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Adolescents Combat Cultural & Religious Norms

Should one be expected to live up to the norms in one's culture and religion? Human beings are all so different and complex, it would be oversimplifying to group certain expectations to one racial or religious group. Yet throughout adolescent literature, characters are forced to conform to strict expectations due to their ethnicity, culture, and religion as demonstrated in the novels: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz (2007), *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2003), and *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Anne Frank (1947). When such unrealistic norms are placed on an individual, incredible harm and struggle is invoked on the individual. While some characters work to fight off these racial and religious expectations, others aim for the ideal and cause harm to themselves.

All characters of the chosen novels suffer forced cultural and religious norms and expectations. In the novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the characters Oscar and Lola are forced to succumb Dominican norms. Oscar struggles living up to "the typical Dominican male" and Lola is expected to be "the ideal Dominican daughter." In the graphic novel *Persepolis*, the character Marji is forced to conform to the idea of the "traditional Muslim girl." due to the new norms of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In the *Diary of Anne Frank*, Anne is given the expectation to suffer, be sad, and have her thoughts be confined due to going in hiding from Hitler's Reign. Each character is told a way in which they should behave and norms they should aspire to.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao opens up to this passage: "Our hero was not one

of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about- he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock" (p. 11). The beginning of the novel sets the tone for what Oscar is expected to live up to. Oscar is contrasted with being a Dominican playboy, fly bachatero, and home-run hitter. With norms like these, Oscar almost fails from the beginning as the norms are so unreachable. From the beginning Oscar is forced under these Dominican cultural restraints telling him how he should be and how he differs.

Throughout the novel Oscar shows up short of the Dominican expectations of being a lady's man: "Anywhere else his triple-zero batting average with the ladies might have passed without comment, but 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" (p. 24). Through this quotation, the ability of being able to "pull women" specifically in the Dominican culture is important. It states that maybe in other cultures, no one would take notice of Oscar's "triple-zero batting average." When a player hits a homerun or when a Dominican man gets all the women, he has value and machismo. In Oscar's case because he gets no women, he has struck out and thus having no value. He was suppose to be "Atomic Level G" meaning he was suppose to be on another level with women. He was suppose to be "pulling bitches with both hands." Diaz uses this language to show how causal or easy it should be for Oscar to find a girlfriend. This quotation again reaffirms the expectation or the norm Oscar is expected to live up to.

Because Oscar did not live up to the stereotypical norm, he is later regarded as not being Dominican at all. "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" (p. 49). For another person to deprive one of their own ethnic identity because they do not match the ideal they had in mind is incredibly cruel. The white kids treated Oscar very special "with inhuman cheeriness" because they knew he was not like the other Dominicans. They felt bad for him so they treated him special. As for the kids of color, they did the opposite. They examined the way he moved and the way he spoke as something that was different and not typical of the Dominicans they knew. Because of this, they removed him from being Dominican altogether. They even accused Oscar to his face, "You're not Dominican." Just imagine the immense pain and rejection Oscar has from being denied his own ethnicity because he is different. Junot Diaz uses the Spanish at the end to try to show Oscar trying to reaffirm his Dominican identity because he is doubted. Through the use of Spanish, it also slows the pacing, revealing the pain Oscar felt and thus feeling to need to reaffirm his Dominicanity.

Just like Oscar, Lola is too accused of not being a true Dominican. Lola is criticized for not being the perfect Dominican daughter. Lola is expected to do all the chores and be ever obedient to her mother. From an early age Lola learns what is expected of her: "From ages two to thirteen I believed her and because I believed her I was the perfect hija. I was the one cooking, cleaning, doing the wash, buying groceries, writing letters to the bank to explain why a house payment was going to be late, translating...I stayed at home and made sure Oscar was fed and that everything ran right while she was at work...You're my hija, she said, that's what you're supposed to be doing." (p.56). As a Dominican girl, Lola's value was in being there for her mother. When Lola states that she "believed" she was the perfect daughter, it is the past tense

showing that she now thinks otherwise. The author Diaz makes sure to include an extensive list of all the chores and what all Lola was suppose to complete at the ages of only two to thirteen. Lola was expected of so much for her age and it is truly an unreal expectation. Lola's mother also regards all she does as just doing "what she is suppose to do," as her Dominican daughter. It is a Dominican expectation to run the household which is why Lola's mother is neither appreciative nor sympathetic towards Lola.

Lola goes on to further explain this cultural norm and what it means to her: "You don't know the hold our mothers have on us, even the ones that are never around—especially the ones that are never around. What it's like to be the perfect Dominican daughter, which is just a nice way of saying a perfect Dominican slave" (p. 55). Lola feels "a hold" of obligation towards her mother and a sense of pressure in being perfect. When she states "especially the ones that are never around" she is referring to the guilt she holds. Guilt in the pressure to be there for Oscar while Beli is not and guilt in her mother working hard which sets the ideal. She compares being a Dominican daughter to being a slave. This shows the extreme strain and complement Lola feels towards all these obligations. There is a sense of resentment she has towards her mom, being born Dominican, and being a daughter.

