

Authenticating Transgression of Tradition: A Critical Analysis of Gender Dynamics in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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Abstract:

As one of the most original voices of the 21st century, Junot Diaz uses his novel as a mouthpiece to expose the oppressive dynamics of gender by delving into the intricate psychology of male characters who “act” female and female characters who “act” male to represent how the fluidity of gender is natural, and curtailing these natural characteristics will lead to catastrophe. This paper aims to reassess the social construction of these gender roles in Diaz’s novel and analyse how it sends the characters in the novel off a trajectory that is essentially based upon their ability or inability to transgress the traditional gender norms. By using the theory of gender performativity put forth by Judith Butler, the paper will undertake the nuanced analysis of the lives of Oscar, Lola (Oscar’s sister) and Yunior (Lola’s boyfriend) to emphasise that Oscar is not punished because he does not conform to these traditions but because he does not challenge them.

Keywords: gender, performances, masculinity, fluidity.

Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is a critically acclaimed Pulitzer prize-winning novel that narrates the ordeals of the main protagonist, Oscar who frantically tries and fails to fit within a wide range of sociocultural generalisations associated with his gender. On the surface, Oscar’s horrifying and untimely demise is a reminder of how the individuals who fail to conform to the traditional gender roles are punished. However, the nuanced analysis of the lives of the two characters, Lola (Oscar’s sister) and Yunior (Lola’s boyfriend) reveal that Oscar does not die because he does not conform to these traditions but because he does not challenge them. As one of the most original voices of the 21st century, Diaz uses his novel as a mouthpiece to expose the oppressive dynamics of gender by delving

into the intricate psychology of characters with different views, male characters who “act” female or female characters who “act” male to represent how the fluidity of gender is natural and curtailing these natural characteristics will lead to catastrophe. This paper aims to reassess the social construction of these gender roles in Díaz's novel and analyse how it sends the characters in the novel off a trajectory that is essentially based upon their ability or inability to transgress the traditional gender norms.

Oscar is portrayed as an overweight and sci-fi, Japanese animation, and Marvel comics nerdy Dominican from New Jersey. Gender is one of the first social categories that children learn, and thus knowledge of gender stereotypes is evident from early childhood on and into adulthood (Martin and Ruble 354). Oscar construes his self-concepts about masculinity and sexuality in line with the gender stereotypes he has internalised from the society around him since his childhood. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler describes gender as “a shifting and contextual phenomenon [which] does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations” (15). At the beginning of the novel, there is a great deal of emphasis on how he is unlike a ““normal” Dominican boy raised in a “typical” Dominican family” (Díaz 11). In comparison to the “normal” Dominican boys, he “simply lack[s] all aggressive and martial tendencies” (Díaz 15). He spends time “reading Tom Swift” and “watching Ultraman” while the “normal” Dominican boys are learning to “play wallball and pitch quarters and drive [their] older brothers’ cars and sneak dead soldiers from under [their] parents’ eyes” (Díaz 20). The convergence between culture and social norms thus creates a set of gender conventions that Oscar fails to fulfil.

The Dominican definition of masculinity which outlines what is “normal” makes Oscar a transgressor. What is ironic is that Oscar is a conformist. He continues to struggle throughout the novel to try and confine to the cultural definition of what is deemed “normal”. He naturally acts contrary to the traditional Dominican model of masculinity. Whenever he is in pain, he goes home to “to the Herculoids and Space Ghost” (Díaz 14). His nerdiness presents the personality attitude which is internally motivated but it continues to clash with the norm of gender conventions that he is supposed to follow. The spectrum of his life seems to fit within Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in which she argues that the culture dictates certain expectations for gender performances and punishes the individuals who do not live up to these expectations. His individual identity varies from the gender role established by the Dominican culture. Although it seems that he has to face the repercussions for not abiding by these gender norms, the plot suggests that it is his inefficiency to challenge these norms and accept his natural self that leads to his tragic demise.

