

A Caged Bird Set Free: The Women Saviors in Fae Myenne Ng's Steer Toward Rock

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Abstract : Steer Toward Rock, Fae Myenne Ng's second novel after the National Bestseller Bone, is superficially concluded as a story of pessimism, which underestimates the sophistication of Ng's portrayal. It is often summarized as a "heartbreaking novel of unrequited love" or "a story of timeless and tragic"; yet, Ng's novel conveys more than a mere sense of tragedy and heartbreak, but rather an overflowing warmth and optimism. Ng is complimented of "illuminating a part of U.S. history few are aware of"—the false identity established on the paper relationships. Nevertheless, toward the end of the novel, this falsity enlightens the male protagonist, Jack Moon Szeto, of the ultimate realization of the "truthfulness" to himself, with the escort of the female characters. This paper intends to investigate how Ng's depiction subverts the traditional sex/gender system and also the patriarchal savior stereotype. This paper mainly examines the characterization of and the relations among the four major characters: Jack Moon Szeto, Joice Qwan, Veda Qwan, and Ilin Cheung. By deploying Kate Millett's, Marilyn French's, Mary Daly's feminist theories, the first half of the essay elucidates the power relations between Jack and the three females Joice, Veda, and Ilin in terms of gender and sexuality. After analyzing the relations, Jack, this male caged bird, is set free by the epiphany derived from the three female characters, which is the pivot of the second half. In reference to Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist perspectives, I argue how Jack is transformed from, in Sartre's term, being-for-others to being-for-itself. Hence, the caged bird is free by the women saviors.

Keywords : Fae Myenne Ng, gender and sexuality, feminism, power relations

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