

**CLASS XII | ENGLISH | FLAMINGO
POEM: AUNT JENNIFER'S TIGERS**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrienne Cecile Rich (1929 – 2012), American poet, essayist and feminist. One of the most widely read and influenced poets of the second half of the 20th century. She talks about a woman's experiences in her married life. She has tried to explore the inner feelings of a woman who is living under the dominance of men.

THEME

The poem deals with the pathetic condition of married women all over the world. Aunt Jennifer is a symbol of all married women, who are suffering at the oppressive hands of a patriarchal society.

SUMMARY

The poet expresses the inner feelings of a woman - Aunt Jennifer. The aunt is embroidering a motif comprising of energetic, fearless tigers moving freely around the bright greenery. She is living a life of submissiveness to her husband's command. Her acts are dominated by him and she fears him constantly. This pattern of the free and fearless tigers reflects her inner desire to live a free and fearless life. The tigers are graceful, elegant and bright. Aunt Jennifer's fingers tremble as she embroiders. She is old but still fears her husband. She does not enjoy the freedom to do anything as per her wish. She is scared doing the embroidery too and fears his wrath. Since the day she got married, she has been fulfilling the demands of her husband. The wedding ring on her hand is a constant reminder that she belongs to her husband. The burden of the demanding marriage has exhausted her. The torment will not end until her death.

POETIC DEVICES

Rhyme scheme: aabb

Anaphora: use of same word in two consecutive lines (they do not ... and they pace in...)

Metaphor: Use of topaz to describe the yellow color of tigers (Bright topaz)

Alliteration: 'finger fluttering, prancing proud, Chivalric certainty

Symbols:

Aunt, Tigers, wedding band, uncle, her hands, Embroidery,

- Aunt Jennifer represents women all over the world wedged under the tyrannical hand of a patriarchal society.
- Aunt Jennifer's tigers symbolize her dreams and desires of being powerful, fearless, decisive and liberated.
- The wedding band signifies the patriarchal society where the command is defined as masculine.
- Uncle denotes the oppressor.
- Aunt Jennifer's hands represent the reality of her life.
- Embroidery: a symbol of creative expression. The artwork expresses the Aunt's suppressed desires and becomes her escape from the oppressive reality of her life.
- Ringed with ordeals: even death would not free her as the wedding band, a symbol of oppression, would still be on her finger.

Irony:

(a) a weak and submissive woman weaving a picture of tigers that are strong and fearless.

(b) brutal tigers are depicted chivalric and the cultured man is depicted as an oppressor.

WORDS/PHRASES AND THEIR CONTEXTUAL MEANINGS

Prance : walk or move around with high springy steps.

Topaz : a bright yellow coloured stone.

Denizens : here, an animal that lives or is found in a particular place.

Sleek : elegant.

Chivalric : being courteous esp. to women, an act of a gentleman.

Ordeals: extremely severe tests or experiences.

Prancing : to move around proudly.

Fluttering : to move in quick, irregular motions as if being agitated.

Think it Out (NCERT)

Q1. How do 'denizens' and 'chivalric' add to our understanding of the tiger's attitudes?

The word 'denizens' means that they are proud of their home, they feel safe there and have a feeling of belonging attached to it.

The word 'chivalric' shows that they have a majestic and worthy position like knights.

Q2. 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?

Her hands are fluttering probably because she is scared of her husband who could come anytime and scold her for sitting idle and wasting her time doing embroidery. She finds the needle so hard to pull because her fingers are tired of working endlessly all through her life.

Q3. What is suggested by the image 'massive weight of Uncle's wedding band'?

'Massive weight of Uncle's wedding band' suggests symbolically, that the bindings and obligations of her marriage are so much that they have put a lot of burden and stress on her.

Q5. 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?

The 'ordeals' are: Obeying her husband's orders, Fear of men, Giving in to his dominance and fulfilling his commands. 'Ringed' indicates entrapment. As the ring encircles the finger, similarly, her husband has encircled her in his clutches. Her body and soul are both trapped, struggling for freedom and fearlessness.

Q6. 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?

I think that aunt Jennifer's intense desire for freedom and fearlessness came out through her creativity.

This is the time when she is with herself, and then, her innermost feelings are expressed, here her medium of expression is the embroidery.

Through this difference it is shown that the lady is not what she is. Her circumstances have made her so but even she has a desire to live life with respect and pride.

Q7. Interpret the symbols found in this poem.

- 'denizens of a world of green' means inhabitants of the forest.
- 'massive weight of Uncle's wedding band' means the burden of marital obligations.
- 'Sits heavily upon Aunt' means 'has laid a lot of stress on her'.
- 'ringed with ordeals' means to get entrapped in hardships and sufferings.

DO-IT-YOURSELF EXERCISE

Think it out (QUESTION no. 4 & 8)

SHORT ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS

1. What are the characteristics of the tiger that lend contrast to the Aunt?

Ans. The Tigers are fearless, chivalric and they are confident. They enjoy their freedom. On the other hand, Aunt Jennifer is oppressed and a victim of a male-dominated society. The Tigers are fearless and are not afraid of men.

2. What is the theme of the poem?

Ans. The poet subtly brings out the contrast between the wonderful freedom of the work of art created by Aunt Jennifer and the constraints of her married personal life. The Aunt has been subjected to suppression at the hands of her dominating husband and it is only in the embroidery that she is free and gives expression to her creativity.

3. What does Aunt Jennifer's creation of the tigers symbolize?

Ans. The tigers symbolize Aunt Jennifer's desires. She expresses herself through the creation of her tigers whom she embroiders with a needle for a panel. The Tigers are free and symbolize Jennifer's own longing to be free and powerful.

4. 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?

Ans. Aunt Jennifer's hands are fluttering because they are a reflection of her dominated and suppressed spirit. She is physically and emotionally drained and finds it hard to pull the needle. Her hands are heavy with the weight of the wedding ring which symbolizes the hardships and difficulties of her life

5. What is suggested by the image 'massive weight of Uncle's wedding band'?

Ans. The image suggests that not only is Aunt bowed down by the emotional and physical pressures of her married life but she is also suppressed by the weight of the wedding band meaning that male-dominated society has put her under a lot of stress and has curbed her freedom and happiness.

6. 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?

Ans. The 'ordeals' that surround Aunt Jennifer are the hardships and the oppression in a male-dominated society. The poet uses the word 'ringed' to signify that after her death also, Aunt Jennifer's hands will still be affected by the dominance of a male, perhaps her husband. While the Tigers will be free, she would never be free; her only hope for freedom is through her artistic creation or the Tigers on the screen. Through them she can depict the courage and confidence that she lacked in her own life.

7. What does the poetess suggest by saying that the tigers that she has embroidered will forever go on prancing proudly?

Ans. When Aunt Jennifer is no more, her tigers will continue to live on the panel. A work of art will continue to be an expression of Aunt Jennifer's creativity and the Tigers will forever be seen, prancing about, fearless and free-spirited.

8. Why has Aunt Jennifer made 'prancing, proud and unafraid' tigers?

Ans. Aunt Jennifer has tried to express herself through her art. She has created proud, prancing, unafraid tigers on her panel because she wants herself to be like her tigers, confident and have the freedom to live her life in her own way.
