorate in Philosophy in the Dominican Republic, Tió Rodríguez demanded the right for women to cultivate their own intelligence, declaring women's education to be compatible with domesticity:

Educate mothers and they will become citizens who will not sell themselves for a plate of lentils (...).

The home is like a small country; the more educated is she who governs it, who is most often the mother, the greater the yield of honest citizens.

The time is over when the only honored woman is she who knows how to sew and perform other vulgar household chores.

Modern times are broader.

Education does not exclude the performance of domestic chores. Everything can be done. One thing does not exclude the other.<sup>27</sup>

This call to make women's education compatible with domesticity, for women to be able to occupy both private and public spaces, stems from the discourses of modernity and free thought

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

that were circulating in the Island's rhetoric at the time, especially in speeches, including spiritist speeches, that promoted female emancipation. In the words of Tió Rodríguez:

I am a new soldier of progress who is ready for battle, having an enlightened conscience as armor, and freedom and rights as weapons. (...) The woman will triumph! I invite all those who listen to join our ranks. Do not listen to those who say that the home will be ruined if women become intellectually equal to men. No: the home will be improved, it will triumph.<sup>28</sup>

It is within this context of emancipation and free thought that Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú analyzes the Puerto Rican women's situation, making use of spiritist philosophy.

In the chapter "La mujer" ("The Woman") of *Ramo de azucenas*, Armstrong de Ramú introduces the fundamental issue that concerns her: the woman has been reduced to archetypes because of her gender. On the one hand, "many believe her to be endowed with a kind heart, a clear imagination, and as a whole suitable for all that is good" and, on the other, they consider her "an image of a tempting demon adorned with the colors of deviance so that she can better imprison man's heart in her nets."<sup>29</sup> However, Armstrong de Ramú's biggest concern is not female archetypes, but rather how society has ignored and abandoned women. That is why she writes:

What can explain this? The oblivion in which she has been immersed for so long, the lack of her education, wanting to destroy her and repress the beautiful feelings that are innate to her, trying to make her a piece of luxurious furniture for the enjoyment of her owner (...)

There is no doubt that the woman has come to Earth to fulfill a great mission, but in the state of ignorance in which she still remains, she will only produce thorns for society.

May we educate her, then, and may the veil of fanaticism fall from her eyes so that she sees clearly the wide field of science and be welcomed into it, so that she learns how to carry out her mission (...).<sup>30</sup>

In this passage, Armstrong de Ramú seems to attribute an essential nature to gender. From her perspective, gender determines women's mission in the world. However, it is also important to point out that, as Tió Rodríguez did, Armstrong de Ramú decentralizes this essentialist tendency that was so common in her time by proposing the emancipation of the woman through moral and scientific education. Furthermore, it would appear that Armstrong de Ramú manipulated her context's more established ideas of gender and education in order to mobilize alternatives for emancipation. For example, in "Algo más sobre la mujer" ("One More Thing Regarding the Woman") she addresses the belief that women are "weak" and "impressionable" in order to establish the difference between "scientific education" and "moral education." The woman, says

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>29</sup> Armstrong de Ramú, *Op. Cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

Armstrong de Ramú, needs moral education above all, which can only be achieved in “the domestic home:”

The purest science for the girl’s heart, who is just beginning to become a woman, is the one taught in the domestic home, and her best teacher, the judicious and active mother, who, as such, will tirelessly instill the seed of virtue in her tender heart, which must be sown early on in order to obtain its fruits one day.<sup>31</sup>

Placing the woman’s primary responsibility in the domestic space is risky, without a doubt. However, the conclusion of the chapter returns us to the border territory that Armstrong de Ramú tries to create for the women of her time; a space that guides them towards the true freedom promised by Spiritism. For this reason, although in this example she privileges moral education over scientific education, she ends the chapter by affirming the need to educate women in both fields: “Be careful, then, to educate women morally and scientifically and not, as is customary, for traditional education that so often neglects morality, and the most foolish fanaticism that still guides many families.”<sup>32</sup> She considers religious fanaticism (read Catholic fanaticism) as a fundamental problem because, regardless of social class, Catholic fanaticism strips women of their own reason and judgment by stigmatizing them as both a “generator of evil and perversity,” a symbol “of sin and ruin,” and as a responsible mother who must “save society by means of the Christian family” and rehabilitate worship of the Virgin Mary.<sup>33</sup>

