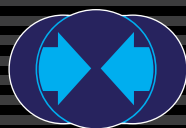


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THE FAILURE OF THE SYMBOLIC ORDER IN SHAPING THE FEMALE SUBJECT IN ADRIENNE RICH'S *AUNT JENNIFER'S TIGERS*

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Abstract

Adrienne Rich was one of the leading feminist voices who called for the re-establishment of the feminist discourse away from the bigotry of the patriarchal thought. In her early stage of writing, Rich imitated the styles and subject matters of the great male writers of the literary scene. Therefore, the female characters in her early poems didn't find the appropriate signifiers that express their voices in the masculine symbolic language they used. They tried to revolt but in vain because the masculine symbolic language gave no space to the circulation of female needs and desires. As such, the objective of this paper is to examine the failure of the symbolic order in the construction of the female subject in Adrienne Rich's Aunt Jennifer's Tigers. However, the study is conducted in the light of Kristeva's the Symbolic and the Semiotic (1984). Kristeva thinks that these two modalities are completing each other in the dynamic signifying process needed for the constitution of the Subject, and that the failure of reflecting the semiotic in the symbolic results in the destabilization of the subject. Thus, the study concludes that the female subject in Aunt Jennifer's Tigers suffered the duality of living due to the failure of interaction between the symbolic and semiotic as two modalities of signification, which led to the destabilization of Aunt Jennifer's subject and the domination of the symbolic order.

KEYWORDS: ADRIENNE RICH; THE SYMBOLIC ORDER; THE FEMALE SUBJECT; SEMIOTIC AND SYMBOLIC.

INTRODUCTION

The problem with women along history and especially in the middle of the twentieth century was that they had been taught to be good housewives, caretakers and nurturers only. They accepted the role given to them by patriarchal ideology that they are "the angels of the house". The acceptance of such labels put women into frames that kept them away of what was going on outside her house. Betty Friedan described women of the fifties in her *The Feminine Mystique* saying:

Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. They had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home; they wanted the men to make the major decisions. They glorified in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: "Occupation: housewife." (1963, 18)

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Thus, women felt themselves totally isolated from the social, economic, and political life. Any kind of definition to woman cannot be approved unless associated with the existence of man. Penelope Eckert said in her essay, *The Good Woman* that it was easy for men to define themselves in the society depending on their achievements, possessions, or their institutional role, but "women must justify and define theirs on the basis of their overall character and the kinds of relations they can maintain with others" (Lakoff, 2004, 167). With the increase of women's awareness that they have to be active agent in the shaping of their destinies and in the decision-making of women's issues, they started questioning the premises they inherited from the patriarchal thinkers and theorists. Friedan went on saying that women's suffering lies in the internalization of chains imposed on them by external factors: "chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices. They are not easily seen and not easily shaken off." (31) Thereby, they felt that the common discourses available in the fifties were not serving women's needs and desires. Therefore, it was decisive for them to think of solutions and substitutions for their critical situation. Again, women faced another problem of how could they find the appropriate means of expressing themselves. They realized that they were bounded by the symbolic order of language because it was formulated to serve man only. Language was determined to maintain man's power over woman. Jan Campbell talked about the role of Lacan's *symbolic order* in depriving woman of her subjectivity saying that "the symbolic is phallic, identity is constructed within the realm of the masculine; the feminine is left behind, situated as a negative, unconscious and bodily exclusion, outside culture, representation and sanity." (2000, 80)

Mary Slowik did a study on Rich's early work entitled, *The Friction of the Mind: The Early Poetry of Adrienne Rich* (1984). She examined the early collections, *A Change of World* (1951), *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* (1955), and *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), to deal with the issue of anger. She said that Rich was of the feminists who reflected her anger against women's oppression, but she concluded that Rich treated her anger and moulded it into a creative rather than destructive emotion. Regarding Rich's *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*, Slowik stated that the speaker in this poem condemned Aunt Jennifer's marital situation which caused her misery and criticized her silent revolt represented by weaving an embroidery of vital masculinity while she herself was doomed to live the 'ordeals she was mastered by.' She said that the final stanza juxtaposed the dead aunt and the lively needlework of tigers to point "to the way art can critically counter the predicament which brings it about and reveal the underlying tragedy." (1984, 146)

