

Unveiling the red
clowns: sexual
violence against
female adolescents
as demonstra...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The perception of the crucial and critical topic of sex held by the majority of adolescents, even in today's progressive world, is alarmingly apocryphal. The world's frantic attempts to preserve the beauty of childhood's innocence and the alluring vision of passionate love has led inexperienced adolescents to conceive an idealistic and unrealistic image of sex. This fallacious belief is a severe threat for young girls who may unknowingly become victims of harrowing sexual encounters. The revolutionary author, Sandra Cisneros uses the vignette "Red Clowns" within her autobiographical novel "The House on Mango Street" to poignantly depict the socially suppressed horrors of sexual oppression. This haunting story is narrated by the novel's adolescent protagonist, Esperanza, after she is sexually molested at a carnival while she was waiting for her friend, Sally. The vision of sex traditionally painted by the media is radically misleading. Most movies and novels portray sex as a sacred and romantic union of two love-struck individuals. The gory details of rape and other forms of violent sexual assaults are rarely mentioned. The few books and movies that expose this dark alter ego of sex are carefully concealed from the unsuspecting eyes of idealistic adolescents. As a result, most girls grow up naively dreaming of a passionate, loving sexual experience. Esperanza, having believed in this dream, is thus left in a state of complete confusion after her traumatic sexual encounter: "The way they said it, the way it's supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me?" (Cisneros, 122). This lyrical sentence, composed of detached fragments, depicts Esperanza's wrecked mental state with heartbreaking clarity. The reader can easily understand, without being explicitly told, that Esperanza's negative sexual experience was the antithesis of what society had led her to expect. Her softly

<https://assignbuster.com/unveiling-the-red-clowns-sexual-violence-against-female-adolescents-as-demonstrated-in-the-house-on-mango-street/>

reproachful tone for having been tricked into cherishing unrealistic romantic ideas later changes into vehement accusations: “ I waited my whole life. You’re a liar. They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong.” (Cisneros, 123). The hyperbolic statement, “ I waited my whole life”, cogently conveys the crushing disappointment she experienced on seeing her long-held dreams of fairy-tale love dissolve. It also implies that the innocent life she used to lead was over. The personification of “ books and magazines” indicates that Esperanza’s rage is directed against the people who wrote them. The simplicity of the diction used in these terse, childlike allegations potently portrays her ravaged faith in the integrity of the media and human beings in general. The media is not solely responsible for maintaining this false depiction of romantic sex. The people centrally involved in this conspiracy of lies are, in fact, females themselves. Women’s overwhelming personal insecurity makes them wary of sharing unpleasant sexual encounters with others. Thus, Esperanza only heard stories of tender romance from her best friend, Sally, and was devastated when her own experience ended up being so brutally different: “ Sally, you lied. It wasn’t what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn’t want it, Sally.” (Cisneros, 122). Although Esperanza never mentions details of what happened, the fragmented sentences, “ What he did. Where he touched me”, vividly evokes images of the harrowing sexual abuse she was forced through. Her pathetic cry, “ I didn’t want it, Sally”, conveys her utter helplessness during this event. Throughout this vignette, Esperanza repeatedly reproaches Sally for lying to her. According to Maria Herrera-Sobek, her “ diatribe” is aimed not only against Sally, but rather against “ the community of women who keep the truth from the younger generation of

<https://assignbuster.com/unveiling-the-red-clowns-sexual-violence-against-female-adolescents-as-demonstrated-in-the-house-on-mango-street/>

women in a conspiracy of silence” (Herrera-Sobek, 222). The misrepresentation of sex by society is one of the principal causes of the rising rates of sexual assaults. Adolescent females are not aware of the perils of sexual oppression and thus do not take necessary precautions against it. Instead they try their best to attract men’s attention and revere the ones who are successful in doing so. The “ Red Clowns” subtly portrays this destructive tendency of young women: I was waiting by the red clowns. I was standing by the tilt-a-whirl where you said. And anyway I don’t like carnivals. I went to be with you because you laugh on the tilt-a-whirl, you throw your head back and laugh. I hold your change, wave, count how many times you go by. Those boys that look at you because you’re pretty. I like to be with you, Sally. You’re my friend. (Cisneros, 122-123) This simple passage, filled with powerful imagery clearly illustrates Esperanza’s excessive devotion for her friend, Sally. She went to a carnival, where she was clearly bored, merely to be with Sally and was willing to do everything Sally said, even if that meant waiting for hours. Although Esperanza justifies her extreme affection for her friend by saying, “ I like to be with you, Sally. You’re my friend,” her former observation that “ Those boys that look at you because you’re pretty” suggests a different reason for her attachment. Sally enticed boys through flirtatious actions like throwing her “ head back” and laughing; by spending time with Sally, Esperanza wanted to learn the means of exercising such power over men. Ironically, her attempts to understand the technique of controlling men led her to experience the most traumatizing event of her life in which a man had complete control over her. Another significant cause of women’s continued oppression in society is the lack of female bonding.

