



INDIAN SCHOOL MUSCAT
SENIOR SECTION
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
CLASS XII
FLAMINGO: AUNT JENNIFER'S TIGERS



ADRIENNE RICH

Twentieth century poet, critic, scholar and feminist, Adrienne Rich wrote 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' as a part of her first book of poetry 'A Change of World' (1951). Feminism was making its presence felt in the 1950s fighting for equal voting, legal and social rights for women. This poem is Adrienne's voice against the emotional and physical brutalities women face as part of their marriages especially, in a patriarchal society. On the surface, this is a simple poem with an uncomplicated rhyme scheme about a woman busy with needlepoint. However, the true meaning emerges when the layers are peeled.

Relevant Background: Adrienne Rich is an American poet who was born in 1929. - She was brought up in a well-off family. - Adrienne was the elder of two daughters. - Her father was a doctor and her mother was a music composer. - She grew up in with a Jewish father and a Protestant mother. As a result of this mixed marriage she was used to tensions between her parents. - Rich felt dominated by her father's strong personality while growing up. It was he who most guided her as a young poet. This wasn't always to her liking as he expected her to write her poems his way. - When Rich was growing up men dominated and women were expected to become dutiful wives in their adult lives. - All these elements may have influenced the picture of marriage Rich drew in this poem. At the heart of the poem is an image of a husband who controls and frightens his wife. - Rich wrote a lot of poems based on everyday experience. In the poem 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers', Rich mocks the weakness of Aunt Jennifer, and the clout and authority of her husband in their marriage. Rich was also fascinated by how people could use a hobby like art-work to create a happier and prettier world than their daily life. - Rich has been one of America's most important female poets for the past fifty years.

Summary: This poem of three four-line stanzas imagines a person whose hobby is needlework. - Aunt Jennifer reveals her dreams of a happier life in her needlework. - From the titles given to the adults, it seems as if the speaker is a child. - In the first stanza the relative, Aunt Jennifer, makes a panel with images of tigers parading proudly across it. The tigers are free, unlike their maker. - Her panel contains animals that are happier and more confident than she is. There is a 'certainty' about them that their maker lacks in herself. - Aunt Jennifer paints confident, proud tigers. They are assured and confident dwellers, 'denizens', of their green world. 'Denizen' suggests independent citizen. - It would seem that Jennifer is not an independent citizen of her own world. She is instead a wife, weighed down by duties as we learn in the second stanza. - Jennifer uses sharp and contrasting colours, sharp yellow against a green background. - Her tigers are as bright as topaz, a yellow gem. - Her picture contains an image of men under a tree, though the proud tigers show no fear of the men. This is mentioned to show that they differ from Jennifer, who lives in fear of her husband to some extent. - The tigers remind the poet of knights, full of courtesy and style. Chivalric men respected their women and acted kindly towards them. Again, this seems to contrast with how 'Uncle' behaved towards Aunt Jennifer according to the second stanza. - In the second stanza, the poet describes Aunt Jennifer's nervous hands struggling to pull the wool with her ivory needle. The word 'fluttering' suggests trembling. - We get the impression of a frail woman who finds it hard to pull the needle. - It is interesting that if her needle is made of ivory it may have come from an elephant's tusk. Ivory is a bit like topaz, a precious material. As ivory involves the killing of elephants for their valuable tusks, it would seem that Jennifer may not care much for tigers in the wild or know much about their reality. - Thus, her artwork is unrealistic. Perhaps the poet feels it is a pointless and empty type of art. - The poet humorously suggests that Aunt Jennifer's fingers find it hard to hold the weight of her wedding ring and then pull the needle at the same time. - The wedding band is another reference to a precious substance, probably gold. -

By mentioning that it is 'Uncle's wedding band', the poet suggests that Uncle owns Jennifer too and that as a female she is the property of her husband. - The words 'massive' and 'heavily' suggest Aunt Jennifer lives a demanding sort of life in which she has to attend to her husband's needs and fulfil his commands. As a result she is somewhat worn out in her old age. - In the third stanza, the poet predicts that, when Aunt Jennifer dies, her hands will look worn from all her needlework as well as the hard time she has trying to please her husband. - Aunt Jennifer is 'ringed', trapped in her marriage and controlled like an animal. Her husband is her master. - Her artwork will live on after her as a reminder of the dreams she never fulfilled.

