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THE POSTFEMINIST QUESTION IN ALMUDENA GRANDES'S *ATLAS DE GEOGRAFÍA HUMANA*

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Almudena Grandes, in her novel *Atlas de geografía humana* (1998), has created a verisimilar fictional world that reflects the society and times in which it was written. This article shows how shifts in women's expectations, both at home and at work, changed, looking to the critical field of postfeminism. The analysis reveals how issues such as maternity and heterosexual relationships continue to confront contemporary working women in Spain. The novel studied here, *Atlas de geografía humana* (1998), tells the story of four women—Fran, Rosa, Ana and Marisa—who work together for a publishing house. Told from each woman's point of view, each character narrates four sections. The narrative takes place over the course of a year, in which the women must produce a series of atlases. All four women talk about their positions at work and the importance of their jobs, as well as referring to the supportive social aspects of their jobs working with other women.

The novel conveys the experiences of a whole generation, showing how each character confronts certain ideals when met with reality and must decide how to cope with the difficulties that reality presents. Their ideals shift, and the women must accommodate these changes, deciding what they want and how to get it when all of the road maps are outdated. This article examines how these shifts occurred in women's expectations, both at home and at work, looking to the critical field of postfeminism. The analysis will reveal how postfeminist issues of establishing oneself professionally and balancing work, family, and relationships cause many aspects of a woman's life to address issues of control.

Estrella Cibreiro, in her article "Entre la crisis generacional y el éxtasis sexual: El dilema femenino en *Atlas de geografía humana* de Almudena Grandes," says that this novel represents a certain cross-section of a

generation of Spaniards—a middle-class, early forties, college-educated crowd's reality in Spain in the late 1990s (133). In *The Economist*'s review of the novel entitled "And for my next," the reviewer states a similar opinion of the work, saying that the novel develops a genre which the reviewer calls "the slice-of-urban-life novel," also suggesting that the group of women as a whole portrays "a generational image of a new sort of 'working girl'" (14).

Both Miguel Pérez-Abad and Estrella Cibreiro mention that Grandes's works are postfeminist, although neither one supports an in-depth analysis of what aspects of postfeminism exist in her novels. Pérez-Abad states that "el universo literario de AG exhibe un feminismo postfeminista [...] en el cual [...] no se manifiesta un ataque virulento al hombre" (17). Cibreiro agrees when she says, "En esta cuarta novela Grandes adopta una postura equilibrada entre la orientación femenina de su discurso y las implicaciones posfeministas de sus premisas narrativas" (141), one of which is the premise that women's self-sufficiency and sexual independence are myths (138). However, Mercedes Carballo-Abengózar states that she sees Grandes's work as feminist in that it creates "unos personajes creíbles, desde su posición de mujer escritora, en una sociedad machista y clasista que busca respuestas a su pasado y una proyección hacia el futuro" (30). Carballo-Abengózar also believes that for this reason, Grandes uses "el romance [...] como motor de sus narraciones, ese lugar donde confluyen placer, subversión, identidad y feminismo" (30). The presence of both traditional feminist as well as postfeminist premises allows Grandes to portray each of the four protagonists in a different fashion, each representing a different aspect of cultural reality in Spain in the late 1990s.

Since postfeminism has many definitions, forming a school of postfeminist pluralism, it is necessary to first explain some of the definitions and their contradictions and put forth the way in which the term will be used in this analysis. According to Sarah Gamble, the term appeared in the media in the mid 1980s, meaning a group of young women who were tired of feminism and felt they had moved beyond "the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement" (44). However, in the academic community, the term has come to be linked to other literary critical terms such as postmodernism, postcolonialism and poststructuralism (Brooks 4). Ann Brooks states that the term postfeminism, in the academic community, has come to be understood as:

> the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference [...]. Postfeminism is about a critical engagement with earlier feminist political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change. Postfeminism expresses the intersection of feminism with postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks. In the process postfeminism facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic conception of the application of feminism [...] (4)

Deborah Silverton Rosenfelt claims that postfeminism "connote[s] not the death of feminism but its uneven incorporation and revision inside the social and cultural texts of a more conservative era. The term, read analogously to terms like *postmodernist* and *postrevolutionary*, acknowledges the existence of a world and a discourse that have been fundamentally altered by feminism" (269). She goes on to contrast feminist texts and postfeminist ones, saying that feminist novels "privilege women's bonding and female friendships; reject, marginalize, or subvert heterosexual love and passion; interrogate family and motherhood. Their characteristic modalities are the *bildung* and the utopia. Their characteristic tone compounds rage at women's oppression and revolutionary optimism about the possibility for change" (270).