Rich's *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* (1951) described an image of a woman who was troubled with her household life. Aunt Jennifer escaped her husband's brutal world to her imaginary world in which she could enjoy certain kind of freedom. She started weaving images of dancing tigers in the field to reflect upon her buried feelings. Knitting turned to be the only means for Aunt Jennifer to express her innermost desires through art only. Aunt Jennifer suffered a duality of life due to the failure of language in conveying her female needs and desires. On one hand, language with its symbolic signifiers already designed the female subject of Aunt Jennifer as passive, powerless and inferior. She was living the burden being a housekeeper and caretaker in the patriarchal society. On the other hand, she felt the power of the semiotic; the energetic drive for creation inside her, but it was only in the world of imagination. As a result, Aunt Jennifer's subject was divided between accepting the symbolic frames given to the female subject by patriarchy, and living in isolation following her semiotic drives and world of imagination. Rich wrote two poems, namely *Mathilde in Normandy* and *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* to show that woman has the power, but these two poems "are metaphors for the divided self, double-voiced poems in which women cannot "own" their power outright." (Keyes, 1986, 21). Though Aunt Jennifer escaped her traditional role through the craft of knitting but this skill was experienced negatively for it did change nothing on ground. She was content with the

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schizophrenic life she had in her household, knitting the image of the unafraid tigers, but not following their example. Thus, the present paper aims to explore the role played separately by the semiotic and symbolic signifiers in the failure of Aunt Jennifer in her quest to find her female subject. As such, the study follows Julia Kristeva's model of *the Semiotic and the Symbolic* to deal with the formation of the female subject in Rich's *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*. Kristeva does not go with the view that language manifests itself independently. For her, the acquisition of language means the adaptation of the laws, norms, cultural values and moral codes of the society. The language used is not only transferring information but it is a rich reflection of the sociological, religious, moral, and economic components that make up the environment in which language is acquired. Her thesis of reflecting the semiotics into language is to show how the self and the other communicate on different layers of meanings. Lemma says:

Kristeva shows that our learned, acquired language helps to form our perception of our environment and our perception of self. Language simultaneously develops and determines the self's ability to express, to communicate with the other, and limits the self's ability to express and to communicate with the other. Language introduces and indoctrinates the self into society and culture. The acquisition of language is the process by which the self identifies or disassociates with community and by which the self expresses individuality, or the lack thereof, within that community. (2009, 95-96)

Thus, Language plays a decisive role in shaping the subject either serving his needs and desires or going against them. Hassan, Talif and Kaur commented on Kristeva's definition of the semiotic and the symbolic saying that Kristeva:

defines the Semiotic as the maternal space of language and the way of expressing the impulses and drives of the body through language. These impulses and drives are unconscious and reflected in the character's sound, rhythmical sentences and even in the kind of imagery used to convey the feelings and desires by language. The Semiotic lacks structure and meaning and associated with the feminine, and represents the undifferentiated state of the pre-Mirror Stage infant. On the other hand, the Symbolic is the rule-governed patriarchal language. It is reflected in the grammatical and syntactic structures that subject to the patriarchal logic. (2015, 246)

Hereby, the language used in describing Aunt Jennifer's real miserable world in the household of her husband enhanced the traditional and stereotypic role given to woman. This poem explored the tensions between Aunt's creative imaginary world and the social circumstances of the Uncle's terrifying authority. Thus, this study explores the role of the failure of interplay between the semiotic and the symbolic signifiers in destabilizing the subject of Aunt Jennifer.

Discussion

Rich in her early poetry was writing for a particular man in order to please him because she was brought up in a milieu that was totally fashioned by the traditions of patriarchy. She was not only preoccupied with the satisfaction of the male figure in her poems, but also with the poems written about women. She said in her essay, *When We Dead Awaken* (1971):

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there were all those poems about women, written by men: it seemed to be a given that men wrote poems and women frequently inhibited them. These women were almost always beautiful, but threatened with the loss of beauty, the loss of youth, the fate worse than death.
(21)

Her first collection, *A Change of World* (1951) was highly complimented by critics top-headed by W. H. Auden who praised her poems in the preface saying they are, "neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them" (Rich, 1993, 278-279). Undeniably, Rich was familiar with the literary conventions of the period which led her to follow the rules of writing established by patriarchy. As such, she found herself overwhelmed between following the masculine criteria of success and the following of her personal female voice. Such conflict was clearly reflected in the poems of this collection, especially *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*.

