

2016

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### Recommended Citation

Andres, K. (2016). The F-Word in *The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao*. *First Class: A Journal of First-Year Composition*, 2016 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/first-class/vol2016/iss1/7>

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# Spring 2016 First Prize Essay

## THE F-WORD IN THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO

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Heads turn when someone hears it. It can be said casually mentioned or used in a heated argument. Yes, the F-word. No, not that f-word; the other one: Feminism. A new wave of feminism is here and is an important topic more than ever. Between fighting for women's rights and bringing down sexism, feminism seems to be a hot topic for all types of literature. The 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction book, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz is one example of such literature. Narrated by a womanizer named Yunior, Oscar Wao follows the life of the fat Dominican loser, Oscar de Leon, and at the same time tells the story of the rise and fall of Yunior's love life. Although the book explores Oscar's life, it also maintains a focus on the oppressed voice and struggles of an immigrant family living under an oppressive Dominican Republic regime. Even though women in the book are subjected to violence and objectification, Díaz's book pulls a double agent and uses this to exploit the problems of sexism. Through feminist literary criticism, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* can be argued to be a piece of feminist literature because Díaz cleverly uses the irony of Dominican culture to show the dangers of hypermasculinity, shows how following gender roles led to the downfall of characters, and puts an emphasis of using strong female character to shape the story of Oscar's life as oppose to male characters.

It is crucial to understand feminism in order to determine how *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar* should be viewed. Why do so many people think of 'feminist' as a dirty word? Many girls nowadays try to steer away from being identified as one. Despite what many say, feminism is not about bra burning, hating men, and destroying the traditional nuclear family. Feminism throughout the different waves have changed but have maintained the same goal. It focuses on gender equality, not just the advancement of a particular gender. In the article *The Next Generation: Young Women on Feminism* from Sage Journal, four young women are interviewed to see their views on feminism. All of them seemed to believe that feminism has become more of an umbrella term to encompass a wider range of problems and different movements including sexuality, cultural differences, sex education, the sex industry, civil rights, and reproduction rights (Winston 1). Even though the feminism and the Women's Rights Movement was made to help women have the same the rights as men, it has expanded to much more than that. A common word seen in feminism is the 'patriarchy'. The patriarchy is a society that is "male-centered and controlled, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains" (Abrams 89). Patriarchal society have been around since biblical times starting with Abraham, the father of all nations. Men are seen as the head of the family unit and the source of power while women are usually submissive to them. Because of this, the patriarchy is responsible for the implementation of the societal values and gender roles that are seen today. As seen later in this paper, the Dominican Republic will be referred to as a patriarchal society because of its male headed society.

In addition to feminism, it is also important to understand feminist literature. Feminist literature, or feminist criticism, involves "reconstitute[ing] the ways we deal with literature in order to do justice to female points of view, concerns, and values" (Abrams 90). Feminist criticism analyzes pieces of literary by questioning women's role in society and application of the patriarchy. Feminist critics aim to make readers look at pieces of literature differently to bring to light of the sexual biases written about women by

male writers. Many famous works of literature someone will think of will most likely have a male protagonist: *The Odyssey*, *MacBeth*, *Hamlet*, *Great Expectations*, *Beowulf*, *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby* and so on. Many of the male protagonists embody strong masculine traits. Female characters – if any are even mentioned – are subordinate and marginalized usually in a sexual way – by their male counterparts. Feminist literary criticism is important in *The Brief Life of Oscar Wao* because there are countless parts throughout the book where women are marginalized and subjugated. Many critics argue about the subjectivity and violence the female characters endure throughout the book that make it a very non-feminist book. In an interview with *Elle* magazine, Díaz provides a daunting rationale for this. Díaz explains “representing a subjectivity doesn’t equate with approving the subjectivity. So the questions we have to ask are...What does our interaction with this subjectivity do for us?” (Vitzthum). By shedding light on the epidemic of violence against women in the Dominican Republic, Díaz makes the reader make several questions: Why is this a problem? How did it arise? What does this mean for me? Just because he writes about objectifying women does not mean he supports it. Díaz’s first point to explain violence on women is to explain male behavior first.

