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GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN SELECT POEMS OF ADRIENNE RICH

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Adrienne Cecile Rich who was considered as one of the most widely read and influential poets of the second half of the twentieth century was an American poet, essayist and feminist. Born on May 16, 1929, Adrienne Rich has become a major voice in the feminist movement in America. Poetry of Rich deals with female, feminism and family. Her first collection of poetry, *A Change of World*, was selected by renowned poet W. H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award. *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems* (1955) was followed by *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), published long after her earlier volumes. Her fourth volume, *Necessities of Life* (1966), was written almost entirely in free verse. Rich turned down the National Medal of the Arts in 1997, publicly claiming that the politics of the Bill Clinton administration conflicted with her ideas about art. She was awarded the National Book Award in 1974, Bollingen Prize in 2003 and Griffin Poetry Prize in 2003.

Women have played stereotypical roles from time immemorial. Their lives are destined to the kitchens and their only responsibility is to produce progenies. They play the role of a doll in the doll's house. When women started to realise this, they challenged the patriarchal system and this gave birth to feminism. Chimamanda Adichie, a Nigerian novelist in her essay "We should all be Feminists" claimed equal rights for women and also gave a definition for Feminism of the twenty first century. She says that Feminism is a word used not to overpower men but to equal men in all respects.

Adrienne Rich through her poems depicts the life women of in a patriarchal society, their restrictions and their fight for survival. The society in which the women live is biased towards male gender and women are never given the opportunity to express their emotions. In this research paper two poems penned by her are taken for a study.

The first poem to be analysed is *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*, a poem in three stanzas. This poem talks about the inner feelings of a woman who is living under the dominance of a man. Adrienne Rich does not express her thoughts directly but makes the readers to understand her feelings through symbols. Aunt Jennifer knits a tiger. The tiger is a symbol of chivalry and boldness, which Aunt Jennifer does not possess. She has created an image of Aunt Jennifer's life. From the lines of the poem it can be understood that Aunt Jennifer is unhappily married and that she is oppressed by her husband. Rich writes, "The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band/ Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand" (7-8).

These words show that the nuptial ring is a heavy burden and it makes her life unhappy. In the male dominated society, women have little freedom and independence. She uses the phrase "Uncle's wedding band" to create an image that it is his possession that she is wearing. In the beginning of the third stanza Rich writes, "When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie/ Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by" (9-10).

The wedding ring is the fetters which control women. The author shows that marriage is one of many ways men use to oppress women. Even after Aunt Jennifer's death the ring remains on her hand and the husband's rule over her will not end.

The second poem taken for study is "The Trees", a symbolic poem that focuses on the movement of trees that are initially indoors but seeking to escape to freedom in the forest. The trees represent the nature of a woman in particular. Trees are symbolic of women who had been kept slaves for centuries. The house is the society that kept women its captive. "the forest that was empty all these nights/ will be full of trees by morning" (6-7).

The trees are moving into the forest and it will be filled by morning. 'Trees' here symbolises women, who are trapped inside their house and their desire to free themselves. The poet sat at her desk writing long letters. But she does not mention about the trees and their preparation to go out of the house because she is willing to free them.

The glass is breaking.
The trees are stumbling forward
into the night. Winds rush to meet them.
The moon is broken like a mirror,
its pieces flash now in the crown
of the tallest oak.(27-32)

In the final stanza the speaker grabs the attention of the reader. Glass is breaking, a symbol that this transformation is serious and eternal. The moon, symbol of womanliness and feeling, breaks like a mirror and the fragmented image lights up an Oak, the strongest of trees.

Inequality theory explains the biological difference between men and women which is inescapable, amongst race, class, culture and tradition irrespective of being developed or underdeveloped. According to Linsey 2007, sex is the biological difference between men and women while gender is the social construction of sexes considering race, politics, social, economic, culture and traditional background. These cultures that are learned change with time within and between cultures.

Gender discrimination is seen in both the poems of Adrienne Rich. In the poems, Aunt Jennifer and the woman (symbolised by the trees) are seeking an escape from their duty bound lives. In "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", Aunt Jennifer uses the tiger to show her oppressed state and in "The Trees", the woman's wish to be free is portrayed with the image of a tree. The women in the poems are the representations of women in real life. They are expected to break their fetters and live for themselves.

Works Cited

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