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## **The Male Identity and Masculinity through Gender Roles in *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier and in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz**

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**Abstract:** *Gender is a problematic issue on which numerous discussions and surveys have been made throughout the centuries. Especially, since more than two hundred years the feminine and masculine roles have been among the main concerns of writers and theorists. However, in time the clear cut differences between female and male roles become more blurred. Actually, the female reactions and feminist movements help the improvements in female life and her value in patriarchal societies. Yet, the male roles and masculinity cannot be erased from social life and they change from culture to culture even from religion to religion. The aim of this paper is to show the male identity and masculinity through the gender roles in Appalachian Society and Dominican society. The main idea of this research is illustrated and supported by the examples from Cold Mountain by Charles Frazier and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Diaz.*

**Keywords:** *Masculinity, Gender Roles, Dominican culture, Appalachian cultures, Patriarchy*


### **Charles Frazier'in Soğuk Savaş ve Junot Diaz'ın *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* Adlı Eserlerinde Cinsiyet Rollerini Üzerinden Eril Kimlik Ve Erillik**

**Öz:** *Cinsiyet, üzerine yüzyıllar boyunca sayısız tartışmanın ve araştırmanın yapıldığı tartışılabilir bir meseledir. Özellikle iki yüzyıldan daha fazladır, dişil ve eril roller yazarların ve kuramcılarının ana konuları arasında yer almaktadır. Ancak zamanla dişil ve eril roller arasındaki bariz farklılıklar keskinliğini kaybetti ve daha belirsiz hale geldi. Aslında, kadın tepkileri ve feminist hareketler kadının ataerkil toplumlardaki yaşayışında ve değerinde gelişmeler sağlanmasına yardımcı oldu. Fakat eril roller ve erkeklik algısı kültürden kültüre hatta dinden dine bile değişirken sosyal hayattan kaldırılması söz konusu dahi olamaz. Bu makalenin amacı Apalaş ve Dominik toplumlarındaki cinsiyet rollerini üzerinden eril kimlik ve erkeklik algısını ele almaktır. Makalenin ana fikri Charles Frazier'in Soğuk Dağ ve Junot Diaz'ın *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* adlı eserlerinden örneklerle aydınlatılıp desteklenmektedir.*


**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Erillik, Cinsiyet Rollerini, Dominik ve Apalaş Kültürleri, Ataerkillik*

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## **I. Introduction**

Masculinity which is also named as “boyhood, manliness or manhood” is a number of characteristics, acts and functions which remind the reader the male members of the society and men power. Masculinity is a constructed norm by the society; however, it is supported not only by social explanations but also by biological and existential differences. For instance; masculine behaviors constructed by the patriarchy consist of bravery, freedom, self- confidence, self- assertiveness, logical thinking and reasonability. Those behaviors change from society to society, from religion to religion, from culture to culture and but most of these social codes are affected by the social and cultural hegemonies which denies the existence of the common features. Meanwhile, it can be claimed that not only men but also women are able to show these masculine features. (Alexander, 2011: 52). The main issue is that the male dominated ideology cannot equalize the power of woman and man as the male identity has to have a distinction. Furthermore, machismo is a concept stems from the area of power and hegemony which takes place in the limitations of masculinity. Bryant Keith Alexander defines masculinity as a “...performative. Not simply that it is a performance as in a doing; maybe masculinity is performativity; an assessment of the embodied thing done, the iteration and achievement of the expected.” (2011: 52). The fundamental reason behind this performativity is the absence of iconoclasts who could be from any gender. In fact, the femininity and masculinity are two norms dividing society according to the constructed concepts. The defined male and female roles are among the main concerns of a huge number of writers and theorists. The illustrations of these gender roles in the literature are variable according to the social background. For example; Dominican writer Junot Diaz applies the male role models of his own society who see the male as the main character of the family who is not accepted as a man if he is virgin. Nevertheless, American writer Charles Frazier who has his origins in Appalachian society uses a more domestic but hegemonic male figure in his works. The aim of this paper is to display how these two successful American writers applies the male roles and masculinity in their works. The first work which will be dealt is *Cold Mountain* by American writer, Charles Frazier and the second work is *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Dominican- American writer Junot Diaz.

