



## AUNT JENNIFER'S TIGERS - Adrienne Rich(poetry)

### *About the poet:*

Adrienne Rich (1929) was born in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. She is widely known for her involvement in contemporary women's movement as a poet and theorist. She has published nineteen volumes of poetry, three collections of essays and other writings. A strong resistance to racism and militarism echoes through her work. The poem Aunt Jennifer's Tigers addresses the constraints of married life a woman experiences.

Aunt Jennifer's Tigers is a poem by Adrienne Rich illustrating her feminist concerns. In the male dominated world, a woman of her time was only supposed to be a dutiful homemaker. This poem through the world of Aunt Jennifer, tells us about her inner desire to free herself from the clutches of abusive marriage and patriarchal society.

### *Theme:*

The poem revolves around desires and the depressingly harsh realities of Aunt Jennifer's existence, using sharp contrasts between the tigers that she sews and her own self. The tigers appear to be everything that she's not. The tiger's actions are smooth, uninhibited and robust. Aunt Jennifer on the other hand has great trouble even to embroider because her movements are so weak. Aunt Jennifer is evidently a lonely, pained old woman plagued by anxiety. The reason for her miserable plight is the oppressive patriarchal family system wherein "Uncle" dominates the scene. She creates an alternative world of freedom-a world that she longs for.

### **Poem Summary**

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The first stanza opens with Aunt Jennifer's visual tapestry of tigers who are fearless of their environment. "*Bright topaz denizens of a world of green*" – evoke an image that these regal tigers are unafraid of other beings in the jungle. Bright here signifies their powerful and radiant persona. There is a sense of certainty and confidence in the way these tigers move as can be seen in the line – "*They pace in sleek chivalric certainty*".

In the second stanza, the reality of Aunt Jennifer is revealed as she is feeble, weak and enslaved, very much the opposite of the tigers she was knitting. Her physical and mental trauma is depicted in the line – "*find even the ivory needle hard to pull*". Even though a wedding ring doesn't weigh

much, "*the massive weight of uncle's wedding band, sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand*" signifies the amount of dominance her husband exercised over her. This also means that her inner free spirit has been jailed by the patriarchal society.

The last stanza starts on a creepy note about Aunt Jennifer's death. Even her death couldn't free her from the ordeals she went through which can be seen in "*When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by*". But her art work which was her escape route or in a way, her inner sense of freedom, will stay forever, proud and unafraid.

### *Stanza-wise explanation:*

**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.**

As we will come to know later in the poem, Aunt Jennifer is a very mild woman who lacks self-confidence and is terrified of most things in her life. She is seen designing a tapestry of tigers in a green forest. The tigers appear to prance around confidently, unafraid of the hunters hiding among the trees. They move around in elegance and certainty. 'Chivalric' symbolizes knightly bravery. Using astounding poetry, she describes the tigers as bright topaz denizens – 'denizens' meaning inhabitants. The world of green is their home – the forest. A beautiful contrast of colors is sprung. The tigers wander through the forests with a grace that everything around them belongs to them. This gives them a dignity that makes them unafraid of man.

**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, as we will see in the last paragraph, is a woman, who is terrified of the marital ordeals in her life. Hence, the wedding band appears to be weighing her down. She appears to be bound to social and marital obligations and the wedding band appears more of a restraint than a symbol of love or joy or freedom. She seems to have lost her freedom of expression in her marriage, and therefore expresses herself through the only way she knows – her art of designing tapestries. Being the mild woman she is, she wishes to channelize her desire of becoming that bold woman who stands up for herself. This she does, by creating tigers who are entirely opposite in nature to herself. Whilst she is terrified of everything in life, the tigers are bold and

strong and do not fear anything. Whilst she is meek and unable to express herself, the tigers are elegant and pace with assured certainty. Why, Aunt Jennifer seems frightened even in the making of these bold, elegant beasts! This is seen in the fact that her fingers tremble in pulling the light, weightless ivory needle.

With creativity, it can be seen that like a ringed-in animal at a circus with no freedom, Aunt Jennifer appeared to be ringed in (with her wedding band) with no freedom.

