

**UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL
INSTITUTO DE LETRAS
DEPARTAMENTO DE LÍNGUAS MODERNAS**

THE POSTMODERN IDENTITY IN OSCAR WAO

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**PORTO ALEGRE
DEZEMBRO, 2015**

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RESUMO

O objetivo desse trabalho é analisar Oscar Wao, personagem epônimo do livro *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Escrito por Junot Diaz, uma nova voz da literatura latina nos Estados Unidos, seu trabalho ganhou fama internacional e ajudou a manter uma vívida discussão sobre a cultura latina na nação americana. Essa análise será realizada usando dois diferentes conceitos, pós-modernidade e identidade. Usarei os conceitos mencionados de acordo com Stuart Hall e Zygmunt Bauman, respectivamente, para investigar as duas aparentemente diversas identidades do personagem.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to shed some light on the analysis of Oscar Wao, the eponym character in the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz. Written by Junot Diaz, a new voice in Latino literature in the United States, his works have gained international critical acclaim and helped to maintain a vivid discussion about the Latino culture in the US. This analysis will be done using two different concepts, postmodernity and identity. I will use these ideas according to Stuart Hall and Zygmunt Bauman, respectively, to investigate the two seemingly different personalities of the character.

Key-words: Literature; Postmodernity; Identity;

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1. INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to argue that Oscar Wao - the main character of the book *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* - is a representative of the postmodern individual. In order to do that, I will discuss the concepts of identity and postmodernity comparing it with excerpts from the book. This paper is divided into five sections. In the first one, the introduction, I will discuss the life of the author as well as some information about the book, in order to give the context of creation of the novel. I will also discuss a limited part of the history of The Dominican Republic that is presented in the book and the concept of FUKÚ, a superstition that is also a curse that dooms the New Latin World. In the subsequent section, I will explain the definition of identity, an important concept that attempts to explain how and why people react as they do. According to Bauman (1996, p. 19), identity is a concept that “one thinks of whenever one is not sure of where one belongs”. Therefore, the function of identity is to help the subject to find his own place in the world. In the third section, I will analyze the term “postmodernity” and its implication on our current society, focusing mostly on the Latino society and how it is depicted in the book. In the fourth section, I will incorporate these two different concepts in order to understand Oscar’s character, demonstrating how his persona is divided into two different identities. In the last section, I will draw some conclusions based on the theoretical approach discussed and presented in the paper.

1.1 ABOUT THE BOOK AND THE AUTHOR

The first edition of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, a novel written by Junot Diaz, was published in 2007. The novel was awarded with the Pulitzer Prize for fiction the following year and in 2015 was also elected by the BBC as the best novel of the 21st century so far. Michiko Kutani, from *The New York Times* describes the book as “Mario Vargas Llosa meets Star Trek meets David Foster Wallace meets Kanye West”. The book narrates the story of a young, fat, black nerd who is in his search of true love. Furthermore, the book also narrates the saga of his family departing from the Dominican Republic and its arrival in the United States. Oscar’s passion for geek culture and the political life in the Dominican Republic are also themes

addressed in the book and brilliantly sewed up in the plot, creating a narrative with vitality and emotional richness.

The story is narrated by Yunior, a former brother in law of Oscar Wao. It starts by presenting the reader to the childhood of Oscar Wao's, a gallant kid born in New Jersey with Dominican roots, in love with geek culture and its heroes. After following his upbringing, the author then shifts the narrative to his sister, Lola. Through her diaries we are able to see the disruptions that affected her youth, her troubles with boys from the ghetto and the fights she had with her mother, Beli. Later on in the story, we observe Lola and Oscar in their teens, while Junot Diaz takes us to Santo Domingo during the times of Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship. Oscar and Lola's mother, Beli, become the protagonist of the story; Beli's turbulent life in Trujillo's regime is presented, as well as her parents' stories (Oscar and Lola's grandparents). When the narrative finally returns to Oscar in New Jersey, we have already been presented with the story of three generations of the De Leon family and its subsequent saga.