It is not merely the absence of these specified characteristics, according to the sociocultural definition of Dominican masculinity, that continue to afflict Oscar's growth but also his personality traits, like vulnerability to emotions and love for comics that assumedly makes him less manly. Moreover, his average looks and fatness are further seen as an outrage to his masculinity. It is on account of these personality traits that Oscar is described as the man who "had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male" (Diaz 15). His natural conduct becomes criminal as what is required of him is to be able to pull off a girl over everything else. He is described as a man who "cried often for his love of some girl or another" (Diaz 18). His mother and sisters dread that he will die a virgin and a Dominican man cannot be a virgin. Inevitably, Oscar's struggle to have a sexual relationship is significant for him to be accepted as a "normal" Dominican boy by his family and peers. This demonstrates Oscar's desperate efforts to fit within the conventions of these gender roles and be an ideal Dominican man.

Through his narrative, Diaz is not only shedding light on the oppressive dynamics of traditional gender roles but also emphasising how confiding to them can lead to the self-destruction of society as a whole. Oscar's submission to the Dominican idea of masculinity is the tragic flaw that leads to his downfall. Even though he is unable to abide by the traditional spectrum of Dominican gender roles, he spends a large portion of his life trying to fit within it. Oscar does not die because he chooses to be a transgressor. He dies because he tries his best to confine himself within these social norms. By highlighting the plight of Oscar's death, Diaz encapsulates the death of the society that is unwilling to grow and change. While Butler's gender performativity theory provides a straightforward causal relationship of failed performances that lead to punishment by the character's culture, Oscar's story traces a trajectory of a causal relationship where the ideological binary of gender roles is being threatened. If Oscar challenged these gender roles actively, his death would have symbolised punishment for his transgression. However, his death despite his willingness to abide by rules symbolises the falling apart of a culture that doesn't take into account the personality traits of different individuals.

It is not only Oscar who is punished for his failure to challenge the oppressive structure of Dominican masculinity. Yuniór, who lives with Oscar while he attends Rutgers University is also penalised for the same reason. Yuniór is what Díaz calls a "normal" Dominican man who is strong, outgoing and dominating. He loves Lola but he does not admit it because he is conditioned to understand that feelings would make him weak. He continues to sleep with other girls in the hope of overcoming his feelings for Lola. Towards the end, when Lola moves on

in her own life, Yunior still yearns to be with her. His macho Dominican façade leads to his misery as he is unable to have what he really wants. His refusal to admit his feelings and thus challenge the Dominican idea of “normal” masculinity becomes the root cause of his suffering.

In accordance with the Butler's gender performativity theory, Yunior conforms to the gender norms. Therefore, he should not have been punished by society. Nevertheless, Yunior is punished since his dream of having Lola in his life never comes true:

Before all hope died I used to have this stupid dream that shit could be saved, that we would be in bed together like the old times, with the fan on, the smoke from our weed drifting above us, and I'd finally try to say words that could have saved us. ——— ————. (Díaz 327)

The three words that would have filled this blank space in Yunior's life are “I love you”, yet his fear to appear vulnerable restrains him from fulfilling his dream. The obsession of Yunior with Lola till the end is the indication that even though he succeeds in maintaining his masculine charade, he is miserable. Díaz's emphasis on his longing reflects the oppressive hierarchy of the traditional gender norms and how he suffers on account of his failure to challenge them.

A number of scholars emphasise how Oscar's masculinity has been portrayed in direct contrast with Yunior in Díaz's narrative. Yunior is aggressive and outgoing. In comparison to an overweight Oscar, Yunior is portrayed as a good-looking and attractive man who can woo women with greater ease. By placing these two characters as diametrically opposite to each other, Díaz thus stresses how the social construction of gender is substantiated through physical and behavioral attributes. By emphasizing on this contrariness, Díaz intends to accentuate the aberrant gender stereotypes inherent in the Dominican community which negatively impact everyone despite their differences. In a satirical way, Díaz builds his case as to how men like Oscar who lack the masculinity of Yunior are seemingly seen as insufficient and therefore unable to date girls with the ease of guys like Yunior. At the same time, it also exposes how this puts undue pressure on men like Yunior to continue performing the façade. Eventually, Oscar's failure to have a fulfilling sexual relationship and Yunior's failure to have a romantic relationship are attributed to their inefficiency in challenging the gender binary.