**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 prancing, proud and unafraid.**

The poet has smartly used the phrase ‘terrible hands’ in which Aunt Jennifer’s hands represent her whole being.

The poet does not show if she sympathizes with Aunt Jennifer or not. This stanza vaguely indicates that the poet may have expected better from Aunt Jennifer. She might have stood up for herself more and freed herself from all social, marital obligations and restraints. It might be too late; it might not – but when aunt is dead, she will still be imprisoned in her restraints. There will be no freedom for her, even in death. However the tigers that she has crafted will continue to prance around their home – the forest – bold, proud and unafraid.

Aunt Jennifer embroiders a couple of tigers with a forest as the background. They are depicted as having a proud and brave gait. Moreover, they appear to be free, happy and confident. Also, they are not scared by the presence of men and thus are fearless. This piece of art embroidered by Aunt Jennifer is a reflection of her own desires. She feels suffocated in the patriarchal system where she is left devoid of her individuality. She wants to be cheerful, fearless and independent like the tigers in her art. The very idea that she chose tigers shows that she wants to be brave and bold. Also, the bright and lively colours, topaz and green, create a beautiful and happy environment which the aunt lacks as she is bound in the patriarchal dull life assigned to her. The picture of the happy and fearless tigers above the men can be seen as representing the aunt's wish to break free from this male-dominated world.

## *Symbols / Images:*

- **Wedding band/ring** is the symbol of male domination/chauvinism. Symbolizes suppression of women in matrimony.
- **Aunt Jennifer** is the symbol of the struggling feminists such as the poet. She is symbolic of women as a whole rather than one individual.
- **The tree** in the poem is symbolic of the social order where women used to occupy the lower branches in the past.
- Prancing/jumping upward is symbolic of woman's rising in her new social status.
- **Tigers** symbolize the freedom of spirit which Aunt Jennifer dreams of attaining but never achieves except in her dreams and her art.
- **Also, symbol of terror and oppression perpetuated on women by the male world.**
- **Embroidery** may exist forever as the work that she leaves behind.
- **Image of fluttering fingers**-highlights extensive oppression of women. Her struggling with the ivory needles suggest the loss of her individual identity under the weight of uncle's domination.
- **Ringed with ordeals**-is an image used by the poet to express the struggles of the spirit, racial and religious injustice and oppression that she suffers but never expresses or complains against.
- **Repetition of Aunt Jennifer and tigers** – creates a horrifying ambience of the oppressor and the oppressed. The theme of male chauvinism runs throughout the poem creating a fearsome atmosphere of tigers on the prowl for its prey.

## *Short Answer Questions:*

### **1. Describe Aunt Jennifer's tigers. How are they different from her?**

A. Aunt Jennifer's embroidered tigers prance across a green screen. They are fearless. They are not afraid of the men beneath the tree. They move elegantly in style and with confidence which is opposite to Aunt Jennifer's character who is meek and finds difficult to pull the ivory needle from the wool and on whom the responsibility of married life weighs heavily.

### **2. Explain 'massive weight of Uncle's wedding band'.**

A. Aunt Jennifer is tied down by the constraints of married life. The wedding band symbolizes the ordeals of married life.

### **3. Why do you think Aunt made the tigers that were proud and unafraid?**

A. Aunt Jennifer wanted to be chivalric like the tigers; but was stifled by the institution of marriage. To give an expression of freedom to her subdued self she embroidered the prancing tigers that were proud and unafraid.

## *Questions and Answers-Stanza wise:*

**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**

- Aunt Jennifer's tigers - Tigers knitted by a lady
- Prance - Jump upward.
- Screen - Panel; canvas.
- Topaz - A precious yellow stone.
- Denizens - Animals that live in dens. Citizens Vs Denizens
- World of green - Jungle
- Tree - Society. In the past women occupied the lower branches.
- Pace - Move freely
- Sleek - Elegant; Characteristic of feminine movement
- Chivalric - Brave and submissive
- Certainty - Confidence

**1. Why are the tigers called 'Aunt Jennifer's tigers?'**

The tigers are knitted by Aunt Jennifer and therefore they belong to Aunt Jennifer and they behave fearlessly .

