

Latino Representation in Television Exemplified in *Jane the Virgin*

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Mass Communications 1307

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19 November 2017

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Today, “15% of the U.S. population is Latino,” and the numbers are growing every day, as “one of every two people added to the population is Latino” (Monk-Turner et al. 102). However, very few television shows depict Latino characters, and when they are represented, they often exhibit inaccurate and degrading stereotypes. The CW Network’s hit dramedy/telenovela series, *Jane the Virgin*, breaks free from this struggle, as it focuses on an all-female family of middle-class Latinas. The series centers around Jane Villanueva, a twenty-three-year-old college student who hopes to be a writer, but currently works as a waitress in an upscale Miami hotel called The Marbella. She lives with her mother, Xiomara, and grandmother, Alba, who together raised her to be a strong, intelligent Catholic woman in touch with her American and Venezuelan cultures. Jane’s perfectly planned life suddenly becomes much like the telenovelas she watched growing up when she goes to the doctor and accidentally becomes impregnated by receiving an artificial insemination procedure meant for Petra Solano, the wife of Jane’s current boss and former love interest, Rafael Solano. By examining Season 1, Episode 10 of *Jane the Virgin*, we see that the show gives an honest portrayal of Latinas and Hispanic-Americans, discusses religion and its connection to Latin culture, and confronts important social issues like immigration.

One accomplishment of *Jane the Virgin* is it provides its viewers with a dignified and realistic image of Latinos and Hispanics. This image can be seen by analyzing the tenth episode of the first season, “Chapter Ten.” In this episode, the Villanueva women rally to support each other as Alba is unconscious in the hospital while a dangerous

hurricane takes over Miami. At the same time, Jane's ex-fiance detective, Michael, is investigating The Marbella's possible connection to a drug lord named Sin Rostro. Even with these plots and subplots, the episode keeps the main focus on the lives of the three Villanueva women, and makes them realistic and dignified through their close familial bond. One of the biggest truths about Latino culture is the huge importance of family. Alba's fall and hospitalization brings the women, and Jane's famous telenovela actor, Rogelio, together. In "Episode Ten" when Jane goes to The Marbella to search for Alba's rosary, Rogelio comes to the hospital to comfort Xiomara at Alba's bedside. "I'm so glad you're here," Xiomara says to Rogelio as he enters the room ("Chapter Ten"). "Of course I'm here. We're family. And nothing is more important," Rogelio responds ("Chapter Ten"). The brief exchange speaks volumes as it gives an honest portrayal of Latinos through their value of family. This representation of "the strength of family values in Latino households... may be perceived in opposition to mainstream U.S. values of individuality," but on the other hand, showing this aspect of a real Latino household makes the characters very human (Avila-Saavedra 140). Thus, they become more relatable to the mainstream American audience.

"Chapter Ten" not only gives an honest depiction of Latinos through the value of family, it also provides accuracy by avoiding stereotypes. During the hurricane, Rafael, who has been running The Marbella in his father's recent absence, tries to persuade him to give him more responsibility. He urges his father, "I can handle the Marbella in your absence... There's a lot to do right now. The storm is picking up. We've got to prepare the hotel" ("Chapter Ten"). This shows that Rafael is not only ready to take on a

leadership role, he also wants more power so that he can help the people in the hotel. This is a huge contrast from the stereotype of Hispanic men being criminals, gardeners, or other degrading positions. Throughout television and film, Latino and Hispanic men are often seen as “violent urban criminals, drug dealers, and gang-bangers” (Picker and Sun). Rafael fits none of these oppressive roles to which Latino actors are so commonly limited. Instead, he demonstrates initiative, responsibility, and class throughout the episode.

“Chapter Ten” also uses wardrobe choices to ensure that Rafael and the other Latino characters do not fit into yet another common role of “exotic lovers/sex objects,” which is a racial stereotype for both Latin men and women (“Television Ethnic/Racial Stereotypes” 541). Though Rafael is handsome, he refrains from being the typical Latin lover as he is fully clothed throughout the episode, wearing a modest grey, long-sleeved shirt, loose, light blue slacks, and dress shoes. Latino actors and actresses alike are often dressed in revealing clothing, wear “more accessories and jewelry than whites,” and don an overwhelming amount of color, giving them the image of exotic foreigners and seductive charmers (Monk-Turner et al. 106). Most of the Latino cast of *Jane the Virgin*, however, matches Rafael with more modest style, while still displaying their character’s personality in the episode. Jane’s mother, Xiomara, does however dress more similarly to the stereotypical Latina seductress. Throughout most of the episode, she wears the low-cut, sparkling dress she wore the night Alba fell and had to go to the hospital. In the episode’s flashbacks, she wears shorts and a revealing tank top. This may be seen as degrading, since “a substantial number of Latinos are hyper-sexualized,” in primetime

television, especially through this type of clothing (“Portrayals of Race/Ethnicity on Primetime” 27). However, Xiomara is the only character that dresses this way throughout the episode, and truly throughout the series, which leads one to believe the costuming choices of this character are mainly a reflection of her showy, free-spirited personality, not of the stereotypical Latin lover.