Regarding the narrative itself, one can claim that its richness does not come only from the imagetic force of the epic lived through Beli's escape from Trujillo's regime or from a possible great moral question that afflicts our protagonist. There are no great philosophical matters that may instill the reader's thoughts with great aspirations. Actually, the question that runs through the entire book is much more direct, carnal and simple: "Will Oscar ever get laid?" What is impressive is not the question, but the reason why the reader starts to care about it. The richness of the novel comes, therefore, from its honesty: both in linguistic and narrative terms. The book presents an Oscar Wao divided between his love towards geek culture and his passion for women; his brief wondrous life is in a measure driven by this division in the core of the protagonist's identity who is incapable of orbiting both spheres at ease.

Junot Diaz, the author of this novel, was born in Santo Domingo in 1968 and immigrated with his family to New Jersey when he was six years old. When he graduated from school, he started to write his first book *Drown*, also narrated by Yunior. In *Drown*, the narrator tells us the story of him growing up without his parents, starting the narrative whilst still in the Dominican Republic and then continuing it in the United States. Junot Diaz experienced a similar situation: his family also immigrated to the US when he was a child and, according to him, living in the United States in his childhood was far from easy. In an interview conducted in 2010, Junot states that:

I can safely say I've seen the US from the bottom up... I may be a success story as an individual. But if you adjust the knob and just take it back one setting to the family unit, I would say my family tells a much more complicated story. It tells the story of two kids in prison. It tells the story of enormous poverty, of tremendous difficulty. (DIAZ, 2010)

The story of his childhood also finds a certain parallel in Oscar Wao's life. Even though Oscar is an American citizen, born in the United States, and Junot was born in the Dominican Republic, both have roots in the Caribbean culture. Both have lived in the margins of society, divided between books, poverty and the criminality of their neighborhood. Both were torn between the perspective generated by the Latino society that they lived in (a perspective of an identification with masculinity and the notion of group and belonging) and their internal pleasures (mostly books and sci-fi culture) which did not find any support in the Caribbean community in New Jersey.

In this section, I have attempted to provide a brief overview of the novel analyzed here and the life of its author. In the following section, I will discuss some issues addressed in this book which are Trujillo's government and FUKÚ, a Dominican kind of curse referred to in the story.

1.2 DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, TRUJILLO AND FUKU

It is not possible to talk about the Dominican Republic of the 20th century without mentioning its most illustrious and vicious son, General Rafael Trujillo. This political figure was the dictator of the country from 1930 until his assassination in 1961. Trujillo ruled the Dominican society with a fierce brutality. In a footnote on the book, Yunior, the narrator, classifies him as "one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators" (p. 2) or simply "He was our Sauron¹" (p. 2). Additionally, Trujillo, as Junot states, could be considered, at first sight, the prototype of the Latin American warlord; however, his power and his sphere of influence affected all levels of society:

[Trujillo] came to control nearly every aspect of the DR's political, cultural, social, and economic life through a potent (and familiar) mixture of violence, intimidation, massacre, rape, co-optation, and terror; treated the country like it was a plantation and he was the master. (DIAZ, p. 2)

¹ Sauron is the antagonist character in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

This main figure of the Dominican society is also a permanent character in the novel. Even after his death, the memory of Trujillo serves as reference to the current ailments of the country and his marks are still seen in the present time of the book. This issue works as if the Dominican nation were some kind of tragic hero and Trujillo its tragedy. The comparison between the dictator's figure and tragedy is not gratuitous, since right at the beginning of the book, the narrator makes a comment about FUKÚ, in other words, about the curse that permeates the Latino society.

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. Fukú americanus, or more colloquially, fukú —generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World. (...) No matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we've all been in the shit ever since. Santo Domingo might be fukú's kilometer Zero, its port of entry, but we are all of us its children, whether we know it or not. (DIAZ, p. 1)

This affliction caused by FUKÚ affects everyone in the Latino society, regardless if they believe in it or not. Besides, after FUKÚ sets in the tragedy is already settled, just waiting for a protagonist. In the novel, Trujillo becomes the personification of FUKÚ; he is the transmitter and spreader of destruction in the Dominican Republic. The dictator, as mentioned before, is a permanent character in the novel, however, his permanence occurs in the background, as a constant warning that he is the owner of the destiny of the population of the Dominican Republic. Trujillo, or FUKÚ, feeds the sense of tragedy in the novel.