**2. Where do the tigers prance to?**

The tigers prance up to the higher branches of trees in a wild green forest that is drawn on a panel or canvas.

**3. What is topaz? How is the word 'topaz' used to describe the tigers ?**

Topaz is a kind of precious yellow stone. The yellow color signifies the bright yellow fur of the tiger. The beauty of the tiger is well represented by the ornate topaz color and the black stripes running through it.

**4. How are Aunt Jennifer and her tigers the indicators of the poet's own life?**

Adrienne Rich's life and poems were dedicated to the freedom of the suppressed American women. Aunt Jennifer is no one else than Adrienne Rich .

**5. Who are they in these lines?**

They are the tigers of Aunt Jennifer on the panels.

**6. Why don't they fear men beneath the tree?**

Aunt Jennifer's tigers are fearless and confident. They have chivalrous qualities and therefore they do not fear men.

**7. Explain, 'sleek chivalric certainty.' What makes the tigers pace in sleek chivalric certainty?**

Sleek, chivalric and certainty are the three qualities of the tigers knitted by Aunt Jennifer. Sleek indicates the smoothness of their movement while chivalric and certainty are fearlessness and confidence respectively. As the tigers have overcome the fear of men beneath the tree, they pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

8. **What do you mean by the certainty that the tigers possess?**

The tigers used to fear the men. But once they were made by Aunt Jennifer, they learnt courage. In their new birth these tigers feel at ease and confident. Now they do not have to run away from anyone. They move slowly. They run ferociously.

**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.**

- Flutter - Move delicately
- Ivory needle - Shows the weightlessness of the needle.
- Massive - Enormous; heavy.
- Wedding band - Marriage ring, a symbol of love and care but for Aunt Jennifer it was a symbol of slavery.
- Sits - Remains
- Heavily - Imposing.

1. **Why do Aunt's fingers flutter? Which figure of speech do you find in this line?**

Aunt Jennifer is the victim of male domination. She loves to knit tigers for the realization of her dreams. While she does so she finds it difficult to pull her light ivory needle due to the weight of the marriage ring that her husband put in her finger years ago.

Fig.of Speech- ALLITERATION

2. **How does the poet use 'wool' and 'ivory needle' to reveal the weightlessness/ease of Aunt's knitting work?**

Wool and ivory needle are very light to carry. They are so light that one doesn't notice their weight. The poet intends to create an atmosphere of complete weightlessness and ease through these objects used for knitting.

3. **Why is the Uncle's wedding band massively heavy to Aunt Jennifer?**

In fact a wedding band is very light, but for Aunt Jennifer it is a sign of her husband's dominance over her. It has become a burden for her that limits her freedom as a social being.

4. **Why is the term 'sits' used instead of 'remains'?**

Sits here refers to domination over someone's freedom. For Aunt Jennifer her husband's wedding ring was no sign of love or care. For her it was a sign of suppression and burden.

5. **How does the poet draw the picture of male domination through 'Uncle's wedding band'?**

Uncle's wedding band for Aunt Jennifer was never a representation of love or matrimony. The band symbolized bondage for her. Like a rope binds one, the wedding band bound her.

**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.**

1. **What will happen to Aunt Jennifer when she is dead?**  
When Aunt Jennifer dies she will herself have no freedom even in her grave.
2. **Why are Aunt's hands terrified?**  
Aunt Jennifer's dream-work was to knit tigers in her panels. While she did this she was stopped, threatened and burdened by her husband. This fear of her husband later left her terrified.
3. **Explain, "the ordeals she was mastered by..."**  
The ordeals that Aunt Jennifer had been mastered by were her sufferings and difficulties that she had to suffer under her husband and the burden that society had imposed upon her because she was a woman.
4. **Which were the ordeals Aunt was a master of?**  
Aunt Jennifer's life was a life of submission, slavery and sufferings in a male dominated society. She wanted to knit tigers for herself but the wedding band that her husband had put in her finger stood as a stumbling block in her life. By sitting on her finger, the wedding band made her suffer a lot of pain while knitting tigers. By bearing these sufferings she became a master of sufferings.
5. **Will Aunt have freedom after her death? Why?**  
No, Aunt Jennifer will have no freedom even after her death. As a tradition she will have to wear her matrimonial ring even in her grave. This ring bore the mark of her slavery under man, her husband.
6. **How will male domination follow Aunt beyond her life?**  
Male domination used to haunt Aunt Jennifer throughout her life. When she wore her husband's wedding band on the day of marriage she became a slave of the male power. Later on, even after her death, Aunt's name will be engraved on her tombstone under her husband's name, but she will not have an identity of her own.
7. **What will happen to Aunt Jennifer's tigers after her death?**  
Aunt Jennifer's tigers will survive proudly and bravely even after their creator's death.
8. **How can the tigers remain proud and unafraid even after the death of their creator?**  
Aunt Jennifer was the creator of the tigers in the panel. Even after her death these tigers will live proud and unafraid with the cherished feelings that they are no more the slaves of men. They feel proud of their newly achieved free status in the society and of their great liberator, Aunt Jennifer.
9. **Why is Aunt Jennifer referred to as 'Aunt' in the end?**