## **II. *Cold Mountain* By Charles Frazier**

Charles Robinson Frazier was born in 1950, in Asheville which is lovely city located in North Carolina regional state. Frazier has his undergraduate education from the University of North Carolina. Then, Frazier gets his M.A. degree at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. After receiving his M.A. degree, Frazier continues with the Ph.D. program at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. He studies on 20<sup>th</sup> century American literature. He interests in the Appalachian culture because he is a part of this culture; therefore, he decides to write on his own culture, fiction or nonfiction, under the light of his own personal experiences and researches (Schaub, 2004: 2). Moreover, Frazier’s first novel, *Cold Mountain*, is a descriptive portray of American Civil war on the Appalachian Mountain and its effects on Appalachian society. Actually,

the events happen in the life of a volunteer Confederate soldier, Inman, and his townswoman lover, Ada (Smith, 2016: 1). As it can be understood from his biographical information that he reflects his own culture and the represents the male figure in a conventional culture in the novel. In fact, Schaub describes Inman's story as "a kind of picaresque" which involves "an episodic series of adventures" on the way to home (2004: 3). In that respect, it can be likened to the Odyssey's story not only in adventures but also in the manly features. Furthermore, *Cold Mountain* deals with the life experience of W. P. Inman during Civil War who is called as Inman in the book. He is one of the numerous males from the Blue Ridge Mountains who attend to the service in the Confederate army willingly. However, Inman is wounded during war and he sees the bloody side of the war which means that a huge number of men died for nothing. After this realization, Inman decides to turn back his home. The aim of Frazier is not to write a war story because he is not concerned about the battles; yet his main concern is the epical journey of Inman, his struggle and his real love with a townswoman, Ada Monroe, who has transformed into a mountain woman in time. The parallel struggle of Inman and Ada Monroe gives the sense of the equality of feminine and masculine behaviors against the hardships of life especially in war time (Schaub, 2004: 3). However, it does not change the reality of the differentiation between man and woman in Appalachian society. In that, the male and female gender roles are structured by the society and they are so strong that it is very difficult to change those determined roles. For instance; Appalachian women accept the home labor as their responsibility while the authority of man is the central point of Appalachian society (Harrell, 2014: 9). Yet, the labors of farming are seen as the duty of man because they need male power. In addition to these farming duties, the main responsibility of men in society is to take care of his family and home but the wars prevent men perform their gender role in the society while crown them for their victory in wars (Harrell, 2014: 119). In that sense, it is possible to express how the man's position is exaggerated in a community. For example; American Civil War has a very important place in male role and masculinity issue. In fact, the need of soldier for the Civil war creates a manhood which means the male members of society have the responsibility of protecting their women, children and homeland. Moreover, the male power should be crowned with the war victory; therefore, the Civil War becomes a male work (Harrell, 2014: 25). Therefore, this victory has glorified the existence of man in Appalachian community and dignified the male identity. What is more is that Maegan Kathleen Harrell states that the children, women and slaves are called as the dependents of men in Appalachian society (2014: 26). On that point, it can be implied that the woman is illustrated as the weak side who is in need of the help of man. In addition, Harrell declares that:

Young men growing up in East Tennessee and western North Carolina during the antebellum years learned and accepted particular gender roles. They saw their fathers, grandfathers, older brothers, and uncles as their role models. They understood that when the time came, they would become their own patriarchs and look after their dependents. Thus,

Southern men exuded confidence, loyalty, and honor toward family and home and total dominance over women, children, and slaves. (2014: 112)

