

Obedience

by Amanda Laager

Through the reading of The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, we see many references to sexual behavior and indiscretions. It seems to be equally potent in both male and female figures portrayed in the book. The males we see tend to have a more passive approach to romance, or just completely ignore that feature altogether. This is definitely a male dominated culture. We see this with the continuous threats, references, and actions of rape. Sexuality seems to be the tool of dominance for the males. But, where does this leave the women? From the reading, we see the women partaking in the same sort of deviant sexual behavior. There is almost a longing for affection and male attention. It seems like such a vicious circle, or a continuous game of cat and mouse. It seems as though the females in The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao have developed an obedient attitude toward male sexuality.

The most deviant acts are committed by Beli, the mother. She becomes sexually active while at her prestigious school. She is found entertaining a young man in the broom closet of her school. Not long after her conduct at school, she became involved with a man referred to as “The Gangster”. It is during this relationship we see Beli partake in, what seems like a form of prostitution. She had an affair with a married man, who would disappear for lengths of time. He bought her nice things, took her to nice places, and even took her on vacation. She never saw his house, they only met at motels. While researching Dominican prostitution, I found that it is common for young ladies to participate in sexual activities for some form of compensation. Some of the reasons for these acts of sexual deviance could possibly be caused by the same life experiences of Beli. According to the Journal Archives of Sexual Behavior, “Some significant

differences found between the samples of prostitutes and the samples of “normal” women were that the prostitute samples, on the whole, learned less about sex from parents and more from personal experiences, as children experienced more sexual advances by elders, were more victimized by incest, generally initiated sexual activity at a younger age, more often had no further relationship with their first coital partner, and experienced a higher incidence of rape”. Beli did not have parents, or real parents until she was rescued by La Inca. It was not implied anywhere in the text that La Inca would have been the type of woman to have a sex talk with Beli. While Beli was being handed around as an infant and into her adolescence, there is a possibility that she could have encountered incest or rape. Although that is not supported by the text, little is known about the years Beli was missing. The only thing we were told is that she was physically and mentally abused. We do see rape used in the beating of Beli in the cane field. Even though she is a pregnant girl, she may have been raped. We also learn that when Beli reached puberty, she became an attractive young lady. It is stated that there were advances by older men. As for her first relationship with the boy in the broom closet, it was over as soon as they were caught. Beli’s life fits the description of a prostitutes life experiences.

In a book by Denise Brennan, called “What’s Love got to do with it?: Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic”, there are accounts of women offering themselves as “sex workers”. One account of a woman sounded almost exactly like Beli’s situation with “The Gangster”. This “sex worker” meets a man and not only did he pay her well for her services, he showered her with gifts and empty promises as well. She became pregnant during this period, and shortly after, he disappeared. This is almost like when Beli gets pregnant, except less dramatic.

In the chapter titled “Numero Uno”, we see Beli come into her own. Almost immediately we see her turn herself into a sex object. This experience is described as, “The first time she was scared shitless and it hurt bad, but nothing could obliterate the feeling she had that finally she was on her way, the sense of a journey starting, of a first step taken, of the beginning of something big.”(100) In her mind, losing her virginity was the beginning of a journey. Most girls see it as the end of innocence and childhood, she was extremely optimistic about her new found promiscuity.

During Beli’s history, we see a great amount of violence and male dominance. These acts are seen almost as a power struggle between men and women, or in this case men and teenage girls. According to The Advocates of Human Rights, “With the current understanding of sexual assault as an act of violence, theorists also came to understand sexual assault as a manifestation of and means for ensuring female subordination. “[R]ape is a result of long-held traditions of male dominance. This male dominance is reinforced by prostitution and pornography, in which women are degraded and treated in subservient ways. In other words, rape is the male response to social inequality between men and women.” In other words, rape is the forced subordination of women. If Beli had gone with the two men the first time they came for her, would they have beaten her so badly and raped her? It is possible that the struggle caused the hatred of the men. In their eyes, this could have been a power struggle. In order to restore the gender balance of male dominance, they beat and raped her. Again, according to The Advocates of Human Rights,

"Rape has been used historically for the subjugation of women and as a means of ensuring that women conform to the behavior patterns required by the community." Beli unknowingly had an affair with the husband of an important woman in the Dominican Government. She then had to pay the price to ensure subordinate behavior in the community.

