

# "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers"-A Subdued Spirit of Freedom

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## Abstract

Adrienne Rich is widely acknowledged for her political activism and poetry. The present study makes an attempt to explore the assigned role of women in their marriage relations. This paper focuses on the critical study of Adrienne Rich's popular poem, 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers', as the poem depicts women's problem of emancipation from the proprietary codes. The idea presented in the poem is thought provoking. Adrienne moves us to the intuitive awareness of reality, which lay behind the gleaming facades of life.

It probes deeper into the shrieking silences of women in the male- dominated society and shuns the conventional norms restructuring identity. The poet envisions a new world in cradle.

Keywords- Activism, Emancipation, Conventional norms, Identity

## 1 Introduction

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" is a beautiful record of marginalization of women in an oppressive chauvinist society. Entangled in the complex web of relationships aunt Jennifer has grown out to be a timid creature and escapes into an alternative world of embroidery and sewing. Jennifer stands for a woman who becomes a victim of gender roles dictated by patriarchy. Cultivated over years through accumulated learning, her nervousness and fragility get deeply embedded within her personality. Jennifer's tapestry is Rich's attempt to de-bias the gender roles in society.

Though timid in her real-life Jennifer projects her vivacity in art by showing 'prancing tigers' who seem to convey her inner urges. Marriage the most intimate and sacred of relations becomes a medium of exploitation of women where they are treated as second creatures. While her husband become the archetype of patriarchal oppressions, who wants to control and frighten his wife. Adrienne gives vent to the clout authority of Jennifer's husband in marriage. The suppressed feelings of aunt Jennifer get projected in the tapestry. The central conflict of the poem owes its origin to tapestry which consists Tigers, as the free bright brave heart dwellers of green world. The tapestry is in strict contrast with the fluttering Aunt Jennifer. Her feminine sentimentality can't bear the sight of needle. Her nervousness implies the constrains of married life experienced by women while her art will stand testimony of her desire.

## 2 Wistful longing to escape

Adrienne paints a haunting picture of subdued spirit of freedom. She once said that 'poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don't know you know'.<sup>(1)</sup> Aunt Jennifer seems to be doing the same in the poem.

Being a staunch advocate of women's rights, Rich was well aware that the patriarchy propounds a very narrow definition of women's role in society. In the form of aunt Jennifer, she brings to the scene the woman who claims to be happily married but feels deep inside that everything she is living is a lie and begins to realize it.

The historical nature of gender-based violence confirms that it is not an unfortunate aberration but systematically entrenched in culture and society, reinforced and powered by patriarchy.

Tigers are a symbol of her inner life that she couldn't express, alternatively they are representations of all the qualities that she herself wanted to have, but couldn't, because of her husband. Ironically, Rich has chosen a delicate, and historically feminized, tapestry of animals in the forest as her sheltered bay.

Her frantic search of her individuality results into her tapestry. Fluttering timidity of her real life stands in sharp contrast to the ferocity of tigers that she embroiders. The majestic motion of the tigers corresponds with their clarity of vision and their surety to accomplish what they desire. They are undeterred and full of robust energy. She seeks to escape from constant fear, but she finds it hard to pull the ivory needle hinting at her nerve wrecking marriage. What she weaves well projects the trapping of gender oppression. She grapples with atrocious and overbearing husband.

Wedding band is no more a symbol of conjugal joy and happiness it rather implies her caged aspirations and subdued spirit. The intensity of submission has even rendered death incapable of being a liberating force.

Adrienne brings to the shore life of a disempowered woman and offers a vision of her future immortality through art. Tigers with their empathic ferocity, are true symbols of Jennifer's pent up energies: proud and unafraid. The poem makes a very important statement about Rich's feminism.

## 3 The Dark and Green World

Contrary to Jennifer's ringed dark world tigers inhabit green world where their majestic movements express fearlessness and rebirth. The syntax plays a crucial role-

“Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.  
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;  
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.”

The use of word 'Chivalry' connotes ancient knightly virtues including courteous treatment, especially of women by men. But patriarchy is completely ignorant about it.

Patriarchal power is apparent in the second stanza, whilst the first highlights the creative drive of Aunt Jennifer's tigers. The one redeeming feature of her life however, the prancing, free spirited tigers, will continue indefinitely. Art can bring a sense of inner peace and instill confidence, however fragile.

“The tigers in the panel that she made  
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.”

