

The Cage as A Multi-Layered Symbol of Female Oppression in Jasmin Darznik's Novel "Song of A Captive Bird"

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Abstract: This article examines the cage as the central organizing symbol in Jasmin Darznik's biographical novel *Song of a Captive Bird* (2018), which fictionalizes the life of Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad. The study investigates how the cage metaphor reconfigures itself across three distinct social domains — the paternal household, the conjugal home, and the psychiatric institution — while maintaining a single underlying function: the systematic containment of female autonomy. Each domain introduces distinct mechanisms of control, namely spatial restriction and physical coercion in the first, normative surveillance and legal dispossession in the second, and institutional pathologization in the third. Through close reading of key episodes, the article demonstrates that the cage symbol accumulates meaning progressively, enabling Darznik to present patriarchal oppression not as an individual misfortune but as a systemic social force reproduced across every institution that governs the protagonist's life.

Keywords: Cage metaphor, female oppression, patriarchal discourse, symbolic analysis, Forugh Farrokhzad, Jasmin Darznik, Iranian literature, spatial confinement, female agency, biographical fiction.

Introduction: Jasmin Darznik's *Song of a Captive Bird* (2018) fictionalizes the life of Forugh Farrokhzad (1935–1967), one of the most significant and controversial poets in modern Persian literary history. By transforming biographical material into novelistic form, Darznik constructs a sustained argument about how patriarchal authority organizes female experience — not as an isolated injustice inflicted by particular individuals, but as a systemic logic reproduced across the full range of social institutions that constitute a woman's world.

The novel's primary argumentative instrument is the cage metaphor, announced in its title and structurally central to every phase of its narrative. Unlike a static literary emblem, the cage in the novel is dynamic: it assumes a new institutional form at each stage of the protagonist's biography, adapting its mechanisms of control to each new social environment while maintaining the same essential purpose. The paternal household, the conjugal home, and the psychiatric

institution each constitute a distinct manifestation of the cage — different in form, identical in function.

This article examines these three manifestations in sequence, attending to the specific mechanisms each deploys, the subjective damage each produces, and the way each intensifies the logic established by the previous one. The analysis proceeds through close reading of key episodes and the novel's spatial symbolism, demonstrating how the cage figure accumulates argumentative force across the narrative and enables Darznik to construct a critique of patriarchal oppression that is simultaneously personal and systemic.

The First Cage: The Paternal Household

The family home is the site at which the cage is first encountered in its most elemental form. Its logic is inscribed in the spatial organization of the domestic environment before it is expressed through any explicit prohibition. Male siblings move freely between the household interior and the wider world; the female

protagonist is bounded by walls that simultaneously provide shelter and enforce confinement. The same structure that is a home for its male members is a cage for its female ones.

The window is the novel's most resonant spatial symbol in this section of the narrative. It functions as a threshold the protagonist can see across but cannot cross — a boundary that makes visible precisely what the social order has organized to deny her. Through the window she observes the mobility of her brothers, the openness of the street, the wider world that constitutes itself, through this framing, as everything she is not permitted to be part of. The window makes desire for freedom available while making its satisfaction impossible, and in doing so it reveals the structure of the cage with particular precision: she is not merely confined but made to feel her confinement, made to experience the boundary as something she presses against rather than simply accepts.

Physical violence enters the narrative as the mechanism through which the cage enforces its limits when transgressed. When the protagonist is discovered meeting a young man without authorization, her father strikes her — splitting her lip, loosening a tooth — before confining her to a cellar. The sequence literalizes the symbolic logic: physical harm followed by literal imprisonment, the coercive underside of a domestic arrangement that presents itself as natural and protective. The violation being punished is not harm done to another but the unauthorized exercise of the protagonist's own desire. It is this — female desire, autonomous and self-directed — that the paternal authority cannot tolerate, because the cage is not organized around the prevention of harm but around the maintenance of control over female agency itself.

