

Aunt Jennifer: A victim of patriarchal society and a persona evolving consciousness of modern women - A study based on Adrienne Rich's poem Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

Dhanya G

(Assistant Professor, Department of English, Vignan Pharmacy College, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India- 522213)

Abstract : *This paper aims at to study how women are silenced in the male- dominated society, a topic that has great relevance even in this twenty- first century. To pursue the study I have chosen Adrienne Rich's poem Aunt Jennifer's Tiger. Rich, in her poem, has explored the mechanisms of the 'male domination' and 'patriarchy' that exists in the society. Adrienne Rich, a poet from marginalized communities reacts towards the dominating nature that forms the mainstream society. Rich saw poetry as a keen-edged beacon by which women's lives and consciousness could be enlightened. The poem is an eye- opener to re-construct the identity of the women as it was before being distorted by the phallogocentric ideology. The poet examines women's positions in a conventional society, and strongly argues for restructuring identity and, rewriting the norms that result in en- visioning a new world to come.*

Keywords: *Aunt Jennifer, Tigers, Patriarchy, gender, disempowered*

I. Introduction

Adrienne Rich was one of those major twentieth-century intellectuals. She was a poet, critic and a scholar of towering reputation and rage, whose work distinguished by an unswerving progressive vision and a dazzling, empathic ferocity. As an activist for women's and LGBT issues she brought the oppression of women and lesbians to the forefront of poetic discourse and kept it there for nearly a half-century. Rich won the prestigious Yale Younger Poets prize for her first published book of poetry, *A Change of World* (1951), a collection that featured, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers." Her poems have been published in many collections, including *Collected Early Poems: 1950-1970* (1993), *The Will to Change* (1971), *The Fact of a Door-frame* (1984), and *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991). She has also written *What Is Found There* (1993) and other books of prose. Rich retained a dexterous command of the plain, pithy utterance. In a 1984 speech she summed up her reason for writing — and, by loud unspoken implication, her reason for being — in just seven words. What she and her sisters-in-arms were fighting to achieve, she said, was simply this: “the creation of a society without domination.” [1]

This poem was written in 1951, a time in which there were much fewer options for women in terms of careers and family planning. Women were not financially independent. We get a glimpse into the lives of the Aunt Jennifer's of the world, and a glance into the ways that gender affects us. Even today the problem lay buried, silent, in the minds of women over the globe. In the middle of the twentieth century women suffered a strange stirring and a sense of dissatisfaction. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. Time and again women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian superiority that they could desire--no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. Some women, remembered painfully giving up their dreams and passions, but most of the younger women no longer even thought about them. The society celebrated their maturity, femininity and their adjusting mentality. Women were expected to devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children. But women's imagination is boundless, like music, painting, and writing: their stream of apparition is incredible. “Rich, in her poems, has explored the mechanisms of the ‘male-gaze’ and tried to re-construct the identity of the women as it was before being distorted by the phallogocentric ideology. The poet has directed her ‘gaze’ upon the gazing process of the mainstream. She examines women’s allotted positions in American society, and pry open a space in the critical models available for reconstructing identity and, rewriting the canon that result in en- visioning a new world to come [2].

II. Analysis

The poem “Aunt Jennifer’s Tiger” explores the controlled condition of women with all its possibilities of challenging the patriarchal ‘gaze’ upon the women. Aunt Jennifer is the archetype whose creative energies are blemished by mans’ desire to see the women in conventional roles like knitting. “For too long, she feels , women have been estranged from their creative female selfhood. She refers to herself as a member of a new generation of women writers creating new work from the “psychic” energy being generated by women’s

movement toward what was being called the “new Space” on the boundaries of patriarchy”[3]. The poem reflects a core theme that is seen in Rich's work throughout her writing life: her unwavering support for women's rights. When she received the award in 1974, Rich dedicated it to women everywhere—women who had been silenced, who hadn't been given the opportunity to speak in their male-dominated society. Andrea O' Reilly states, I had not realized how fully and deeply Rich had touched the lives of so many women [4]. “Poetry is not a healing lotion, an emotional massage, a kind of linguistic aromatherapy,” she said. A seasoned campaigner Rich believed that verse alone could change deep-rooted social institutions. She was among the most influential writers of the feminist movement and one of the best-known activists among public intellectuals of America.

