

Dominican Roots of Male Dominance

by Kara Heiser

In reading *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, it becomes evident that a large emphasis is placed on both male and female gender roles. Through these extremely important roles found throughout this book, it becomes evident that through the extreme machismo attitude that is expected of men from the Dominican Republic, the women, in turn, are degraded and are seen as nothing more than a piece of meat. According to the dr1 website that provides various information about the Dominican Republic, “Machismo is defined as a strong sense of masculine pride, or exaggerated exertion of masculinity, or male-like qualities. It is derived from the Spanish word macho, literally meaning male or masculine, and through time it has come to be the defining characteristic for males in Latin America.” Although this story of Oscar takes place in New Jersey, the strong Dominican culture is still very strong and alive throughout the many characters in the book. As time will show, the cultural expectations are destructive to male and female alike. The Dominican culture is so strong, it is nearly impossible to remove hard-wired cultural aspects even when moving to the United States. Through understanding how the Dominican culture strongly impacts the characters in *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, it allows one to fully understand the motives and actions of many of the individuals throughout this book.

Through the Dominican stereotypes that allow “machismo” men to degrade women, simply in order to prove their masculinity, many types of abuse occur without much repercussion. Some of the types of abuse women face due to the overt masculinity of men

include verbal abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse, much like that of Lola and Beli throughout the book. An explicit example of this is when Beli was younger and a sold to a man who poured hot oil on her back. It becomes clear throughout the book and research into this culture that women are degraded by the overt masculinity that males are encouraged and are raised to cultivate.

Through men following the traditional male Dominican role, women are seen as nothing more than objects and have next to no personal rights or freedoms. As the men continually use their masculinity as a form of superiority since childhood, the women are not allowed to advance, but are simply expected to turn their heads in the other direction. Examples of this kind of behavior can be seen in the book when boys such as Oscar are encouraged to have several girlfriends even though they are simply little boys. Because of this way of life, it is difficult for women to rise up above the sexual discrimination that they are faced with day in and day out. Despite the fact that the women are clearly subjugated by the male population, it can be seen in many places throughout the book how women only help continue this vicious cycle. This can be seen as women encourage their boys to act like men, such as in the story where Beli encourages Oscar's young-love escapades and talks degradingly of the girls he was dating. The women also clearly do not stand up for themselves, or for their daughters despite the pain they know that they have suffered. The women refuse to make any effort to change what is going on, and therefore, become trapped in the cycle of male domination. This example can be seen when nothing is done after Lola was raped. Perhaps in the Dominican it would be hard to do anything about the incident, but they are living in America when this happened and something could have certainly been done about this. Through the women not standing up for themselves it only allows the males more power. In all of this, it is important to take a closer look at how the Dominican

males have continually maintained domination over women even when immigrating to the United States, where “liberty and justice for all” is a mainstay. It is hard to understand why women still allow the culture of their homeland dictate their lives even though they now live in a country that guarantees them more rights and freedoms.

In obtaining information on the Dominican Republic most information pieces express how women are simply “objectified,” rather than blatantly expressing how women are clearly dominated by men. It is one thing to be objectified and have a voice, but it is a completely different thing to be a woman who matters for nothing more than her physical appearance and abilities of being a mother. This can be seen in the book as Beli received much attention for her looks as she was younger, and as she slowly aged then her sole responsibility in life was raising her children to the Dominican standards. Since such a great influence is placed on the physical appearance of women, Dominican boys are taught to see them as nothing more than a literal conquest (Brown 57). This type of behavior is pushed onto the minds of young ones before they even know what they are being taught. This can be seen in the Dominican culture where little boys are allowed to run around naked and carefree at the “amusement of family members,” whereas girls are dressed with much care and consideration (Brown 58). This type of behavior, although seemingly minor, clearly promotes this behavior at an age where the children do not even realize how they are being raised. When boys are young in Dominican culture, it is not unlikely for a father to take him prostitutes so that he might be able to be “instructed” on how to have sex (Brown 57).

