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Breaking out of the Fortress of Solitude

The role that norms play in our everyday lives are mixed. Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* discusses ideas about norms in society. Social norms dictate how people should act or behave to conform to society. The novel is a coming to age novel featuring Oscar, a Dominican teenager who grows up in Paterson New Jersey. Oscar is overweight and is into the sci-fi genre, so he is deemed unpopular by his peers. He is the opposite of what people’s social norms are for Dominican men, strong and masculine, and struggles to find love. Though social norms can help guide people to help outcasts conform to society, Diaz explains that social norms are harmful because they are oppressive by putting too much negative pressure on people and causing people to internalize racism.

Diaz explains that social norms encourage and guide people to help social outcasts be better accepted into society. When Oscar is growing up, he is really into girls, but can not find a girlfriend and still is a virgin. Oscar’s sister then tells him, “‘Oscar’, Lola warned repeatedly, ‘you're going to die a virgin unless you start changing.’” (25) Diaz uses tone to describe how Lola talks to Oscar. Lola “warned repeatedly” because she is concerned with Oscar and truly cares enough to mention it more than once. One of Oscar’s greatest goals is to have sex with a girl. Lola is concerned that Oscar cannot achieve that goal and knows that not achieving it upsets him. Because Diaz uses tone to describe Lola, the reader can understand that Lola feels concerned for Oscar and wants to help him. Lola knows that in order for Oscar to achieve his goal, he has to be socially accepted, so that girls who are familiar with existing social norms will better accept him. Lola knows that Oscar has to change and helps him by telling him to change himself. Social norms can have a positive effect because it helps people reach out to help outcasted people to achieve their goals. When Oscar goes to college, he meets Junior, a young man who is the narrator of the book. He becomes Oscar’s roomate and, like Lola, pushes Oscar to become a better person. Yunior describes, “I had fatboy like Master Killer in Shaolin Temple. Was on his ass 24/7....Got him to start watching his diet and to stop talking crazy negative — I am ill fated..I am going to perish a virgin, I’m lacking in pulchritude..Positive thoughts, I stressed, positive thoughts, motherfucker!” (176) Here, Yunior encourages Oscar to change his body image to better conform to what society thinks is acceptable. Diaz uses diction to show Yunior’s colorful character by using casual language with swearing. This allows the reader to see Yunior’s enthusiasm. Yunior’s enthusiasm to help Oscar reveals the push to be socially accepted and the lengths that people will go to help people be socially accepted. People in society instinctively push out and oppress people who do not fit in such as Oscar. But by using social norms, Yunior can help Oscar fit in with his peers and possibly be happier.

Even though social norms help push people to help others improve, social norms oppress people by putting too much pressure on people to conform and further pushing people away from conforming. In high school, Oscar is constantly bullied by his peers. Yunior describes Oscar’s frustration writing, “For Oscar, high school was the equivalent of a medieval spectacle, like being put in the stocks and forced to endure the peltings and outrages of a mob by deranged half-wits.” (19) Here, Diaz uses an analogy to describe how the kids make fun of Oscar. In medieval times, people who did crimes or misbehaved were put into wooden constraints that trapped their head and hands, so they could not move and were on display. The other people around them made fun of the person in the stocks and threw rotten fruit at them. Diaz applies that to being in high school. Oscar’s peers similarly make fun of Oscar. His peers see him as a whimsical spectacle for their amusement. Stocks, in medieval times, were a form of punishment meant to prevent people from doing crimes, so Oscar is facing a form of punishment, but it is just because of social norms. Because Diaz uses an analogy, the reader understands that social norms harm people because those norms the pressure to conform makes people feel punished and outcasted. Another example of these norms hurting people is when Oscar’s sister, Lola, has friends at their house. Those friends make fun of Oscar because he is a virgin and an outcast. Yunior describes that, “It wouldn’t have been so bad if these chickies hadn’t treated Oscar like some deaf-mute harem guard, ordering him around, having him run their errands, making fun of his games and his looks; to make shit even worse, they blithely went on about the particulars of their sex lives with no regard for him.” (27) Lola’s friends treat him like less of a person. Diaz uses a simile to compare Oscar’s treatment to that of deaf-mute harem guard. Harem guards, or eunuchs, were servants of royalty in Asia. They were usually castrated, so they would be more loyal servants. That ,in turn, made them lose a large part of their sexuality because they could not have sex in a traditional manner and were seen as lesser people. Diaz compares these servants with Oscar. Oscar has issues having sex because of social rather than physical reasons. Because Lola’s friends treat Oscar like a eunuch, they cause him to internalize beliefs that he to is unable to have sex. By having Lola’s friends mock Oscar, Diaz uses this to explain the symbolic wall people put around Oscar that prevents him from achieving his goal of having sex. This further exiles Oscar away from being conformed in society.

Diaz also depicts how social norms cause internalized oppression because the social norms stem from racism caused by colonialism. When Oscar was growing up, he found solace from the bullies through books and movies. Yunior describes that “[Oscar] read The Lord of the Rings for what I'm estimating the millionth time, one of his greatest loves and greatest comforts since he'd first discovered it, back when he was nine and lost and lonely and his favorite librarian had said, Here, try this, and with one suggestion changed his life. Got through almost the whole trilogy, but then the line ‘and out of Far Harad black men like halftrolls’ he had to stop, his head and heart hurting too much.” Diaz alludes to the Lord of the Rings, one of Oscar’s favorite books. Oscar trusts this book and Yunior describes that Oscar has read it millions of times and loves the books. Diaz’s allusion fits Oscar’s character because Oscar loves things in this genre that includes the Lord of the Rings. But these books have racist ideas and describe people with darker skin as monsters. Because Diaz uses accurate allusion, he is able to convey to the reader the profound effect the racism has on Oscar because he is so close to those books. This racism stems from colonialism which used interpersonal oppression as a tool to enslave and strip power from native people by dehumanizing them. The effect lives on in literature and Oscar feels the oppression from the belief that since he has dark skin, he is less of a human. By having this racism in a book that is accepted in society, these ideas become norms. Because of these norms, people such as Oscar see themselves as lower than others. Diaz reveals that social norms driven by racism are negative because they cause people to internalize false stereotypes that hurt people’s self esteem. A couple years later, Oscar goes to college. He faces discrimination there and Oscar describes that “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. And he said, over and over again, But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy.” (49) Oscar faces discrimination and marginalization by most of his peers. At the end of the quote, what Oscar says translates to “I am Dominican. Dominican I am.” Diaz writes that he says this “over and over again.” Diaz uses repetition to explain how the discrimination by Oscar’s peers affects him. Oscar’s peers reject Oscar because he does not fit in with what they think he should look or act like and strips his identity from him by saying he is not Dominican. Oscar responds by repeating that he is Dominican to try to reclaim his identity. By using repetition, Diaz better explains to the reader that social norms that people put on others is a form of oppression and are difficult to counteract. Because of social norms, Oscar internalized the idea that he is not Dominican and struggles to reject it. Diaz argues that social norms driven by racism hurt people because the norms cause internalized oppression which strips identities and cause people like Oscar be rejected by everyone.

Though social norms encourage people to help outcasts become more accepted, they are overwhelmingly negative. These social norms put too much pressure on people to conform and often push them farther away from conforming because they are hurtful. These social norms are often influenced by factors like racism and that does not help at all. Social norms can be good to use as guidance and may be necessary to keep order, but the pressure needs to be kept in moderation.

Works Cited:

Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.* New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. Print.