

Women's Inner Conflict in Twentieth-Century Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Women always suffer from a universal inner conflict with their society, with their family, and with their selves. Being the poets of the 20th Century, the American feminist poet Adrienne Rich, the poet laureate of Maryland Linda Pastan, and the Japanese-American poet Janice Mirikitani have written some beautiful short poems about women's dreams and their real-life experiences. The present article aims to apply a famous psychoanalyst Karen Horney's "Theory of Inner Conflict" to show a comparison between women's dreams and reality through the poems "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" by Adrienne Rich, "Marks" by Linda Pastan, and 'Suicide Note' by Janice Mirikitani which will present women's inner conflict and their attempts to win over the conflicts to prove that women are always the victims of the sexual politics in the patriarchal society, thus the society should be concerned about women's internal strife.

KEYWORDS: Inner Conflict, Women, Karen Horney, 20th-century poetry

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I. INTRODUCTION

In her book *Women and Poetry*, Muske (1997) says:

The sense of self in poetry written by women is historically elusive, certainly less culturally defined than in poems by men. Yet it has ended up, in the present climate of truth-telling, autobiography, and testimony, that the positioning of the self as an autobiographical referent in poetry has become central to our reading of poems by women.

As the reflection of the society and human mind, literature attempts to present the true picture of every society along with every human mind, and being a modern genre of literature 20th-century poetry has a diverse variety of themes. Modern poets find inspiration from everything surrounding them, mostly from their real-life experiences. Being the modern poets of 20th-century literature Rich, Pastan, and Mirikitani also try to show some real pictures of women's lives and their surroundings through their poems.

For many years, women are trying to take a position in society and in their families where everyone will respect them, hence the bitter truth is, they are always underscored by the males and by the other members of the family. From their childhood, they are treated as second citizens and it continues to their youth, maturity, and older age. There is no end to their sufferings in this life; rather it ends only to the grave. From dawn to dusk they do contribute for their families, yet finally, they find nothing. As Millet (2016, p. xi) says in her book *Sexual Politics*:

"the family is identified as male supremacy's primary institution, its internal elevation of men over women and younger men, expanding outward to pervade social life. The term "patriarchy" in her hands thus offers a family-centered theory of male power that begins in the male-headed household and ends in society, the "phallic state" and the international order".

That means if women are not free in their homes, they cannot ever be free outside the world. Because the same males, after going outside treat other females in the same way as they treat their women. In *the Second Sex*, Beauvoir (2011) says:

'One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. She further says that the woman is not simply determined by a male-defined culture. She is at once invented by men and 'exists without their invention'

So, woman emancipation seems to be an abstract idea that does not exist ever.

Adrienne Rich is one of those poets who have been famous especially for their feminist poems. Her poems give us the details of women's domestic life, their inner sufferings, and their internal urge to get freedom. In the article titled "Adrienne Rich" Birkle (2019) says:

In most of her poems and essays, Rich focused on her own and, thus, a woman's relationship to a world that she described as patriarchal, with predetermined and fixed gender roles that made being a successful poet.

Her poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" is a reflection of her concern about women's emancipation and identity. Another modern American poet Linda Pastan has realistically shown a woman's life in her poem "Marks" which also determines her weariness being a woman of patriarchal society. And lastly, Janice Mirikitani, a Japanese-American poet and activist who deals with the theme of gender and justice has presented the difference between a boy's and a girl's way of living along with a resolution in her poem "A Suicide Note".

II. METHODOLOGY

To apply Horney's theory of inner conflict, the researcher has chosen three poems written by three poets. The poems were critically analyzed followed by a qualitative or observation method to bring out women's inner trauma.

Women's Inner Conflicts according to the psychoanalyst Karen Horney

Horney (1945) in her famous book *Our Inner Conflicts* talked about human beings' inner conflicts, the types of those, and the consequences. She says:

At one time or another our wishes, our interests, our convictions are bound to collide with those of others around us. And just as such clashes between our-selves and our environment are commonplace, so, too, conflicts within ourselves are an integral part of human life. (Horney, p.23)

That means every living human being has some conflicts within, especially between desires and obligations. A little girl may wish to be a singer or a dancer but her family may not wish her to do so, their wish for her is to be a doctor, an engineer, or something very much esteemed for the society, though not for her self-esteem. A young girl may wish to read storybooks, write poems or short stories, whereas her surroundings may hinder her desires and wish the girl to concentrate on her study getting the best result. When these girls become wives or mothers, they naturally adapt a power of adjustment and power of sacrifice, though our minds cannot cope with those sacrifices or adjustments always. Human minds revolt someday, get involved in a conflict, a conflict between a mind and the society, or a conflict between a mind and a family or sometimes some inner hidden conflicts that rule inside the heart, nobody can know about it as Horney has asked:

Do we really like a person or do we only think we like him because we are supposed to? (Horney, p.25)

Yes, does the woman wish for the life they are now? Or it is all about their obligations, adjustments to living a better life, and sometimes a sacrifice to stay in peace? Because they always have the fear to be criticized by the people surrounding them, it could be their people or the people of the society.

