

Unfaithful and Visible Translator in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

Yuanli Yin^{1,*}

¹*School of International Studies, Shaanxi Normal University, Xi'an, Shaanxi 710061, China*

^{*}*Corresponding author. Email: yvonneyuanliyini@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Diaz's role as a migrant bilingual writer has raised extensive discussion on multilingualism and transnationalism through his translingual writing. Meanwhile, his narrator Yunior disguises as an unfaithful and visible translator to conduct subtle manipulation on language, through which the issue of colonialism, race, blackness, whiteness is neatly weaved into this novel. This essay explores the potential for Yunior as a translator; it then looks to Yunior's efforts on penetrating the superficial familial story to the Dominican Republican national trauma; his role as a translator also allows Yunior to discuss dreams and memory even blankness in the novel, which conveys much wordless critique on racism and colonialism.

Keywords: *translator, blackness, Junot Diaz, race*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Multilingualism and Transnationalism in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* have raised overwhelming discussions on their exotic idioms, sci-fi languages, and fusion of Spanish and English. These manipulations of language not only highlight Junot Diaz's identity as an immigrant writer but also throw readers into linguistic illusion since the authentic multilingual materials have already been mediated or, in other words, been translated by the narrator Yunior who also secretly carries his own political agenda on race, totalitarianism, and colonialism. As a result, Yunior is unfaithful to the original emphasis of the individual story by breaking the curse of "the invisibility of the translator" through his obvious linguistic manipulation.

2. YUNIOR AS A TRANSLATOR

In *Oscar Wao*, Oscar's family story is not honestly retold but rather translated by Yunior because of its multilingualism. Oscar's grandmother La Inca speaks Dominican Spanish due to the previous colonialization; Oscar's mother Belicia speaks English and Spanish as a Dominican immigrant; Oscar and Oscar's sister Lola, born in American, might just speak English despite their Dominican background according to a psychological study of immigration and the minority:

Ordinarily, we assume that when children acquire a second language, they add it to their primary language, and the result is bilingualism. But in the case of most present-day immigrant children, the learning of English is a subtractive process, with English quickly displacing and replacing the primary language in young first-generation immigrants.

The result is that few immigrant children become bilinguals today by learning English [1].

The second generation of immigrants in America tends to use English almost exclusively in order to be absorbed by the majority and to prevent discrimination. Oscar and Lola, suffering much from school violence as Dominican Americans, are reasonable to be assumed as non-bilingual speakers. To sum up, the original stories of Oscar's family are individually narrated in different languages. And Yunior, as an overall narrator, "translates" their multilingual stories into one language which is a fusion of English and Spanish. Besides, Yunior's personal 'color' of Trujillo's regime has also deliberately added into the colorful linguistic palette that Yunior has evenly mixed. Thus, Yunior is both unfaithful and visible with his linguistic and subjective erasure through translation.

Yunior's unfaithfulness and visibility define him as a neo-translator who reconstructs and re-organizes the original, giving the original an afterlife. In modern linguistics, perfect translation is hardly possible because there are always subtle discrepancies in the connotation of different languages for "language is not a nomenclature"[2]. On a similar note, Walter Benjamin [3] suggests that the task of a translator is to bring the afterlife of the original: "For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change". Bella Brodzik [4] further explains this "afterlife" suggesting that "in an act of identification that is not imitation, translation hearkens back to the original or source text and elicits what might otherwise remain recessed or unarticulated, enabling the source text to live beyond itself, to exceed its own limitations" (2). Therefore, by capturing what has been silenced back on the stage, the task of translator is to excavate the past, leaving the original to be reconfigured as the pretext. Yunior in *Oscar Wao* also encourages readers to penetrate through the superficial familial

tragedy and analyzes the deep national and racial reasons for their sufferings. As a fictional biography of the Abelard family, the very first sentence of the novel is about the fuku: "They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved...fuku—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World" [5]. Yuniór, as a translator, seals eye-catching words like "Africa", "enslaved", "Curse", and "Doom of New World" at the beginning, alluring readers to figure out his riddles and accept his colonialism setting. On top of that, the first note of *Oscar Wao* points to the dictator Trujillo: "...Trujillo, one of the twentieth century's most infamous dictators, ruled the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1961 with an implacable ruthless brutality"[5]. Yuniór gains the initiative to define Trujillo as evil and the haunting of fuku and terror of Trujillo's regime is constantly played as the background music with Oscar's story. Through Translation, Yuniór gives this familial saga an afterlife that the sorrow of Abelard's family can be expanded to other hundreds and thousands of ordinary Dominican Families.