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" on the peripheral level is only twelve lines long. But at a deeper side this poem packs a serious punch, a kind of protest and gesture of solidarity. In just three short stanzas it presents us with the life of a disempowered woman and offers a vision of her future immortality through art. "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", though addresses the issues of woman is not written only for an audience of women. This poem is a symbolic representation of a woman whom we admire, but who has perhaps been held back in life because of her gender.

"Patriarchy" is an important term while analyzing Rich's work. Patriarchy refers to a male-dominated society in which men hold authority and power and women are subordinated to them. Rich, however, uses an inventive image to recast these conventional themes in a new way. Aunt Jennifer is a wife who is totally controlled by her husband. Her fingers ‘flutter’ while in wool work. She is scared of her husband which shows inequality and injustice in her marriage. Marriage brings two people in an equal position where both expect justice, love and equality in behavior. But here in this poem Jennifer has become the victim of injustice. As long as power can be envisioned only in terms that are culturally determined as masculine; the revolutionary content of the vision, which was all limited to a highly intervened and symbolic plane, will remain insufficient. The fact is that assertion against the patriarchy is here imagined only in terms set by the patriarchs may be seen as this poem's version of the tigers' "fearful symmetry." And the "Immortal hand or eye" that framed their symmetry is not Aunt Jennifer's framing her needlework. It is patriarchy and male - chauvinism framing Aunt Jennifer.

As a feminist poet Rich insists on the importance of the “imaginative identification with all women (and with the ghostly woman in all men)” and commits herself to the re-creation of a female community. In Keyes's rendering, Rich's feminism, while on the one hand the source of her strength, has made her into an "ideologue" who "may well sacrifice the truths of her heart and of poetry for what she perceives as higher purposes". For Keyes, the "female chauvinism" of this "man-hater" brands "all men as the enemy," "guilty of crimes against women and against life on this planet" [5]. Rich hopes that the community of all women “the poet, the housewife, the lesbian, the mathematician, the mothers, the waitress....” will create a culture in which women have equal economic, social, and political rights with men. She also strove to convey a sense of immediacy, even urgency. “Instead of poems about experiences I am getting poem that are experiences,” Rich wrote in 1964.

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree:
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

The first verse of the poem describes the fearless tigers Aunt Jennifer creates in needlepoint. The speaker describes the tigers which her aunt produced by using colored threads on heavy cloth. They are set in motion, moving quickly by raising the front legs and jumping forwards on the back legs. In the green jungle they look bright yellow and as valuable as topazes which reveals her dream of a happier life in her needle work. Aunt Jennifer lives a quiet and subdued life but the tigers she imagined are just opposite to her. They are proud, active, fearless, determined and chivalric "prancing" across the tapestry. Their freedom and dignity is contrasted in the second verse to the restrictions of marriage, symbolized by the wedding band that weighs down Aunt Jennifer's fingers as she sews. The poet tells us about Aunt Jennifer's needlework tapestry, which features beautiful bright tigers prancing fierce less. Though they aren't real, these tigers seem pretty alive to us. The tigers are strong and have no fears, so they've got that going for them. Why does the speaker ascribe a human attribute like "prancing" to a non-human thing like an animal, or a representation of an animal, Aunt Jennifer, though, is not so free. It is found that these tigers aren't in iron cages, just scattered throughout the house. They are not afraid of the men, even though they are right underneath the tigers. The tigers are so brave that they "pace in sleek chivalric certainty." Their "chivalric certainty" is a representation by Aunt Jennifer of her own envisioned power. It reassesses the rift between her actual social existences. Yes, passages in Rich, especially certain poems of the mid-to-late seventies, have, quite intentionally, shaken and shocked readers, women as well as men, and, not surprisingly, anger and outrage expressed with such concentrated and convincing vehemence alienated many. "The Phenomenology of Anger" is an extreme and disturbing statement (for the poet, too, no

less), but Rich's attempt to become the lightning rod for feelings long suppressed in herself and in other women has to be read as a lyric poem in a body of work that extends and qualifies and complements it. There is no question that during those initial combative years of feminist definition Rich decided to write primarily to and about women and that male figures entered the poems almost exclusively as the patriarchal enemy [6].