It can be interpreted from these sentences that these role models lead the society and direct the Northern woman's ideology which shows the selfish masculine satisfaction while the Southern men tries to bundle their women up against the inner and external dangers. Furthermore, Wyatt-Brown puts forward the differences between the Northern manhood and Southern manhood clearly. He claims that Northern man accepts the term responsibility as "patriotism, loyalty to the Constitution, law, and order" while the Southern man accepts the term responsibility as "self- sacrifice, to family, community, race, and region against outside forces of evil and ruin." (qtd. in Harrell, 2014: 116). Yet, both sides' men consider the woman as the vulnerable and in need of protection. Additionally, the male members of the societies liken their enemies to women if they want to cross the limits of masculine identity of their enemies. For instance; Harrell claims that the Unionists and Confederates try to break the male power of the opposite side through feminizing the enemy (2014: 112). In short, it can be inferred that dishonoring one's manhood, no matter who he is; a Unionist or a Confederate, is seen as the worse action than attacking his family or his properties. Between 1861 and 1865 Appalachian men are called for army with the Conscription Act which is an act required that all "able-bodied white males from eighteen to thirty-five years old to be available for up to three years of service." (qtd. in Harrell, 2014: 56). It is obvious that the older male members of the society are classified into the weak part such as children and woman. Besides, Alexander Jones asserts that nearly 5,790 white men from North Carolina's different counties "crossed the lines" (qtd. in. Inscoc & McKinney, 2003: 104). That means the majority of the male population sacrifices their being for the sake of their dependents' wellbeing. Furthermore, in Salisbury's *Carolina Watchman* this consecration is reflected in these words: "The millions of weeping mothers, wives and sisters, and the millions of prayers going up from hearts burdened with grief, will not restrain the voluntary human offerings which are to be made in defense of our rights and honors, but rather increase them, and nerve them for the conflict." (qtd. in Inscoc & McKinney, 2003: 72). These words put forward the spiritual motivation and the sacralization of the performance of the man. However, this sacralization disturbs Inman and this issue is reflected in these words "that Lee made it clear he looked on war as an instrument for clarifying God's obscure will. Lee seemed to think battle—among all acts man might commit—stood outranked in sacredness only by prayer and Bible reading." (Frazier, 1997: 6). In that, American Civil War is consecrated by the government and in this process the church has an important role in persuading men to attend the war (Inscoc & McKinney, 2003: 70). Thus, the religious factors have guided the male and female into a blindness which hinders them from realizing the severe results of the war. The fact is that the war weakens Appalachian economic life because their men have attended the Civil War and could not come back (Harrell, 2014: 13). The man's physical power has led the society a developing economy through agriculture. Unfortunately, as it is stated in these grievous words that "The absence of adult males also left no one to break the sod during spring planting or to haul heavy rocks and timbers from newly cleared fields." (Inscoc & McKinney, 2003: 168). It is clear that the war helps the so called weak side,

female, to move and perform their own duties without the male support. Hence, in wartime, women try to continue their lives after their men, but they could not plow their lands as well as their fathers, husbands and sons (Inscoc & McKinney, 2003: 168). This situation is exemplified in *Cold Mountain* in these words: “Women and children and old men worked the crops, since every man of age to fight was off warring.” (Frazier, 1997: 90). Although at the beginning Ada thinks that only a male power can help her in the farm, she understands in the course of events that Ruby is the right person for being a companion for her and they can overcome these hardships by their own (Bauer, 2014: 5). While it is mentioned that even the engineering is seen as a manly occupation by the majority of the society (Frazier, 1997: 105), Adah learns, with the help of Ruby, that all the works like wood-chopping can be carried out without male muscle power (Frazier, 1997: 168). One of the most important result of the war is that woman discovers her own self and power. In other words, it can be stated that the American Civil War is a turning point for women economic life. For instance; the government employs women to replace the male teachers who will attend the Civil War although the mountain women do not have the enough education to teach students (Inscoc & McKinney, 2003: 199). In addition, women take place of men in labor in East Tennessee and Western North Carolina; then, the men return from the war but these women maintain their economic freedom and works on farms (Harrell, 2014: 64). Actually, the women gain their economic and social control after the war which causes most of the male members of the patriarchal society to be wounded and worn out (Harrell, 2014: 140)