In Rich's *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*, there was a double-voiced discourse, in which there were two stories: the dominant story and the muted one. These two stories encouraged two possible interpretations of the text. Though Aunt Jennifer fitted into the category of being a good housewife who kept her job done perfectly, she reflected upon her agony and disappointment through her embroidery only because in reality she could change nothing.

The speaker in Rich's poem was detached from Aunt Jennifer and remained outside the action of the poem as no sense of identification was accepted with the woman artist. The speaker described Aunt Jennifer knitting a decorative screen. The screen was decorated with the image of dancing tigers in the forest. The poem relied on the contrast between the lively, powerful and fearless tigers and Aunt Jennifer who was presented as old, scary and weary. This contrast as a structural device of the symbolic language served the circulation of meanings of the binary thought. Thus, it empowered man as the master and woman as the slave. Woman was absented from culture, that's why Aunt Jennifer resorted to imagination and knitting to escape oppression and subjugation. She was scared of her husband unlike the tigers which 'do not fear the men beneath the tree'. It was through her tapestries that she conveyed her feelings of terror experienced with her husband. Only in the world of imagination, Aunt expressed her courage by the tigers' pacing 'in sleek chivalric certainty'. But the problem here is that this poem "asserts the traditional theme that art outlives the person who produces it" (Keyes, 1986, 22) The semiotic drives and energies could not be tolerated into the symbolic world, thus, the Aunt projected what was she denied onto a piece of art.

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the trees;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty. (1-4)

Such projection ensued forms of disguise and denial on the part of Aunt Jennifer. She projected her feelings in the embroidery of the fearless tigers, giving them the attributes of power, courage and strength but she did not claim any of these attributes as her own. Keyes said that the Aunt "never integrates the "tigers" into her psyche, Aunt Jennifer remains ambivalent toward them" (Ibid, 22). The tigers asserted their own independence, confidence and freedom away from the authoritative power of men. Actually, this was caused by the fact that Aunt Jennifer did believe in the incompatibility of the symbolic language in serving her needs. Thus, Aunt thought that she was doomed to live the ordeal of life.

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Rich's Aunt Jennifer was passive and terrified woman, overwhelmed between her desire to have freedom and imagination represented by the tapestry of 'prancing tigers' and imprisonment and imitation imposed by gender roles of patriarchy. Rich wrote in her essay, *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision* (1971):

I thought I was creating a portrait of an imaginary woman. But this woman suffers from the opposition of her imagination, worked out in tapestry, and her life-style, "ringed with ordeals she was mastered by." It was important to me that Aunt Jennifer was a person as distinct from myself as possible- distanced by the formalism of the poem, by its objective, observant tone-even by putting the woman in a different generation. (Rich, 1979, 40)

Aunt Jennifer did not find the appropriate signifiers that could convey meanings help in the expression of her needs and desires. The only signifier working here was that of 'Uncle's wedding band', which only signified the heavy burden and ordeal of this woman because of this marriage.

Aunt Jennifer's finger 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. (5-8)

The 'massive weight' of the band rested heavily on her hand, chaining her and reminding her of the bond of marriage which turned to be a symbolic signifier of slavery. 'Uncle's wedding band' weighs the woman down. (Keyes, 1986, 23) In return, Aunt Jennifer was not even able to pull the needle through the wool because it was handicapped by the Uncle's wedding band. Her fingers 'fluttering through the wool' indicated her worry and scare because she knew that she was monitored all the time by her man. It was only art that could release her feelings. The symbolic world curbed any endeavour to show woman's genius. That's why, Aunt Jennifer escaped to imagination because it was only in the imaginary world that she could find a space to express her semiotic drives and reflect upon her desires. Rich herself was separated from the persona of her poem by the use of the third person pronoun because it was not permissible to the female writer to voice herself directly in her writings following the symbolic system of signification of the masculine language. Imagination and creation were continuously separated in man's world because creation was only associated with man's intellect and culture. Associating women with nature and imagination, Aunt Jennifer could not find a place for her in the world of patriarchy. This kind of division between imagination and duty, power and passivity was intentionally formulated and maintained to keep women in an inferior position to men.