The cellar to which the protagonist is confined is the paternal cage's most explicit spatial expression: without windows, without access to the exterior, without even the qualified freedom that the house's other rooms allow. In the cellar, the window figure disappears entirely — the threshold between confined interior and desired exterior is eliminated, and what remains is pure enclosure. The cellar is the logical extreme toward which the domestic cage tends whenever its ordinary mechanisms prove insufficient.

The Second Cage: The Conjugal Household

Marriage transfers the protagonist from one cage to another without dissolving the underlying logic of confinement. In her husband's household, the mechanisms of control are adapted to the new institutional context: overt physical coercion recedes, replaced by normative surveillance administered through a distributed network of social agents, most

prominently the mother-in-law, Khanoom Shapur.

Khanoom Shapur's monitoring of the young bride is comprehensive and relentless. She observes every dimension of the bride's conduct — appearance, appetite, movement, religious observance — treating each detail as evidence of conformity or deviation from the norms that govern proper feminine behavior. Her daily question about ritual ablutions functions not merely as an inquiry about religious practice but as a mechanism of hierarchical assertion: a daily reminder that the young wife's standing in the household depends on evaluations she cannot escape and standards she has not set. The conjugal cage operates through this unceasing audit, replacing the paternal household's physical walls with the equally effective walls of social observation.

The protagonist's response marks a shift in her relationship to patriarchal authority. Where the paternal cage had produced outward compliance at the cost of the inner life — poems hidden beneath mattresses, desires managed rather than expressed — the conjugal environment generates an increasingly explicit refusal. She declines chaperonage, contests the household's regulatory demands, and asserts through action what she cannot yet fully assert through speech: that she has no interest in transferring obedience from one domestic authority to another simply because the institution has changed. This refusal is not abstract or ideological; it is a visceral response to constraint that has become intolerable.

The legal dimensions of the conjugal cage become starkly visible when the marriage dissolves. Full custody of the couple's son is awarded to the father as both custom and law — a determination made in advance of any particular case, on the basis of premises that the protagonist's speech cannot alter. Whatever she says in response registers not as a legal argument but as an emotional reaction, absorbed into a framework that has already decided the outcome. The conjugal cage reveals itself at this moment to be not merely a domestic arrangement but a legal and epistemological structure: one that has organized the conditions of legitimate speech to ensure that certain claims cannot be heard as claims at all.

The Third Cage: The Psychiatric Institution

The Rezayeh psychiatric facility represents the cage in its most comprehensive and coercive form. The protagonist is committed not because she is mentally disordered but because her persistent nonconformity has exceeded the capacity of ordinary social mechanisms to contain it. Her confinement performs a fundamental translation: a political act — the refusal of prescribed gender roles — is converted into a medical

symptom, removed from the domain of the rational or contestable and relocated in the domain of pathology, where it need only be managed.

The physical environment materializes total control with a thoroughness the domestic settings could not achieve. Windowless rooms eliminate even the visual contact with freedom that had structured the protagonist's earlier experience of confinement — there is no threshold to observe, no exterior world to desire from within. Restricted movement, institutional surveillance, and the absence of private time or space reduce the protagonist's existence to what the institution permits. Electroconvulsive therapy extends this logic from the spatial to the biological, intervening in the neural substrate of experience and memory itself. The cage no longer merely constrains what the protagonist can do; it targets what she can be.

A newspaper article circulating during her hospitalization performs what might be called double discrediting: the simultaneous deployment of two frameworks for delegitimizing female speech. The medical framework pathologizes the protagonist as mentally disordered, converting social nonconformity into clinical symptom and removing it from the domain where it might demand a reasoned response. The religious-mythological framework invokes the figure of Eve to situate female creativity within a cosmic moral order in which women who take up the pen are inheritors of original transgression, condemned by the very act of writing. Together, these two frameworks ensure that whatever the protagonist asserts can be absorbed into one or the other discrediting category before it reaches the form of a claim that demands substantive engagement. The psychiatric cage is thus also an epistemological one: it forecloses not merely the protagonist's freedom of movement but the conditions under which her speech can be received as meaningful.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the cage metaphor across its three manifestations yields findings relevant to both the interpretation of the novel and the broader study of female oppression in literature.