Through feminist criticism, Díaz uses irony to expose the dangers of hypermasculinity in Dominican culture and how it hurts Oscar and the other male characters around him. Contrary to popular belief, feminism also seeks to empower men – not necessarily in the same way as women empowerment, but to bring to light on the stereotypes men face that hurt them. A problem in the Dominican culture as found in other patriarchal societies is hypermasculinity. Hypermasculinity is the “inflation of stereotypic masculine attitudes and behaviors involving callous attitudes toward women, the belief that violence is manly and danger is exciting...the valuation of status, self-reliance, aggressive activities, dominance over others, and devaluation of emotion and cooperation” (Corprew 1). Hypermasculinity hurts men because it devalues them. The only acceptable attitude and behavior accepted from a man is an emotionless, macho, womanizing sex god. Compassion, intimacy, empathy, and emotional openness are deemed as feminine qualities and seen as weak and unintelligible. Hypermasculinity will avoid these qualities as all cost. Any man that falls outside of the norm is seen as a loser and is usually alienated from the group. In the Dominican culture, there is a heavy emphasis on stereotypical male behavior. Writer for the *Undercurrent* journal, Courtney Vaughan, describes her experience as a woman doing volunteer abroad work in the Dominican Republic: “[hypermasculinity was] more obvious because it expressed itself in a way that was less covert than the patriarchy that exists in Euroamerican societies” (Vaughan 67). In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Oscar struggles with fulfilling the hypermasculine Dominican identity. The only time Oscar felt like a true dominicano was when he was young. He was a cute chubby boy who would always holler at all the ladies. He even had two girlfriends at the same time. Ever since he lost both girls, he lost his macho-ness and Dominican identity. As he grew up, he became a complete loser. Instead of sleeping with multiple girls, Oscar spent his time obsessing over nerdy science fiction comics and movies. While all the other “real” Dominican boys were a bunch of suave good-looking motherfuckers, Oscar was an ugly 245-pound boy who could barely acknowledge a girl. His Tio Rudolfo kept telling him “Grab a muchcha, y metéselo. That will take care of everything. Start with a fea. Coje that fea y metéselo” (Díaz 24) (This roughly translates to “Grab an ugly girl and put it in her”). The only way Oscar can gain respect and his Dominican identity back is by losing his virginity. By imposing hypermasculinity on Oscar, he feels like he is worth nothing until he has sex. This is the main source of his low self-esteem and crappy life. While women are oppressed through the patriarchy, men are no exception. Oscar feels trapped and unable to succeed in life because he cannot get girls. According to Dominican culture, this means Oscar is a loser. Even though he has other talents such as writing, it does not matter because it is not important for men to like writing. Through this feminist criticism, Díaz exposes the problem of patriarchal values in

men by showing the dangers of hypermasculinity.

Feminism is also tied to Oscar Wao by showing how following gender roles and stereotypes instituted by the patriarchy are harmful to people because it only leads to the downfall of the characters. The first problem with gender roles is the dichotomy of male and female. Specific actions, emotions, and behavior are assigned to each gender. Characteristics of male and female are black and white with little to no grey space. In addition to her article in the Undercurrent, Courtney Vaughan explains that having a limited spectrum of characteristics is harmful because it “suppress[es] one from fully expressing themselves for fear of acting outside of her or his own gender norm” (Vaughan 66). In Oscar Wao, there are specific gender roles seen throughout the story. A prominent stereotype seen in Oscar Wao is sexuality. In Dominican culture, the men are supposed to be hooking up with multiple girls whether or not if they have a partner. Girls on the other hand are supposed to be pure and wait until marriage for sex. Yunior, the narrator of the story and a prime Dominican boy, becomes one of Lola’s flings, but nothing eventually comes of it. Deep inside, Yunior knows he has fallen in love with Lola but does not admit it because he is conditioned to only understand fucking girls will make him a real man. Yunior does not understand how to be in love so he continually sleeps with other girls in hopes of fulfilling the emptiness he has for Lola. In the end when Lola has her own child and her own life, Yunior still yearns to be with her but still refuses to admit his feelings. He dreams “we would be in bed together like old times...and I’d finally try to say words that could have saved us. \_\_\_\_\_” (Díaz 327). It is obvious the three blanks would be ‘I love you’. Díaz puts these blanks in the text on purpose to show despite how much Yunior still wants to be with Lola, he still dismisses his feelings in fear of it being out of the norm and the fact that he does not understand how to truly love another person. Feelings are for the weak and makes a person vulnerable. Yunior insists on keeping his macho dominicano façade. On the other hand when Oscar’s mother, Beli, was caught having premarital sex with Jack Pujols, La Inca gave her a “tongue-lasing...excoriating her poor judgment, her poor morals, her poor everything” (Díaz 102). If it wasn’t for La Inca kind spirit, Beli would have probably been beaten until she was in the hospital and then beaten again when she got out. Díaz sheds light on this double standard, and it makes the reader realize how these standards make a stalemate in society. No one can win without criticism.