The main character, Oscar, despite being born on American soil, carries this curse with him. He is inevitably connected to the culture that produced FUKÚ, and no matter how long or how much he distances himself from Santo Domingo, he will have to, sooner or later, come to terms with FUKÚ. In this regard, FUKÚ, as a curse, is analog to a stereotype: It follows the immigrant wherever he goes; it carries the discomfort of a tragedy, a sense of inevitability. In a sense, both of them have no rational reason to exist, but they do. In an essential part of the book, Beli, his mother, summarizes this feeling of powerlessness: “but if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in.” (DIAZ, 2007, p. 209). Some of the ailments that the US suffers in the twentieth century (the Kennedy

assassination, the war in Vietnam) are also caused by FUKÚ, according to the narrator, but as Yuniór points out, this is not something directly related to the USA, it is “just a little gift from my people to America, a small repayment for an unjust war. That’s right, folks. Fukú.” (Ibid p. 4)

In this section, I have presented the way in which FUKÚ is associated with General Trujillo’s dictatorship in the novel and how these two issues are fundamental to the development of Oscar’s fate. In the next part of this paper, I will present the concepts of identity used to analyze the character of Oscar Wao.

2. IDENTITY

2.1 CONCEPT

Identity is the particular characteristics belonging to any singular person; it is the property in which a person manifests his individuality. Comparing it to human senses, if the five senses are the way through which we perceive the world, our identity is the way through which the world perceives us. According to Stuart Hall, the definition of ‘identity’ in a common sense language is identification [that]

is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. (HALL, 1996, p. 2)

Hence, ‘identification’ is a construction of the subject, it depends on how the subject feels related to the group that he belongs to. Even more, it is also a concept in constant transformation within the subject, for he does not need to have the same level of empathy or sentiment of belonging to the group throughout his entire life. Thus, identity is not the same as belonging, as Stuart Hall points out: “Belonging, is a tricky concept, requiring both identification and recognition.’(2000). He also categorizes identity in three different concepts: “those of the (a) Enlightenment subject, (b) Sociological subject, and (c) Post-modern subject.” (1996, p.597)

The Enlightenment subject is a concept based on the idea that a person, by itself, is the one who determines their identity. It does not depend or is influenced by the exterior. This concept is extremely individualistic, and it opposes external influence on the subject. It sees the subject as free from external pressure but, at the same time, the subject is a prisoner within himself, incapable of transforming and evolving. The second concept is the approach of the Sociological subject: this echoes the dynamism of a more complex world, the notion that the individual is not a complete entity, that he is affected by the world surrounding him and that he, himself, affects his exterior. In other words, the individual is himself and the sum of what he appropriates from others around him. Moreover, the culture that surrounds him interferes in his

inner core and changes his perception of the world. According to this concept, he still has one identity in himself, but this identity is built in cooperation with society. There is, thus, a dialogue between the self and the culture that helps to shape the subject. According to Stuart Hall:

Identity, in this sociological conception, bridges the gap between the "inside" and the "outside" - between the personal and the public worlds. The fact that we project "ourselves" into these cultural identities, at the same time internalizing their meanings and values, making them "part of us," helps to align our subjective feelings with the objective places we occupy in the social and cultural world' Identity thus stitches (or, to use a current medical metaphor, "sutures") the subject into the structure. It stabilizes both subjects and the cultural worlds they inhabit, making both reciprocally more unified and predictable. (HALL, 1996, p. 597)

Therefore, the sociological concept works as glue that unifies the subject and his surroundings, creating the notion that identity is a concept that embraces relations and, therefore, is mutable, in constant transformation. At the same time that the sociological concept is aware of the individual's capacity of development, it still perceives the individual as the owner of only one identity. By weighing too much importance on society, the sociological concept ultimately sees patterns of behavior that restrict the subject, limiting him to be only a representation of this interaction with the culture that surrounds him, as if identity were necessarily the sum of this influence.

The third concept is the Postmodern subject. This concept considers the various idiosyncrasies of the subject, endowing him with multiple identities. Thus, the individual is no longer the owner of only one identity formed by the conjuncture of the self and society. He is a fragmented being, capable of operating, acting and thinking in various ways, most of the times incompatible amongst themselves. Hall (1996) once again brings light to the concept exposing that

the subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent "self." Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. (HALL, p. 598)

