

The Feminist Side

by Devin Heck

Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* may cast Oscar de León as the main character and be filtered through the distinctly male voice of Yunior, but it is firstly the history of the handful of women who shape Oscar's whole life. His only male examples are the stereotypical "Dominican men" who are among those who hurt his own family. As applied to *Oscar Wao*, feminist literary criticism allows the reader to approach the story from the woman's point of view, exploring the tremendous impact even seemingly insignificant women have upon his life and death. The masculine influences create the no-nonsense, domineering women that physically surround Oscar his entire life, first his mother and sister and later, La Inca.

The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms describes literary criticism as "reflective, attention consideration and analysis of a literary work... Some kinds of literary criticism involve close and detailed analysis of the texts, others the biographical background of the writer or the historical contexts within which the work was written..." (271). The *Glossary* goes on to define feminist literary criticism as focusing on women and their issues (177), something Díaz focuses most of *Oscar Wao* on. While telling the story, Yunior describes a particular period of Oscar's life, followed by a section explaining one of the females who came before him. Perhaps the most poignant line that truly sets a feminist tone is the introduction to Beli's chapter, on page 77, "Before there was an American Story...before Oscar and Lola... There was their mother, Hypatía Belicia Cabral". By this one line, Díaz relates the entire book, both Oscar and Lola's futures as well as their mother's past, to one woman's life; simply by being a

woman, Beli makes *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* possible. The stories of the women in Oscar's life are rife with masculine ideology, whether it is the Trujillo style of life that views women as simply objects to be used and discarded, or Oscar's warped history of one-sided romances that can turn platonic friendships into life changing love affairs and a semi-retired prostitute into Queen Guinevere. The narrator reveals his own ideals as he writes the story, referring to women as "bitches" and throwing in lines such as "...me I couldn't not get ass, even when I tried" (Díaz 198). Yunion is a "Dominican man," and despite the story being told through his distinctly male voice the reader still views these men within the context of the women's stories, in which the men inadvertently create women who are able to survive the worst life can throw at them only by becoming strong feminists.

The Dominican Republic is culturally a patriarchy; according to Gurak and Kritz, "Dominican social norms discourage the employment of women when it is not unavoidable" (403). Their research also shows that a very small percentage of families in the Dominican Republic are headed by women (Gurak and Kritz 406). Rafael Trujillo's era of tyranny meant that Beli and her children lived as a minority in an era of political turmoil, a state never good for anyone. The Cabral women are employed in various ways throughout the book both in the Dominican Republic and in the U.S., and raise their children without the benefit of a two parent household; most significantly La Inca owns her own bakery and Beli is employed by the Brothers Then at their restaurant. The behaviors of the men, from Abelard supporting a mistress in addition to his family to Trujillo's avid pursuits of the flesh, it is clear that Dominican society judges men different from women, seeing the later as nothing more than objects to be used

until something better comes up. Even the Gangster, the man Beli was in love with, wanted nothing more from her than to “suck [her] enormous breasts, to fuck her pussy until it was a mango-juice swamp, to spoil her senseless” (Díaz 124).

The Trujillo Era brought about strict oppression, especially through the elimination of political parties and random murder. As the voice of Yuniór describes in footnotes, “Trujillo came to control nearly every aspect of the DR’s political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror” (Díaz 2). Trujillo’s ego extended to renaming various parts of the Dominican Republic after himself as well as orchestrating his continued dictatorship (NationMaster). “El Jefe” played part in many assassinations, some of which directly affect the Cabral/ de León families; Abelard was certainly one of the “Failed Cattle Thief’s” many victims, along with the Mirabal sisters, exiled leaders such as Angels Morales and “supernerds” like Jesús de Galídez who dared to expose Trujillo’s darker deeds, as well as several others mentioned by Yuniór. The Gangster himself was, according to Yuniór, tight with Trujillo: “[the Gangster] and El Jefe. . . broke bread and talked shit. . .” (Díaz 121), even to the point of murdering someone for mispronouncing the dictator’s mother’s name. Trujillo set the example for how “real” Dominican men acted, a personality Oscar was never able to embrace and the twin to the Gangster’s swag. Yuniór describes the dictator as being famous for ruling with an “implacable ruthless brutality...” and “for fucking every hot girl in sight, even the wives of his subordinates, thousands upon thousands upon thousands of women” (Díaz 2). His ruthless womanizing habits and reckless lifestyle, supported by a vicious approach to politics and government, laid the foundations for how the Gangster, Yuniór, Jack Pujols,