Aunt Jennifer had allowed herself to become subservient to her husband; she had lost her identity. The poet has universalized the crisis by using only 'aunt' in the end.

10. **Bring out the symbolic representation of the poet Adrienne Rich, her works, struggles, her success in freeing women through the image of Aunt Jennifer.**  
Aunt Jennifer is a parallel character who represents the poet Adrienne Rich, her attempts to liberate the women folk from male domination, her struggles and ordeals, and finally, her victory. Like Aunt Jennifer who knitted tigers with wool and needle, Adrienne Rich knitted a new America inhabited by brave women. However, while knitting her tigers,

Aunt Jennifer had to face difficulties because she wore a heavy wedding band imposed upon her by her husband. Similar was Rich's experience. She too had to face harsh attacks from her society for writing poems against the existing male domination. Aunt Jennifer never had a time free from ordeals. She was constantly haunted by her fear of the wedding band. Similarly did Rich have to live till her death. Unfortunately the male ruled her even after her death as she still had to bear her husband's name even in her grave. The two women had similar life and death and pains and failure at death but what they left behind them was a brave generation. Aunt Jennifer left behind her a number of fearless tigers while Rich had new generation of brave women to succeed her.

11. **What does “prance” tell about the tigers’ ambitions?**

Prance is an upward jump. In this poem, Aunt Jennifer's tigers are jumping upward to the higher branches which means they are all ambitious and wish to reach the higher branches of the tree, above the men who are beneath the tree, defying the old order.

*Additional Questions:*

1. How do ‘denizens’ and ‘chivalric’ add to our understanding of the tiger’s attitudes?
2. Why do you think Aunt Jennifer’s hands are ‘fluttering through her wool’ in the second stanza? Why is she finding the needle so hard to pull?
3. What is suggested by the image ‘massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band’?
4. Of what or of whom is Aunt Jennifer terrified with in the third stanza?
5. What are the ‘ordeals’ Aunt Jennifer is surrounded by, why is it significant that the poet uses the word ‘ringed’? What are the meanings of the word ‘ringed’ in the poem?
6. Why do you think Aunt Jennifer created animals that are so different from her own character? What might the poet be suggesting, through this difference?
7. Interpret the symbols found in this poem.
8. Do you sympathise with Aunt Jennifer. What is the attitude of the speaker towards Aunt Jennifer?

*Value-Based Question:*

1. How does the poet advocate gender sensitization in the poem?

Ans. The poem reflects gender struggle; the poet criticizes the male-dominated world for terrifying and oppressing Aunt Jennifer, leaving her with no alternative but to create an alternate world of freedom for herself with her sewing. The embroidering of tigers on the panel, her only form of expression, underlines a woman’s struggles with expression, rebellion, and a society where power is defined as masculine. The poet depicts the pain of a woman who is living with a brutal husband who dominates her. Her hidden, vibrant inner life is in sharp contrast to the outer image of the terrified,

trapped woman. The poem is almost a tragedy relating the plight of women trapped in unhappy marriages. The poet however makes her stance clear by using the figure of independent and fearless tigers as a telling symbol of an ideal that women, like Aunt Jennifer, seek to approximate. The poet yearns for freedom and equality for all women.

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