

Manic Repression: A Family's Demise Due to Silence

by Hollie Logsdon

"The cost of liberty is less than the price of repression."

W.E.B. Du Bois

At an age where information can reach us at the click of a button, it is hard to imagine that there are some things in the world that remain unknown. Some people remain silent. Usually a book or internet source can guide anyone through the life of a stranger, leaving the reader feeling the emotions of the subject; yet some of the worst stories are untold, or even forgotten. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* tells the story of a family, which chooses to keep its past silent, a family that seeks solace in silence. This family is also plagued by a curse called a fukú. What exactly the fukú is remains unknown, but one thing is certain, repression and silence plays a huge role in the fukú. Oscar and his family have suffered the brunt of this curse for years and their silence helps contribute.

In the end of the story, Oscar faces his fate and tries to tell the tale of the fukú, making it known so that it can be erased. However, the fukú is strong and so is the family's repression. "There is within the family a silence that stands monumental to the generations, that sphinxes all attempts at narrative reconstructions. A whisper here and there, but nothing more" (243). The family does not talk about their experiences, but their issues are still embedded in them. Throughout the novel, several of the characters experience dreams that reveal things they have been trying to avoid. Because of this, special attention needs to be placed on symbolism and what it means in regards to the fukú and the family in general. The family's silence took a toll on each person, and had they talked about their past experiences from the beginning, their lives would have been different, and mostly likely would not have been centered on such negativity.

As the narrator explains at the beginning of the novel, the fukú dates back all the way to the discovery of the New World. It has plagued many families, and still no one is quite sure what it is, but it remains powerful and feared. In fact, people are still afraid to mention or hear the name of the Admiral. It was said that the Admiral was one of the great European victims of the fukú, and due to its devastating effects, the Admiral died a terrible death. Just this one piece of information helps shed light on the situation of the fukú. People are afraid to talk, causing silence. No one is completely sure of the whole story of the fukú, because it is never talked about openly, out of fear. Even uttering a name is too hard for people who are superstitious to the fukú. When one is trying to avoid the curse, they do the opposite of what they normally do. They speak. Saying “Zafa,” is the counter spell to the fukú. Ironically, a curse that is not talked about can be avoided through speech.

Oscar’s family is notorious for not being open, and that is how their saga of the fukú began. Abelard is the man who brought forth the fukú onto the family Cabral. In the book, Yuniór says, “When the family talks about it at all- which is like never- they always begin in the same place: with Abelard and the Bad Thing he said about the Trujillo” (211). Abelard was a man who was fairly well-off financially, and apparently one thing that people always said about him was that he was curious and had a remarkable mind. These two traits mixed together are things that the Trujillo regime disapproved of.

Trujillo was one of the most infamous dictators of the twentieth century. He was ruthless and ruled the Dominican Republic, unfortunately for 31 years. Somehow it is believed that he was related to the fukú, as Yuniór says, “No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that their two was tight” (3). It is hard to believe that one could have such power or evoke so much fear, yet he had more power than most people, and was feared by everyone. “If you even thought a

bad thing about the Trujillo, *fua*, a hurricane would sweep your family out to sea” (3). Because of this fear, no one talked much about Trujillo. It was best to keep quiet. Yuniór, the narrator, makes it seem as though everyone understood this rule and made sure not to mention the Trujillo, or even think about him too much- everyone, that is, except for Abelard.

Abelard eventually faced a terrible fate, all supposedly due to the *fukú* caused by the Trujillo regime. Abelard went out one night with his friends for some drinks. During this time he was asked to open his trunk, due to suspicion. When Abelard opened it he said, “Nope, no bodies here, Trujillo must have cleared them out for me” (235). That was all it took for the Trujillo to *fukú* Abelard and his entire family. Abelard tried to make light of the situation, and it was the wrong thing to do. No one ever knew for sure exactly what Abelard said, there were different variations of the story. The variations show that no one every really knows the whole story, which happens frequently in the novel.

