

Fragmented
masculinity: a critical
analysis of Junot
Díaz's *Drown*



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The effects and significance of unequal powers between males and females appearing in literature has been a popular topic in literary criticism. While a universal way of reading texts from a gender approach is yet to be defined. Kimmel, Hearn & Connell (2005) argued that all literary texts involving characters show a certain degree of the author's supports to either masculinity or femininity. This essay adopts the definitions of masculinity and fragmented masculinity proposed by Gardiner (2005), Hofstede (1998) and Whitehead (2002); and argues that *Drown* written by Junot Diaz portrays the idea of fragmented masculinity. This paper first defines fragmented masculinity. Then, the significance of the absent father figures of protagonists; and the protagonists' objection towards feminine behaviors as reflected in *Ysrael*, *Aguantando*, *No Face* and *Edison, New Jersey* will be featured.

The concept of fragmented masculinity was first coined by Whitehead which refers to a male's misinterpretations and failure to achieve wholeness of masculinity (Whitehead, 2002). Masculinity in literary context refers to the description and enforcement of confined roles and identities of male in the text (Gardiner, 2005; Hofstede, 1998). It includes emphasis of possession of qualities, or characteristics considered typical of or appropriate to a man. Argued by Gardiner (2005), it is a social construction but not an in-born one. Different males have to construct their own masculinity throughout their lives based on their own cultures and others' perceptions so to form part of their own identity. It implies that the concept of masculinity may vary from one place to another. When males fail to discover or construct the commonly accepted masculinity, this will lead to fragmentation of masculinity. They

cannot fully recognize and understand the identities and roles of being a man. In many situations, they will show a heavy reliance of father figures, strong objection to any feminist idea and abnormal violent actions to show case their masculinity in an abnormal way. But these are just fragments instead of a true masculine wholeness which only serves as a kind of psychological compensation (Reeser, 2010).

The text's portrayal of fragmented masculinity can be discussed in two aspects. First, characters in *Drown* rely heavily on their father figures to learn about masculinity. In Ysrael, it tells the tragic story of the narrator, later revealed as Yunior; and his older brother, Rafa. Both their father and mother have been absent in the story leading to Yunior and Rafa being left behind. Without sufficient parental guidance, the two boys bullied Ysrael whose face was mangled by a pig when he was an infant. He has long been wearing a mask and to know what is behind it, Rafa plans to take off his mask. At the moment when Yunior remains unknown to Rafa's plan, there is a conversation with Ysrael in a kite field. " We couldn't find it, Rafa said. How stupid are you? Where did you get that? I asked. Nueva York, he said. From my father. No shit! Our father's there too! I shouted" The captioned conversation reveals that survival of the entire family can be highly dependent upon fathers. Argued by Gardiner (2005), males will assume a role model as the basis while constructing masculinity; and presence of father figure is an important element for a full construction. But in the captioned scenario, their father's abandonment has caused the absence of father figures in their lives which have led to fragmented masculinity. This is portrayed by their cruelty on Ysrael at a later scene.

In a later story *Aguantando*, we can find that the protagonist even have negative views towards their father. “ when Abuelo was around (and awake)he talked to me about the good old days, when a man could still make a living from his finca, when the United States wasn’t some-thing people planned on” “ he was the soldier in the photo. He was a cloud of cigar smoke, the traces of which could still be found on the uniforms he’d left behind”. In such a limited closet when their father cannot be a role model in their minds, the main power and force shifting their masculinity becomes a responsibility of their peers. To fulfill their desires of being a man, they can only rely on a collective vision of masculinity as there has been nothing for them to follow. Sadly in many cases, it becomes a kind of hyper-masculinity (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005). Hyper-masculinity is a key consequence of absence of father figure as they can only be extremely cruel and selfish to maintain their social status and masculinity among their peers. This happens throughout the entire novel: in *Ysrael*, the males bully Yrael; in *Aguantando*, they show a tremendous desire of protagonists for girls. “ I’m going to go crazy—chinga all my girls and then chinga everyone else’s” Lack of masculinity finally leads to an overwhelming masculinity. They have no way but to over-exert masculinity on others who are weaker than them, on girls who are regarded as fragile so to maintain a kind of psychological compensation (Newkirk, 2002). This is a way for them to prove their own existences in the world. On the other hand, it also demonstrates their prolonged oppressions over society through their expressions of patriarchal privilege in which they have been lacking of. Riofrio (2003) argued this as a way of Diaz allowance for us “ to consider Rafa as a stand-in for the

hegemonizing process of masculinity”, though at last it fails and remains a misinterpreted and fragmented masculinity.