### **III. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* By Junot Diaz**

Junot Diaz is an immigrant from Dominican Republic who is born in 1968 (Hunter 1). Diaz immigrates with his family to New Jersey while he is six years old (Wilkinson, 2014: 193). At first Junot Diaz’s father immigrates to America for a better life. After has found a job and worked for five years, he takes his wife and five children with him to America. Meanwhile, there are minorities, marginal and weak parts of community within their new neighborhood. In this outraged and othered part of society Junot Diaz cannot find a place for his language and his identity as a child in the country of freedom. In one of his speech he says: “I was a child. I didn't speak English, and I experienced the competitiveness of America, and it's a profoundly cruel childhood culture.” (Cutolo, 2012: 1). When Junot Diaz attends Rutgers University, he comes across the racial discrimination. At the same time, he discovers different ideologies among students; feminism, black-nationalism and different reactions by the university students belong to minority groups (Cutolo, 2012: 2). After the university education, Diaz gains his doctoral degree from Cornell University. In fact, he works in different jobs in business sector till his first short story is published on a magazine (Hunter 1). In time, Junot Diaz becomes concerned about writing and putting his ideas together on a piece of writing for the sake of his shunned community (Cutolo, 2012: 2). Actually, Junot Diaz tries to put forward a political reaction through his writings which reveals the touching facts of immigrants covered by the misleading stories (Wilkinson, 2014: 193). Nearly ten years after publishing his first work *Drown*, in 2007 Junot Diaz publishes *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* which reveals the Dominican- American identity in twenty- first century

in United States (Bautista, 2009: 81). Junot Diaz's purpose is showing the linguistic difference of the Dominican diaspora, "specifically demarcating the borders of a representative diasporic subject in terms of masculinity and sexuality." in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (Saez, 2011: 523). Moreover, Tim Lanzendörfer claims that Dominican males in Dominican diaspora in United States are not in touch with their Dominican identity which is called as Dominicanness (2013: 127). In this novel Yuniors, the spokesman of Diaz, tries to create this Dominicanness. The clash of different characters symbolizing "masculinity, femininity and sexuality", who are supported from the different parts of society, is one of the main concerns of Junot Diaz (Jay, 2010: 181). Gender and sexuality are brought together in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and it is narrated by Yuniors, who is as significant as Oscar the protagonist. Not only Yuniors but also Oscar gives voice to his feelings on masculinity and sexuality through writing to be able to have a male identity or American- Dominican male identities in twenty- first century (Jay, 2010: 181). Diaz explains this dynamic in these words while he discusses it with Paul Jay:

The first rule of intimacy is that you have to drop your performances, that the "masks" have to drop. This is a book filled with characters wearing masks, and that's what's so disturbing, that we're narrative animals. We love to wear masks; that's the way we live. We perform. But yet, I really believe it's very difficult to connect at a human level without the dropping of masks. For me that's the art of stories. Stories are there so you can get to the point where you can finally take off that last mask. And I think that that's what growing up is. When you take your last mask off you are utterly vulnerable, you are utterly in another person's power. And what contemporary masculinity, what contemporary power structure ever puts it-self utterly in someone else's power? Isn't storytelling the desire to put everything about the world in your power? (2010: 192)

It can be inferred that Oscar is oppressed to follow an appreciated Dominican sample of masculinity who is the roommate of him and the narrator of his own biography, Yuniors. In the novel, the humiliating macho man ideology is represented in these words "You really want to know what being an X-Man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto." (Diaz, 2007: 18). As it can be understood from the quotation, throughout the book Oscar is attacked verbally and he is accused of not behaving like a real man. According to Diaz, "one of the things that's really happening in this book is that Yuniors is attempting to unlearn" that masculinity, but "unfortunately he's doing it in exactly the same way that the masculinity he's trying to undermine has always perpetuated itself, by being the only voice speaking," (Jay, 2010: 184). What is more is that the "nerdiness" which makes Oscar an outraged male in his society is about his ugly appearance as a result of his fat body, therefore; it can be related to his masculinity (Jay, 2010: 184). For instance; Oscar is described and marginalized in the book in these words: "he had none of the Higher Powers of your typical Dominican male, couldn't have pulled a girl if his life depended on it... And most damning of all: no looks. He wore his semi-kink hair in a Puerto Rican afro" and "rocked enormous Section 8