It is apparent that the *fukú* affected the whole family, seeing all the misfortunes they faced. However, could Abelard have stopped it? Silence is the key in this story; no one talks about anything and memories are repressed, but Abelard speaking got the family into the mess of the *fukú*. Could speaking have gotten them out, or were they doomed forever?

In the story, Abelard’s wife, Socorro, mentions to him, “I’ve been dreaming” (237), but before Socorro could finish narrating her dream, Abelard disregarded her by a wave of his hand. He encouraged the silence. What Socorro was dreaming was that a faceless man was standing over her husband’s bed and she was unable to scream or say anything. The mere fact of Socorro’s inability to scream shows that the silence had consumed her. This dream, which may seem insignificant, sets up the rest of the novel, or at least connects it all together. Had Socorro screamed in the dream, maybe the faceless man would have left and she would not have been scared. Had Abelard listened to Socorro’s dream, the whole situation could have been avoided.

However, she did not tell her husband, and after that she dreamed of the same faceless man standing over the beds of her children.

This faceless man is seen several times throughout the novel and could be considered the fukú. He is always present during dire times of terror. Had Abelard listened to his wife, it is possible that the fukú could have been avoided. All they had to do was talk. The family could have relocated to a different area, away from the Trujillo. Instead, they ignored it and ultimately faced the consequences. Every family member suffered horribly, because of the Trujillo and the Curse. They each suffered terribly, and those who survived to see the curse lived out, were also victims to the faceless man, who haunted their dreams, and their realities.

Beli was Abelard's youngest daughter. She is the only member of the family Cabral to have survived, although it was not without trouble. She was sent away and was abused as a child. Beli never talked about these incidents though, instead she just pushed them down and tried to forget; in other words, she repressed the memories. In 1990, Donna Della Femina, a psychologist, conducted a study regarding repression. Many of the subjects were similar to Beli and were abused as children. While many of the people being interviewed, 38 percent, were abused, they did not mention it. Upon further investigation, Femina found that they all remembered being abused; they just did not want to talk about it (Pope 55). It was found throughout the study that people were unwilling to disclose information because they did not trust others and so were unwilling to disclose personal information.

Trust is something that Abelard and everyone in the Dominican Republic were not able to do. Trujillo was at large and no one knew who was working for him. Because of this, no one was willing to trust anyone for fear of it getting back to them. Maybe Beli understood this, and knew what speaking out had done to her father and that is why she did not speak of her past. It is also possible that the feelings were too traumatic and she did not want to relive them.

I believe that Beli did not talk about her past because she was trying to avoid it. No one wanted to mention that the fukú was present in her family, and so she kept the memories private. For nine years, Beli was abused. She was abused for nine years, until she was reunited with La Inca, her only remaining relative. “Of those nine years, Beli did not speak” (258). This shows that even after finding safety and comfort with La Inca, Beli was never able to talk about her past. Maybe she did not trust anyone or maybe she was trying to forget about it, either way, no one ever heard the details of those abused nine years from Beli herself. She never told anyone about her trials, she started a new life with La Inca and never wanted to remember her previous one. Beli was not discriminatory over who she would not disclose to either: “It says a lot about Beli that for *Forty years* she never leaked word one about that period of her life: not to her madre, not to her friends, not to her lovers, not to the Gangster, not to her husband. And certainly not to her beloved children, Lola and Oscar” (258). Beli did not tell a soul about what had happened to her. Perhaps she did not tell anyone because she did not trust them, not even her own children. It is difficult for a family to unite if there is always one member holding things back. Oscar and Lola did not establish a close relationship with their mother, because she never wanted to let them in on her past.

In an article, co-written by the psychology department at Harvard University, repression is addressed. It is said that repression could occur because of traumatic childhood experiences. When a child is abused or raped, they do not want to remember, and so they force themselves to forget. Beli certainly faced her share of horrific encounters as a child, and it would make sense that she would repress them (Cognitive). The fact that Beli was abused contributes to her repression, and also her lack of trust amongst other characters in the novel.

