

Reyita book review essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Reyita tells the story of Maria de los Reyes Castillo Bueno, a black Cuban woman living through several pivotal moments in Cuban history as a member of perhaps the most disenfranchised group of people in Cuban society; Reyita was poor, she was black, and she was a woman. The story begins with a recounting of the story of Tatica, Reyita's grandmother, and her trial of being abducted from her native Africa and brought to Cuba to be sold into slavery. Tatica's story sets a precedent that is upheld by the next generations of her family of racial discrimination, struggle for survival and equality, and political activism.

Reyita explains that her grandmother's love of Africa instilled in Reyita a passion for visiting her grandmother's homeland that led her to join Marcus Garvey's movement to send black people back to Africa, and her role in this movement inspires her desire for equality and social advancement, although she contradictorily advances her family through means of 'whitening'.

Reyita was born into a large family of mixed origin and color. Reyita, however, was the blackest of her mother's children, and as a result faced racial discrimination within her own family.

She recounts that her mother was embarrassed by her, cruel to her, and always more affectionate with her lighter-skinned siblings. Reyita also recounts her mother's personal struggle, with almost constant instability and movement from place to place, looking for work, and putting trust in numerous different men, only to have them either prove not to be deserving of Isabel's trust and affection, or to leave one day and never return. Reyita briefly discusses Isabel's mother-in-law, who was also involved in political activism, but more importantly, lived without discriminating based on color.

Mamacita was in a relationship with a white man for thirty-seven years, and Reyita reminisces about her warmth and love, saying that her life would have been very different had she lived with Mamacita instead of numerous different relatives, where she is always made to work. Reyita's next exposure to political activism and its potential power of destruction came when she was living with her aunt, Manga, who was the president of the Committee of Ladies for the Independent Coloured Party.

Manga participates and helps with the movement, only to have her shop burned to the ground, her life threatened, and then after she flees, she is found and arrested and sent to prison. Reyita is exposed to this sort of injustice throughout her entire life, due to her repeated close proximity to political leaders and activists. Reyita also faces race-based injustice and discrimination in her social life. This comes primarily in the form of her marriage. Reyita marries a white man, named Rubiera, which is seems was always an aspiration or plan of hers.

She says “ I didn't want a black husband, not out of contempt for my race, but because black men had almost no possibilities of getting ahead and the certainty of facing lots of discrimination” (p. 166). Unfortunately, Reyita's marriage to Rubiera did not help her much in her struggle for survival and equality. Although Rubiera always had a job, the family still had to move around frequently, and Reyita often had to find ways to make extra money. Reyita's main goal throughout her life is to make a better life for her children, which is why she resigns herself to being “ just a mother”.

All of her children survive, except for her sons who are killed in conflicts, and although Rubiera was sometimes cold and restrictive to Reyita, he is warm and loving to her children. In her desire to better her children's life, Reyita submits herself almost completely to her husband, although she eventually has a feminist "awakening" when she joins the Popular Socialist Party. Ultimately, Reyita learns that Rubiera is not in actuality her husband, because he never got their marriage formalized.

Eventually, despite Rubiera's betrayal, Reyita is able to find bits of happiness in her 118-person family and her material goods that she purchases herself, as well as her "spiritual riches". In the beginning of the book Reyita says that now she is happy enough and surrounded by so much love that she wants to live to be 100, a statement that she reinforces at the story's close. Part II: Thematic Analysis Race and Gender interacted in interesting ways throughout Reyita's story and in Cuban Society at the time.

To me, it seemed that there were times that it was unclear whether Reyita was being discriminated against because she was black or because she was a woman, or whether it was a mixture of the two. Reyita herself does not think less of herself for being a woman or for being black, although she lives in a society that does think less of her, and that stigmatizes and disenfranchises her for both of those qualities. Reyita is very unique in that she undergoes a transformation during her marriage, which changes her views about herself and her place in her household.

In the beginning of her marriage, Reyita accepts Rubiera's harsh restrictions on her social life and her independence, and is submissive and obedient to

him. At one point she describes putting his socks on for him while he lies in bed, saying that she volunteers for this sort of task and does it willingly.

Reyita and her husband's perception of her gender changes, however, when she becomes involved with the socialist party and becomes a breadwinner for her family in her own way.

She says that Rubiera guaranteed that he could pay for things that were considered his responsibility as the man of the house, but anything else Reyita had to pay for herself. A specific example she gives is that she raised money on her own to pay to have electricity installed in the house, so that she could buy and operate a radio. Reyita says that with the purchase of the radio, she disrupted “ the tradition of submission to the man of the house” (p. 145). Despite Reyita's personal feminist victories, I found it interesting that there still seemed to be evidence of gender-based discrimination in her life.

For example, when Reyita becomes a member of an organization that works to promote equality not only between white and black Cubans, but also between men and women, there is evidence of enforcement of traditional gender roles in her work there. Reyita does exclusively ‘ women's work’ for the organization, holding bakesales and parties, making food, cleaning, and working as a dressmaker. It seems that the organization contradicts itself and its desire to have equality by assigning women to do unequal work as a means of helping the cause.