Postfeminist novels, on the contrary, "retain an awareness of male domination in gendered relations" (270). They tend to deal with heterosexual passion and heterosexual love and familial relations (270). The novels tend to be more skeptical, less optimistic, and less transgressive, "more elegiac than 'bildungsromanic'" (270). Rosenfelt states that the narrative of oppression found in feminist texts is replaced by "a multiplicity of plots, and the revolutionary chorus of the feminism of the seventies is replaced by multiple inharmonious voices, often contradicting one another within the same text" (270). However, she insists that postfeminist novels do not reject feminism "but rather find it, implicitly more often than explicitly, insufficient as an account of the diversity of women's experiences or naively optimistic about the possibilities for change" (Rosenfelt 270). In this study, Rosenfelt's view of postfeminism will be used and the analysis will show how Grandes incorporates postfeminist characteristics in the actions of the protagonists of this novel and how these situations speak to a larger question of issues of control.

Of primary narrative focus in *Atlas* is the construction of a female-centered workplace. The appearance of women in the workplace and their

subsequent financial autonomy comprises one of the major changes for women in post-Franco Spain. In this novel, the workplace environment centers on Fran because Fran's family owns the publishing house where the four women work. The protagonists create a community in their workplace, supporting each other and each woman's decisions about her family life.

Within the working world, the question of motherhood brings to mind another of the issues addresses by postfeminism. Shelly Godsland states that postfeminist texts tend to vilify the position of mother (92), most likely because of its possible negative effect on women's work position in a patriarchal society. However, Grandes refers to the importance of children and motherhood throughout the novel. One example is when Fran becomes pregnant, creating a stir in the office because of Fran's age (she will turn 40 before the baby is due) and because of her desire to take advantage of maternity leave. This question of working women choosing to become mothers strikes a chord with many readers. In the latter part of the twentieth century, as women have become a large portion of the work force, many have felt the need to choose between maternity and professionalism, since a woman's fertile years come during the time of professional establishment. Fran's decision to take maternity leave is supported by laws that allow women the chance to keep their jobs and become mothers.

Rosa also exemplifies both the importance and the difficulties in being a mother. She states that in general she doesn't mind taking care of the kids and working:

> En general, no me molesta trabajar y ocuparme al mismo tiempo de los niños, y cuando llego a casa rendida, después de una tarde de cine y un McDonald's, por ejemplo, y decido que no tengo ganas de cenar, y me meto en la cama presintiendo que el sueño me noqueará sin piedad apenas pose la cabeza en la almohada, me estremece un placer difícil de describir, la conciencia de una tarde invertida en hacer cosas de verdad. (24)

She understands how important this time with her children is and how motherhood is not only work but also reward.

When asked to go on a business trip, Rosa must plan out how her household will run without her. First, she must think about the care of her two children and the hours of work that she will need to make up upon her return:

> tuve en cuenta [...] el agobio económico en el que nos había sumergido la compra de una casa que no me acababa de gustar y luego, lo bien que me sentaría darme una vuelta por Centroeuropa, desconectándome durante cuatro días de niños, horarios, deberes, colegios, trabajo y demás. Calculé el tiempo que debería invertir en el despacho para recuperar las horas perdidas, y las mañanas de sábado y domingo que necesitaría para escribirme un par de docenas de columnitas cortas (60)

She must plan all of this because, although both she and her husband work fulltime, their children are her responsibility. We see this concept portrayed by Rosa who has it all—a husband, a job, children—but who also does it all—works, cooks, cleans, and takes care of her children—while her husband fulfills his one role of wage-earner. While acknowledging this conservative, male-dominated society, postfeminist thought allows space for women to build their own careers and experience success in the workplace; however, the question of balance and control still is debated.