The lack of trust and immense amount of silence present in the novel says something about the relationships of the characters. They are relationships that should be closer than any

others: mother and daughter, lovers, brother and sister. Yet the silence remains as prominent as it is between strangers. No one talks, and when they do, people try not to listen.

Lola, Beli's daughter, tries to confide in her mother, only to be greeted by a harsh truth. Lola had been sexually abused as a child and told her mother but, as she explains, "I was eight and I finally told her what he had done, she told me to shut my mouth and stop crying, and I did exactly that," (p. 57). Beli encouraged the denial and silence of her daughter's terrible past. Lola was able to stop thinking about the incident, and, "Within a year I couldn't have told you what that neighbor looked like, or even his name" (57). Repression now manifests itself in Lola, which makes sense, because of the sexual abuse she faced as a child. The lack of addressing issues can also be traced back to Beli, Lola's mother. Sometimes people get trapped in the thought that they do not have control over their future. They believe that because of something they cannot control they are doomed to live a certain way. This could be the case with repression in the family Cabral.

In the book, *Speech and Reality*, Eugene Rosenstock-Huessy mentions this idea: "Whole generations may prove decadent because they behave as though prosperity did not depend on their intellectual severity with their progeny" (115). This could relate to the family, because they all just assumed that they would succumb to the fate of the fukú, and there was nothing they could do to stop their misfortunes. They did not think to look further into what was causing the family's terrible fate. Oscar, although he finally realized the truth in the end, was a prime example. He just thought he was going to be a fat nerd forever. He never really tried to exercise or change what he was, because he did not see the point. He did not talk about his feelings of inadequacy either. The trend of repression is taught in the house and therefore it continues with the children, until Oscar tries to make a change.

If the fukú is a Curse that is never talked about, and perhaps even causes the silence, then

the way to erase the curse should be to talk about it. That is what Oscar does. He does research and found out about what happened in his family's past and tried to piece the puzzle together. He spent 27 days and figured out his past, while he tried to make his future. Oscar was talking with the woman of his dreams, and making love to her, but he knew his good fortune could not last. He had to take action against the curse, but he did not tell anyone that was his plan. Many things were not talked about and inferences had to be made, but overall Oscar discovered the past and wrote it down.

While Oscar was willing to find out more about the fukú, he was still afraid of it. When he was confiding in Yuniór, he did not say the word instead, "He wrote out the word for me: fukú" (306). Oscar could not even say the word; instead he had to write it. This writing continued with Oscar. He tried to write down the truth, but there is a reason he came about this decision.

Like Socorro, Oscar had dreams that haunted him. He dreamt about a man, one wearing a mask, who was holding up a book that Oscar was supposed to read. When Oscar took the book, he realized that it was empty and the pages needed to be filled. Oscar's dream, like Socorro's was one warning him and telling him something. In *Writing About Literature*, Janet Gardner, talks about psychological theories and how they are used in literature. She notes that, "special attention is often paid to symbols as the manifest representation of a deeper hidden meaning" (149). The faceless man is a symbol, and therefore represents something. However, symbols tend to apply more to the readers, but the faceless man meant something to Oscar as well.

So what does the faceless man present in the dreams of the family represent? He factors into the silence that the family endures. He is the representation of silence and unknowing. Every time one of the family members sees this man in a dream, they are imagining what is to come. Socorro saw him standing over the beds of her family members. Later her husband would be

taken away by Trujillo and her children were separated and died horrific and untimely deaths. Oscar saw an unwritten book. He realized that he needed to write down what his family went through. Oscar saw the faceless man again right before he died. As he drove past a bus stop, he saw his whole family boarding a bus, and the faceless man was on the bus as well. To him the faceless man was the driving force behind the curse. Oscar saw him at the most pivotal moments in his life.