"Chivalric" connotes all those things that a true knight represents: loyalty, courtesy, and bravery. The main images are of Aunt Jennifer as a fearful wife and, secondly, the magnificent tigers she creates in her panel. Images of precious substances run through the poem: topaz, ivory, and gold of 'wedding band'. The yellow precious stone 'topaz' metaphorically stands for the stripes of tiger. In the poem, meek Jennifer and her confident tiger are contrasted with each other. Fear is the prime atmosphere in Jennifer's painful life where her fingers tremble while doing needle work in her husband's absence. The speaker personifies the tigers, imagining that they have human feelings, like fear. But these men beneath the tree on the tapestry- are real men, careless and dominant. The tigers are awesome bright topaz denizens of the forest who pace with honor and braveness.

Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

Aunt Jennifer's hands move swiftly and daintily while she works on her wool—maybe even nervously?—through the air. This contrasts with the tigers, who pace "in chivalric certainty." The movement of the tigers is definitive, while Aunt Jennifer's movements are less so. She is struggling hard to pull the needle through the wool that makes the tapestry. At work sewing something, she's not very certain of her work and it seems to be giving her difficulty. Aunt Jennifer's needlework seems like a labor. A distinct contrast, between Aunt Jennifer's tigers, who are brave and stately, and Aunt Jennifer herself, who struggles with her craft is seen.

Let's think of Aunt Jennifer's needlework itself. Needlepoint, sewing, crocheting—these are all historically feminine types of craft work, often considered as "lower" art forms than painting and sculpture. It's interesting, then, that Aunt Jennifer is stalled even in her needlework—an area of life she could express her feminine self. The only thing Aunt Jennifer seems to have in this poem is her needlework, and she even struggles with that because of the weight of her marriage. One of the interesting questions about the poem is whether Aunt Jennifer's struggles are due to her relationship with her husband, or because of the lack of power for women in the patriarchal society in which she lives. In other words, is her problem her husband's fault, or is it the problem of an entire culture that subordinates women to men?

The air of freedom and confidence dominates the atmosphere in her artistic creation. The paradoxical situation is created in the poem when trembling and 'mastered' woman creates free and confident creatures in her work of art. The tone appears to be positive and cheerful when the poet describes the tiger but it becomes sad and dull at times of describing Aunt Jennifer.

The metaphorical weight of Aunt Jennifer's wedding band in lines 7-8 raises a question. Why Aunt Jennifer struggles with the needle? She is being weighed down by her wedding band from her husband, called "Uncle" by the poem and implies that her marriage was unhappy and held her back from the life that she wanted to live. The wedding band is acting as a symbol for Aunt and Uncle's marriage itself. Even though Aunt Jennifer herself wears it, the wedding band is "Uncle's wedding band". Aunt Jennifer is defined by her husband, and the symbolic "massive weight" of the wedding band is holding her back from her needlework. She is sadly weighed down by a wedding band while the tigers are prancing and pacing bravely.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

When Aunt Jennifer is dead her hands will still be "terrified". She will be ringed with ordeals she was mastered by" in death, as in life. "Ringed" appears as a symbol of the marriage that trapped her. The master is "the ordeals" that she suffers, presumably at the hand of her husband. Though the lines are ambiguous here, it still suggests that Uncle is the master and Aunt Jennifer is the slave. She finds no escape from her troubles even after her death. But, the speaker says, the tigers will keep prancing in her needlework, and Aunt Jennifer will be immortalized through her art. Though Aunt Jennifer may die one day with "terrified hands," but her tigers will be just the opposite of those hands. They'll keep up their pride and go on prancing.