Just as the boys have been raised to chase after and lay as many girls as possible, the girls have been taught to flaunt their physical appearance, causing them to “dress provocatively, usually wearing high heels, and an excessive makeup” (Brown 57). Through these women

simply parading themselves around as if they were up for bids at an auction allows men to pick whichever one he finds most attractive and take her home with him. This type of social interaction lacks anything more than looks and appearance and is a rather shallow process of picking a potential wife or husband. This type of behavior shows how generally men and women fall into their roles without questioning how degrading the entire culture is. It seems as if the men and women of the Dominican culture do not care about personality, feelings, and level of education, but the only thing that matters is simply whether or not the member of the opposite sex is good looking. Much like in the story, if Dominican men are not the suave, “conquistador”, such as Oscar, they are set up for failure for the duration of their life in this culture and are forever considered to be less than a man. Throughout the book it can be seen that Oscar has many good qualities, but none of this matters to his culture since he is not a good looking guy having sex with a lot of good looking women. It is almost heartbreaking to know that someone who has many good attributes is not recognized for any of them, but only made fun of and torn down for what he lacks.

Women in the Dominican culture obviously place much emphasis on their appearance since it seems that no one would care about their feelings or intelligence. Besides the excessive makeup and provocative outfits, the women strive for straight, white-looking hair. As if it were not bad enough that they are simply women, they must also try to appear to be “more white” since that is seen as more attractive in this culture (Robles 1). Throughout the book it becomes obvious that it was more desirable to have lighter skin. Words such as “mulatto”, “darkie”, and “yellow” all show the emphasis that was placed on skin color. It became noticeable very early on in the book that it was better to have lighter skin because it conveyed the sense that the lighter one was more beautiful, more white, and more wealthy. Even though people such as Lola

lived in the United States where all different races and ethnicities flourish, it was still important to look more white because this is what the Dominican culture had imbedded in her mind. It becomes obvious that women are valued for all the wrong reasons and must strive to be something other than what their heart tells them to be. This is also seen many times throughout the book when such a large emphasis was placed on race and what it entails. One's gender and race were rarely ever good enough throughout the book.

While men are taught to have a machismo mindset, women are expected to be *marianismo*, meaning the women are supposed to act as the Virgin Mary (Brown 58). This is a ridiculous thought and a backwards concept in the Dominican culture. The men are taught to sexually conquer as many women as they can, but women are to be pure, innocent virgins until they are married, and when married are not allowed to have extra-marital affairs. This backwards stereotype really makes no sense when given any thought because how did these men expect to have sex with as many women as they could, but yet when they decided to settle down and marry one how do these men expect to find any women left who have not already been slept with.

As women reach middle age in the Dominican culture, less emphasis is placed on their physical beauty, and is placed rather on their ability of being good mothers. Although the women get to become something slightly more meaningful at middle age, they still lack next to any respect from their husbands or males in general. A wife generally "cooks, cleans, keeps house, cares for the children, and puts her husband's needs above hers. If she is an educated career woman she is to put her career aside in order to support her husband's career, and her voice within family decisions is silenced in the presence of her husband's." (dr1) An example of this is clearly seen as Beli does everything she can to care for her family in the story.

Women get married so that they can sacrifice everything they have for their husbands, but the husbands are usually just the opposite. It is not uncommon for Dominican men to have mistresses. Dominican men view having mistresses and extra-marital affairs as their “right,” but of course women do not have this right to any extent (dr1). This is seen in the book starting before marriage as Yuniór is often found cheating on Lola. This double standard is not too all unfamiliar to the culture of the United States as men are seen as players, and women are simply easy and lack anything worthwhile when it comes to have sex with multiple people. Having a mistress as a Dominican man is also seen as a sign of prestige, which is not surprising in a culture such as this. (Brown 57). It can be seen as prestigious to have a mistress in this culture since the boys have been raised to conquer as many women as they can. Apparently if the men can apply this idea even in marriage they are quite the alpha male. In the book it is told how Oscar’s grandfather had a mistress named Lydia and this was simply acceptable. Unlike in typical American culture, these women are rarely a secret, but the wives are simply expected to ignore it and raise their children as they were meant to do such as Socorro did in the book. This instance shows how women are unwilling to speak out and stand up for themselves in situations where the men are clearly sexist towards them.

Even as the mothers have suffered this sexism throughout their lives, they seem to do very little to prevent their daughters from the exact same hurt and heartache. The mothers simply gloss over the hurt and sexual domination that their daughters face. Even as Lola was raped, Beli did not do anything to help stand up for Lola and protect her.