The poem was well-crafted and written in a strict structure, following the quatrain form and rhyming aa, bb, cc, dd, ff, dd. The rhyme scheme indicated discipline, which was a demand by the great male elites for those who want to be successful writers. But this kind of discipline and imitation left women with no choice to express and circulate their own feelings. Werner said that Aunt Jennifer's *Tigers* "demonstrates Rich's ability to use her control of sound, rhythm, and metrical emphasis to explore an issue of great importance in the development of her personal and political vision: the

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creativity of women not recognized as artists by the dominant culture” (1988, 14). Though the ‘prancing tigers’ stood for Rich’s creative power, it was a passive kind of power that was not exploited because the speaker failed to find the suitable means to transform that power into the world of reality. The lively power of the tigers was limited to the world of imagination and it was introduced in a sharp contrast to the impotence of Aunt Jennifer in order to show that woman’s creative powers and feelings have no place in man’s symbolic world.

Even when Rich came to talk about Aunt Jennifer, she referred to parts of her body ‘finger’ and ‘hand’ instead of talking about the whole body as a sign of degradation and inferiority. Fluttering fingers and terrified hands signify nothing but the impotence and subservience of Aunt Jennifer in facing the oppressive ideology of the Uncle’s way of life. On the other side, Rich tried to demonstrate an alternative for women to escape their traditional role as in the case of Aunt Jennifer who found herself in her tapestry. One of her tactics was the addition of stressed syllables and enjambment. She established a rapid tempo in stanza one when the tigers went on prancing in the forest while the rhythm was disrupted when she started talking about the wedding band in the second stanza. (Ibid, 15) The clash was obvious between the semiotic energy reflected in the rapid rhythm of the first stanza, in which Aunt Jennifer was relying on her imagination to create embroidery of dancing lively tigers, and the slow motion of the second stanza when she mentioned the symbolic signifier of the ‘wedding band’ that chained and mastered her.

The poem showed Aunt Jennifer’s genius in incorporating the experience of male power into a work of art that testifies the transformative power of women’s creativity. Alliteration as one of the semiotic aspect of language was intellectually utilized by Rich to convey themes of male dominance and female subjugation. Werner commented on Rich’s manipulation of sound devices saying, “ ‘Tigers’ transforms the *g* of “ringed” and the *er* of “mastered”; “made” emerges from “mastered,” “dead,” and “ordeal,” all words associated with masculine power and female suffering” (1988, 16). These semiotic elements failed to be injected into the symbolic masculine language in order to fill the gap between these two modalities of signification. Though the image of the ‘proud’ tigers ended the poem with an optimistic tone, it was only in her piece of art and nothing changed on ground leaving the speaker an overwhelmed between the semiotic maternal drives and the symbolic patriarchal signifiers.

At the end, Aunt Jennifer felt that it was only death that could liberate her from man’s oppression because the symbolic language did not signify what serves the expression of female identity. It was only on the semiotic imaginary level with her piece of needlework art that she reflected upon her quest for freedom through the tigers that ‘will go on prancing, proud and unafraid’.

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. (9-12)

Rich was aware that the repression of unarticulated experience as in the case of Jennifer led to her dual life and that the shift in consciousness “involves exploring of repressed experiences, naming

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these perceptions, and incorporating them into daily life by creating new clusters of awareness, new patterns of meaning.” (Martin, 1984, 169)

Conclusion

The study concludes that the failure of integrating the semiotic drives into the symbolic signifiers of the symbolic order resulted in Aunt Jennifer's destabilized subject and in her sense of incompetence in finding an appropriate female voice that defines her subjectivity as a woman. Aunt Jennifer did not utilize the power of the semiotic in troubling the fixed-meanings of the symbolic language. Thus, her female subject was only defined in terms of the symbolic order which relied on the superiority of the male subject. Consequently, Aunt Jennifer lived these two contradictory worlds due to the separation between the masculine symbolic signifiers and maternal semiotic drives. Her escape to the world of art reflecting her feelings into the image of lively tigers indicated certain kind of power, but this power could not be translated into the Uncle's patriarchal world due to the prejudiced language. As such, the female subject was continuously destabilized by the symbolic order, which raised Rich's awareness of the necessity of injecting the semiotic drives into the symbolic order to have unprejudiced language. Finally, the study showed that the speaker in Rich's *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* did not succeed in the identification with the fearless tigers due to the lack of appropriate signifiers in the symbolic order, but she was capable of projecting the lively tigers' image, which showed that Adrienne Rich was moving into more open assertion of her poetic consciousness that would be seen in her later poetry.

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