That only heterosexual relations are discussed in this novel differs from Grandes's earlier novels. Each protagonist's story in some way deals with the shifting of power in a relationship, either voluntarily or through force. We learn that Fran loves her husband fanatically, visits a psychoanalyst, and has chosen not to have children until her forties. Despite (or possibly because of) these characteristics she strives to succeed in her job, needs her husband to feel complete, and struggles to have it all. She strikes the reader as one who exercises control over all aspects of her life.

However, Fran's relationship with her husband Martín does not fit into this presupposition. She has high expectations of him, both sexually and politically, and he fulfills these expectations. When Martín recalls the first time they made love, he says, "no era posible, que no existían los milagros, que no podía tener tanta suerte, que ni siquiera me la merecía" (392). When they have sex, they find that they are extremely compatible,

> Hundió las manos debajo de mi falda y le besé, y me devolvió un beso caníbal, el filo de sus dientes presagiando una ceremonia de intensidad antigua y memorable. Sus dedos trabajaron muy deprisa. [...]. Tenía que ser así. Yo sabía muy bien lo que le gustaba, y él sabía lo que me gustaba a mí [...]. Cuando me penetró, de un golpe seco, aullé de placer, pero no conseguí decirle que le quería. (151)

She only approaches sex passively, and cannot even tell Martín that she loves him.

By addressing Fran's sexual submissiveness, Grandes broaches a subject that many writers prefer to ignore. Here, though, Grandes emphasizes Fran's desire to remain passive sexually. In an earlier relationship, Fran's boyfriend, Teo, complained about this passiveness, saying that she would lie down in bed as if she were dead, and wait for him to perform (388). His friends encourage him to try different things, explaining "lo que quiere es que la uses [...] que seas tú el único que dé órdenes, que la trates como si fuera una cosa, como si te diera igual, o como si la despreciaras, a muchas tías les gusta eso" (388). This submissive behavior on Fran's part suggests that women who have power and who feel equal to their partners do not deem it necessary to be assertive sexually.

The narrative insists that the relationship between Fran and Martín is both equal and fundamental. After many years of marriage and various infidelities, each still believes that the other is the one true love. Martín says that Fran continues to be "la única mujer de este mundo con la que puedo vivir" (396). As modern-day readers, we may question the validity of this idea of the perfect pair, or "media naranja." Cibreiro says, "Almudena Grandes rechaza de manera tajante ciertos mitos de autosuficiencia femenina e independencia sexual, proclamando, en su lugar, una interacción mutua y fundamental entre hombre y mujer, y mostrando sin temor la vulnerabilidad femenina—y, en último término, humana—al vacío y la insatisfacción existencial" (138). We see here that Grandes does write about a woman who finds fulfillment in her relationship with her husband. In the character of Fran, Grandes sets up the reader from the beginning to think that Fran depends too much on her husband. The reader then learns that Fran's husband returns these same sentiments about her, so maybe, given the doubts and the disbeliefs experienced by the characters, this equal interaction and interdependency is possible. Fran has found what Azucena Mollejo says all of Grandes's characters search for: "éxito e independencia profesional junto con la esperanza de compartir su vida con un buen hombre que las quiera y respete" (130). However, the importance of their interaction lies in the fact that Fran has no control over their sexual relationship. Her workplace personality demands respect and obedience from others, but she searches for a submissive role in her sexual relationship.

Grandes does not only show one type of relationship. Each of the other three women interacts with a different man in some play of power. Rosa's relationship with her husband Ignacio differs greatly from Fran

and Martín's. In their interactions, Grandes portrays a typical scenario of a young woman whose life is full of endless possibilities tying herself down to a man and children, recalling the promise that women can have it all—a career, children, beauty, a fulfilling relationship—while no one ever explains how women can accomplish all of these things.[1] Rosa, though, longs for losing control. Her life is built around her marriage, her children, and her jobs, but she longs for something that explodes this carefully constructed life.