Armstrong de Ramú uses a personal anecdote to challenge the female archetypes of Catholicism. She remembers her mother, a young widow, enrolling her as a boarding student because she lived far from the school. The girl, who suffered from typhoid fever, heard from her mother “that [she] would be useless in this world and that without her firm support she would be a hopeless wreck.”<sup>34</sup> Her mother dies, as well as her teacher who spoiled her because of her illness, but one day Professor Ramón Tinagero, an austere but wise man, reminded her: “You are an orphan; you cannot remember your father, but I knew him, and he came from a strong and resilient family. You will also be strong. Your last name means *strong arm (brazo fuerte)*, and because of that, you will live up to his legacy.”<sup>35</sup> To which Armstrong de Ramú added: “my *strong arm* has been my visible support. I have been my own motivation and I am the only one responsible for my actions.”<sup>36</sup> The moral education that her teacher (not her Catholic mother) imparted to Simplicia at that moment gave her the tools to face the many challenges of her fruitful but difficult life. For this reason, Armstrong de Ramú makes a call to all teachers, explaining that the root cause of women’s oppression is not their gender, but rather societal customs and systemic biases: “Teach your children, and especially your daughters, to value themselves: in my country we raise girls to think that they only serve as decorations, that

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>33</sup> María F. de Barceló Miller en “De la polilla a la virtud: Visión sobre la mujer de la Iglesia jerárquica de Puerto Rico” en Yamila Azize Vargas, *La mujer en Puerto Rico: ensayos de investigación*. Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, Inc., 1987, pp. 49-88.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

working hands are not the hands of noble ladies, and from that idea, thousands of problems emerge that can only result, as illustrated, in a deficient set of morals.”<sup>37</sup>

Armstrong de Ramú’s progressive thinking regarding women’s emancipation is revealed at the end of the chapter when she says:

The woman is not called to be a piece of luxurious furniture, and if she understands this from an early age, she learns to appreciate herself, to love school and work, and she will want to be useful at home, at school, and in the world.<sup>38</sup>

Here, we see how Armstrong de Ramú views the domestic space as only the first step, the base, where the woman receives and imparts a moral education that enables her to understand herself, value herself, and launch herself into the world. After all, as our writer affirms, “feminine weakness is as ridiculous as it is false: no one can bear physical and moral pain like the woman, and no one can triumph over danger as courageously as she does.”<sup>39</sup>

## Gender and Spiritism

In terms of gender, Armstrong de Ramú’s proposal is not entirely simplistic or dichotomous. On the contrary, it is interwoven with spiritist knowledge in order to transform the exercise of domestic love into universal fellowship. The tool that she uses to explain her proposal is precisely her own *spiritist* spirituality. She says, in the chapter entitled “Caridad” (“Charity”):

To love! To feel the heart burning with that sacred fire that gives life to everything it touches; to be able to say, like the Divine: “Let there be light,” and to create, by the faith of our convictions, by the feeling that envelops us, another perispirit, that emerges from the light within the darkness of the brain, that spark of love that ignites within the emptiness of the heart; herein lies a joy known only by those whose emotion overflows from their being, who seem to live more for the life they give to others than for their own existence.<sup>40</sup>

As this passage demonstrates, Armstrong de Ramú believes that true charity (loving one’s neighbor) is only achieved through love. For her, love is a magnetic force; a fluid nature that envelops us and that, like the *perispirit*, works over matter.<sup>41</sup> The spark, the flame, or the “sacred fire” that Armstrong de Ramú speaks of is the Spirit that Kardec spoke of, the “intellectual and moral principle” of the human being.<sup>42</sup> That is why, according to Armstrong de Ramú, all people, including women, have an absolute right to moral and intellectual education. This education begins and is rooted in the home. This is why, in certain instances, Armstrong de Ramú does not dissolve the home/street, private/public opposition. For example, in the following passage, men

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36-37.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> Allan Kardec, *El libro de los médiums*, 11 ed., trad. revisada y corregida por Salvador Gentile y Alipio González Hernández, Brasil, Instituto de Difusão Espírita, 1986, ítem 3, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, ítem 55, p. 63.

and women seem to perform different roles with respect to the moral and intellectual education of the individual:

If we are not charitable at heart, how can we play the role of charity, which women never entrust to anyone else, in the heart of the home, when in reality we tie the bonds of the family? (...)