Ironic awareness of Aunt Jennifer's position as a married woman shows her as ringed with ordeals she was mastered by, image Rich sets against the proud and unafraid tigers, potently and aggressively themselves as a symbolic expression of the confident and capable female artist certain of her powers. Yet powerful they are,

they are fixed and framed within the screen, as within the art form – static as an emblem, bounded in space, suspended in time and utterly unfree to act in the world – just as the feminine woman, ornamental and decorative object of male domination is caged, her energy restricted, with a patriarchal culture [7].

Did Aunt Jennifer imagine herself as a tiger? It can be presumed that the tigers are symbols of her inner life that she couldn't express. Those tigers are representations of all the qualities that she herself wanted to have, but couldn't, because of her husband. The tigers display in art the values that Aunt Jennifer must repress or displace in life: strength, assertion, fearlessness, fluidity of motion [8]. The poem also explores the eternity of art. Even if she was unsatisfied by her marriage, Aunt Jennifer found a life for herself in her art and she will live forever through her tigers, "prancing, proud and unafraid". The final verse of the poem persists in this destabilization as here rebellion and repression meet in the simultaneity of the fearless tigers and the lifeless aunt.

Meg Boerema Gillete's reading, however, is that the poem resists those oppositions upon which Pope's and Byars' criticisms depend. "I would argue that "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" does not stage a contest between the individual and the social, but rather characterizes them by their interdependence. In the central symbols of the poem--the tapestry tigers and the Uncle's wedding band--the individual and social, the personal and the political meet. Byars argues 'the tapestry tigers are not just individual artistic expressions; they are politically inflected, engaged in patriarchal chivalry myths. Gillete calls tigers as icons of colonialism - suggestive of capitalist regimes as in line 6 – "Find even the ivory needle hard to pull ivory needle" [9]. The personal and the political again meet in the intimacy of "Uncle's wedding band" (line 7).

Deborah Pope's and Thomas B. Byars describes the poem as a contest between the individual and the social, between "imagination" and "gender roles and expectation", [10] between the "oppressed" and the "oppressor" Aunt Jennifer's Tigers is a poem highly provocative encouraging political action. Like Plath, Rich writes about women's roles and experiences but she moved beyond Plath in discovering ways to apply her anger not to self-destruction but to pointed critiques and re-envisioning of society. Aunt Jennifer provides a chronicle of the evolving consciousness of the modern women. Aunt Jennifer's image explores the experience of women, who reject patriarchal definitions of femininity by separating themselves from the political and social reality that trivializes and subordinate females. As in other works of Rich, her Aunt Jennifer stands as a representative for all who are silenced and crippled by the "world masculinity unfit for women or men."

III. Conclusion

"Aunt Jennifer's life implies the presence of patriarchal politics". She feels the burden of duty and obedience. This is shown by the symbol of the wedding ring that she wears. It is described as her husband's property: 'Uncle's wedding band'. Her life with her husband described as a life of 'ordeals' present a negative picture of marriage. The tigers in the poem represent Jennifer's innermost desire. She wants to be strong like the tigers that do not fear the men. She wants to create precious pieces of art. Her life has been uncertain, helpless. She finds courage, justice and honor in the smooth movement of the tigers. Thus the tiger stand for her unfulfilled wishes. Perhaps Aunt Jennifer uses art as an escape from her troubles. In her artwork Jennifer imagines the kind of life she would have liked.

Adrienne Rich's poems are known for her observation of the experiences of women in society. This poem is remarkable in her mission of reconstructing identity. "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" is a statement of conflict in women, specifically between the impulse to freedom and imagination and the "massive weight" of gender roles and expectations, signified by "Uncle's wedding band. Rich echoes many ideas of the radical feminist movement, counterposing the struggle for women's liberation to workers' struggles for economic justice, despite the fact that, as she later acknowledges, the vast majority of women are workers [11]. Rich strongly argues that women's disenfranchisement at the hands of men must end. Rich deals with that power of the women which is to engender, to create, to bring forth fuller life, unlike the exploitative power of the males.

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