Grandes chooses to emphasize that Rosa does not want to be one of those women who complains about her marriage. Rosa says, "Quizás, lo único que ocurre es que mi insatisfacción contradice el modelo de insatisfacción consagrado por las estadísticas para mujer española emancipada de clase media urbana universitaria de mi edad. Eso espero, porque siempre he detestado a las mujeres insatisfechas" (24). She says that many of these women—emancipated, Spanish, university educated, middle class—have amorous adventures in order to feel satisfaction, but she dislikes that option. Rosa does not consider herself a victim of her husband's infidelities nor of her own indifference, and she chooses to stay in the relationship due to inertia—it is much harder to make the decision to leave than to stay with the status quo.

Rosa, instead of desiring a meaningless affair, wants to shake up her mundane existence. She hopes for someone who will change her life, make her lose control: "La única diferencia entre nosotros consiste en que él [Ignacio] parece satisfecho de su destino y yo no lo estoy, y por eso, supongo, él ambiciona amantes jóvenes y deliciosas que no le compliquen la vida y yo, en cambio, aspiro a un-hombre-de-verdad que me la complique irreparablemente y para siempre, aun a costa de que mi vida pueda parecer, desde fuera, una febril, patética carrera en pos del adulterio" (65).

Rosa suffers from what Cibreiro calls "angustia existencial femenina" (136), which manifests itself "como un estado de crisis definido y concretizable [...] como un estado perpetuo de desencanto, soledad y desolación" (136). Although Rosa enjoys her work at the publishing house and loves her two children, she feels like she is missing some important aspect of her life in her relationship with her husband. She remembers when, as a teenager, "los besos constantes, inagotables, furiosos, llegaron a hacérseme imprescindibles en algún momento" (341). Her sexual interactions as a youth were central to her being, and now she has lost this "hambre de besar" (341) that helped define her. Although she doesn't remember the name of the boy that caused this sensation, she does remember the feeling of insatiability that came with the kisses she

shared with him, and she misses that feeling in her dead relationship with her husband.

However, when Rosa becomes entangled in an extramarital affair with a womanizing photographer named Nacho Huertas, she reverts to the typical "mujer insatisfecha española," causing many things in her life to change. When remembering the first of their brief encounters, Rosa recalls, "me preguntaba si de verdad me apetecía acostarme con él, después de todo, y recuerdo nítidamente, [...] que me daba un poco de pereza la idea, pero estaba muy emocionada, es curioso, ahora estoy casi segura de que la emoción desplazó a otros muchos sentimientos que ni siquiera llegaron a brotar en mi interior" (73). She wanted a change from her dull home life, and this affair with Nacho would provide that, but she still had not found the escape she needed. She cannot call herself a victim, but she still feels used when the affair turns into little more than a one-night stand.

Even though Rosa recalls the doubts she felt upon initiating her affair with Nacho, she chooses to embellish the events when she retells them to Ana, "hablándole de Nacho casi sin proponérmelo" (74–75), realizing that "lo que le estaba contando cada vez tenía menos que ver con lo que había ocurrido en realidad" (75). She hoped to make the event worthwhile in retrospect. She comes to understand instead that she does not care about her husband at all, and that this tryst with Nacho says more about her general dissatisfaction with her life than it does about her feelings for him. Only when she understands that her husband does not matter to her does she realize that a different man does not solve her problems. A different man only creates new problems, and with either Nacho or Ignacio, she never lost her control. At the end of the novel, she tells her husband that she wants a divorce, and she leaves him, not for Nacho, but for her own self-preservation. In Rosa's relationships, Grandes presents a more traditional, feminist view by "privileg[ing] women's bonding and female friendships" and "reject[ing] [...] heterosexual love and passion" (Rosenfelt 270).