Themes: 1. Marriage is unequal due to male domination/Inequality: The woman at the centre of the poem, Aunt Jennifer, is a nervous and fearful wife. She lacks inner conviction or 'certainty', unlike the tigers she portrays. Aunt Jennifer is 'mastered' in her life. She lives a life of inequality. She is so nervous that her fingers 'flutter' through the wool she is using in her tapestry or panel. The poet portrays the marriage of Jennifer as an unhappy one for her. Aunt Jennifer 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'. It 'sits heavily' on her hand because he dominates her life. Her life with her husband is described as a life of 'ordeals'. The poem therefore provides a negative picture of marriage. The poem is probably saying that the 'Uncle' or husband is behaving like a tiger, and the tigers are 'chivalric' like the husband should be. Each world is the reverse of what it should be.

2. The world of art is happier than the real world/Dream versus Reality: Aunt Jennifer's hobby is making designs and pictures from wool. Jennifer produces wool tapestries that she places on panels. The creatures she places there are free and proud, the opposite to herself. She is 'ringed' or mastered in marriage and therefore she is not free, but controlled. It seems that she creates a happier looking world than the one she lives in. She makes precise and brightly coloured pictures like the sharp yellow tigers of the poem, pictured against a green background. These bright contrasting colours are probably much more vivid than Jennifer's everyday world. Her artistic work will live on after she dies, as, according to the poet, her tigers will 'go on prancing'. The figures she creates are stronger and happier than she is. They are proud and 'prance' about, unlike their creator, who is nervous and fears her husband. The word 'prance' or parade contrasts sharply with 'fluttering', meaning trembling. The tigers do not fear the men the aunt places under some trees in her tapestry. Therefore, the imaginary tigers produced by Aunt Jennifer live a type of proud and free life that she can only dream about. Perhaps Aunt Jennifer uses art as an escape from her troubles. In her artwork Jennifer imagines the kind of life she would have liked.

Values raised in the poem: Respect for women, equality, equity, gender sensitivity, empathy, feminism, value for art.

Literary Devices used in the poem: Comparison: The tigers are compared to knights from the time of chivalry in the middle ages. - Imagery: 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 the gold of 'wedding band'. - Metaphor: The poet compares the yellow stripes of the tigers to a precious stone, topaz. - Contrast: [difference] The main contrasts are between nervous Aunt Jennifer and her confident tigers. Another contrast is between the strong yellow and green colours. The words 'prancing' and 'fluttering' contrast as well. - Mood/Atmosphere: Fear is the main atmosphere in Aunt Jennifer's life of 'ordeals' where her fingers tremble and show terror. An air of freedom and confidence dominates the atmosphere in her artistic creations. The men beneath the tree create an atmosphere of mystery. The image of Aunt Jennifer's corpse from the future is a bit eerie or creepy. - Hyperbole: [Exaggeration] The poet exaggerates the weight of her husband's wedding ring to make a point about how dominating he is. - Paradox: [apparent contradiction] Here a trembling and 'mastered' woman creates free and confident creatures in her artistic endeavors. 'Fluttering' fingers produce something that has 'certainty'. - Tone: The tone appears to be positive and cheerful when the poet describes the tigers. See the comment on sibilance below. The tone becomes sad and even creepy at times in describing the life of Aunt Jennifer. - Repetition: The word 'prance' is repeated to emphasize the pride and freedom of the tigers. 'Ringed' echoes 'wedding band'. There is repetition of various sounds as indicated in the next few bullet

points. - Alliteration: [repetition of consonant sounds at the start of nearby words] e.g ‘p’ in ‘prancing proud’ emphasizes the feeling of confidence expressed in the tigers’ movements.

Short Answer Questions:

1. How do ‘denizens’ and ‘chivalric’ add to our understanding the tiger’s attitude? The tigers embroidered by Aunt Jennifer are free inhabitants of the vibrant green forests, masters of their domain and movements. They are ‘chivalric’- i.e. noble and majestic, pacing powerfully and confidently, fearless of the hunters. They stand in stark contrast to their frail creator who is timid, fearful of her husband, confined and crushed in an oppressive marriage.