Another example of the downfall of a character due to harmful stereotypes and gender roles is male aggression and the concept of love. There is a correlation between violence and love as the reader sees all these girls in the story in abusive relationships: Maritza and her twice-her-age boyfriend, Ybón and El Capitan, Beli and the Gangster, and Trujillo and literally every female he sees. The stereotypical male should not show any type of touch-y feel-y emotions. Thus, there is a prominent showcase of aggression in men. On the other end of the spectrum, the stereotypical female should be the opposite and come off as serene, fragile, and compassionate. Commitment is risky because men will succumb to female desires and lose their manliness. 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” (Montero 59-60). As women strive for love in order to be powerful or become relevant in society, men will push away resulting in aggression. When Beli became pregnant with the Gangster’s baby, she claimed this was “the magic she’d been waiting for [as] she placed her hand on her flat stomach and heard the wedding bells...saw in her mind’s eye the house that had been promised” (Díaz 136). By having the Gangster’s baby, Beli thought they would be together, and she would be able to move up in society. She will be finally be able to do great things by being married to the Gangster. This turns out to be obviously false as two of the Gangster’s men are sent to beat her to death. The Gangster torments Beli to a point where she is forced to flee the country and go to New York in America. By exploiting gender roles in the Dominican culture as seen in Oscar Wao, Díaz expresses

feminist ideals because he shows how these assigned roles by the patriarchy are harmful to everyone.

The last way Oscar Wao should be considered feminist literature is Díaz's focus on using strong female character to shape Oscar's life. In Fremio Sepulveda's analysis on Oscar Wao in his paper *Coding the Immigrant Experience*, he explains that "third-world wom[en] as a body within both patriarchy and imperialism has no room from which to speak and be heard" (Sepulveda 28). Living in an oppressive government especially with violence against women make it difficult for women to strive for greater things. Strong, independent women are the opposite image of the Dominican culture's view and is frowned upon if they do not conform to the proper roles of a women. Díaz uses strong women to fight the timid image of Dominican image. Instead of using males to shape Oscar's life – which is traditional to many patriarchal societies – Díaz uses the females present in Oscar's life to dictate how the story goes. Unlike how the men in the story are portrayed as weak and corrupted, the females in the story overcome the traumatic events that happened in their life – which are usually caused by other men. Díaz's feminist tone is clearly seen when the reader is first introduced to the story of Beli, Oscar's mother: "Before there was an American Story...before Oscar and Lola...there was their mother, Hypatía Belicia Cabral" (Díaz 77). The whole book of Oscar Wao is completely dependent on one woman: his mother. Without Beli, there would be no Oscar, no Lola, no story to tell. Oscar's dad is nonexistent and is given no mark of importance. Beli grew up knowing only cruel things about the world. She was raised during the dictatorship of Trujillo – a regime so oppressive you could be sent to jail for mispronouncing his mother's name wrong (Díaz 214). Her whole family was killed by Trujillo (or as they say "suspicious circumstances") and she was tossed around from family to family where she was abused until meeting La Inca. She had her share of shitty relationships but was able to overcome them even when death seemed imminent. When she moved to America and had Lola and Oscar, she raised them by herself and work three jobs until she could buy a house. Even though Beli turned out to be a horrible mother, she still showed great strength in order to survive. Lola, Oscar's sister, took care of Oscar while their mother's health slowly deteriorated and started to become clinically insane. Oscar was the one of the only people that Lola truly loved. She watched out for Oscar up until the day he died. Lola rejected to conform to be the perfect Dominican daughter or "just a nice way of saying a perfect Dominican slave" (Díaz 56). She did not want to conform to what her mother wanted her to be. La Inca, the matriarch to this triad of women, is another strong women present in Oscar's life. Widowed after a few months of marriage, La Inca never remarried, but continued to make a life for herself. She opened a very successful bakery on her own without any assistance from a man. She was credited with saving Beli's life when Beli was taken to the sugar cane fields to die through an intense prayer circle with the other women in the village. Without any of these women, the story of Oscar would seek to exist. By writing about strong women, Díaz is able to use feminist criticism to defy the roles and beliefs of the patriarchy.

It may be hard to see, but Oscar Wao is a feminist piece of literature. Díaz does not explicitly say "Empower Women! Support feminism!" or anything of that sort in the book. Instead, his writing makes the reader question the wrongdoing against women and the stereotypes of men and women found in the book. It makes the reader wonder why an author would write these vulgar things. Diaz exposes the dangers of the patriarchy for men through hypermasculinity, explains why gender roles are bad, and finally brings to light the strong women that are written in the book. This is the genius of Junot Díaz. He sheds light on the issues of sexism in an unorthodox way through irony. Díaz writes about problems such as sexism and writes characters that exemplifies these sexist characteristics. From there, it is up to the reader to realize the deeper problem in society and decide what they should do in order to fix this problem. It is important to be informed to be aware of these issues. The next step is to be proactive to combat sexism and spread feminism to all.

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