Hence, we are no longer a unique and singular creation not affected by society; we are not even the construction of a bond between the self and the culture surrounding us. We are individuals capable of constant transformation, capable of assuming various identities according

to what suits us, each of them giving us comfort and, at the same time, demanding something from us. The society around the individual is no longer uniform and monolithic, while the individual is capable of perceiving its complexity and reacting towards it. The concept of a unitary, coherent and orderly identity is a delusion. Hall (1996) goes on:

as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities. any one of which we could identify with - at least temporarily. (HALL, p. 598)

In conventional societies, the past is celebrated and admired for what it encompasses and the experience passed through generations is revered. However, this celebration has lost much of its meaning in a society that values dynamism. Hence, the subject is no longer tied to the obligation of being a part of the representation of his society, because this subject itself has lost a lot of its “experience passed through generations”. So there are no more reasons to hold onto just one permanent identity: the subject now faces the possibility of dividing itself into many different identities.

Jeffrey Weeks, a sociologist, goes along with this theory and points out in his essay *The Value of Difference* that

identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality. But it is also about your relationships, your complex involvement with others and in the modern world these have become ever more complex and confusing. Each of us live with a variety of potentially contradictory identities, which battle within us for allegiance: as men or women, black or white, straight or gay, able-bodied or disabled, ‘British’ or ‘European’. The list is potentially infinite, and so therefore are our possible belongings. Which of them we focus on, bring to the fore, ‘identify’ with, depends on a host of factors. At the centre, however, are the values we share or wish to share with others. (WEEKS, 1990, p.88)

The postmodern individual, consequently, does not need to follow the paradigm of the single and fixed narrative associated to modernism. He is also no longer a servant of the single ideology that emanates every truth about culture. This freedom creates a sense of flux, allowing the subject a bigger maneuverability and disassociating itself from the historical burden. The individual can mix and transform himself according to his will, he is finally free to choose his own path according to his own will.

Identity has a social and political importance as an element of inclusion and exclusion by

the government over one's life. For example, being part of a minority group in a xenophobic country can be determined regarding one's fate. In a much more personal level, identity has its importance because it helps the subject to perceive how he has been represented in his society, the way he is seen by it and what is expected of him in that same society. But most importantly, identity and the perception of identity helps the subject to be capable of giving a meaningful answer to his role in the society that he lives in and also helps him to decide what he will make of himself despite this representation. In the context of a literary production, it is in the character's answer to this confrontation - of this exterior vision of him -, a personal answer, particular, unique, that resides much of the power of narrative. The identity to which the character belongs does not limit him to a narrow minded arrangement; moreover, it helps him stand out amongst others. This individualization gives depth to the character, strengthens the consciousness that he is part of a greater scene inside society, that his actions have consequences and are not random and gratuitous, that the people around him will judge him according to these actions. To the reader, it emphasizes the sensation that the character's actions matter and that he is aware of that.

3. POSTMODERNITY

3.1 ORIGINS AND CONCEPT

Postmodernity is a socio-cultural concept associated to the condition of awareness of Western civilization in the second half of the 20th century. According to Perry Anderson in *The Origins of the Postmodernity*, the term was used for the first time during the 1930's, by the Spanish Frederico de Onís, as description of an artistic movement. But only in the 1950's the term began being used as an expression relating to the nature of an epoch:

It was not until some twenty years later that the term emerged in the Anglophone world, in a very different context - as an epochal rather than aesthetic category. (ANDERSON, 1998, p. 4)

After the second half of the 20th century, the term “modernity” was no longer capable of encompassing all the cultural and artistic nuances of the period. The discomfort and incompatibility of the existing modern narratives are amplified by the horrors practiced in the name of Civilization during the Second World War. New narratives begin to flourish attempting to explain this era. The independence of countries in Africa that were until then colonies provides new historic discourses, capable of comprising different voices that had until then been silenced by the colonists. These new historic discourses enabled new cultural interpretations, and the subjects that up until then would relate to the concept of culture passively, began to interpret their identities more personally. The intention was not necessarily to replace a discourse with another, but to dismantle them, provide them with new interpretations; it is self-reflective rather than destructive. According to Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Intimations of Postmodernity*

Postmodernity (and in this it differs from modernist culture of which it is the rightful issue and legatee) does not seek to substitute one truth for another, one standard of beauty for another, one life ideal for another. Instead, it splits the truth, the standards and the ideal into already deconstructed and about to be deconstructed. It denies in advance the right of all and any revelation to slip into the place vacated by the deconstructed/discredited rules. It braces itself for a life without truths, standards and ideals. (BAUMAN, 2003, p.9)

As explained by Bauman, Postmodernity restores to the world what modernity had taken

away: the capacity to reevaluate itself. To him, modernity brought hierarchy and an imposed consensus, a dichotomy of a high and a low culture, while postmodernity was a response to that arrangement: “It is against such a disenchanted world that the postmodern re-enchantment is aimed” (BAUMAN, 2003, p.11).