glasses” (Diaz, 2007: 15). Additionally, the sexuality issue puts Oscar in trouble because it is thought that a Dominican man cannot be a virgin. For this reason, Oscar’s “nerdiness” keeps him away from girls who are seen merely as sexual objects by the patriarchal society. To set an example, in the book it is stated that: “Oscar was a social introvert.... His adolescent nerdiness vaporizing any iota of a chance he had for young love.... He cried often for his love of some girl or another” (Diaz, 2007: 18). It is clear from the quotation that the most of the fiction is concentrated on Oscar’s effort to have a romance or only have a sexual relationship with any woman around him. Meantime, Yunior the narrator is the wise man who shows and opens the doors of Dominican male sexuality and masculinity (Jay, 2010: 186). Further to that Oscar is called as un-Dominican because “...except for one period early in his life, dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him).” (Diaz, 2007: 9). His virginity is a kind of shame for him as a Dominican man. Besides, Yunior accuses Oscar of not being a Dominican because he is threatened by “drunk white-boys” and he is not seen attractive by girls (Diaz, 2007: 36). It can be put forward that Oscar is deeply affected by the behaviors of Yunior more than the social norms oppression. The narrator of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* describes Oscar Wao in these words:

In those blessed days of his youth, Oscar was something of a Casanova. One of those pre-school lover boys who was always trying to kiss the girls, always coming up behind them during a merengue and giving them the pelvic pump, the first nigger to learn the perrito and the one who danced it any chance he got. Because in those days he was (still) a ‘normal’ Dominican boy raised in a ‘typical’ Dominican family. (9)

This quotation reveals the normalization process of Dominican manhood and the social codes which determine the structure of the community. While he experiences the migration, Oscar sends letters to inform his family. When the last letter arrives from Oscar, Yunior informs about the sexual experience Oscar has undergone for one week. He narrates Oscar’s letter in these sentences:

What really got him was not the bam-bam-bam of sex—it was the little intimacies that he’d never in his whole life anticipated, like combing her hair or getting her underwear off a line or watching her walk naked to the bathroom or the way she would suddenly sit on his lap and put her face into his neck.... So this is what everybody’s always talking about! Diablo! If only I’d known. The beauty! The beauty! (Diaz, 2007: 224-225).

This suggests that Oscar has this sexual relationship, whether he loves Ybon or not and whether he wants her or not, just to be able to be accepted by the Dominican society. The social norms oppress people to do what is expected by the social codes in accordance with the gender roles. It is seen that Yunior achieves his mission as a social controller in Oscar’s life who interferes from Oscar’s weight to his private life for the sake of victory of masculinity. Díaz declares in his interview with Paul Jay that:

I always thought that there's this very interesting relationship with the paterfamilias, the sort of dominating father or the dominating masculinity, the dictator masculinity, and the role that one plays when one is an author of a book. ... he's trying to undermine has always perpetuated itself, by being the only voice speaking. ... Yunior keeps giving very clear messages, that in some ways, look, guys, I'm trying to lay out a map of how fucked up I am and how fucked up this is but the very map is a product of that power, but also the desire that the reader has for that authoritative narrative. (2010: 191)

This has connotations that the hegemonic power of speech is used by Diaz under his spokesman's (Yunior's) character. Diaz represents his society's and culture's realities through the masculine representation in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* on two men who symbolize the examples of the successful and unsuccessful masculine identity. Even if this representative figure is not sympathized by the reader because of his oppressive character throughout the novel, Yunior is the most realistic part of the book which symbolizes the truth of a male dominated society.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

To conclude, it is clear this research demonstrates the distinguishing characteristics of the masculinity in different regions and cultures. These differences are illustrated by Charles Frazier and Junot Diaz in their works in accordance with each one's own cultural facts and realities. For instance; the Appalachian male is portrayed and depicted as a patriotic, protective and productive breadwinner of the mountain family. Likewise, the Appalachian man is shown as a man who cares his family and his homeland for the sake of his manhood identity. On the other hand, the Dominican- American man is described as a macho who does not consider his own history and far from being a totally Dominican man. Besides, the Dominican- American male regards woman as a sexual object and the woman is depicted as the weak side of the society while she provides the power for man to claim their masculine desires. It is obvious that both of these authors evaluate even their own male identity in their works to be able to examine the masculinity and gender roles in a context. As exemplified by Frazier and Diaz from different perspectives, the masculinity and gender roles involves the hegemony of the men in each society and inequality between the rights given women and men.

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