Yunior strategically becomes a social controller in Oscar's life who meddles from Oscar's weight to his private life for the triumph of masculinity. In an interview with Paul Jay, Díaz calls Yunior “the dominating masculinity, the dictator masculinity, and the role that one plays when one is an author of a book” (Jay 191). The choice of Yunior as one of the main narrators of the story is an interesting characteristic. Yunior does not only narrate the woes and

plight of Oscar from the perspective of a traditional Dominican male but also deflects the attention away from his individual vulnerabilities projected by the varying notions of gender and masculinity in the native Dominican community and American culture. In his narrative, Oscar is represented as a failed man who is unable to find a girl for himself. His representation ignores other qualities of Oscar like his intelligence and his empathetic attitude.

This seemingly simple variation between manly Yuniór and lesser-manly Oscar is further complicated by Díaz as the plot develops and the reader discovers that Yuniór's vulnerability is rooted in a violent childhood. Yuniór is a victim of sexual abuse and therefore perceives himself as inalienably vulnerable—particularly to the hyper-manly men who have developed the political and social circumstance in which dread and sexual injury are standardized. In order to mask himself, Díaz explains the behaviour of Yuniór in the narrative:

This is a book filled with characters wearing masks, and that's what's so disturbing, that we're narrative animals. We love to wear masks; that's the way we live. We perform... When you take your last mask off you are utterly vulnerable, you are utterly in another person's power. And what contemporary masculinity, what contemporary power structure ever puts it-self utterly in someone else's power? (Jay 192)

As the plot proceeds further, the masculine infirmities of Yuniór are reinforced through the fragmented and non-linear structure of the narrative. His code exchanging between hip/hop street slangs and eloquent academic language and switching between Spanish and English are additionally vital to the story as these characteristics point towards the fluidity of the plot, themes and narrative.

Both the characters of Yuniór and Oscar thus represent the struggle to bear the burden of the conventional notions of Dominican masculinity. While Yuniór successfully superimposes masculinity over his vulnerability, Oscar fails in his attempt to successfully perform within this gender dynamic. Nevertheless, both the characters are punished on account of their failure to challenge these restricting gender binaries. Throughout Díaz's story, it turns out to be evident that Yuniór's exchange of masculinity and his route of personal connections—familial and sentimental—is difficult to disengage from the culture of violence inside the Dominican Republic. Despite imposing the Dominican model of masculinity on Oscar, he consequently slips through the pretence of this type of masculinity which is nothing but a social construct. The tragic flaw of Yuniór is the mask of Dominican masculinity that he wears to protect himself and mask his vulnerability. The notion of Dominican masculinity in the narrative reveals how the authority of the men in each society leads to undue pressure on men

whereby they have to suppress their desires and act in accordance with constructed notions of gender.

According to Bruno Tovar, the past is “an important feature in the novel’s understanding of gender dynamics” (6). Both Oscar and Yunió are victims of the decisions they made in their past. The “past” here is inextricably related to tradition. In his preface, Díaz introduces a curse into his narrative which is responsible for the miseries of all the Dominicans: “Fukú americanus, or more colloquially, fukú—[is] generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World” (4). The character that succeeds in breaking the curse is Lola. Even though she has to endure pain on account of her mother’s mistreatment, Lola refuses to conform to the gender traditions. Throughout the narrative, Lola challenges the ideals that her culture dictates for a woman, thus illuminating her presence as a hybrid character. Her identity does not conform to the dependency—either to family or a man—expected of her. According to the cultural standards, Lola should be the obedient daughter, yet she shaves off her head, runs away with a white boy and constantly contradicts the expectations that her culture sets forth. Butler’s theory which elucidates that failed gender performances are culturally punished serves to explain how her choices have allowed for the punishment she endures when she is sent away by her mother to live with a distant relative in the Dominican Republic.