Public men of my country: strengthen the home if you want a homeland; that there and there alone, great men are challenged and great characters are formed; everything else you hear is vanity, nonsense!<sup>43</sup>

If spiritists believe that the Spirit has no sex and that gender is unimportant in and of itself, why does Armstrong de Ramú address gender difference in this passage? Perhaps she does believe in a gender difference or maybe society imposed it on her. It could also be that the author utilizes gender difference to better navigate one of the greatest obstacles she encounters in her effort to empower women; I am referring to the prevailing gender prejudices in Puerto Rican society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, based on what we will call betraying cultures.<sup>44</sup>

### **Betraying Cultures**

“Like freedom of law, freedom to think cannot be exercised if we do not have free will.”<sup>45</sup> This is how Armstrong de Ramú summarizes the fundamental dilemma of the late-century Puerto Rican woman. Expected to be humble and selfless in the working class and an object of ornamentation or service in the upper class, the Puerto Rican woman did not have more rights than this and even less freedom of action.<sup>46</sup> Armstrong de Ramú denounces and absolutely rejects these betraying cultures:

Women have sacrificed everything for love, and today women are (...) objects that men carry around as they please, but can a woman who understands the principles of our philosophy play a passive role, being carried around like a toy in the hands of a whimsical child? No.<sup>47</sup>

Furthermore, she elevates Spiritism as a philosophy capable of transforming culture and mobilizing change to lead women to take ownership of their conscience and their free will. Therefore, making use of reason and the principles of freedom, equality, and fraternity that guide the Spiritist doctrine, she challenges social conventions:

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion regarding gender in the Island’s economy during the period of colonial transition, see the study by Yamila Azize, *Luchas de la mujer en Puerto Rico (1898-1919)*, San Juan, P.R., Litografía Metropolitana, 1979.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>46</sup> For a historical account of the Puerto Rican women’s struggle for rights, see the research studies collected in Yamila Azize Vargas, *La mujer en Puerto Rico: Ensayos de Investigación*, Río Piedras, P.R., Ediciones Huracán, 1987.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

What is reason when it is at the service of social instability, of the demands of conventionalism? (...) Peace and Justice, where will they be lost if they are not grounded in Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity?<sup>48</sup>

Armstrong de Ramú describes the cultural transformation that she envisions with her own example. She raised her adopted daughter, Amalia, in ways that were unconventional for her time:

A girl whom God has put under my custody has come into my home; and we started to take care of her, not as they had taught us, but rather as reason told us. The experience came to prove our methods successful: her throat and head kept uncovered, her feet gently warmed, many walks taken in the fresh air, putting her to sleep early and waking her up early, very light food (she was raised without breastmilk), little cooked food, always given at fixed hours and never at night. All this developed a robust child who rarely got sick, even though the other mothers predicted that my method of raising the girl would kill her.<sup>49</sup>

At barely four years old, Amalia would read constantly. Her first book was a brief lecture about the written work of a freethinker, and the girl read it so much that she came to know it by heart.<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting here not only the writer's pragmatism, but also the use of "we" to refer to the girl's caretaking; a matter that was discussed, agreed to, and carried out by both parents together.

Another spiritistic principle that Armstrong de Ramú presents as a way to challenge the cultures that betray women is the law of work. This law is laid out in Book Three, Chapter III of *El Libro de los Espíritus (The Book of Spirits)*: "Work is a law of nature, and for that reason it is a necessity. Civilization forces man to work more, because it increases his needs and his joys."<sup>51</sup> Armstrong de Ramú roots her proposal for a sustainable economy on this law, with the intention of benefitting both the poor and the rich and freeing women from useless tasks. Her goal is to get rid of all the unnecessary things used to accentuate earthly pleasures, from food, to luxurious housing, to the use of the corset, which artificially decorates the female body while stunting it.<sup>52</sup> Thus, for Armstrong de Ramú, women's emancipation is inextricably linked to work and education:

Work is the basis of social regeneration, but in order for women to understand their mission on Earth, in addition to doing practical work, they need to think; whether or not she is with a man, education is necessary for society. If she is able to work and think, the woman does not have to wait for her applause, since she will already have an audience in her intelligence.<sup>53</sup>

Stripped of conventionalisms, useless needs, and the desire for male approval, the woman finds

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>51</sup> Allan Kardec, *El libro de los Espíritus*, trad. Gustavo N. Martínez. Brasília (DF), Brasil: Consejo Espírita Internacional, 2011, p. 385, ítem 674.

<sup>52</sup> Armstrong de Ramú, *Op. Cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

the ability to create her own destiny. That is why Armstrong de Ramú, addressing both women and men, invites Puerto Rican society to her proposed cultural transformation of emancipation and progress:

Women of Puerto Rico, think! The time has come. For one day, your children, the generation that we are raising, will ask us to account for our actions; replace the fashion magazine with a book; the dressing table for a work office; the temple of stone for Creation.

And you, men of my country, inspired poets, illustrious writers, Magistrates and Legislators; Do not push women into the abyss with your false kindness; do not oppress the woman of your land with your laws, because: you will not rise from the ground nor will your children be men as long as they are nourished by a fanatic woman's bosom, an ignorant woman who is a slave to routine.<sup>54</sup>

The appeal she makes here to both men and women shows that betraying cultures impact both genders and all social classes.

