

Sample critical thinking on name

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‘ Instructor’s Name’

‘ Subject’

Patriarchy Confounded

‘ Caetana Says No’ is a story which provides profound insights into the lives and struggles of two Brazilian women, who lived during the early nineteenth century. The author, Sandra Lauderdale Graham, takes her readers through a heartwarming journey into the lives of these women who battled against patriarchy, slavery, and society induced constraints, to fight for justice and rights. This essay is an attempt to explore, how Caetana, through her determination, resisted the male authority of her family, and how, despite being a slave, she convinced her master and the society to take heed of her wishes, thus asserting the right she has in deciding her own life.

The story is based on real life incidents, which the author reconstructs with the help of meticulous and painstaking archival research. The book contains vivid details of planter culture in the Brazilian society and the dynamics of a master slave relationship. Graham, through the lives of these women, elucidates how the unjust practices enforced on women by patriarchal dominance, can be contested and even be thwarted if women could muster the strength to stand up against oppression.

Caetana’s story is not the usual slave story, as her fight is not against slavery but against an imposed marriage. It does not deal with the usual slavery stereotypes of vicious owners and docile slaves; rather it dwells deep into the lives of the members of a specific slave family, and in particular the patriarchal dominance witnessed in that family. The story also reveals a great deal about the life of slaves in a Brazilian plantation. Through

extensive research, Graham establishes how religion and economic interests of the masters shaped the life of their slaves.

Caetana took on the traditional institutions of her times (slavery and patriarchy) and exhibited bravery and resolve, when faced with adversity. Graham, through this book, revisits the intriguing historical issues of slavery and gender oppression, and through her focused research on ecclesiastical documents unveils, the injustices endured by women and slaves. For example, she delineates how religious doctrines might have prevented masters from becoming the Godparents of their slaves. She also explains how a house slave was considered to be in an elevated place than the other slaves working in the plantations, and at the same time how they had to endure the constant monitoring of the mistress of the house.

“ Indoor work was understood as privileged, less strenuous than the long hours spent in the field at heavy work, in the sun’s direct heat or the dank chill of winter.”

Caetana was a house slave while her husband Custodio was a master tailor. The slaves were recognized by the work they did, rather than their first names. Through such examples, the author does a commendable job of reconstructing the nineteenth century plantation life in Rio Claro.

However, one clear trend that is witnessed in the lives of the slaves, especially in the family of Caetana is the overlapping of authority between the male members of her immediate family and that of her master. In fact, the author named her story ‘ Patriarchy confounded’, probably because of the complicated question that arises in Caetana’s case as to who hold more authority over her life – the male relatives or the male owner. She believed in

the protective power of her ultimate patriarch - her master, and expected him to protect her from the male members of her family.

Caetana faced two forms of oppression - slavery and patriarchy. Her husband was chosen for her by her master, and she had no say in deciding her match. After trying in vain to resist the marriage, she eventually is forced to enter into wedlock with Custodio. However, once married she realizes that she could not go through her life trapped in an unhappy marriage. She takes the bold decision of separating from her husband, and even convinces her master to consent to the same.

Tolosa, initially plays the role of a tough master, who has complete control over the lives of his slaves, when he chooses the groom for Caetana, without consulting her and forcing her to marry him, despite her misgivings.

However, when Caetana flees her family and comes to him for support, he seems to have transformed into a benevolent master consenting to free her from her marital bonds. He goes a step further and launches a petition on Caetana's behalf, to annul the marriage.

Graham says,

“ A nearly model household of patriarchal, slave-owning order became problematic when Caetana said, ‘ No’.”

Caetana had to endure the authority and intrusion of not just her owner Captain Tolosa, but the entire male hierarchy of the society - her uncle, husband, and the Church. The author expertly showcases the patriarchal mores exhibited by Caetana's relatives, who supported Tolosa's decision to choose a husband for Caetana, but rejected her idea of annulment. When she ran to her Uncle (godparent) wanting to end her marriage with Custodio,

her Uncle threatened to beat her if she does not return to her husband. She then decides, rather surprisingly, to approach her master to help her. In the end, Tolosa, by acceding to Caetana's wish to terminate her marriage, helped her defy her male relatives' authority over her life.

As Graham puts it,

“ Her (Caetana's) story demonstrates that patriarchy was not solely the right of a white master, but was claimed as well by a slave man.”

Tolosa's support for Caetana's marriage annulment trumped her male relatives, as their patriarchal authority over Caetana came into conflict with Tolosa's authority as her master. As her master, Tolosa had the legal right to pursue a Church annulment on Caetana's behalf, and for reasons unknown he decided to aid her cause, thus helping Caetana to stand up against the dominance of the male members of her family. In those times, a slave was expected to obey and be loyal to her master, but the fact that Tolosa agreed to help Caetana escape from her depressing marriage, despite the fact that the marriage was arranged by him, shows that maybe he saw her more as a person than as a property.

Unlike Dona Inácia, who was surrounded by educated men leaving a paper trail about her life, the slave Caetana had left no detailed documents on her life. Hence, the reasons behind her decisions and actions are unknown. The only document based on which her story is constructed is the annulment petition, and thus there are a lot of gaps as to why she wanted her marriage terminated. However, it is clear that she was one among the few, if there were any other, women slaves who took on the authority of both the men in their family and that of her master.

Her petition was eventually denied in a long fought and heavily documented hearing, which lasted over five years, citing lack of proper grounds for annulment. Unfortunately, we do not know what become of Caetana after the Church ordered her to go live with her husband. However, the fact that she had the courage to say ' no' to her master, family and the society, makes her story truly remarkable one, and one that highlights how an oppressed person could take control of her life if she is willing to fight for it.

Bibliography

Graham, Sandra Lauderdale. *Caetana Says No: Women's Stories from a Brazilian Slave Society*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2002.