For Ana, the other divorced woman in the novel, sexuality and control play a major role in her life. Ana's story recounts the initial and final phases of her first marriage and her subsequent affairs with married men and suggests that the postfeminist principle proposed by Cibreiro (that women's self-sufficiency and sexual independence are myths) is correct. Ana's first marriage is with her high-school art teacher, Félix, and she tells the story of her supposed seduction of Félix, using the teacher/student fantasy as a metaphor of seduction. Ana tells of how on days of tests, she would write the answers on her thighs and wear short skirts; during the

test, she would push up her skirt and read her thighs. When Félix, the test proctor, discovers her doing this during a test and doesn't report her, Ana realizes that she has some sort of power over him. She says that she understood:

> que yo era una tía buena, que había nacido así, igual que podría haber nacido pelirroja, o bajita, o con talento musical. Muchos años después, la experiencia me enseñó a agradecerle al idioma que hablo la expresa diferencia que establece entre el verbo ser y el verbo estar, porque desde luego no es lo mismo ser una tía buena, que ser una tía que está buena, pero en aquella época todas las ventajas caían de mi lado, porque a nadie le impresionan las chicas de dieciséis años y medio. (97)

This sexual awakening caused her to flaunt her sexuality. She feels powerful, triumphant with the control that she has over him, but she doesn't understand it or how to use it. In retrospect, she says that, "ni siquiera tenía muy claro si me convenía ejercerlo de algún modo, quizás porque no acababa de creérmelo, era muy difícil aceptar que el mundo pudiera cambiar tan deprisa" (98). Although she feels powerful, she is just a young girl who has little idea about sexuality and the control of it.

After their marriage, Ana continues to debase herself in order to please Félix. Félix spent his years with Ana training her to be the woman that he wanted her to be. She lost the power that she felt she had as an adolescent and became reliant on him. She did what he asked and did not question his authority because she had no other experience to base her interaction upon. Because of that, she entered into uncomfortable social and sexual situations, denying herself any aspect of self-worth. She finally breaks the cycle of powerlessness and takes control of her life by divorcing him. This story could be told blaming Félix for exploiting his advantage over his willing young student. However, Grandes inverts the conventions of control here, placing the onus of the decisions squarely on Ana, allowing Ana to understand the consequences of her actions.

Ana's stories of love, such as her marriage to her high-school teacher and her subsequent affairs with married men, cause her to be an unlikable character to many women readers. Grandes's emphasis on Ana's beauty likewise contributes to our possible dislike of her. Ana neither finds fulfillment alone nor takes part in a healthy heterosexual relationship. Her only growth as a character is within her workplace persona, where she receives admiration for her accomplished work and where she forges some

supportive relationships with the other protagonists. Her personality—and especially her relationships—cause her to be the most controversial and contradictory of the four protagonists.

The fourth character, Marisa, also reinforces the postfeminist principle of the importance of heterosexual relationships. Marisa's mother, grandmother, and aunt, with whom she lived while growing up, taught her that women without men lack a place in life. Marisa does not have much self-confidence, repeating various times, "No me gusta lo que soy. No me gusta mi cara, ni mi cuerpo, ni mi historia, ni mi vida" (214). Due to that emotional baggage and self-deprecation, Marisa develops an alternate identity named Alejandra Escobar. She buys semi-elegant dresses for Alejandra and goes to fancy hotels to sit in their bars because, "Nadie sospecha de una mujer sola que se toma tranquilamente una copa en una mesa discreta del bar de un hotel muy caro" (211). She does not prostitute herself; she only watches people while imagining an escape from her dull, ordinary life. She does not want anyone to consider her to be a "buscona" as her mother called women who went to bars alone searching for men (111).

She finds an escape from her self-hatred (or self-pity) in the figure of Alejandra Escobar. Alejandra wears sexy dresses, such as her favorite red one, "cuerpo ceñido de manga larga, con un considerable escote entre las hombreras que se cortaba al llegar a la cintura para dar paso a una falda con pinzas estratégicamente colocadas, que se iba estrechando con sabiduría hasta rodar las fronteras de mis rodillas" (221) that she later describes as being threadbare at the elbows due to frequent dry-cleaning (222). The difference between the tight, revealing apparel and the actual well-worn state of the dress illustrates the degree to which Marisa's imagination interferes with her life. With Alejandra, Marisa can cede control to someone outside herself, acting against her mother's ideas of how a woman should behave.