Armstrong de Ramú showcases her culture's harmful customs in order to dismantle them. For example, in the chapter entitled "Nuestras costumbres IV" ("Our Customs IV"), she denounces two cultural manifestations that denigrate and dehumanize women: offensive language and prostitution. "What a desirable broad," says a prominent doctor from the beautiful City of the South to a very pretty young woman crossing the street,<sup>55</sup> to which the author comments: "I would have thought, I tell you, that he was talking to one of the many dairy cows that give rich liquid to the homes of this town."<sup>56</sup> In Puerto Rico, during Armstrong de Ramú's time, offensive language was common. Both manual laborers as well as educated men and fathers used it, and the culture would excuse them in the same way that it would permit and protect male exploitation of women prostitutes. For this reason, Armstrong de Ramú accuses: "Do those parents not understand that the virus that their children pick up in brothels morally and materially infects the well-formed family, simultaneously corrupting the ones who are growing up?"<sup>57</sup> This is also why, in *Ramo de Azucenas*, she repeatedly challenges Puerto Rican women to study and work in a useful job, the only way for them to achieve full possession of themselves and to make autonomous decisions based on a critical education that aims to dismantle idols and oppressive traditions:

Women of Puerto Rico; dear sisters! Let us put aside the men of our country who want to follow routine customs, and march in a straight line to the Centers of study and work, which are fortunately being built all over our land; and obeying our motto, let us be priestesses of the home rather than doctors of knowledge, even though we could acquire such a title in intelligence tournaments, because today, what our country needs the most are mothers of families, since the customs

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

that we have endured up until now have made women useless.<sup>58</sup>

Evidently, Armstrong de Ramú places the woman's emancipation into her own hands. That is why she invites women to study and work at new study Centers, to do good, as suggested by Spiritism, and not to be distracted by harmful masculine customs. Likewise, she understands that the seed of cultural change and women's emancipation must be sown in the home, where parents transmit aspirations and beliefs, virtues, and knowledge. For Armstrong de Ramú, being a parent is a privilege and a dream that can result in either a "reality or a nightmare, depending on whether or not they have fulfilled the mission of such a sacred duty."<sup>59</sup>

### **Spiritism as a Process of Awareness**

Nancy Herzig Shannon, in her valuable study *El Iris de Paz: El espiritismo y la mujer en Puerto Rico, 1900-1905* (*The Iris of Peace: Spiritism and Women in Puerto Rico, 1900-1905*), concludes by pointing out the contradictions left unresolved by the spiritists of this first generation of writers:

Thus the spiritists defended the traditional family while trying to redefine some of its characteristics. They argued for the need to educate women, to cultivate her intellect, to free her from unproductive idleness and from her condition of ornamentation, while also insisting that the role of mother was the determining feature in a woman's life and inclinations.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, the mother's role was fundamental for turn-of-the-century spiritists. However, for Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú, the mother is an object of study and critique. For this reason, in light of *Ramo de Azucenas*, the contradictions that Herzig Shannon identifies become an effective mechanism to reveal and dismantle the social forces that kept Puerto Rican women captive in a state of complete ignorance and abandonment; unprotected by laws, institutions, and generations of men. Complex and original in her treatment of women's emancipation, in *Ramo de azucenas*, Armstrong de Ramú examines a society structurally served by patriarchy, Catholic fanaticism, and misogyny. She concluded that only women, who were expected to mold the consciousness of new generations, could carry out the necessary changes to make public space more inclusive; that only the woman, in solidarity with her emancipated peers, could truly liberate herself. Ahead of her time, she awakens in women the "pedagogy of the oppressed" that Paulo Freire develops decades later, and offers them the tools of spiritist study, work, and spirituality so that they may become independent from a culture that disempowers and disregards them. She roots herself in Spiritism in order to equip and enable her with freedom of action. Specifically, moral and scientific education constitute the fundamental principles of the spiritist process of awareness. Therefore, in *Ramo de azucenas*, Simplicia Armstrong de Ramú's voice is not that of a woman confused or trapped in her own contradictions. On the contrary, it is a voice that cleverly and skillfully deliberates, because she recognizes the mechanisms that Puerto Rican society used to subjugate voices like hers. Armstrong de Ramú puts the issue of female

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>60</sup> Herzig Shannon, *Op. Cit.*, p. 144.

emancipation into the hands of women themselves, in solidarity with other emancipated men and women, because cultural change for the construction of a more equitable and just society is only possible through an authentic process of inner liberation; a process of awareness that, in the case of our writer, was mediated by Kardecian Spiritism.