A woman's experience in Pastan's "Marks"

"Marks" is a 12-line poem where Pastan has talked about a woman's experience being a wife, and a mother. She is someone who works for the family throughout the day, cooking, ironing, and so many household works. The title of the poem "Marks" is used as a metaphor for "Grades" which is usually used to assess the students by their teachers. But Pastan uses the title just to express her inner plea that in society women are always evaluated or assessed by others. They try to give their maximum effort to keep the families happy, still, at the end of the day, their hearts get broken when they are underscored by everyone. The poem starts with the point of view of a woman saying:

*My husband gives me an A
for last night's supper,
an incomplete for my ironing, (Pastan, 1-3)*

She declares her grades of different activities done by her as if these were the marks of different subjects given by different teachers. She has got an "A" for making last night's supper, an "I" for ironing, and a "B+" in bed. These are the grades given by her husband. The grades and the performance show that she is the one who fulfills all the duties of the house. She might not have any helping hand or the husband may not help her. Yet the husband is very expert in giving grades. He is someone who likes to criticize the wife or evaluate the wife so that he can make her inferior and control her saying that she is not perfect. It also shows the woman's emptiness that after her long day's effort she is judged by her husband in this way. She further adds:

*My son says I am average,
An average mother, (Pastan, 5-6)*

So, the son thinks if she puts her mind on it, she can improve which sounds so ridiculous that a mother is judged by her son whom she has brought into this world and groomed up by her love, care, and patience. She might have not slept nights after nights just to take care of the children or she might have sacrificed her hundred dreams to stay beside her kids. And now, when the kids are grown up big, they do not think the second time to dishonor their mothers by giving her scores and asking her to improve. Her daughter, who herself is a female, says that she has passed. Finally, the woman becomes so traumatized that she decides to "drop out". The

meaning of “drop out” is not clear to the readers though, it could be the woman’s decision to find her isolated life where she will be hers or her new journey to fulfill that entire unfulfilled dream she has sacrificed for the sake of her family.

‘Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers’ by Adrienne Rich

Being a feminist poet Adrienne Rich has talked about a married woman’s dream and her real-life experience in the poem “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”. Rich starts her poem by saying:

*Aunt Jennifer’s tigers prance across a screen,
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;(Rich 1-2)*

The tigers are not the real tigers but they are the knitted animals of Aunt Jennifer who uses the tigers as the symbols of the woman whom she wishes to make free from the control of the patriarchal society. The tigers represent her dream of freedom. She also dreams to become brave and strong like the tigers. Her married life seems to her like a burden as she says:

*The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band;
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer’s hand. (Rich 7-8)*

It is not always because women are to do the household works and take care of the children, sometimes it happens because they cannot be psychologically free from the patriarchal control. Rich does not talk about any particular reason in her poem; she shows Aunt Jennifer’s wedding band as a massive weight upon her hands that prove that married life looks like a burden to her. And to get out of the conflict Aunt Jennifer chooses knitting, a way to fulfill her unfulfilled dream. In her lifetime she is never able to be free and brave, but after her death, her “knitted tigers” will continue to move independently.

‘Suicide Note’, a Poem by Janice Mirikitani

Mirikitani’s “Suicide Note” is a poem about a college passed girl who commits suicide just because she receives slightly less grade than the full grade and brings some disappointments for her parents. She thinks that she is never perfect in her parents’ eyes as she says:

*not good enough not pretty enough not smart enough
dear mother and father.
I apologize
for disappointing you. (Mirikitani 3-6)*

The young girl further adds that her parents better have a son, who could have fulfilled their dream fully by bringing some lights in the mother’s eyes or becoming the pride of the father. The lines of the note present the bitter truth of life, where most of the people expect sons just because sons can properly take care of them in their old age or sons would make them financially solvent. Whereas, many girls can do better if they get the proper chance to use their intellectuality, explore their hidden qualities, and disclose their creativity to the world. By the repetition of the line *not good enough not pretty enough not smart enough*, the young girl wants to show her lack of confidence, her inferiority as a girl, and her failure.