Evidently, this transformation is by no means identical everywhere, and in the Latino culture it will project itself in its own way. The concept of Latino identity is problematic in its own construction because it assumes a cultural homogenization in the Latin countries that is not necessarily expressed day-by-day in the society. In his book *Latinos in America* Jorge J. E. Gracia raises the issue:

The difficulties raised by social identities are many, complex, and confusing. They have at least two sources: first, the very notion that there are overall and general social identities for groups at all; second, the fact that this kind of identity seems to dissolve into many other, more particular, identities. (GRACIA, 2008, p.3)

The issue raised by Gracia is pertinent. How accurate and faithful can the application of the concept of identity be to a group from various different nationalities, with religions, manners and languages distinct from one another? Jorge Gracia concludes his essay affirming that the different identities (that of a nation and that of an aggregation of countries) can coexist within the individual, as long as “we adopt the Familial-Historical view of Latino identities”, a view that proposes

[...] that ethnic groups, such as Latinos, Mexicans, or Dominicans, are best conceived as constituting extended historical families whose members have no identifiable properties, or set of properties, that are shared by all the members throughout the existence of the familial groups, but that the historical connections that tie them give rise to properties which are common to some members of the groups and, in context, serve to distinguish them from other social groups. (GRACIA, 2008, p.18)

The problem is then put to rest. As a group, the Latino society has a historical connection that separates them from the rest of America. This historical connection is enough to make them feel as a common culture. Nevertheless, the opinion that part of the USA society has about Latin American countries’ immigrants is that they can be categorized into a single group that would be antagonistic to WASP² values. Thus, even if the Latinos do not recognize themselves as part of a

²White Anglo-Saxon Protestant

characteristic culture, the WASP population does. According to Samuel P. Huntington:

The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream US culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves – from Los Angeles to Miami – and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream. The United States ignores this challenge at its peril. (HUNTINGTON, 2004, p.30)

Whether this rhetoric has its value or not, the expansion of the Latino population in the United States is meaningful and the investigation of Latino identity has its importance. The sense of a common identity is often constructed based in a symbolic shared past and through related characteristics. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, this shared past is conveyed by a common curse that afflicts all Latin America, which is the FUKÚ. It also seems to Yunior that the characteristic that binds together those belonging to this common culture is their proneness to engage in sexual relationships. For Yunior, what is worth mentioning about the other sex is their outlook: the outcome of the girls that Oscar dated in his childhood, what is important to Yunior is the physical appearance that they ended up having; Lola's friends were to him just "the sort of hot-as-balls Latinas who only dated weight-lifting morenos or Latino cats with guns in their cribs" (Ibid, p. 26). Basically, all the comments on girls, even when they are not necessarily in a sociological level that comes from Yunior are related to a sexual connotation. This view of Yunior of the social relationship between the genders as just a means for intercourse affects how the latino community is seen by the WASP community itself. By stereotyping women solely as an object of lust, it leads to the idea that the same stereotype (men incapable of controlling their lust) can be applied to them.

4. OSCAR WAO AND THE REPRESENTATION OF POSTMODERN IDENTITY

The character who best represents the Latino identity in the book is Yuniór. He is the narrator of most of the novel and it is a former brother in law of Oscar. Yuniór, as the narrator, is the means by which the reader perceives the identity of Oscar as “inauthentic”. The “contradictions” perceived in Oscar’s identity are displayed to us through the perception of Yuniór. The narrator has not acquired yet the capability to accept that a human being can sustain multiple identities but, at the same time, he is smart enough to recognize that these identities can exist. Yuniór himself has a fair amount of knowledge of what can be considered “nerdy”, but he hides that from the world. He even states that “Perhaps if like me he[Oscar]’d been able to hide his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, but he couldn’t.” (Ibid, p. 21). In a way, Yuniór represents the subject with the Sociological Identity. He is an individual who is able to relate with his surroundings and has the capacity to recognize the importance of it in his own upbringing, but, at the same time, he is limited by this view. Being unable to distinguish and accept the two different identities in Oscar, the narrator reveals that he still notices the world without the latent idiosyncrasies of the period. The unrest between the two different cultures gains traction in the incapacity of one of them to accept the plurality of the other. The problem for Yuniór is not just the fact that Oscar is a nerd without any appeal, but that the division between the Latino culture and the nerd culture is irreconcilable.