Just as Lola dislikes the norms being pushed upon her, Marji from the novel *Persepolis* too finds the new norms put upon her troubling. "And then suddenly in 1980.. All bilingual schools must be closed down. They are symbols of capitalism. *Bravo. What wisdom!* Of decadence. This is called a cultural revolution. We found yourselves veiled and separated from our friends" (p. 4). This quote introduces us to the world Marji is in and the new cultural norms put upon her country and herself. All western items are now seen as symbols of capitalism and

decadence. She is now forced to wear a veil and be separated from her friends due to gender. Author Satrapi uses sarcasm and witt to show her true feelings, she is mocking the new norms with the quotations “What Wisdom!” and “Bravo.” Just as this regime was destined to cause revolt, so were the new norms pressed upon Marji and her peers.

Due to this new regime, Marji was forced to start dressing accordingly. Marji is told exactly what to wear according to Islam’s new tradition. “You! Stop! They were guardians of the revolution, the Women’s branch. This group had been added in 1982, to arrest women who were improperly veiled. (like me, for example.) Their job was to put us back on the straight and narrow by explaining the duties of muslim women (p. 132-133). Marji is confronted face to face with how she is expected to dress due to her religion and where she lives. The Women’s Branch is forcing her to dress the way they see fit. They are critiquing her because it does not match their set norms. They explained to her what the usual duties of muslim women were and how she must follow them to strict accord. Using the words “straight and narrow”, Marji is using a double meaning to really tell their etiquette is narrow minded. One of the women state, “Lower your scarf, you little whore!” (p. 133). This statement is so ironic because although these women are all about tradition and religion, they use horrible cuss words to insult Marji. Because Marji has not conformed to the “traditional muslim girl” she is insulted and attacked.

Just as Marji has faced oppression from her government so has Anne in *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Anne Frank and her family are forced to go into hiding from the Nazis because they are Jewish. The norm pressed upon Anne and other Jewish people during this time was for them to be unshakably scared and sad. “I hear nothing but this sort of talk the whole day long, invasion

and nothing but invasion, arguments about suffering from hunger, dying, bombs, fire extinguishers, sleeping bags, Jewish vouchers, poisonous gases, etc, etc” (p. 149). All of the news they hear is about the execution and torture of the Jewish people. Anne makes sure to list all of the news and talk she hears to show the audience just how extensive it is. Hitler's regime is aiming to invoke total fear and sadness by sharing this news amongst the Jewish people, to the point they will turn themselves in. Anne realizes this new invoked norm for the Jewish people and acknowledges it by stating, “None of it is exactly cheering” (p. 149). Anne is using sarcasm to take off the heavy weight that the messages hold.

Anne goes on to further explain how she is always told of who she is and how she is suppose to act. “We have been pointedly reminded that we are in hiding, that we are Jews in chains, chained to one spot, without any rights but with a thousand duties.... Who has inflicted this upon us? Who has set made us Jews different from all other people? Who has allowed us to suffer so terribly up till now?” (p. 207). Because of the era of Hitler, Anne is told because you are a Jew you are expected to be in torment and suffer. Frank uses the word “pointedly” to show just how critically they are told you are a Jew therefore you are suppose to be in hiding. She reminds us she is “chained to one spot” demonstrating that Germans believe Jewish people are like criminals therefore they deserve to be treated like such. Anne asks many questions knowing she will not receive answers to show just how confused she is in why people would do such horrible acts to people just because they are Jewish. She asks “Who, Who and Who?” because she is looking for one person to blame for all the suffering and for Jewish expectation pushed upon her.

While all characters are forced with a harmful cultural or religious norm, all characters cope and react differently with the pressure to assimilate. Oscar falls under the pressure of aiming to be the “perfect Dominican male” by attempting suicide. Lola rejects being a “perfect Dominican daughter” and Marji also rejects “being a traditional Muslim girl.” Lola and Marji both rebel by turning to identify with the rock scene. Both seen as unacceptable in their cultures. Anne Frank copes with all the harm forced upon her people with hope and believing there is still good. She escapes her situation through writing in her diary.

Oscar was the complete opposite of ideal Dominican male by being overweight, into comic books, sci-fi, and fantasy movies. “To my virginity! Oscar shouted” (p. 189). Oscar is at the point where he knows everyone teases him, so he begins to make a joke of himself which complete loss of self respect. Ultimately Oscar deals with never being able to attain the expectations of a Dominican male by attempting suicide. “Wishing he’d been born in a different body. Reviewing his miserable life....The train was nearer now, and so, before he could lose his courage, he threw himself down into the darkness” (p. 190). Because of this cultural expectation being pressed on Oscar and not being able to fulfill that, he feels he has no worth. To the extreme to where he wishes he were born with a different body. All of this pressure explodes when Oscar decides to jump. Oscar is clearly overwhelmed and depressed, he reviews all the torment before he decides to jump. This truly shows the consequences of pressing such harmful norms on an individual.

Lola copes differently with the pressure of the being the ideal Dominican daughter through her outrageous appearance and getting involved in the punk rock scene. “A punk chick.