However, Lola’s tenacity in challenging the traditions makes it possible for her to endure and survive the pain. Unlike Yunió and Oscar, she does not compromise her individuality. The two aspects of Dominican masculinity, violence and sexuality run parallel with each other. A number of sexual relationships incorporate the theme of violence and abuse. Yunió is dominating and hence good with girls. Maritza’s boyfriends “slapped” her all the time. Ana’s boyfriend “used to smack the shit out of her” (Díaz 40). In an analysis of gender and politics in Oscar Wao, Óscar Montero discusses the paradox of Dominican love by saying “a traditional society as the Dominican love stands for male weakness because women’s access to power is predicated upon love” (59-60). Lola succeeds in breaking this cycle of violence when she decides to leave Yunió. She is committed to challenge the traditional binaries of gender dynamic. Eventually, it is this commitment that helps her survive everyone else in her family, thereby breaking the curse. Eventually, she is able to find love, have a daughter and be happy thereby breaking the fukú curse which afflicts the other characters in the story. This intertwining of curse with gender dynamics explains how Díaz authenticates the transgression of tradition in his novel. It suggests that challenging and breaking these gender norms is the only way to break the curse.

Oscar is depicted “unlike his sister, who fought boys and packs of morena girls who hated her thin nose and straightish hair” (Diaz 15). But there is something else that places the characters of Oscar and Lola diametrically opposite to each other. Oscar’s insufficiency as a Dominican man is attributed to the fact that he doesn’t have any fatherly figure in his life to infuse the “aggression and intimidation” which characterise Dominican men (Diaz 15). Yunior tries to infuse these missing masculine traits in Oscar, yet Oscar fails to incorporate them in his behaviour. However, Oscar’s willingness to learn these characteristics makes him different from his sister. Lola’s unfeminine characteristics last despite the suffering she is made to endure on account of her mother’s sternness towards her. This is how Diaz ultimately uses his characters to expose how the traditional gender norms limit the individuals and there is only one way forward that requires challenging these norms.

By interweaving a wide variety of references to diasporic culture, identity and history, the plot offers a sweeping reinterpretation of steadfast gender roles in a uniquely Dominican-American backdrop. The poignant story narrated in a comical way with stress on things like dating, making out etc. intertwined with memory and alienation highlights the contemporary gender dynamics with respect to the traditional norms. Diaz is able to point out the suffocating and inept notions of masculinity and femininity that restrict the individual freedoms of these characters through these farcical characteristics. Courtney Vaughan elucidates how the gender binaries “suppress one from fully expressing themselves for fear of acting outside of her or his own gender norm” (66). It is this fear that leads to the constant misfortune of Oscar and Yunior. Lola, on the other hand, breaks free of this trial as she consciously challenges these stereotypes.

The ultimate aim of this book is to inspire the readers to acknowledge the social dictums and consciously resist the gender roles. According to Díaz, “one of the things that’s really happening in this book is that Yunior is attempting to unlearn” that masculinity, but “unfortunately he’s doing it in exactly the same way that the masculinity he’s trying to undermine has always perpetuated itself, by being the only voice speaking,” (Jay 184). Towards the end, Yunior confronts his masculinity and tries to distance himself from its negativity when he says that Lola’s daughter, Isis will come to him “looking for answers,” that she will “take all we’ve done and all we’ve learned and add her own insights and she’ll put an end to it” (Diaz 331). So, his retraction from the dominating voice of authority and acknowledgement of his helplessness validates the transgression of gender norms that is required to break the fukú curse and survive. Through the intertwining of narration and theme, Diaz succeeds in crafting a masterpiece that punctures the gender stereotypes in a patriarchal

society. The assertion on the oppression perpetuated by the patriarchal binary-preferring culture thus emphasises on the alternative fluidity of gender as its idealistic replacement.

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