Those dreams and the memory of Oscar and Belicia interpreted by Yuniór can also be regarded as translation. Kathleen Brogan claims that,

We are most accustomed to thinking of translation as an empirical linguistic maneuver, but excavating or unearthing burial sites or ruins in order to reconstruct traces of the physical and textual past in a new context is also a mode of translation, just as resurrecting a memory or interpreting a dream are acts of translation[4].

The true intention and feelings always hide in one's memory and dreams, which are the main birthplaces for an afterlife. One can easily disguise or lie but can hardly block the memorial sorrow in the dreams or subconsciousness. In *Oscar Wao*, dreams are both the concentration camp and the shelter for all of them. According to Yuniór, Belicia, Lola, and Oscar are all trapped in the nightmare of the cane field. As long as they prey for the emancipation of fuku, the words of Zafa told by Mongoose or showed in no-face man's book will helplessly disappear before they wake up. Yuniór quotes Lola's word: "you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in" [5]. Even though Belicia refuses to retell her past and Oscar pretends to be brave to his sufferings, the man without face, the mongoose, and the cane fields appearing in their dreams suggest that victims are constantly dialoguing with the past and try to find the cure. Yuniór leaves spaces for readers to interpret the metaphor of these spirits which are obviously related to Dominican trauma.

Similar to Yuniór's manipulation, Maxine Hong Kingston who writes about the experiences of Chinese Americans also translates her mother's "talk story" in *The Woman Warrior*, which according to Bella Brodzki [4] "is a fantastic cosmic drama played out within the parameters of an immigrant family, a parable about the fundamental ambiguity and violence of translation and its power to betray, disarm, and transform inherited, reified cultural scripts". Brodzki claims that "Kingston's self-attribution as an 'outlaw knotmaker', a mythopoetic story-teller...

creates a textual memorial on her own terms and in her own rights" [4]. Likewise, Yuniór has also created a life-sustaining act, a life-empowering moment shared between two generations in an ongoing process of carrying over the past into the present. Therefore, what attracts Yuniór and Kingston is the ethnic history which are broken but cherished, aged but long-lasting, unfamiliar but homey. Even though they spent their whole life to escape from their ethnic sorrow, they constantly drew the spiritual power from it to fight for their community.

3. YUNIOR'S MANIPULATION

Hence, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is not an autobiography of Oscar. Yuniór's manipulation is tricky but obvious.

3.1. The highlight of Trujillo

Yuniór implies that what Oscar has experienced and suffered can be traced back to the fuku inherited from the Abelard family by taking 3/4 of the novel to present Belicia's, Lola's, La Inca's, and Abelard's stories with Trujillo hiding in the footnotes, which successfully transfers this personal story into a national epic. Yuniór implies to readers that Oscar's destiny can even trace back to the first step of Admiral Columbus on Hispaniola on the first page of *Oscar Wao*. Fuku, an emissary of colonization from 1492, creeps on its summit during the regime of Trujillo from the 1930s to the 1960s and has craved into Dominican souls as an inexorable doom. The sense of powerlessness derived from fuku immigrated to the United States with Dominican immigrants. But in Yuniór's story, nobody was cured because the savior never comes; the mongoose never speaks the spell; the answer book is always blank; the United States offers no escape. While unveiling the Abelard's familial tragedy layer by layer, Yuniór pretends to unintentionally point his sword at Trujillo who was responsible for lots of deaths, including between 12,000 and 30,000 Haitians in the infamous Parsley massacre. Since history is always written by the powerful side, Trujillo will definitely describe himself as a Dominican liberator and even won numerous "honors" during his lifetime. But Yuniór, as a translator, grabs his narrative rights to ascribe Oscar's personal failure to his Dominican heritage. Piled with others' trauma through generations, individual narrations gain enough power to counter the authority of Trujillo's "official" narration. Benjamin [3] claims that,

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it actually was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger...the danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era that attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.

In this dangerous moment of recording history, the “nobody” Yuniór takes advantage of his role as a translator to present the violence and tragedies caused by Dominican colonialism and totalitarianism: “...but, friends: it would be hard to exaggerate the power Trujillo exerted over the Dominican people and the shadow of fear he cast throughout the region...[Trujillo] acted like he owned everything and everyone, killed whomever he wanted to kill, sons, brothers, fathers, mothers...”[5] Yuniór invites readers to imagine themselves living in Dominican republic as his “friends” and constantly emphasize the authenticity of his words—this is a “fake” family saga but a “true” documentary of Trujillo. History is no longer “a tool of the ruling classes”, but a sword stabbed in the throat of the “somebody” dictator.