That's what I became” (p.54). Lola changes her whole image by cutting her hair and turning punk knowing it will disappoint her mom. Diaz uses two brief sentences to show the immense change the punk rock look brought her. Diaz uses the word “became” to truly show the total evolution of her new look. Lola later describes the impact her punk look had on her relationship with her mother. “It was that feeling I had, that my life was waiting for me on the other side, that made me fearless. When she threw away my Smiths and Sisters of Mercy posters—Aquí yo no quiero maricones [I do not want queers here]—I bought replacements. When she threatened to tear up my new clothes, I started keeping them in my locker and at Karen’s house” (p. 57). Lola talks about the feelings of rebellion that made her feel alive and “fearless.” Taken on the punk rock look was a the total act of defiance against her mother, Lola knows there is no going back. Lola is relentless in also maintaining her new look by continuing to buy poster replacements and holding her clothes. Her mother harshly insults her by saying in spanish she wants no queers around, while she may know Lola is not queer, she is insulting her by saying she looks it. Through the use of language, we can tell Lola is purposely defying her mother and defying the norm of the ideal Dominican daughter.

In the graphic novel Persepolis, Marji rebels the new conforms of being a traditional Muslim girl through both protest and being into the rock scene even though Western items are prohibited. To show her separation and disapproval from the traditional Islamic state, Marji decides to protest. “When I finally understood the reasons for the revolution I made my decision. Tomorrow we are going to demonstrate. *We are not allowed!* Don’t worry! We are going anyway!” (p 38). This is an important quotation because it shows Marji has come to a decision about what she thinks about the revolution. As a child, she was very confused about what to

make of it all but here she has realized her belief. Even though she knows she is not suppose to be protesting, she believes in it so much she willing to risk getting in trouble with her parents and getting hurt. Through the short simple sentences, it shows how easy her decision was for her to revolt and how affirmed she is.

To further distinguish herself she chooses to become apart of the Western Rock scene. “I put my posters up in my room. I put m 1983 nikes on. And my denim jacket with the Michael Jackson Button, and of course, my headscarf” (p. 131). The illustrations show how happy and proud Marji is too have found her identity. The first panel shows Marji rocking out to music as she hangs her posters. The images really help show her total immersion into becoming a rocker. Through these notions of wearing westernized clothing she is defying the cultural norm set out for her. She is choosing to abandon that traditional Islamic woman ideal by embracing Western music and clothing. At the end of the passage, she states “and of course my head scarf” to form a distinguishment between what she is choosing to wear versus what is forced to wear.

In *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Anne is overwhelmed the news of the persecution of her Jewish people. Yet instead of conforming to the Nazi’s wishes to make her afraid and sad, Anne remains hopeful for her future and escapes through her diary. “I can shake off everything as I write; my sorrows disappear, my courage is reborn. But, and that is the great question, will I ever be able to write anything great, will I ever become a journalist or a writer? I hope so, oh, I hope so very much, for I can recapture everything when I write, my thoughts, my ideals and my fantasies” (p. 197). Despite her whole situation she in, Anne is still able to find a refuge and hold hope for her future. Her writing is an act of rejecting the Jewish norm pressed upon her to just be a prisoner and have no say. Through her writing, she can articulate her feelings and her true

identity can arise. Anne also “can shake everything off” through her writing, all of the painful things she hears she is able to get rid of. She realizes the power writing has for her and the courage it brings forth. The language she uses when she writes “I hope so, oh, I hope so very much” shows the immense hope and aspiration she holds inside her heart for the future.

Through all the characters experiences, we see the harm caused by being pressed under such strict cultural and religious norms. It is especially difficult for adolescents as they are still navigating their own identities. So when they are told, they have to behave in a certain manner, they either respond by aspiring to that ideal or through complete rejection of it. Through Oscar’s character, he is given the high and unrealistic expectation being a ladies man and playboy. Yet because he is different, he gets denied of his identity of being Dominican altogether. Due to this torture and not being able to live up this norm, Oscar attempts suicide. Through Lola’s character, she is expected to be the ideal Dominican daughter who puts up with her mother and does all the housework. Lola copes with this norm by rejecting it completely and defying her mom through her punk rock appearance. Lola would not have to turn to such drastic measures if this norm was not pressed upon her. Through Marji’s character, she grows up during the Islamic revolution and is then forced to conform to ideal of being a traditional Islamic girl. Marji defies the tradition by protesting in adult protests and turning to western rock music. Marji would not have to put herself at risk in the protests had it not been for the norm pressed upon her. Through Anne Frank, we see the reality of persecuting and silencing a certain group. Anne Frank grew up in Holland during the Nazi invasion and was expected to be sad and silenced. Anne’s true act of defiance was through her writing and hope she had for herself. Writing gave her the courage to persevere.

Through the forcing of these norms, people are given the chance to either persist and find their true selves or give up and fall victim to them. If we all embrace the fact that we are different and unique, we would not expect one to hold on to unattainable norms. Just because one does possess that cultural, religious, or ethnic expectation does not make them any less valuable.