This instance in the book also lends itself to Dominican culture where rape and sexual abuse are not taken very seriously. The simple concept of “sexual harassment is very new to the

Dominican Republic” (Brown 58). In a culture that is so sexually charged by men, it must be difficult to know where to draw the line in the newly found idea of sexual harassment. It is obvious that in a culture where men are allowed to be overtly sexual and in which many men’s attempts at flirtation with any and all women could possibly be considered sexual harassment by standards in the United States. The vulgar and derogatory words these men use and their lack of understanding of personal space definitely lends itself to borderline sexual harassment on what is a regular basis. It is not unlikely for men of the Dominican culture to make cat-calls at women walking by because, not only are the men flirting for the sake of flirtation, they are also trying to prove themselves to one another as the superior, machismo male (dr1). It seems as though the Dominican males get off on the power trip they ride every day.

Along with the idea of sexual harassment is domestic violence; in the Dominican Republic domestic violence stems from the overtly-aggressive behavior that these men have come to embrace. It cannot be certain how many Dominican women are abused by their husbands each year due to lack of reporting the abuse, yet; according to the Social Institutions & Gender Index, it is estimated that “up to one-third of women have suffered physical violence at the hands of their husbands or other men and half of the victims received no help” (Gender Equality).

Through the weak laws in the Dominican system, it is hard to bring a case of domestic violence to the court system, and the men often go unpunished (dr1). According to the Social Institutions & Gender Index:

A law was passed in 1997 to combat domestic violence, but it has been slow to take effect. Amongst the obstacles identified is a resistance on the part of judges to take gender into account in their decisions. Lack of budgetary resources limits the opportunity

to create rehabilitation centres or mechanisms for men who are guilty of violence, or safe facilities that offer shelter and care to victims of violence.

Although advancements have been made, not much progress has resulted. It is understandable that the legal system does very little to protect the rights of women since very few women hold any political power in the Dominican Republic.

Another aspect of abuse which has more recently been brought to light is the fact that many Dominican women are trafficked in the sex slave business. This was brought out into the open in the book as the gangster was known for being in the “flesh trade”. According to Coalition Against Trafficking Women, “there are 50,000 women from the Dominican Republic overseas in the sex industry - the fourth highest number in the world, after Thailand, Brazil and the Philippines,” (Dominican Republic). The reason for this terrible occurrence still stems from the Dominican men’s total lack of respect for women. According to the website, many women agree to help make money for their families, and at the request of their husband, brother, or father are sent away to do unspecified work, only to find out they have been sold as sex slaves while their male counterpart collects the money for selling her (Dominican Republic). With rates as high as they are in the sex slave trade as reported it is important that one realizes how many families might have been affected by such incidents in the Dominican Republic.

In looking at the Dominican Republic it becomes easy to see how women are treated far less equally than men. This has been something deep rooted in their culture and obviously hard to overcome even when moving. It is possible that women were so subjugated in their culture as they have poor access to health care, bank loans, and an education that they have been brainwashed by the culture to believe that they are simply less superior to men (Gender Equality). While some laws have been implemented to give women more options, such as the

Ability to inherit land, the progress is nowhere to the standards of which it should be. In order to overcome the culture that is so ingrained in the minds of these men and women, the change must start in the Dominican Republic where the problems are forming.

Throughout the book emphasis is placed on beauty and sex, but it becomes apparent by the end of the book, that important facets of the Dominican culture become a lethal mix. People such as Oscar who do not fit into these cultural norms are criticized for not fitting in, and such as in the book died as a consequence from trying to fit it. Through understand how the gender roles and society play out in the book it allows for a better understanding of the characters and the choices that they made. Each character in the book strived to be the best they could be according to Dominican standards, while still trying to attain their own personal happiness and self identity. The characters in this book become easier to understand after looking at why they act the way that they do. It becomes apparent that their culture is so deeply intertwined in their lives that even when moving to a new country, they are unable to separate themselves from the culture that they were born into. After reading the book it becomes apparent that the gender roles pushed onto these men and women were destructive and degrading. The book revolves around the culture and the effects it had on the characters and it seems as though Junot Diaz is show his audience how destructive these gender roles are.

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