Another achievement of “Chapter Ten” is that it openly and truthfully discusses religion and the role it plays in Latino culture. Alba’s hospitalization puts Xiomara and Jane in a state of great concern, and they turn to religion for comfort and hope, since Alba has raised both her daughter, Xiomara, and granddaughter, Jane, in a Catholic household. In this episode, there is a flashback from Jane’s childhood, where a ten-year-old Jane, worried about getting a good grade on an assignment, asks Alba to teach her how to pray using her rosary. Alba tells her, “It’s very special to pray with a rosary. You know? You turn to it when you really need hope. First, take the Crucifix, and make the sign of the cross. Then you say the Apostles Creed” (“Chapter Ten”). Catholicism is often seen as a harsh aspect of Latino culture on television and film. In the media, it can be seen in a negative light, a way for Latinos to scare their children into behaving. However, this episode shows Alba approaching Catholicism in a completely different way. “Alba’s faith is portrayed as a constant that helps her family navigate fear rather than cause it,” and she teaches Jane to pray with the rosary in hopes of helping Jane conquer her fears (Addington 39). We see the positive impact that Catholicism has brought Jane and Xiomara, as they both pray for Alba’s recovery, and feel hopeful afterward. Though the series in general is “steeped in Catholic cultural references that are often

tongue-in-cheek,” they are never “outright disrespectful,” and “Chapter Ten” is a perfect example of the dignified, honest way Catholicism can be portrayed as part of Latino culture (Addington 40).

In addition to religion, the tenth episode of *Jane the Virgin* also confronts a highly important topic often related to Latino culture: immigration. Immigration and citizenship is a social topic that is so hotly debated and relevant to today’s political climate, that it may seem risky or difficult for a television show to call attention to it. However, “Chapter Ten” manages to address unfair immigration laws in a way that is not overwhelming, but subtle and effective. While Xiomara and Rogelio are waiting at Alba’s bedside, a doctor walks in and shares startling information with Xiomara. “Your mother is in this country illegally. She has no insurance. And the hospital cannot afford to absorb the cost of her care,” he says, and then breaks the news, “...when the hurricane lifts, we will have to notify ICE, and they will deport her to Venezuela, where she can continue to receive care if she needs” (“Chapter Ten”). Although Xiomara knew that her mother did not have her citizenship papers yet, she had no idea that taking Alba to the hospital may lead to her deportation. The camera then closes in on Xiomara’s shocked face and letters appear on the screen, reading, “Yes, this really happens. Look it up #immigrationreform” (“Chapter Ten”). This scene is an incredible example of the social messages *Jane the Virgin* often contains between the drama and comedic moments. While the episode’s “medical-repatriation plot point isn’t just played for dramatic effect,” it also serves as a way to get the show’s audience involved, with the use of the hashtag (Martinez). It urges viewers to use their own voices, to go on social media and other mass media platforms,

and openly discuss the horrible situations faced by many immigrants who are fighting to gain citizenship. Without harshly pushing political opinions on the audience, the episode is able to “strike a perfect balance between entertainment and political awareness” (Martinez).

Overall, *Jane the Virgin*, as exemplified in “Chapter Ten,” goes against many of the practices established by mass media and television in regard to how Latinos are represented. Even though years of research has shown that “depictions of race on television are more favorably received when they accommodate white viewers' ingroup norms,” *Jane the Virgin* ignores this by throwing away stereotypes, showing truthful aspects of Latino culture, and addressing topics like religion and immigration that have a heavy impact on Latino culture (Mastro and Morawitz 113). Like no other television show past or present, *Jane the Virgin* focuses on a main cast of Latinas. It is breaking down barriers and opening up mass media to an ethnic group that is “typically comprising 1% to 3% of the primetime television population” (Mastro and Morawitz 110). In spite of Latinos’ long history of under representation in television and film, *Jane the Virgin* is giving hope to Latino actors, writers, directors, and audiences.

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