It would have been one thing if like some of the nerd boys I’d grown up with he hadn’t cared about girls, but alas he was still the passionate enamorado who fell in love easily and deeply. (Ibid, p. 23)

To Yuniór, the cultural difference between the two nations is self-evident and meaningful; to him, not having much luck with girls is a “very un-dominican” (Ibid, p. 11) characteristic of Oscar’s. To the narrator, identity is intrinsically related to nationality, and nationality, specifically the Latino one, is essentially related to sexuality (in this case, to heterosexuality). Therefore, in order for Oscar become a “man”, he has to, according to Yuniór, have a sexual relationship with a woman as soon as possible: “this is a Dominican kid we’re talking about, in a Dominican family: dude was supposed to have Atomic Level G, was supposed to be pulling in the bitches with both hands.” (Ibid, p. 24)

Thus, the novel starts by presenting the story of a ghetto kid called Oscar De Leon. In the

beginning of his childhood, Oscar De Leon was more of an archetype of a Dominican boy, aware of his body and interested in girls:

In those blessed days of his youth, Oscar was something of a Casanova. One of those preschool loverboys who was always trying to kiss the girls, always coming up behind them during a merengue and giving them the pelvic pump, the first nigger to learn the perrito and the one who danced it any chance he got. (DIAZ, p. 11)

In fact, by the age of seven Oscar lived his “Golden Age” and had two girlfriends simultaneously, Maritza and Olga. His life, however, took a completely different course from what was expected when, right after he ended the relationship with one of the girls, he was dumped by the other. After his “girlfriend” left him for another boy, Oscar starts to reveal the outlines of what he will be for the rest of the novel: a self-conscious, overweight, ghetto nerd incapable of relating his identity and his personal passions to the expectations of the people around him.

The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican. (Ibid, p. 49)

The identity (or identities) then become the crucial point of the narrative. The way Oscar relates with others is almost entirely based on the perception of this identity. Oscar is almost incapable of communicating differently other than through nerdy references, and people can't interact with him because his appearance does not match with what is expected from him. He is a Latino boy who does not act like one. This inability of interaction frustrates the character, because his love aspirations cannot be fulfilled without a minimum of communication between him and his love object:

You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest. (Ibid, p. 49)

Books, then, become an escape to Oscar, his isolation is deepened, his communication with his Latino friends becomes meaningless because, according to Yuniors, “he used a lot of huge sounding nerd words like indefatigable and ubiquitous when talking to niggers who would barely graduate from high school” (Ibid, p. 22). His identity, at this decisive moment when his communication skills begins to deteriorate, when the separation from the social and personal

level commence to wide, starts to dissolve. On the one hand, Oscar is another American nerd who loves graphic novels, fantasy and sci-fi; and still on the other hand, Oscar is a passionate and fervently romantic with his Latino blood. Both identities are presented, through the eyes of the narrator, in an excluding way. Oscar no longer has the Latino sex appeal of his early childhood (although he has the passion of one) and, in addition, he does not abdicate his geek love originated in American books, movies and graphic novels. Oscar is still in love with his ‘ex-girlfriend’ Maritza and he has a fervor inside him, but he is incapable of externalizing this passion the way a Latino boy is expected to:

His bedroom window looked out over the front of her house, and so he always peeped her while he was painting his D&D miniatures or reading the latest Stephen King. (Ibid, p. 18)

From the excerpt, we can see how the world inside the house, intimate and lonely, contrasts with the exterior world, unconcealed and sociable. However, the exterior world is sociable to those who do not carry inside themselves such different identities. His family considers him a *paryguaio*, which the narrator explains as “a corruption of the English neologism *party watcher*” (Ibid, p. 19), in other words, someone who sees the action taking place instead of being a part of it. Oscar is no longer capable of practicing sports or going after women, which is what is expected of a Latino man in his society, he “had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male” (Ibid, p. 19). Oscar becomes a pariah amongst his equals for having traces of a different culture that does not value the ideals of manliness.

