

“A Feminist Reading of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*”

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In Alice Walker's "Thesis on a Feminist Novel" she states that, "A feminist novel does not shy away from that which makes...its reader uncomfortable. A feminist novel is not afraid to make the reader hurt" (Walker). Upon opening Junot Diaz's, *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, it may not clearly portray the ideals of a traditional feminist novel, but under Alice Walker's definition it proves to be exactly that. Diaz frames his characters Yunior, Lola, and Oscar in a way that attacks machismo and exposes a cultural defect in this view of women. Through Diaz's use of coarse diction, detailed description, and story plot, he constructs a world where woman can no longer be looked over, but instead their value and equality must be realized.

This novel is deceiving because of the sexist language used by the narrator of the book, Yunior. Hearing this vile subjugation of woman makes the "reader uncomfortable," (Walker) but not in the traditional ways feminists texts generally utilize. Diaz creates a paradox in his characterization of the narrator by writing a sexist character in a book against sexism. From the beginning of the novel, Yunior describes Lola's friends as "not too smart...but fine as shit: the sort of hot-as-balls Latinas" (28). This harsh, sexual language prominent in Dominican culture and coursing through each page of *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, seems to encourage the degradation of women, but Diaz's story represents the opposite. Yunior exemplifies the ideal Dominican womanizer, yet Yunior lacks what Diaz views as ideal: actual love and equality. Yunior who "was fucking with not one, not two, but three fine-ass bitches... and that wasn't even counting the side-sluts" represents the epitome of a Dominican man (185). Despite this

seeming praise, Diaz crafts his novel to expose the problems of this lifestyle and view of women. This celebrated objectification Yunion displays ultimately is his downfall.

Although Yunion seems to be the ideal man by Dominican standards, the characteristics that make him praiseworthy among his culture are the same characteristic that keep him from experience undefiled love. When Yunion meets Lola he immediately recognizes her strength and independence. He knows that she is “like the fucking opposite of the girls [he] usually macked on”(168) and that “with [Lola he] would have to be someone else” (198). Yunion recognizes that the lifestyle he is living is not one that treats women as humans, and that Lola commands respect. Diaz argues that focusing only on women's sexuality is futile, and that there is much more to women than how men view their body. Diaz begins to sculpt the true nature of machismo as he portrays the harm it causes to Yunion and Lola's relationship. For a short amount of time Yunion and Lola were together, but Yunion ruins it because he “couldn't keep [his] rabo in [his] pants” (311). Lola was Yunion's inspiration; she inspired him to take care of Oscar, she inspired him to try to break his cycle of girls, but ultimately the machismo ingrained in Yunion as something good destroyed his chance at a freeing love. Yunion gets married and has a family, as does Lola, but Yunion still dreams in the night that “shit could be saved” between them (327). Yunion found a wife, and his version of an acceptable ending, but his thoughts will always return to Lola, and the love that could have been if not for his self-destructive behavior. Junot Diaz weaves his plot to convince his readers of the harmful effect of undervaluing women has on both males and females.

Through the juxtaposition of Yunion's language and Yunion's story, Diaz confirms his motive that real love can only exist between men and women when women are free from

objectification. Junot Diaz attacks the horrible degradation of women by exposing the abuse machismo causes. Diaz frees the secrets, no longer allowing them to grow and thrive. Diaz questions “How can you change something if you won’t even acknowledge its existence or downplay its significance?”(Moya). Junot Diaz challenges the view of women ingrained in society by talking about, exemplifying, and proving the problem. Rather than speaking directly about the injustices, Diaz constructs a story that lets the flaws in the treatment of women speak for themselves. In an interview with Joe Fassler, Diaz explains that "If it's too brute and too obvious then it becomes... kind of a moral tale. You want to make it subtle enough so that there are arguments like this" (Fassler). Diaz allows his readers to process emotions themselves, and come to their own conclusion about the situations presented. He does not force an opinion upon the reader, but allows the reader to develop one making it more powerful and personal. Junot Diaz “is not afraid to make the reader hurt,” (Walker) and through this hurt, Diaz empowers his readers with the secrets of oppression, and the emotions to rise against it.

Junot Diaz crafts a strong woman character, Lola, to prove that women do not have to yield to the whims of men. Amidst a sea of women who are only included in this books because men sleep with them, Lola stands out as unwilling to submit to the standards of machismo. Lola narrates her own chapters, escaping the sexist perspective Yunion brings. She breaks out of the traditional mold and view of women, and portrays a strong female character unscathed by man's constraints. Although the story is named after Oscar it is more greatly influenced by Lola. Diaz writes Lola to portray the power and strength of woman despite any surrounding condition. Lola’s story begins like every other Dominican girls, tormented because her skin is not the right shade, and her hair is not uniform with everyone else's. Tormented, because in society, she is a

slave to those around her. Lola lived this way as a child, but as she grew so did her defiance. She would not live in the box Dominican culture had assigned to her. Lola's first act of rebellion against the standards for Dominican women was shaving her hair. Lola "put the clippers in Karen's hand, turned them on, and guided her hand until it was all gone" (59). Lola's separates herself from the story by being an alternate narrator and separates herself from women controlled by others by cutting her hair. Diaz creates Lola as a break in the continuous chremamorphism, or dehumanization, of women.