and Ybón's boyfriend all acted when they encountered the various members of the family: exactly as their leader did, they demanded what they wanted and, once acquired, lost interest and easily gave up the woman they so casually used. The Cabral/de León family was essentially torn apart by the same dictator who hunted Arquímedes' generation for being young students with revolutionary ideas about government and whose sister ordered a woman nearly beaten to death, and whose mannerisms were echoed by every "Dominican man."

The men who surround Oscar, both physically and culturally, are the embodiment of Dominican masculinity: suave, well-dressed, womanizing, and usually overcome by their own vices. Simply because they are Dominican, they are "supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands" (Díaz 2). As the only male family member, Oscar's uncle Rudolfo is considered an expert on women because he has multiple children by different women. The typical Dominican men in *Oscar Wao* casually use and toss aside the women in their lives, carelessly damaging them yet at the same time creating the misfits like Lola who refuse to be ruled. In an interview with Powell's Books, Díaz comments, "Yunior clearly has these very fucked up views of women" (Weich). This commentary is an accurate summary of seemingly every man in the story. The men view the women as sex objects to be used and mistreated at their discretion, a mindset that ends up warping the characters, who are unable to become exactly what their ideal persona is. In an interview with Identity Theory, Díaz discusses the men in *Oscar Wao* and how their preoccupation with women is eventually their own downfall. "In [Oscar's] mind, he thinks that getting laid is where he will find home. And what's fascinating is that each of the family members... and all the characters involved in this--from Yunior on

to Abelard--are all on the exact same quest" (Identity Theory). Oscar attempts to follow in the cultural footsteps of his fellow Dominicans, and ultimately succeeds at the expense of his own life. Yunior is able to pull off the Dominican male's playboy lifestyle, but in doing so destroys himself.

...what's so problematic with Yunior is that he doesn't seem to have any life besides masks. Yunior's at his most honest when he's not being himself, and why in some ways the tragedy of Yunior--why he suffers, why he falls, why he fails--is because he's unable to be himself. You can't find intimacy--you can't find home--when you're always hiding behind masks... Oscar, on the other hand, seems incapable of wearing masks...of performing another male self...*even* for the reward that he desires the most--a girlfriend (Identity Theory).

Their weaknesses create a void of shattered women who had no choice but to become the aunts who raise the only surviving member of an entire family, the orphaned daughter who survives torture only to lose her first child through her man's betrayal, and the rebellious third generation who spends her life attempting to repair her own childhood trauma.

While the men slowly destroy the women who love them, the women themselves have so much impact that not even death is too high a price to offer. Beli had the best of both worlds wrapped around her fingers, the Fiat dealer who bought her presents and the perpetually endangered but dashing Arquimedes. As Yunior reports to the reader, "Both of these dudes Beli played hard" (Díaz 111), empowering her to the point of them "*begging*" for her to give it up. Ybón has Oscar so enthralled that he ignores obvious threats and winds up first brutally beaten and then shot to death. His stubborn pursuit

of the woman who supposedly took his virginity shows just how completely women could affect the relatively weak Dominican man. Even La Fea, the wrathfully inconvenient wife, is able to use the power she has over her man to rein in the Gangster and deny him the solace needed that "only a girl like Beli could [deliver to] erase the debacle of Cuba from a brother's mind" (Díaz 124). Even the Gangster's theoretical future son Manuel is sacrificed up to the seemingly subservient gender, his mistress beaten nearly to death on the orders of a jealous woman. The men may run the country, but the women certainly seem to run their men.

