

Dreaming in Cuban and Mental Health

By Christina Valentine

The theme of mental health issues is a topic that is particularly noteworthy in the book *Dreaming in Cuban*. Many of the characters suffer from some serious derangement in one way or another. From the beginning, we are faced with the delusions of Celia, who writes to her lover Gustavo even though it is clear she is married, and her lover left her a long time ago. It is only until the end of the book that it is even known that the letters were not even sent out which is learned from Pilar's account in the first person. Felicia as well suffers serious derangement, she lights a rag on fire and puts it on her husband's face, tired and deranged, suffering mentally through all of his infidelities and sexually transmitted diseases. The cause of such serious mental delusions and distress should be examined to their core in understanding the characters and their motives.

In examining Celia's past, she was given away as a small child to go and live with her relatives. This trauma of separation anxiety at such an early age may have caused her severe delusions which plagued her adulthood in her obsession with a past lover, Gustavo, who had clearly moved on. Yet she was attached to him and could not let go. This may have been directly linked to her trauma, in that she clings to others in fear of imminent loss. In the case of Felicia, Celia's daughter, who frequently cannot remember where she is or why she is doing something, she may have blacked out such severe trauma of abuse from her husband and consequently daily life as well. She pushes her husband Otto from the top of the rollercoaster; however, the reader does not learn this until the first-person account from her childhood best friend. In the first account that is revealed in this event which is in the third person, Felicia blocks the action of pushing him out of the narrative. The story the readers hear in that "...Felicia closes her eyes as

the car begins to fall. When she opens them, her husband is gone” (Garcia 155). Even Lourdes suffers from some neurosis as well, she believes she is speaking with her father and in his presence far after his death, and she speaks with him and has intimate dialogues with him. He even tells her information that she previously did not know, adding to the supernatural quality of the story. He tells her that he put Celia into the mental hospital to make her forget her (presumably) past lover and that to complete the process she should live near the sea, which she (Celia) does the rest of her life in the book. The only woman though who does not experience some sort of serious mental delusion is Pilar. She uses art as her therapy, her form of self-expression. The sort of traumatic experiences she has does not turn into any sort of violent retribution or mental deterioration. When she finds her boyfriend having sex with an exchange student she just walks away and then decides to buy a bass guitar, which she starts, “thumping that old spruce dresser of an instrument for all it’s worth, thumping and thumping, until I feel my life begin” (Garcia 181). Her art is her outlet for self-expression and healing. Her character’s ability to handle trauma also says a lot about the facility of America and the privileges that were afforded to her compared to that of her grandmother, aunt and mother growing up in the poverty of Cuba. She was able to expand her horizons educationally, think for herself and find her own voice. The patriarchal environment as well that Cuba embodied which negatively affected the lives and especially mental health of her other female family members did not influence her life as much. She was also able to have the time to think while she is in college about psychology and grieving. Pilar says, “...I heard a psychologist on a radio talk show once describe the four stages of grief. I forget whether revenge is a stage or not. I’m probably out of sequence anyway” (Garcia 180).

Works Cited

Garcia, Cristina. *Dreaming in Cuban*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992. Print.