According to Scarleteen magazine there are three general categories of rapists, “The anger rapist -- uses rape to degrade or humiliate women; expresses much profanity; attacks often prompted by some marital conflict, occupational or financial problem

The power rapist -- uses rape to express sexual conquest, establish masculine identity, and likely to kidnap victim for repeated assaults over an extended period of time

The sadistic rapist -- uses torture or bondage to experience sexual arousal over victim's suffering; frequently targets prostitutes, women who have had many sexual partners or who actively express their sexuality (or are perceived as doing such, even if they really aren't), or those who symbolize something he wants to destroy or punish” All three of these fit Beli’s attackers, they were there to establish masculinity and punish her for her misconduct.

We then get a glimpse of Beli’s daughter Lola. Lola is not on the same level as Beli was in her adolescence. Lola seems to carry more hatred than Beli. When we meet Lola, she refers to herself as the punk chick. The sexual deviance we see from Lola is mild compared to Beli in the Dominican Republic. After fighting with her ill mother, she runs away from home with a boy she does not know well. Here we begin to see a trend in attitude that resembles her mothers. Her stubbornness has caused her to rebel in the worst ways, and gives us a glimpse into the thought process of the obedient sexual position of our young lady. “I just said, Oh yes, Aldo, yes, because that was what I imagined you were supposed to say while you were losing your virginity to some boy you thought you loved”. (64) This passage shows that her behavior could be considered learned. Somewhere along the way she picked up a compliant attitude toward male sexuality, and the idea that sex should be male gratifying. What would be the cause of Lola’s outburst? The only thing that comes to mind would be that she is from a single-mother home, with no male attention or guidance. Maybe she desperately craves male attention.

According to Statistics of Fatherless Homes, “In a study of 700 adolescents, researchers found that "compared to families with two natural parents living in the home, adolescents from single-parent families have been found to engage in greater and earlier sexual activity”. This study also states that children from fatherless homes are more likely to become dependant on alcohol and drugs, and have poor educational performance. I do not believe it is ever said that Oscar and Lola even know their father. Neither of them have ever had a father-figure in their lives. This could have been the cause of some of their problems. It is also said the Beli works constantly. The fact that Beli has to work all the time to support her family could be another reason for Lola’s behavior. Children who raise themselves may have a skewed outlook on adulthood. The children of this family would be considered latchkey children. Latchkey refers to the image of a child wearing the house key around their neck, meaning that the child returns home from school alone and remains that way for hours until a parent gets home from work. Most studies show that socioeconomic status and length of time left alone can bring forth other negative effects. In one study, middle school students left home alone for more than three hours a day reported higher levels of behavioral problems, higher rates of depression and lower levels of self-esteem than other students.

Although this is a very common resort for most working parents, it was stated that socioeconomic status plays a part in the outcome of the child. This could have lead to both of the children’s’ issues.

Any of these experiences could have caused Lola’s behavior. If it was not for the strong will of her mother, Lola could have ended up in a worse situation. She could have possibly ended up in a situation like Beli.

It seems as though Beli's obedience to male sexuality was taught to her at a young age. She wanted male attention desperately, so she got it anyway she could. Her behavior was more cultural. As an orphan, this could have been the only type of love and attention she received. As readers, we pity Beli because of her life experiences. Therefore, we are more prone to seeing her actions as natural reflexes. The beating of Beli in the cane fields shows us how the politics of the Dominican Republic worked at that time. It also showed us how male superiority worked in the Dominican Republic. Beli resisted, so they beat her into submission. On the other hand, there is Lola. She had a decent upbringing, unlike her mother. She still managed to commit one severe act of indiscretion. It is unsure, as a whole, why women subject themselves to sexual acts. Or, in Beli's case, acts of near prostitution. There are many different environmental reasons for confusion and gender supremacy.

We touched on some possible reasons for Beli's behavior, mostly being her childhood as a orphan and body changes as a teenager. Lola's behavior could be attributed to her childhood as well. Although Lola's childhood is not as extreme as Beli's, there could be issues with self-esteem and lack of a father-figure. The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao is a great book for psychological analysis. We see a few characters with long lists of issues. Each character suffering from their own illness.

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