First, the dynamic quality of the cage symbol enables the novel to make an argument that static symbolism could not sustain: that patriarchal oppression is systemic rather than local. No single institution is identified as the origin of the problem; each is shown as a particular expression of a social logic that reproduces itself across all of them. The protagonist cannot escape the cage by moving from one social environment to another because the cage is not a feature of any particular environment but a principle

that organizes them all.

Second, the progressive intensification revealed by sequential analysis is itself argumentative. Each cage is more comprehensive and more coercive than the one before. The paternal household can be survived by maintaining a protected interiority; the conjugal household makes this increasingly untenable; the psychiatric institution eliminates it entirely. The escalation follows a social logic: as resistance becomes more sustained, the mechanisms of suppression become more extreme. The cage tightens around the subject who contests it.

Third, the window figure — present in the first cage, diminished in the second, absent in the third — traces the progressive narrowing of the protagonist's experiential world with particular symbolic precision. What begins as a threshold across which freedom can be seen ends as an entirely enclosed space in which even the desire for freedom has been structurally foreclosed. The disappearance of the window maps the intensification of the cage more economically than any explicit statement could.

Fourth, the double discrediting analyzed in the psychiatric institution reveals that the cage's deepest operation is epistemological rather than merely physical. The protagonist speaks throughout the novel — she argues, protests, and makes claims. What varies is not her speech but the institutional frameworks within which it is received. In each domain, those frameworks have been organized to ensure that what she says cannot register as a claim requiring substantive response. The cage, at its most complete, governs not what women can do but what they can mean.

CONCLUSION

Jasmin Darznik's *Song of a Captive Bird* constructs its central argument through the sustained development of a single governing symbol. The cage metaphor — dynamic, modular, and structurally pervasive — enables the novel to demonstrate that its protagonist's oppression is not the product of particular cruelty or institutional failure but the expression of a social logic that reproduces itself across every domain of female experience: domestic, marital, medical, and legal.

The progressive reconfiguration of the cage symbol across three institutional settings reveals both the systemic character of patriarchal authority and the relationship between resistance and escalation that characterizes its operation. As the protagonist contests the dominant order with increasing explicitness, the order's mechanisms of containment become correspondingly more coercive — from spatial restriction and domestic violence, through normative

surveillance and legal dispossession, to psychiatric confinement and the cultural machinery of double discrediting.

What the novel ultimately argues, through the form of its symbolic architecture rather than through discursive statement, is that the cage is not a place but a principle — a logic inscribed across the full range of institutions that together constitute the social world its protagonist inhabits. Recognizing this is the precondition for any serious understanding of what resistance to it might involve, and what it might, at its most demanding, require. Darznik's novel does not offer easy answers. But in making the cage visible as a systemic structure rather than a series of individual misfortunes, it creates the conditions within which the right questions can at least be asked.

The Cage Symbol in Comparative Perspective

Darznik's deployment of the cage is not without precedent in feminist literary tradition, but it is distinguished from earlier usages by its structural dynamism. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's foundational study of nineteenth-century women's writing identified the madwoman in the attic as the archetypal figure of female confinement in the Victorian novel — a figure who literalizes, through pathology and imprisonment, the social constraints imposed on women by the dominant culture. In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the attic confines Bertha Mason as the embodied excess that Victorian femininity cannot accommodate; in Darznik's novel, the psychiatric institution performs an analogous function for the Iranian protagonist, converting social transgression into clinical disorder and removing it from the domain of the contestable. The parallel is instructive, but so is the difference: where Bertha Mason remains confined and dies, Darznik's protagonist survives the institution and uses the experience as material for her creative work, transforming enforced confinement into a dimension of the consciousness that contests it.