3.2. Plot vacuum

As a language weaver, Yuniór leaves several holes (plot vacuum) on his linguistic fabric for curious readers to spy on the margin between the translation and the original. For example, when Lola and Yuniór sleep together, Yuniór tries to say words that could have saved them, “——— ————. But before I can shape the vowels I wake up. My face is wet, and that’s how you know it’s never going to come true. Never, ever”[5]. This kind of desperation never reduces even when the angel of history comes. It is a consensus for Dominicans that *fuku* will be passed on through their blood to their offsprings, no one can tell the final point of *fuku* because their blackness can never be whitened and their condition can be even worse while Eurocentrism stands on the stage center again. The trauma of coloniality, dictatorship, and diaspora numbed them: “It ain’t too bad, though. During our run-ins we smile, we laugh, we take turns saying her daughter’s name”[5]. The most vicious part Yuniór presents to readers is that Dominican people live a life as you do, with sorrow and happiness, but they are born with *fuku*, a curse stopping them to think about their past and future: “I never ask if her daughter has started to dream. I never mention our past.” The vacuum in their conversation is the incurable scar that everyone can see but no one wants to touch anymore.

When Oscar is beaten and lies in a coma, the Mongoose’s healing spell is replaced by blank dashes: “More, he croaked. ————, said the Mongoose, and then the wind swept him back into darkness”[5]. How long have Dominican people been repeating this vacuum dream to find out the healing spell? At least till now, no one gets the answer. Another example is Belicia’s refusal to recall her experience after abused: “There was such fear, the stickening blood-draining fear of a drawn pistol...such fear, and yet she refused to show it. How she hated these men. For her whole life she would hate them, never forgive, never forgive...”[5] Though Belicia shows her deepest layer of silence to dictatorship. Yuniór seizes her silence: “[Belicia’s silence] got slopped into those containers in which governments store nuclear wastes, triple-sealed by industrial lasers and deposited in the dark, uncharted

trenches of her soul”[5]. As an unfaithful translator, Yuniór betrays his responsibility to tell a fuller story, on the contrary, he catches more silence to show a more accurate and effective story under the dictatorship with unspeakable texts. With Yuniór’s refusal of a full text, the ambiguity leads to an unfixed and unfinished story. What has been hidden or muted behind these inscribed silence? The vacuum left by Yuniór invites readers to imagine the unstated violence and desperation within the Dominican society.

3.3. Uneven texture

Oscar’s family saga is rather Yuniór’s oral interpretation than his formal translation. To portrait Oscar as a sci-fi nerd, Yuniór quotes Oscar’s sci-fi idioms, meanwhile, lots of pop expressions, Spanish slang, and American vernaculars, disguised as Oscar’s words, create the uneven texture of the novel. The lingual mixture implies a mix of identities. Within Dominican society, people are highly categorized by their non-Haitian DNA, skin, and even hair. Yuniór’s ambition, however, is far more than showing the diversity or multilingualism in *Oscar Wao*. He aims to appeal to everyone but abandon them at his language maze. For instance, while sci-fi readers indulge in his brilliant sci-fi idioms, the Spanish slang blocks their smooth reading. Yuniór’s deliberate “choke” words suggest that you can never fully understand the novel just like Dominican people can never find the *Zafa*.

3.4. Visibility of the translator

On top of that, Yuniór’s visibility as a translator is also shifting. While translating the multilingual stories to a fusion language of English and Spanish, Yuniór successfully cheats on readers that he is faithfully retelling these transnational stories. However, no one can ignore the incongruity in Yuniór’s version interspersed with sci-fi terminologies, regional idioms, Spanglish, and created abbreviations.

The visibility of translation fulfills Yuniór’s several intentions: First, the “otherness” of Dominican heritage becomes obvious; Second, the Spanish words challenge the English supremacy in American literature; Third, readers are immediately thrown to the Dominican setting; Fourth, those interruptions of Spanish create a kind of vivid yet mute anger, without breaking the complete meaning of the whole text, for instance, “*Esto aquí es un maldito infierno*” is much more expressive than “This here is a damn hell”[5].

4. CONCLUSION

In Oscar Wao, Yuniór, the unfaithful and visible translator, has fulfilled his task of maintaining national memories in Oscar’s familial stories and even brings them into the

category of world literature by his fusion of Spanish and English. National trauma can never be whitewashed because the bone of history never lies, but how much a bone can recover the appearance of its previous flesh or how much national memory can restore its real history after translation is still a question.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to express my very great appreciation to Professor Sonia Weiner for her helpful and patient guidance in analyzing this novel. By comprehending the novel, she teaches me how to do critical thinking and organize the valuable thinking into an essay. Also many thanks to my supervisor Yuanhui Zheng for his great support and encouragement throughout my study.

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