This culture that Oscar identifies himself with is the nerd culture. Centered in the imagination, in the occupation of oneself with hobbies that are considered intellectual or academic, nerd culture is, largely, antisocial. Owing to the fact that nerd culture focuses on themes that are mainly abstract, with aims beyond the realm of the real world, without demands of a constant interaction with other people, and is able to sustain itself in isolation, the nerd tends to, in some cases, not care about his physical attractiveness. Oscar’s interested in mangas, animes and fantasy/sci-fi fiction helps to shape his personality, nurturing in him the sensation of escape from a real world that is hostile to him.

You couldn’t have torn him away from any movie or TV show or cartoon where there were monsters or spaceships or mutants or doomsday devices or destinies or magic or evil villains. (Ibid, p. 21)

The epigraph that opens the book is an excerpt from a poem, “The Schooner Flight”, by the poet Derek Walcott, that says “either I’m nobody or I’m a nation”. Such an epigraph already gives the reader a hint of the identity problem that the character might face. This binary view of the relations between two countries, the United States and the Dominican Republic promotes a forced opposition between the identities of its inhabitants. Either you represent your nation as a whole or you will be considered a pariah by both sides. To Oscar, this division of the self lies between an intellectual/asexual identity that is not expected by his community and another one that is sexual and anticipated. Oscar is aware of this ambiguity that spares no one, he is aware of the Latino reputation that he has to follow and he even states that “No Dominican male has ever died a virgin” (Ibid, p. 176) a sentence which Yuniors agrees with in a previously scene, and admits that it is “against the laws of nature for a Dominicano to die without fucking at least once” (Ibid, p. 174). This preoccupation is not just some sort of dilemma that every boy in their teens, trying to satisfy their sexual desires has to face, it is in a broader sense a cultural expectation that pervades the whole Latino society and goes beyond a gender issue. So much so, that Lola even affirms to Oscar that “you’re going to die a virgin unless you start changing.” (Ibid, p. 24)

This division of the consciousness of the character based on his ethnicity is crucial for the identity formation of Oscar. According to Michael Peter Smith in his essay *Postmodernism, urban ethnography, and the new social space of ethnic identity*,

Since consciousness springs from both people's material circumstances and from their perceptions and cultural understandings of these circumstances, an ethnographic approach is increasingly viewed as an indispensable route to knowledge of the ways in which consciousness is actually formed and how it changes over time and space.

In postmodern social analysis, the subject is decentered precisely because there are no clear-cut roles waiting for subjects to occupy in pursuit of their historical mission. Rather, there are a multiplicity of roles that people come to play in history. These produce a "self" experienced not as a single, completed identity, but as multiple, incomplete, and partial identities, formed in historically specific relation to the different social spaces people inhabit over time. (SMITH, 1992, p. 497)

According to Smith, the decentralization of the identity comes from the liberty the individual has in a world that doesn’t expect a defined role from him anymore. In Oscar’s case, the nerd identity comes from this free world, that doesn’t demand respect for tradition. However, at the same time, the price he pays for this free identity is the discomfort and inadequacy that

comes, largely, from the pressure of his Latino friends and relatives. An ethnographic culture cooperates to form this second identity, based on tradition and expectation. At one point in the book Oscar's uncle advises him: "Listen, palomo: you have to grab a muchacha, y metéselo. That will take care of everything. Start with a fea. Coje that fea y metéselo!" (Ibid, p. 24). The pressure that comes from Yunior, his friends and parents is, in a sense, a pressure of a whole patriarchal society. Oscar ends up becoming a lone inhabitant torn between two cultures, one that does not expect anything from him, and another one, demanding, that bestows and curses him with the burden of heritage.

It is evident, that this multi-identity does not cause just a mismatch and misunderstanding of the world in Oscar. He has some friends that also happen to be nerds with whom he spends some time and, to a point, is capable of questioning these differences in identity and evaluate them: "Wondering aloud, If we were orcs, wouldn't we, at a racial level, imagine ourselves to look like elves?" (Ibid, p. 178). The question is, obviously, purely abstract, but the examination is valid. Would it not be possible, then, for a guy with disparate and contradictory personalities see himself in a more optimistic way? In some moments, Oscar seems to be able to reconcile these disparate sides; there are solitary occasions when he does not feel the external pressure of having the obligation to belong to a determined culture. However, the confrontation with the opposite sex exposes the weakness that this division entails.

