

Machismo vs. Marianismo in “Ysreal” and “Never Marry a Mexican”

In Sandra Cisnero’s “Never Marry a Mexican” and Junot Diaz’s “Ysreal” The strict gender roles and expectations of Latinx culture are reflected through the storylines of both narrators and their inner monologues. The strict stereotypes surrounding gender and sexuality greatly impact the ways that both characters interact with members of both the same sex as well as the opposite sex throughout their respective stories. These gender roles are very present in Latinx culture, and both authors being members of this community greatly impacted how they molded their characters throughout their writing.

In Latinx culture, the trend “machismo” is often used to describe men that reflect the specific masculine personality features that are held in high regard- by women as well as men. The term “machismo” was first used in Mexico but spread to Latin America as well and encompasses the “Patriarchal expressions of ‘courage, generosity, and stoicism’”. However, machismo can also be seen in negative characteristics that “comprise a ‘cult of virility’ in which the ‘chief characteristics... are exaggerated aggressiveness and intransigence in male-to-male interpersonal relationships, and arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships’” (England, 68). While the first characteristics were once associated with machismo,

unfortunately with time the phrase has become more often associated with the latter behavior. These characteristics are seen heavily throughout Junot Diaz's "Ysreal", both in the ways that the Rafa speaks about women, Rafa and Yunior's relationship, and the relationship they have with Ysreal.

The machismo of Rafa is first seen when he is describing what he plans to do as soon as he and Yunior return home to Santo Domingo at the end of the summer. Rafa says "When I get home, I'm going to go crazy- chinga all my girls and then chinga everyone else's" (Diaz, 4). An important detail is that at this time, Rafa is only twelve years old and is already speaking about sleeping with girls, and not just one girl but as many as he can. This reflects his thoughts of women simply being objects for men, especially denoting the difference between "his girls" and "everyone else's", as if these girls are property. Rafa spoke of his different interactions with women in great detail to his younger brother, who was only nine, and Yunior listened even though he said he "was too young to understand most of what he said, but I listened to him anyway, in case these things might be useful in the future" (Diaz, 6). Despite being only nine, and being aware that he didn't understand a lot of what his older brother was saying, Yunior listened intently to the way that Rafa described these relationships he had with different girls in a very graphic way. Another source touches on the idea of machismo, and how the term is used to describe Latino men and "their masculinity as consisting of sexual prowess, infidelity, violence, aggression, dominant and sexualized behaviors, and especially relating to the control of women (Liang et. al., 202). This further reflects the deep roots machismo culture has in the lives of these two boys, and is a commentary on the deeper roots of this culture throughout Latinx countries and communities.

Rafa and Yunior also have a relationship very indicative of the machismo culture, as Yunior even says that when they are back home in the Capitol he and Rafa “fought so much that [their] neighbors took to smashing broomsticks over [them] to break it up” (Diaz, 5). As previously mentioned, machismo culture greatly impacts male-to-male relationships, as well as making latinx men more aggressive which can be seen in how the two boys are known for fighting to the point that neighbors have to intervene. The relationship between the two boys is also reflected in the way that they speak to each other, especially how Rafa speaks to Yunior and how both boys speak about Ysreal. After running from the fee collector on the bus, Yunior begins to cry, and Rafa says “You..are a pussy. What the hell’s the matter with you?”. After apologizing and attempting to collect himself, Rafa then tells Yunior “If you can’t stop crying, I’ll leave you” (Diaz, 13). At this point, Yunior is only nine years old, and so it is very understandable that after running from an authority figure he is noticeably upset, however in latinx culture where they value masculinity, crying as a man is unacceptable at any age. When the two boys speak about Ysreal they often focus on how he is ugly and weak for being attacked by a pig, the reader being first introduced to the character of Ysreal with Yunior being told “That’s Ysreal! He’s *ugly* and he’s got a cousin around here but we don’t like him either. And that face of his would make you *sick!*” (Diaz, 8). The boys even go as far as breaking a bottle on his head, simply because he was weaker than them and thus they decided he was worth less than they were.

While machismo is related to men in latinx culture, women are expected to uphold the ideals of Marianismo. Marianismo is defined as “the supposed ideal of true femininity that

women are supposed to live up to” which includes being modest, virtuous, and sexually abstinent until marriage- and then being subordinate to their husbands. The idea emphasizes “the role of women as family- and home centered; it encourages passivity, self-sacrifice, and chastity” (Nuñez). Unlike in Junot Diaz’s “Ysreal”, in “Never Marry a Mexican” Sandra Cisneros flips the idea of marianismo on its head by providing a character who has found meaning outside of these ideals women are meant to uphold in latinx culture, while grappling with the longing to be wanted by a man. The main character of “Never Marry a Mexican” even says “I’ve never married and never will. Not because I couldn’t, but because I’m too romantic for marriage. Not a man exists who hasn’t disappointed me” (Cisneros, 179). This acknowledges the fact that women are meant to serve their husbands, and shows the reader that the reason the narrator is unable to marry is because she has been “the other woman” so many times that she has lost faith in the idea. All she knows is husbands and boyfriends who are not loyal, which seems unfair since as a wife she would be expected to be subservient to her husband while he most likely sleeps with other women. Unlike in Ysreal, Clemencia does not wish to abide by the standards set by their culture. She even says people “invite me to their parties, have me decorate the lawn like an exotic orchid for hire”. Clemencia then describes the way that she scattered gummy bears around the belongings of her lover’s wife’s home, in places only she would find. Despite separating herself from the typical characteristics of marianismo culture by lacking the typical meekness and subservience, she still longs to be with a man- specifically her lover.

The ideals of marianismo culture becomes even more overturned through the rest of the actions by the narrator, including the many phone calls she made, while her lover was in bed with his wife. After one phone call she even says “So. What do you think? Are you convinced

I'm as crazy as a tulip or a taxi? As vagrant as a cloud?" and in her inner monologue she says her lover "answered the phone, and startled [her] away like a bird. And now you're probably swearing under your breath and going back to sleep, with that wife beside you" (Cisneros, 188). Clemencia refuses to present the meek and docile persona that is so expected of women in her culture, instead being arguably pushy in the pursuit of the man she wants. In contrast to the machismo culture which results in violence if taken to an extreme, mariанизmo behaviors attempt to dull the personality of a woman to make her a better accessory for men, thus allowing the violence to continue for longer. Clemencia refuses to fall into this trap of providing for her husband and allowing the macho man she is married to disrespect her and sleep with other women, in the way that she did for so long. Furthering the idea of her lack of desire to fit into the mariанизmo box, Clemencia owned her promiscuity, having said she slept with multiple married men before her lover, something that is incredibly frowned upon in a culture that values a woman's virtue at the time of marriage (The Latin Studies Handbook).

While Rafa and Yunior wish to be known for their "machismo", Clemencia of "Never Marry a Mexican" refuses to lay down and accept disrespect from a man. So much so, that she refuses to marry because she would be expected to behave like a wife for a man that she doesn't trust to be loyal to her. The two stories provide differing perspectives on the latinx culture from a male and female perspective, through Rafa and Yunior wanting so badly to be seen as macho and manly, and Clemencia who refused to mold herself to mariанизmo. The stark contrast allows for the reader to see how this culture has impacted both men and women in society, on a much deeper level than just how people act, but how they think as well.

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