As Lola matures her struggle to be seen as fully human continues. She grows back her hair and her confidence. Lola became "one of those over achiever chicks who ran all the organizations in college" (168). She does not let herself be held back by the rest of the world's stereotypes, but lives the way she desires in spite of a societal claim on who she should be. Yunior narrates that when facing her ambitions Lola does not use "*I'm thinking about* or *I've applied* but *I am.*" (197) She is sure of herself and what she will accomplish. Diaz paints a woman of confidence and unmatched determination. He crafts Lola in a manner that outshines the hate and disrespect she faces. Lola does not let her skin, her gender, her hair, or her past dictate the life she will live. She uses the same ferocity when dealing with men. Traditionally, every man has his girlfriend and his side girls, but Lola is not interested in being one of many. Even with Yunior, who she loves, she will not accept less than she knows she deserves. After suspicion, Lola "called, asked [Yunior] where [he] had been the night before, and when [he] didn't have a good excuse, she said, Good-bye, Yunior please take good care of yourself" (324). Even for someone she cares deeply about, Lola will not give up who she is. Diaz creates this strong female character to combat machismo. Lola is powerful, confident, and eventually

unaltered by people's judgment. Lola's character also serves to reveal Yuniór's hamartia: machismo.

Unable to achieve Dominican males' ideals, Diaz writes Oscar as a character who fails to thrive in society, but is able to earn a respectable love. He is affected by his mother's rape, and takes on, himself, the symptoms of a rape survivor. Oscar does not portray the same degrading view of women, and Junot Diaz accredits this to the legacy of trauma left by Oscar's mother's rape. Oscar is the opposite of machismo. Yuniór points out that "to say I'd never met a Dominican like him would be to put it mildly" (171). Between his nerdy loves and overweight body, he simply could not get girls the way the machismo identity pushes him. Despite this supposed shortcoming, Oscar's difficulty with girls allows him to see women as more than sex and, ultimately, he achieves more happiness than any other character who fits within the Dominican stereotype. Oscar's weight and sci-fi interest is the obvious reason the reader assumes Oscar has trouble with girls, but Diaz reveals that there is more to it than that. In an interview with Paula M.L. Moya, Diaz explains that "Perhaps one of the reasons Oscar ain't getting laid is because he is the son of a survivor of horrific sexual rape" (Moya). Diaz explains that rape survivors may gain weight to hide their body, and this symptom is one Oscar clearly shows. Beli's past is not one openly discussed, but Diaz explains that rape trauma can pass down not only to daughters, but sons as well. Diaz suggests that Oscar does not display the typical characteristics of a Dominican man because he has seen the destruction and pain it creates. Although it seems that society views rape as predominantly a women's issue, Diaz portrays it as more than that. Junot Diaz reveals that rape is a problem that affects and harms both men and

women. He portrays rape as an unacceptable aspect of society and challenges readers to not ignore this act of horror and violence.

Despite the seeming flaw in Oscar's lack of sex, he experiences one thing no stereotypical Dominican character experiences. Oscar tastes true love. In the end of the novel a final letter comes explaining that Oscar and Ybón did eventually get together, but Oscar clarifies that “what really got him was not the bam-bam-bam of sex - it was the little intimacies that he'd never in his whole life anticipated”(334). The true love Diaz paints is not one of rigorous sex and objectification, it is a passionate, sensitive love. This love is a kind that can not survive in the clutches of machismo ideals. Oscar's love is a healing, revitalizing love, barely recognizable in comparison to the marred version of love machismo culture presents. Diaz explains that this love was “the kind [of love] that could liberate them from a legacy of colonial violence” (Moya). Oscar's inability to get girls, whether because of appearance or a legacy of trauma, leads him to the freeing love fantasized about, but unable to be obtained while women are abused and disregarded by men. Despite all of Yuniór's girls he never grasps true love; he has a glimmering shadow of it with Lola but it flees due to his lifestyle. Oscar lives his life in agony over never having a girl's love, yet at the end he is the only one who truly receives it.

In Junot Diaz's, *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Diaz refuses to let the abuse of women continue unmentioned. He refuses to let his readers sit unmoved or un”hurt” (Walker) by the injustices women endure. Diaz fills his novel with Dominican characters, but the abusive machismo ideas he presents expands past these parameters. The dehumanization of women depicted in Junot Diaz's novel is not contained to his pages, but is rampant in our world. Readers are horrified by the lack of action against rape found in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar*

Wao, yet these same individuals may make up a society of people equally unmoved by the barbarity frequent in our world. One in every six American women are victims of rape while only three in every one hundred rapists receive any form of punishment ("Nation Anti-Sexual Violence Organization"). Junot Diaz does not present a story, but a reality about the treatment of women. Diaz pushes readers to pay attention to the hurt that is allowed to live around them, and forces them to choose to either ignore this inequality or stand up against it.

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