At the end of the novel, Oscar finally fulfills the requirement to acquire a Dominican identity, a sexual relationship with a prostitute, Ybon. It is through the service of a prostitute that seems to be the only way for an outcast like Oscar to fulfill such a demand, but Oscar's personality does not allow him to relate to Ybon in this manner. Oscar's desire for romance is stronger than pure carnal desire, therefore the intercourse has to be preceded by the act of wooing. The requirement for the identity to become authentic is then achieved not only by the carnal act itself, but also by the process and commitment that the character shows, by Oscar's effort to lose weight to please Ybon, for the physical transformation of the hero. Yunior states that "Something had changed about him. He had gotten some power of his own" (Ibid, p. 319). We see that this transformation becomes complete when we realize that he has no fear when he has to confront Ybon's boyfriend, the "capitán". When his henchmen prepare themselves to beat up Oscar, the narrator observes that: "This time Oscar didn't cry when they drove him back to the canefields" (Ibid, p. 320). Oscar now finally seems to be at peace, he seems to be aware that he has done the right thing: "He told them that it was only because of her love that he'd been able to do the thing that he had done, the thing they could no longer stop" (p. 321). This "thing"

Yunior tells the reader later on is that “Ybon actually fucked him. Praise be to Jesus!” (p. 334). Oscar is then ultimately seen as an ‘authentic’ individual by Yunior, a person that now has a Latino identity. This transformation was only possible through the carnal act with Ybon, an act that transcends life, and even Oscar's death cannot erase it.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Identity and its affirmation by the individual is still a problem experienced nowadays in our societies. Oscar Wao suffers the misfortune of having identities that are perceived by his peers as disparate in a social system that does not accept this kind of multiplicity. His desire to exhibit his nerd identity is as honest and latent as his willingness to be part of what Yuniór understands as a Latino identity. An honesty so naive that Yuniór describes one of Oscar's favorite moments shared with a girl: this situation "...was the day on the E bus when he informed some hot morena, If you were in my game I would give you an eighteen Charisma³!" (Ibid, p. 174). Oscar's desire to see these two identities reconciled cause a deep pungent feeling, a reaction of empathy in the reader. The postmodern reader is able to see himself hopelessly as fragmented as Oscar Wao. Nonetheless, this empathy is in contrast minimized by the critical and realistic view of Yuniór. If the reader can relate to Oscar's fragmentation on the one hand, on the other he understands that real life demands a more "authentic" attitude of the subject and that this clash between the personal and the social life often ends up with the suppression of one of the identities. In the modern world of Yuniór one of the identities needs to prevail so that the individual can find peace with himself. In Oscar's case these two identities, ironically, are only reconciled on the brink of death, which is when Oscar is able to externalize and vocalize his identity clearly: "The words coming out like they belonged to someone else, his Spanish good for once." (Ibid, p. 321). Oscar finally becomes "man" in the eyes of Yuniór, and he does that without losing its own nerd identity. He

told them if they killed him they would probably feel nothing and their children would probably feel nothing either, not until they were old and weak or about to be struck by a car and then they would sense him waiting for them on the other side and over there he wouldn't be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he'd be a hero, an avenger. Because anything you can dream (he put his hand up) you can be. (Ibid, p. 322)

Oscar no longer has two exclusive identities. The confidence and joy experienced by Oscar finally reaches his culmination: "Diablo! If only I'd known. The beauty! The beauty!"

³ Charism in most RPG games represents likeability, beauty and the ability to relate to others. The number eighteen would be the highest number possible for a human being.

(Ibid, p. 335). Love, at the end, is the confirmation of this liberation.

Discussions on identities and their roles in shaping the culture of a people is quite a touchy topic. The Latin culture is far too focused on the sexualization of the individual, on the patriarchy and 'machismo', all topics that are covered to a greater or lesser extent in the novel studied. However, the study of these characteristics, so peculiar to Latin American people, has not, to me, seemed to be carried out properly by anthropologists and scholars of the area. I say this based fundamentally on the difficulty found in finding papers and essays that address these prevailing behaviors in the system of relation based on the importance of the patriarchal figure. This is an issue that, sooner or later, we as a people will have to discuss.

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