The faceless man also made an appearance with Beli. One day Beli had enough of waiting for the Gangster, her past lover, to return. She packed her bags and left. Upon her travel, she noticed a goat that had been skinned of everything but its face. Around there she swore that she saw a man sitting on a rocking chair with no face. After seeing this man Beli found out that she was pregnant with the Gangster's child. This child did not come as a blessing. The Gangster's wife had people come and beat Beli. She was beat so much, that she miscarried her child.

The faceless man represents a change that is about to occur, most likely a terrible turn of events. Oscar suffered a beating as well after seeing this masked man appear in his dream. And Socorro and most of her family died after she saw him in her dreams.

None of these dreams were mentioned, except for Oscar's. Socorro tried to discuss her dream and the concerns it raised with her husband, but he just dismissed it. Beli asked the man driving if he saw a faceless man, but the driver saw no such thing. After that, Beli dropped the subject. It is not too apparent if talking about the dream made a large difference, but acting on it definitely did.

Oscar is the only member of the family who did something after having the faceless dream. He began writing about the Trujillo, the fukú and all of the family's history. He thought that this would break the fukú and rid his family of all their misfortunes; the only thing he would

have to do would be to confront it.

Ultimately Oscar accepted his fate. He faced the men who were there to beat him and ended up getting killed by the men. Oscar knew this might happen, but he did it because, in his mind, this was the way to defeat the fukú. To Oscar, standing up was the only thing that he could do. Talking about the fukú seemed to rid people of it, they say Zafa. Repressing memories is like running away from an issue. So standing up to a situation would be like talking about it. That is how Oscar thought that the acceptance of his being beaten by the men would stop the fukú and save his family.

In the beginning of the novel it talks about how to avoid the fukú, but it never says anything about the way to actually rid someone of the fukú. If avoiding it is saying “Zafa,” then it makes sense that ending it would be talking. The fukú itself is silence, so the counter curse must be the opposite of silence, speech. However, does it work? Does Oscar really defeat the fukú by sacrificing himself and bringing the issue out into the open?

The novel leaves this decision up to the reader. In the end, Yuniór has become a believer in the fukú. He is also a believer that the fukú still exists. When Lola brings her daughter, the next generation that could possibly endure the fukú, to see Yuniór he has some thoughts as to what her future may be like: “One day, though, the Circle will fail. As Circles always do. And for the first time she will hear the word *fukú*. And she will have a dream of the No Face Man. Not now, but soon” (330). The belief that Yuniór has in the fukú is strong, and so he believes that it is unbeatable, and that the family will be forced to deal with it, even after Oscar’s sacrifice. However, he is under the impression that Isis, Lola’s daughter, could be the one to save the family. Yuniór has all of Oscar’s writings safe and he feels that “maybe, just maybe, if she’s as smart and as brave as I’m expecting she’ll be, she’ll take all we’ve done and all we’ve learned and add her own insights and she’ll put an end to it” (331). However, while Yuniór believes

that Isis could be the savior some days, other days he is downtrodden and believes something he read in Oscar's copy of *Watchmen*: "In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends" (331). This suggests that the fukú will inevitably go on forever, or so Yuniór feels.

The fukú itself seems to be silence and misfortune for being silent. However, when one tries to speak out about it, they face the same doom that keeping quiet would have done. Every character in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* faced traumatic events and misfortunes galore. They all see things which represent their silence; the faceless man, for example, is a symbol of silence and the doom which is descending upon them. When the reader takes a look at all the instances where silence and repression is present in the novel, it is plain to see that this family is one that could have used an open discussion about past situations. Perhaps, had they listened to one another, they could have banded together and fought the fukú, or at least solved it as a unit. Oscar took matters into his own hands, and it remains unknown as to whether or not he defeated the fukú, but it seems as though he was on the right track. Since the fukú was silence, the only logical way to get rid of it would be to talk about it and make it known. That is exactly what Oscar did.

Works Cited

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