The cage metaphor also appears, in different forms, across the broader tradition of postcolonial women's writing. Nawal El Saadawi's fiction represents the social and institutional confinement of women in Egyptian society through similar spatial symbolism; Bapsi Sidhwa's work traces the gendered dimensions of partition violence in South Asia through figures of forced displacement and enclosure. What Darznik's novel contributes to this tradition is the systematic analysis of the cage's reconfiguration across three distinct institutional domains — a formal strategy that enables the text to demonstrate the systemic rather than locally situated character of patriarchal constraint.

The cage is shown to be not a feature of any particular society's pathology but a principle that adapts to different institutional environments while maintaining the same essential function. This comparative dimension of the analysis underlines the novel's relevance beyond its specific Iranian historical context.

Michel Foucault's analyses of disciplinary institutions provide a further theoretical context for the novel's representation of the psychiatric cage in particular. Foucault's argument in *Discipline and Punish* that modern institutions — prisons, hospitals, schools — exercise power not primarily through overt coercion but through the organization of space, time, and visibility in ways that produce self-regulating subjects is directly relevant to the novel's account of the Rezayeh facility. The institution does not merely confine the protagonist; it attempts to reorganize her relationship to herself, to make her internalize the judgment that her own desires and impulses are pathological and in need of correction. That this attempt fails — that the protagonist survives the institution with her creative consciousness intact, if damaged — is the novel's most direct assertion that the cage cannot entirely suppress the agency it seeks to contain.

Symbolic Resistance: The Window as Counter-Symbol

If the cage is the novel's primary symbol of patriarchal constraint, the window functions as its principal counter-symbol — a figure that simultaneously marks the limit of the cage and gestures toward what lies beyond it. The window's distinctive function is to make the object of desire visible without making it accessible: it offers the sight of freedom without granting entry to it, producing a subject who is not merely confined but made acutely conscious of her confinement through the visibility of what she cannot reach. This structure of desire-without-access is more subtly coercive than simple exclusion, because it cultivates the longing it refuses to satisfy.

The progressive disappearance of the window across the novel's three institutional settings tracks the intensification of the cage with a symbolic precision that is one of the text's most accomplished formal achievements. In the paternal household, the window is omnipresent and charged: it is the site at which the protagonist's desire for freedom is most acutely felt, the threshold that she presses against but cannot cross. In the conjugal household, the window recedes as a dominant symbol — the protagonist achieves partial access to the exterior world, though always under social scrutiny — and its place is taken by the street as the figure of qualified, supervised mobility. In the psychiatric institution, both figures disappear entirely: there are no windows through which freedom can be

seen, no streets through which it might be glimpsed or approached. The cage has become total, and the absence of the window figure registers this totality more economically than any explicit statement could.

The window also carries a literary-historical resonance that enriches Darznik's use of it. Forugh Farrokhzad's own poetry is preoccupied with the figure of the window — most explicitly in her poem *Another Birth*, where the window becomes a symbol of the threshold between the constrained self and the wider world of experience and expression. Darznik imports this autobiographical symbolic vocabulary into the novel's fictional reconstruction of Farrokhzad's life, allowing the window to carry simultaneously the weight of the protagonist's social experience and the associations of her creative practice. The window is thus both a spatial figure — marking the limits of physical access — and a poetic one — marking the limits of what can be seen and eventually said. Its disappearance in the psychiatric institution is thus doubly significant: it signals not only the closure of physical space but the attempted closure of the imaginative and expressive space that the earlier windows had figured.

That the window reappears — figuratively — in the protagonist's later poetry, as the open window of *Conquest of the Garden* or the light-filled spaces of *I Will Greet the Sun Again*, suggests that the cage's attempted closure of imaginative space has not succeeded. The protagonist who emerges from the psychiatric institution is damaged but not destroyed; her creative consciousness has survived, and through it, the window reopens. This reappearance of the window figure in the poetry after the institution's attempt to eliminate it is the novel's most condensed formal argument: the cage can confine the body, surveil the conduct, and attempt to reorganize the self — but it cannot, finally, close the window of imagination through which the confined subject maintains her contact with the world she is determined to inhabit.

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