To La Inca falls the task of rescuing and then repairing the last link to her cousin Abelard, the upstanding successful patriarch of Cabral who daughter's beauty was so captivating that almost the whole family died because the ultimate man of the Dominican Republic wanted what he couldn't have. Having to nurse back to health "Hypatía Belicia Cabral, the Third and Final Daughter. Suspicious, angry, scowling, uncommunicative, a wounded hungering campesina. . .DEFIANT" (Díaz 258), required the strength and independence of a woman who lived under Trujillo, a dictator so repressive and utterly cavalier regarding the rights of women that he had them murdered for attempting to gain civil liberties (El Bohío Dominicano). She was even to provide the income with her own bakery, owned and run without the help of a man.

Even still, not only did La Inca raise Beli, but she got the next generation as well. Both Lola and Oscar retreat for the safety of their "grandmother's" home in Santo Domingo. Lola needs consoling after a destructive relationship puts her over the edge; she finally hears her mother's past, and is able to find the strength to move on and work past the damages wreaked by the same sort of suave "man" who broke her mother.

Oscar sought salvation from his own freakish existence, something compounded by his fatal romance with Ybón. As if her fragmented family wasn't already full of bad luck and secrets, this strong but supremely proper woman had to deal with yet another child dancing with tragedy.

Beli was almost wantonly broken in her first year of life; as Yunior states, "I know it's taboo to make this accusation, but I doubt that anybody inside the family wanted her to live, either" (Díaz 252). Orphaned by the actions of a weak Dominican man, permanently scarred by the cruelty of another, Belí was bared to the whims of men her entire life. Some of them, like the Fiat dealer and the student Arquimedes, were simply her toys, used for gifts and to annoy La Inca. Some of them, the most significant, used her for what she had to offer: Jack Pujols discovered her hopeless romantic side early on, while the Gangster rediscovered and nourished it to life. She did, however, have contact with perhaps the only blatantly, albeit unusually feminist character in the entire story, Constantina. Employed by the Brothers Then at the same time as Belí, Constantina parties, swears, and hooks up with men at the clubs. She may not be considered a typical feminist, but in a time when the old ideals of La Inca clashed with the slick new scene of the Gangster, she helped Belí escape the smothering hold of her father's cousin. Granted, if Belí had not met her Gangster at the club, she may never have become the woman her surviving children knew. Yunior describes her choice to go out with Constantina as "the Decision That Changed Everything" (Díaz 113), the final act to drive her previous obsession with Jack Pujols from her mind, and the catalyst for the rest of her life. The Gangster has the most profound effect on Belí because he is what forces her to leave the Dominican Republic, thus causing her to meet her future

husband and father of Oscar and Lola. If she hadn't come into contact with Constantina and succumbed to her influences, then Oscar's brief but wondrous life probably wouldn't have occurred as it did, and perhaps even Yuniór's life may have been different in that he would never have woken up covered in "coke-snot and coke-blood" (Díaz 325) and would instead have died.

Though the book follows Oscar's life, the male figures in the story are overall weak and corruptible, while the women are portrayed as everything strong yet fragile, working through their own traumas in order to attempt to move on. The women who raised Oscar are traumatized themselves, but manage to survive and focus on living their lives; with perhaps the exception of Abelard, the men are portrayed as weak characters that swagger and run through women as fast as they can. Oscar would not be the tragic yet ultimately heroic figure he becomes without the previous generations of women whose lives were so ruined.

Works Cited

- Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: the Penguin Group, 2007. Print.
- Gurak, Douglas T., Kritz, Mary M. "Social Context, Household Composition and Employment among Migrant and Nonmigrant Dominican Women." *International Migration Review*. Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer, 1996), pp. 399-422. Print.
- "Junot Díaz out of the Silence." Interview by Dave Weich. *Powell's Books*. Powells.com, 19 Aug. 2007. Web. 7 Dec. 2009.
- "Las Hermanas Mirabal - The Mirabal Sisters." *El Bohío Dominicano*. Web. 20 Nov. 2009.
- "Mil Máscaras: An Interview with Pulitzer-Winner Junot Díaz (The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao)." Interview by Matt Okie. *Identity Theory*. Identitytheory.com, 8 Sept. 2008. Web. 7 Dec. 2009.
- Murfin, Ross, and Supryia M. Ray. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. 3rd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. Print.
- "Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina." *NationMaster*. Web. 20 Nov. 2009.