This poem was written in 1951, back then women were not financially independent and they were supposed to be the 'perfect wives' of their husbands. They were still regarded as submissive and inferior beings and their husbands played the role of harsh taskmasters. Educational opportunities were limited. We get a glimpse into the lives of women and Aunt Jennifer's world through this poem, and a glance into the ways that gender affects us. An excerpt from "The Feminine Mystique," by Betty Friedan well sums up the dissatisfaction-

“The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night -- she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question -- "Is this all?"

Women's imagination and her incredible stream of apparition was curbed and her femininity was glorified. Rich 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.

#### 4 Search of alternatives for selfhood

Rich was one of the major twentieth-century intellectual poet, critic, scholar and an activist for women's and LGBT issues. A recurring theme in her writings happens to be unwavering support for women's rights.

Jennifer's needlework tapestry emphasizes on her quest for alternatives for the assertion of her selfhood. Jennifer escapes into an alternative world of embroidery and sewing. The tigers she creates will outlast her and become a symbol of freedom and independence. The tigers will keep prancing in her needlework, and Aunt Jennifer will be immortalized through her art. The speaker ascribes a human attribute like "prancing" to the tigers and the vivid colorful imagery intensifies the contrast-

“Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,  
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.”

The movement of the tigers is definitive, while Aunt Jennifer's movements are less so-

“Aunt Jennifer's finger fluttering through her wool  
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.”

Aunt Jennifer is passive and terrified, overwhelmed by events that eclipsed her aspirations. The fundamental implications here is the tug of war between Jennifer's impulse to freedom and her stereotypical gender role dictated by regressive society.

## 5 The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band

Rich engages the reader with the most critical issues of our time-gender inequality. She confronts gender conformity and aims to replace relationships of power with relationships of meaning. Patriarchy is a structural force that influences power relations, whether they are abusive or not. By representing marriage with just the wedding band, Rich is employing metonymy-

“The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band  
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie  
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.”

In patriarchy's sly scheme of affairs Aunt Jennifer gets defined by her husband, and the symbolic "massive weight" of the wedding band is holding her back from her needlework. Adrienne curiously juxtaposes bravely prancing tigers and weighed down by a wedding band, Aunt Jennifer, which indicates a broader cultural setting that is hostile, or at least challenging, toward women.

Rich's syntax here is interesting which is too indicative of slave master relationship. The diction and syntax correspond in harmony with the powerlessness of Jennifer. The contrast is blatant indictment of the lack of power for women in the patriarchal society-

“The tigers in the panel that she made  
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.”

The morbid anticipation of Jennifer's death in the concluding lines increases the dilemma. The poet maintains that contrast will continue even after death of respective Jennifer and tigers, suggesting that they'll keep up their bravery, chivalry, and fearlessness which Jennifer is incapable of given her timidity and chauvinist society.

## 6 The Ineffectual rebellion

The tigers display in art the values that Aunt Jennifer must repress or displace in life: strength, assertion, fearlessness, fluidity of motion. The poem presents a fierce sense of indignation about women's inequality. Aunt Jennifer is filled with potential that lies just below the surface, and she tries to set an example for the speaker about how to overcome repression and find your true voice through art. The oppressive structure of Aunt Jennifer's conventional marriage is the repressive setting in which the poem takes place. Rich is writing to critique through Aunt Jennifer. She is sketching for us a world in which women's art is denigrated, where they're sexually objectified, where they earn less money, and are made victims of abuse and assault

The dichotomy between aunt Jennifer and her tigers forms the crux of the poem. Aunt Jennifer's relationship with the tigers is poem's central question. They represent everything she can't have in life as she is 'Still ringed with Uncle's wedding band' Aunt Jennifer's tigers have a life all of their own outside Uncle's patriarchal authority.

The juxtaposition between the constraints of Jennifer's personal life and the wonderful freedom which gets displayed in the work of art produced by Jennifer adds poignancy to the poem. The smooth gallant tigers are sure of themselves and their existence. She is uncomfortable with the fact that women are somehow always positioned outside the hub of things as a creature conditioned only to live and serve her household.

She only finds free expression in art but is deprived of selfhood in reality. The poem is a statement of feminism's rejection of the unreasonable demands that patriarchy puts on women.

## 7 Conclusion

The speaker finds a distinctly feminine art form through which Aunt Jennifer can become immortal. The tigers are set in motion. They are moving quickly by raising the front legs and jumping forwards on the back legs. On the contrary, Jennifer is tired of doing the household work after she got married. She can't get herself involved in her artistic work

The poem records Rich's observation of the experiences of women in society. This poem is remarkable in her mission of reconstructing identity. 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 <sup>6</sup>

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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