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Feminist Interpretation of '*Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*' by Adrienne Rich

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ABSTRACT

“Being a woman is terribly difficult task, since it consists principally in dealing with men.”

- Joseph Conrad

Feminist literature is a process of self - discovery, self - assertion, and self – reliance. Margaret Fuller was the first American woman to assert her uniqueness and limitations in a patriarchal system in her book *Women in the Nineteenth Century*(1845). In the twentieth century Rebecca West, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson etc. imitated the feminist consciousness movement in literature. In America too this movement was gathering force. As a poet and theorist, Adrienne Rich has vast impact on contemporary American literature. This article tries to read the above poem with regards to Feminist concerns in it. Rich’s innate talents and her will to change gender biases is the main concern of this poem that this article will try to analyze.

Key Words: Patriarchy, gender biases, art and women, women’s roles, individuality, feminist concerns.

“Aunt Jennifer’s tigers prance across a screen,

Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.”

This is a very short poem of three stanzas of four lines, rhyming aabb ccdd eeff. The poem is the contrast between the work of art – embroidered prancing tigers - that Aunt Jennifer has produced and her suppressed personal life. This poem appeared in 1951. In the above lines the embroidered, fearless tigers are described. Rich even describes how colorful, fearless and self – assured the tigers are, which Aunt Jennifer has embroidered on her screen:

“They do not fear the men beneath the tree;

They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.”

The contrast of Aunt Jennifer’s life is foregrounded in these lines. The embroidered tigers “*do not fear the men beneath the tree.*” They are free and are able to “*pace in sleek chivalric certainty*” which Aunt Jennifer could not. Thus, the artwork produced by her and her actual life is totally different and it can even be said that she frees herself through the art she produces. As Virginia Woolf writes in her diary, “*It is this writing*



that gives me my proportions” is applicable to Aunt Jennifer’s creations also.

In the next stanza Rich shows the contrast between Aunt Jennifer’s tigers and Aunt Jennifer herself. While tigers are free and self – assured, Aunt Jennifer is timid and weak. She feels bowed down physically and emotionally by the weight of her wedding ring which symbolizes oppressive male – dominated environment in which Aunt Jennifer lives:

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

The final stanza elaborates this contrast vividly. The poet says when Aunt Jennifer will die, “*her terrified hands will lie / Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by*” but the creation, the tigers she has embroidered “*will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.*” This shows that the tigers have all the spirit, all the energy and all the courage that Aunt Jennifer lacked in her own life. Here, Adrienne Rich is trying to show probably that art may be a form of release for women who are trapped in an oppressive domestic environment, something that Rich herself went through in her own life. Being a woman, it is not easy for Aunt Jennifer to free herself from the “*massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band*” even after death, except her art work, in which she could free herself for moments only.

Not only this single poem but many of Rich’s volumes of poetry and critical essays show her feminist concerns aptly. In 1976, Rich published *Twenty – one Love Poems* in which she used Elizabethan sonnet sequence to express not heterosexual love but a lesbian attachment. As she says in her famous essay “*Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Continuum*” that the word ‘lesbian’ doesn’t simply mean two women going to bed with one another but one can also be a part the “lesbian continuum” i.e. believe in eroticized female friendship.

In another work, *It is the Lesbian in Us* (1976), she writes,

“Even before I wholly knew I was a lesbian; it was the lesbian in me who pursued that elusive configuration. And I believe it is the lesbian in every woman who is compelled by female energy, who gravitates towards strong women, *who seeks a literature that will express that energy and strength.* It is the lesbian in us who drives us to feel imaginatively, render in language, grasp, the full connection between woman and woman.” (Italics mine)



This idea of a “literature” that can express the ‘*energy and strength*’ of a woman is found in the above discussed poem “*Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers*”, where the real self of Aunt Jennifer is only found in her creation of tigers which she embroiders on her screen, but in reality, she is so suppressed under the oppressive patriarchy that even her wedding ring seems a kind of burden to her. And even after her death, her wedding ring would not leave her.

Through another volume *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963)*, Rich expresses from her own real-life experiences and her observations of life concerning the true situation of women in patriarchal society. Women are not only oppressed by patriarchy but sometimes even by women themselves, this she proves with her title poem *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*. In the third section of the poem, it is revealed that an intelligent, talented and qualified girl has to live in adverse circumstances after marriage and she is forced to accept the atrocities inflicted upon her. In return, she hurls them down on her daughter-in-law. Thus she becomes a means of inflicting women’s oppression. She draws life out of her daughter-in-law the same way she herself once had suffered. Thus, it becomes the distressed recognition of women against each other:

“All the old knives

That have rusted in my back, I drive in yours.”

- *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963)*

In this way, the concern of Rich’s many volumes is this patriarchal oppression and even sometimes the oppression of a woman by a woman or a woman herself. Aunt Jennifer is such a woman who is suffering from this patriarchy but she could not revolt against it and the only means to express her revolt and her true self was her needle work, her creation where she can embroider a fearless and self - assured tiger but she herself could not get rid of the “*weight of the Uncle’s Wedding band.*” The poem explores the feminist concerns really in a creative mode where Rich not only shows the patriarchal oppression but suggests a way to get rid of this and find an expression in one of the art work that could express the true self of women.



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