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? Aunt Jennifer struggles to express her dreams through needlework, but her fingers tremble nervously as she tries to pull the light ivory needle because she fears her domineering husband, who has made her physically and emotionally frail. She is weighed down by uncle’s wedding band-a symbol of her suffocating marriage and the compulsions therein, in a patriarchal society.

3. What is suggested by the image ‘massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band’? Uncle’s wedding band is heavy as it is a symbol of bondage, of being crushed in an unhappy marriage. It has kept her encircled and trapped in a burdensome marriage in a patriarchal society- a relationship of subjugation and domination. It has restricted her freedom and eroded her individuality.

4. Of what or whom is Aunt Jennifer terrified in the third stanza? Even after death, Aunt would carry her fear of her domineering husband as she would yet bear the burden of the wedding band on her finger. The ordeals faced by her in an oppressive marriage would continue to terrify her.

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? Aunt Jennifer’s ordeals are those suffered by all women who face physical, mental or emotional trauma at the hands of insensitive husbands in a patriarchal society, restricting a woman’s personal liberty and dignity. The wedding ring has kept her ringed in i.e. trapped in a gender role – a victim of male domination.

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? The timid and fearful Aunt Jennifer creates an alternative world of free and fearless tigers to express her longing for freedom, a medium of escape from her grim marriage. The ironical contrast underscores a warning by the poet against acceptance of subjugation by women as it crushes their dreams, individuality and a full life. Irony: It is ironical that Aunt Jennifer’s creations- the tigers will continue to pace and prance freely, while Aunt herself will remain terrified even after death, ringed by the ordeals she was controlled by in her married life.

7. Interpret the symbols in the poem. Wedding band is a symbol of oppression in an unhappy marriage. Marriage is socially and legally binding, making women silently accept their subjugation and male domination, especially in a patriarchal society. Its weight refers to the burden of gender expectations. Ringed means encircled or trapped, losing individuality and freedom. She is a typical victim of male oppression in an unhappy marriage, who suffers loss of individuality, dignity and personal freedom silently. She becomes dependent, fearful and frail.

Tigers– symbolize untamed free spirit. Here they are antithesis of their creator’s personality. The use of colours implies that Aunt Jennifer’s tigers and their land are more vital and enjoy a sense of freedom far greater than her. Yellow (bright topaz) connotes the sun and fierce energy, while green reminds one of spring and vitality. They pace and prance freely, proudly, fearless, confident and majestic in their bearing a creative expression. The artwork expresses the Aunt’s suppressed desires and becomes her escape from the oppressive reality of her life. (last stanza) – as opposed to Aunt Jennifer. It shows that she has lost her identity completely, thus lost even her name. ‘Pace’ and ‘prance’ are action words. The rhyme mimics the movement of the tigers.

8. Do you sympathize with Aunt Jennifer? What is the attitude of the speaker towards her? Aunt Jennifer's plight as a victim of gender oppression in an unhappy marriage draws our sympathy. However, the poet underscores that Aunt by accepting her suffering silently let her life be completely mastered over by her husband and lost her personal freedom and individuality. Her desires expressed in her art work will remain only a dream unless women like her assert their equal status.

Read the extracts and answer the questions that follow:

1. 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.

- a) What does prancing tigers symbolize?
- b) What are Aunt Jennifer's tigers doing? How do they look like?
- c) Where do they live? Who are they not afraid of?
- d) Explain: They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

2. 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.

- a) Why do Aunt Jennifer's fingers flutter through her wool?
- b) Why does she find it hard to pull the ivory needles?
- c) Explain: massive weight of Uncle's wedding band.
- d) How is Aunt Jennifer affected by the 'weight of matrimony'?

3. 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.

- a) What is Aunt Jennifer's death symbolic of?
- b) What does 'ringed with ordeals' imply?
- c) What will happen to the tigers after her death?
- d) Name the poem and the poet.

Answer the following in about 30-40 words.

- 1. What are the characteristics of the tigers that lend a contrast to the Aunt?
- 2. Describe the tigers on the panel.
- 3. What is suggested by the image 'massive weight of Uncle's wedding band'?
- 4. What is the theme of the poem?
- 5. What does Aunt Jennifer's creation of the tigers symbolize?