Sally’s careless and selfish decision to leave Esperanza all alone in the <https://assignbuster.com/unveiling-the-red-clowns-sexual-violence-against-female-adolescents-as-demonstrated-in-the-house-on-mango-street/>

carnival in order to have a romantic fling with a boy is undoubtedly one of the key reasons for her exposure to sexual violence: “ But that big boy, where did he take you? I waited for such a long time. I waited by the red clowns, just like you said, but you never came, you never came for me.”(Cisneros, 123). Although Sally was supposed to be Esperanza’s friend she deserted her to go with a “ big boy” and never returned. The repetition, “ you never came, you never came for me”, vividly depicts Esperanza’s acute feelings of betrayal. However, the fact that Sally does not return despite having promised Esperanza that she would leaves the reader wondering whether Sally, too, might have been subjected to a similar harrowing experience. But Esperanza does not consider this and blames Sally entirely for her tragic loss: “ Sally Sally a hundred times. Why didn’t you hear me when I called? Why didn’t you tell them to leave me alone?”(Cisneros, 123). In this passage, Esperanza childishly reproaches Sally for not hearing her cries in the midst of a noisy carnival and for not saving her from boys they were both powerless to fight against. She does not even once accuse the men directly responsible for the pathetic state she was in. Her rage is directed only towards Sally because she does not possess the courage needed to blame the true offenders. Victims of sexual oppressions invariably undergo a period of paralyzing mental trauma. They are constantly haunted by memories of this grueling experience despite their desperate attempts to forget. Through her carefully crafted use of powerful imageries, Cisneros depicts, in Esperanza, the damaged mental state of rape victims with heart wrenching accuracy: “ Sally, make him stop. I couldn’t make them go away. I couldn’t do anything but cry. I don’t remember. It was dark. I don’t remember. I don’t remember. Please don’t make me tell it all.”

<https://assignbuster.com/unveiling-the-red-clowns-sexual-violence-against-female-adolescents-as-demonstrated-in-the-house-on-mango-street/>

(Cisneros, 123). This poignant passage, narrated with a tone of uncontrolled panic, cogently conveys Esperanza's torturous mental condition after being sexually molested. She asks Sally to "make him stop", although her assaulters had all left by then. This implies that she was being tormented by agonizing memories of the event. The lines "I couldn't make them go away. I couldn't do anything but cry", illustrate her stifling feelings of utter powerlessness. Her repeated cries, "I don't remember", and pitiful plea, "please don't make me tell it all", portray her crippling fear of the memories that were still haunting her. Sexual oppressions are often a form of racial violence. This appears to be the case for Esperanza. Although the race of her sexual assaulter is never directly revealed, Esperanza mentions that he kept saying: "I love you, I love you Spanish girl" (Cisneros, 123). The beautiful words "I love you" sound repulsively obscene in this context and their repetition only intensifies this feeling of abhorrence. By calling her "Spanish girl", he was clearly mocking her Latino heritage. This insinuates that he himself came from a different racial background. The theme of racial discrimination is prevalent throughout Cisneros's novel, "The House on the Mango Street", but it surfaces with the most heartrending brutality in this passage. The shockingly amusing attitude most men have towards sexual violence and the pure resignation with which the majority of women accept this attitude is leading to a growing heap of rape victims: "Only his dirty fingernails against my skin, only his sour smell again. The moon that watched. The tilt-a-whirl. The red clowns laughing their thick-tongue laugh." (Cisneros, 123). This passage is filled with the key symbols Cisneros uses in this impressionistic story. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, moon is an icon of femininity and through the anthropomorphism "moon that <https://assignbuster.com/unveiling-the-red-clowns-sexual-violence-against-female-adolescents-as-demonstrated-in-the-house-on-mango-street/>

watched”, Cisneros portrays the silent tolerance of male oppression by the female population. According to Wikipedia, the tilt-a-whirl is one of the most popular rides in the amusement parks which exhibits “ unpredictable chaotic motion”. Thus the tilt-a-whirl epitomizes the chaos and confusion Esperanza felt as she was being raped. The powerful imagery created by the phrase “ dirty fingernails against my skin” and the synesthesia “ sour smell” provides a heartrending glimpse into Esperanza’s feelings of physical violation. Also, the term “ red clown” (the title of the chapter), is the most salient symbol in this passage. According to the “ Dictionary of Symbolism”, red is “ an emotionally charged color” which denotes a multitude of elements including blood, anger, passion, sexual arousal and masculinity. Cisneros thus uses red to symbolize Esperanza’s loss of blood and helpless rage during the tragic sexual encounter. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a clown as “ an ignorant, rude, uncouth, ill-bred man” while Wikipedia calls clowns “ comical performers” who attempt to entertain people with their “ grotesque appearance” but often evoke fear instead. Red clowns thus represent formidable male figures and the chilling image produced by the phrase “ red clowns laughing their thick tongue laugh” portrays the cruel pleasure men derive from the oppression of women. On a broader context, “ red clowns” denote the system of deception and lies that increases the vulnerability of young girls to sexual subjugation and foreshadows the sexual content of the chapter. With this heartbreaking narrative in the “ Red Clowns”, Cisneros boldly reveals the harsh face of sexual reality which society has carefully kept hidden behind a mask of tailored romanticism. She also illustrates the principle causes and disastrous effects of the sexual molestation of female adolescents. Through her ingenious use of vividly evocative imageries, <https://assignbuster.com/unveiling-the-red-clowns-sexual-violence-against-female-adolescents-as-demonstrated-in-the-house-on-mango-street/>

subtle symbols and appropriately childish language, Cisneros leaves a lasting impression on the reader's mind, which urges them to try and bring an end to this unvoiced system of brutal sexual violence. Works Cited 1. Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001. 2. "Clown, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 10 May 2010. 3. "Clown." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation. 10 May 2010. 4. Herrera-Sobek, Maria. "The Politics of Rape: Sexual Transgression in Chicana Fiction." *Beyond Portia: Women, Law and Literature in the United States*. Eds St. Joan, Jacqueline and Annette Bennington McElhiney. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1997, 216-225. 5. "Moon, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 10 May 2010. 6. "Red". *Online Symbolism Dictionary*. 10 May 2010. 7. "Tilt-a-whirl." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikimedia Foundation. 10 May 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tilt-a-whirl>