When she begins an affair with a man from work named Foro, she does so as Marisa, opening herself up to a vulnerability that she did not have as Alejandra. However, she still imposes unrealistic expectations, set forth by novelistic fantasies, on this new—and real—relationship. She fears being judged by her failure to attract the "right" sort of man as much as she fears being alone, so she keeps her relationship a secret. Marisa is embarrassed that she can only attract a divorced, alcoholic, older man, so she hides their relationship. However, she realizes that by hiding it, she becomes undeserving of him:

> Porque es injusto, y es mezquino, y es terrible, pero me cuesta mucho trabajo aceptar que [...] dormir sola por las noches es lo mismo que no tener nada, y lo que más me duele, lo que me avergüenza hasta en la esquina más oscura de la piel del alma, es que sólo por pensar lo que pienso, sólo por sentir lo que siento, sé que soy indigna de él, y sin embargo no puedo hacer nada por evitarlo. (307)

She realizes that she cannot make herself feel any differently about him. Cibreiro points out that this decision of Marisa's to take *a* man instead of waiting for *the* man shows one of the underlying premises of the novel, and a controversial one at that, to be "la dependencia de la mujer en el hombre como fuente de significado y complemento de identidad" (138), referring to what she terms Grandes's "implicaciones postfeministas de sus premisas narrativas" (141).

Misha Kavka, in her article, "Feminism, Ethics, and History, or What is the 'Post' in Postfeminism?," states:

> Whether used as a term of self-identification or of accusation, whether flung by or at people named "feminists," the very meaning and appropriation of "postfeminist" is highly contentious. The media has claimed it for the "backlash" girls of conservative feminism; the Third Wave claims it for a younger generation of culturally savvy feminists who seek "to use desire and pleasure as well as anger to fuel struggles for justice"; poststructuralist academic feminists claim it for a pluralistic theoretical feminism that repudiates the supposed essentialism of the second wave[...]. (32)

Kavka's greatest concern about the term is its use by a group of younger, professional women "who believe that feminism has already done its work by achieving as much social equality for women in the home and workplace as one could hope or even wish for" (32). Both Cibreiro and Pérez-Abad, then, state their beliefs that Grandes writes as a "popular" postfeminist, because within *Atlas*, the characters search for satisfactory heterosexual relationships.

This view of postfeminism, however, oversimplifies the idea of postfeminism as solely dependence on heterosexual interactions. These relationships speak more to the issue of control than they do to the question of being dependent on a man. While Fran has control over most of her life, especially at work, she in turn wants to be controlled sexually by her husband. Rosa, too, longs for someone to throw her life out of

control. Ana looks to the teacher/student, married/single interaction with men, both types of relationships putting the question of control at the top of the list. Marisa, in the end, deals with the idea of losing control. The only way to form a lasting relationship is to allow each person to have some control over the other, thereby attaining equality. The four women in this novel search for heterosexual relationships that are somewhere in between complete control and complete submission, mirroring the fact that life's greatest goal is balance.

In this novel, Grandes creates four women characters whose personalities differ from each other, allowing her readers to identify with one or all of them for different reasons. She deals with the issue of control, both in work and in love, showing how, like society itself, life is a balancing act. She combines the three facets of life and shows how love, work, and family interconnect, while showing the positive outcomes that can come from difficult situations. Grandes, then, probes the problematic of the female quest for independence and an authentic, balanced life, creating a mosaic of women in Spain in the late 1990s that reflects not only the difficulties faced by the characters, but the victories won by them. *Atlas de geografía humana* shows itself to be postfeminist in that it could only have been written after feminism. Not only does the novel deal with various of the "clichés" of feminism, it also shows that advances for women in education and political inclusion notwithstanding, issues of real equality and self-realization are more complex than access to the workplace.

NOTE

[1]Germaine Greer, in her text *The Whole Woman* (1999), suggests that this promise (that a woman can "have it all"), a market-led phenomenon, actually only leads to women's consumerism (Gamble 51).

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