The second argument falls on the protagonists’ strong reluctance to femininity. In the novel, empathy, as a feminine act, is being portrayed as dangerous and problematic. In Edison, New Jersey, the narrator makes a conscious decision not to empathize when faced with his partner Wayne’s desire to commit adultery: “ I really want to pile her, he tells me. Maybe on one of the Madisons. Man, I say, cutting my eyes towards him. Don’t you have a wife or something? He gets quiet. I’d still like to pile her, he says defensively. And what will that do? Why does it have to do anything? Twice this year Wayne’s cheated on his wife and I’ve heard it all, the before and the after. Wayne can be a moody guy and this is one of those nights; he slouches in the driver’s seat and swerves through traffic, riding other people’s bumpers like I’ve told him not to do. I don’t need a collision or a four-hour silent treatment so I try to forget that I think his wife is good people and ask him if Charlene’s given him any signals. He slows the truck down. Signals like you wouldn’t believe, he says.” The narrator initially shows his empathy to Wayne’s wife. However, with the story’s progression, empathy brings negative consequences. At last, the narrator sacrifices Wayne’s wife for a peaceful work-day making her the victim of this rejection of empathy. Such victimization of women is closely related to their association as empathetic and feminine beings. Showing empathy can possibly diminish the existing masculinity of the narrator which he has lacked of (Martin & Finn, 2010). Their daily struggles to avoid any possible

feminine nature in their life can also be seen as a significant part to craft their own masculinity so they tend not to be emphatic.

From another perspective, masculinity is in fact fragile in their minds. In a scene of another story No Face when Ysrael is bullied by his peers, there says: “ We’re going to make you a girl, the fat one says and he can hear the words echoing through the meat of the fatboy’s body. He wants to breathe but his lungs are as tight as pockets. You ever been a girl before? I betcha he hasn’t. It ain’t a lot of fun.” Assault of Ysrael is made more terrifying by the threat of rape. Action of raping here suggests an implied meaning that the boys who are threatening Ysrael can equally be raped suggesting their underneath weaknesses (Jayasena, 2007). A similar scenario in the opening story Ysrael, there shows a similar sign of the protagonists’ reluctance to empathy. “ Where did you get that? I asked, Nueva York, he said. From my father. No shit! Our father’s there too! I shouted, I looked at Rafa, who, for an instant, frowned. What the hell are you wearing that mask for anyway? Rafa asked, I’m sick, Ysrael said. It must be hot. Not for me. Don’t you take it off? Not until I get better, I’m going to have an operation soon. You better watch out for that, Rafa said. Those doctors will kill you faster than the Guardia.....” This conversation reveals Yuniór’s initial understanding to empathy and his eagerness to be emphatic. Yuniór shows his empathy through his words of caring like “ It must be hot” and “ Don’t you take it off?”. His empathy reaches a peak point when he abandons his brother’s side in order to catch up with Ysreal who has run ahead of them. “ Are you still into wrestling? I asked. He turned to me and something rippled under the mask. How did you know that? I heard, I said..... The mask twitched, I

realized he was smiling and then my brother brought his arm around and smashed the bottle on top of his head. It exploded, the thick bottom spinning away like a crazed eyeglass and I said. Holy fucking shit.....Roll him on his back, my brother said and we did, pushing like crazy, Rafa took off his mask and threw its pinning into the grass. His left ear was a nub and you could see the thick veined slab of his tongue through a hole in his cheek,,,, The damage looked old but I still jumped back and said. Please Rafa, let's go! Rafa crouched and using only two of his fingers, turned Ysrael's head from side to side." But exactly at this moment, Rafa breaks his continuous silence by bringing the bottle crashing down on the unsuspecting Ysrael. Arguably the most powerful part in the novel (Riofrio, 2003), this scene implies a tragic fact that Ysrael is unable to maintain his empathy in his community, but to be a cruel man to maintain his masculinity so do his social status. However, they can never achieve masculine wholeness as they never have a full understanding of the concept of masculinity, what has left is a fragmented masculinity full of misinterpretations and misunderstandings.

In the captioned analysis, there argues Junot Diaz's *Drown* portrays the idea of fragmented masculinity. The two aforementioned arguments have well supported the thesis. In fact, the notion of gender is common in Junot Diaz's writing (Jarrett & Delgadillo, 2010). Reading of his text may follow the approach as suggested in this essay, which shall be able to give us a better understanding of his writing and himself.

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