In the poem, she is compared to a “bird” as Mirikitani says:

*My sacrifice I will drop
bone by bone, perched
on the ledge of my womanhood,
fragile as wings.
not strong enough (Mirikitani 31-35)*

To the young girl, the weather is snowy and the wind is not strong enough to hold her, the ice has burdened her wings and she is crying. She is crying because she could not achieve the grade expected by her parents. She is crying because she is not born as a “boy”. She is crying because she is “not good enough not strong enough not good enough”. Finally, she commits suicide, she dreams that after finding her body her parents would bury her “bird bones” and scatter her feathers like “unspoken song”. In every uttered word of the girl the readers would find some pain, some emptiness, and some sigh that a girl of the patriarchal society suffers from.

Every day every moment many woman’s voices remain “unspoken”, many woman’s dreams are strangled but the society, the family, the custom, the convention, these are so important to the people that they never let their girls fly in the sky like a free bird. The girls are born to fulfill the dream of their parents as shown in the poem.

Horney's inner conflict and the woman of 20th Century Poetry

The characters of the three poems, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", "Marks" and "Suicide Note" suffer from some inner conflict as referred by Karen Horney. Aunt Jennifer's married life seems to her like a burden rather than making her happy. The woman of the poem "Marks" also suffers from the same psychological plight when she finds herself judged by the family members. The college girl of "Suicide Note" commits suicide because of the same inner pain; otherwise not achieving a perfect grade could not be the only reason for a girl's death.

Horney (1945) shows many reasons of the inner conflicts and shared some consequences as well, such as:

- i) Moving toward people (Wishing to get some love, care, or attention from the surroundings to reduce the pain of inner conflict)
- ii) Moving against people (Getting aggressive or having some illusions that other people do not like the person for some reason)
- iii) Moving away from people (making oneself isolated from the world and wandering in the dreamland when the inner heart suffers the extreme)

The three women of the three poems choose different ways to find peace. Aunt Jennifer chooses knitting to fulfill her dream. By the free-moving tigers, she wants to show the liberal women who are not scared of the males or anything. Her tigers are the symbols of woman's independence in the patriarchal society.

The woman of "Marks" also wishes for a "dropout" so that she can lead a free life of her own where nobody will assess her even after her optimum effort, where she can be a free woman trying to fulfill her dream. She might have had many dreams to execute; she might have wanted to be someone identified or renowned but every dream is sacrificed for taking care of her family, cooking, ironing, etc. After the sacrifice, she deserves nothing but a reward whereas the reality is so cruel that she has to drop out.

Finally, the young girl of "Suicide Note" commits suicide which is a sin in every religion. Then why did she do that? The girl gives the answer saying:

Choices thin as shaved

ice. Notes shredded

drift like snow

on my broken body, (Mirikitani 49-52)

She did it because she could not find any other choice. It is not only about a moment or about a grade, rather it could be the resolution of a long-time trauma; it could be the final step of years after years' pain. The young girl's every word, every line expresses her internal fight with her surroundings as found in Aunt Jennifer and the woman of the "Marks".

So, three of them have moved away from people, made themselves isolated by knitting, dropping out, and committing suicide which is the final attempt of women's extreme inner conflict.

In the essay "Marriage and Divorce: The Search for Adult Identity" of the book *The Psychology of Today's Woman* Cantor (1986) says:

that the changes in women in our society may threaten men, shift the balance between sexes, and increase the aggressive components of marriage.

That means today's women need some resolution of their inner conflicts that the traditional women did not search for, and the resolution could be like Aunt Jennifer, the woman of Pastan, or the young girl of Janice Mirikitani.

Comparative Discussion

In the mentioned three poems the poets have manifested women's experience, struggle, and their way out to get rid of their inner conflicts. Aunt Jennifer, the wife and the mother of Pastan's poem, and the young girl of Mirikitani are the victims of their patriarchal society where after getting married a woman's happy dream gets shattered, where a wife, a mother has to be judged by her most beloved family, where a young girl feels her as an inferior because of not born as a boy, rather as a girl. They find out different ways to stay happy, one chooses knitting, another drops out and the last one commits suicide which shows the inability of society to make the woman happy and joyous. It also explores that every woman should be given a chance to be happy in their way. Rather than controlling them, controlling them, or injecting other dreams into them, people should let them choose their dream and make those successful.

III. CONCLUSION

Every time every dream would not be fulfilled, especially if it is the dream of a woman, there is the most chance to get it unfulfilled as women are always treated as the second sex. It is not about any caste or creed; every woman of every society suffers from the same inner conflict and finds out a way to stay happy. It could not be always like Aunt Jennifer of "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", the woman of "Marks" or the girl of

“Suicide Note”; sometimes it could be through some writing which could be a cry out of those inner conflict and inner mind. No society can be full without the contribution of the woman, so the present study opens a way for future researchers showing some painful experiences of women's lives and the negative consequences of those applying Horney's theory of inner mind in 20th-century poetry so that some solution of the problems could be found out to make the society healthy where no woman will commit suicide, no one will leave the house or no heart would cry secretly for the psychological freedom.

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