

The Rhetoric of Post-Truth in Aunt Jennifer's Tigers: A Foucauldian Feminist Reading

Dr. Bhojraj Singh

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Girls Degree College, Chhibramau, Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh (India)

Email: [bhojrajsingh.anda\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:bhojrajsingh.anda[at]gmail.com)

Abstract: *The term: Post-truth refers to a persuasive language, centering more on emotions and personal beliefs rather than on factual accuracy. This term gained prominence in the 21st century, particularly during the canvassing of the presidential election of Donald Trump, influencing public on emotional appeal and belief systems rather than facts. Misinformation involves the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information with the intent to mislead people. This research paper examines Adrienne Rich's poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" through the lens of post-truth rhetoric, using Michael Foucault's theoretical framework as a critical lens. The main objective of the study is to explore the idea that truth is not fixed but constantly evolving, and that Aunt Jennifer creates her own narrative to express the struggles of women trapped within patriarchal structures. The research employs a qualitative methodology, incorporating both primary and secondary sources, and utilizes analytical and interpretative approaches to arrive at its conclusions.*

Keywords: Post-truth, Discourse, Power/Knowledge, Feminism, Patriarchy, Adrienne Rich, Representation

1. Introduction

The phrase rhetoric of post-truth conveys the meaning of persuasive language used to create or alter perceived truth, disregarding facts. Essentially, post-truth rhetoric entails persuasion to embrace beliefs based on emotion instead of facts. The concept of "post-truth" describes a situation where "objective facts matter less in shaping public opinion than emotional appeals and personal beliefs" (Oxford Dictionaries). The seeds of Post-truth are sprouted in philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, who both ruled out the idea of universal truth. Nietzsche opines that human interpretation shapes the truth. On the other hand, Foucault argued truth as produced through societal power and discourse. Foucault famously stated that "truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power; truth is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint" (Power/Knowledge 131).

In the late twentieth century, postmodernism further questions the idea of a stable truth, pointing out that multiple meanings can have existence instead of a single fixed reality. The term "post-truth" gained momentum in the 21st century during events like the Brexit referendum and the United States presidential election. During these events, public opinion is swayed more by emotional appeals, misinformation and political propaganda than factual evidence. The rise of digital media and social networks also played the vital role in the spread of selective or false information.

This insight disrupts traditional ideas about knowledge and lets to see literary texts as product truth-construction, ideology-making, and resistance-outcome. Within this context, Aunt Jennifer's Tigers is an intriguing text. Written in 1951 and found in Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law (1963), the poem reveals the restrictions on women in married life in a patriarchal society. Moreover, the poem can be explored as an expression of post-truth dynamics, where dominant discourses produce and enforce specific "truths" about women's identities. This paper reveals the rhetoric of post-truth in Rich's poem by disclosing the normalization of oppression, silences and other voices by patriarchal narrative

that builds a truth regime marginalizing women's experiences. Besides, the poem makes an implicit revelation that in the hands of artist the artifact created by the poet is not only an expression of resistance at the face of patriarchal face but also a tool of creation of alternative truth signifying multiplicity of truth.

2. Objectives of the Study

This present study probes into the rhetoric of post-truth in Aunt Jennifer's Tigers. It also looks at the way how patriarchal discourse makes creation and legitimization of "truth" about gender roles. In addition to, it applies Michel Foucault's theoretical framework to find out the relationship between power, knowledge, and truth in the under-scrutinized poem. It examines the role of literary representation as a space of resistance and counter-discourse. Moreover, it investigates the way how silencing and marginalization are operated within truth regimes. Furthermore, the study discloses the anticipation of Adrienne Rich's post-truth dynamics through her poetry.

3. Review of Literature

Previous studies on Adrienne Rich have consistently brought into light her significance as a major feminist voice in twentieth-century literature. In *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich* (1984), Claire Keyes notes that Rich's early poetry reveals "a tension between formal control and suppressed emotional intensity" (Keyes 45). In *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*, this tension shows in the contrast between Aunt Jennifer's constrained figure and the free tigers she creates. Feminist critics interpret the poem as a critique of patriarchal oppression.

Lois Tyson argues in *Critical Theory Today* (1999) that the poem explores how "patriarchal ideology constructs women as passive and subordinate" (*Critical Theory Today* 87). The "wedding band" serves as a widely recognized symbol of marital oppression and institutionalized gender inequality.

Critics like Peter Barry seeks to emphasize the symbolic meaning of the tigers, viewing them as representing "a repressed desire for freedom and autonomy" (Beginning Theory 134). The embroidery, in this way, provides Aunt Jennifer with an imaginative escape from her oppressive reality. However, few scholars have analyzed the poem through the lens of post-truth or Foucauldian discourse theory. While Foucault's ideas have been applied widely in literary studies, their relevance to Rich's poetry- especially regarding truth production- remains underexplored. This paper aims to fill that gap by placing Aunt Jennifer's Tigers within a Foucauldian framework of power, discourse, and post-truth rhetoric.

4. Theoretical Framework

The concept of post-truth resonates with Michel Foucault's analysis of how truth is understood and shaped. In the opinion of Foucault, truth is not a fact, but rather something constructed within particular historical and cultural settings. He argues that "each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth" (Power/Knowledge 131). This "regime of truth" determines what is considered true, who is allowed to speak about truth, and how truth is communicated and maintained. Foucault's emphasis on the connection between power and knowledge shows that truth is not neutral; it is shaped by those in positions of authority and helps to uphold existing power structures. Institutions such as the family, religion, and the state play a key role in creating and supporting specific truths. Post-truth communication fits into this system by placing emotional stories above factual information. It involves shaping truth through language, suppressing opposing views, and making constructed realities seem normal. In patriarchal societies, traditional gender roles are often treated as natural and inevitable. But from a Foucauldian perspective, these roles are not fixed or universal; they are created and reinforced through social institutions and cultural norms.

5. Research Methodology.

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and analytical method based on literary theory. The research mainly uses the Foucauldian perspective on discourse and power, as developed by Michel Foucault. It also incorporates feminist literary criticism to explore gender-based power dynamics. The study employs close reading, which involves a thorough examination of imagery, symbols, tone, and language. It investigates how language shapes ideas of truth and reinforces power relationships. It also looks at how patriarchal beliefs and gender oppression are portrayed in the poem. The analysis focuses on key Foucauldian ideas such as the link between power and knowledge, regimes of truth, discursive formations, and resistance within power systems. These ideas are used to understand the symbolism of the wedding band, the imagery of the tigers, and Aunt Jennifer's silence. The study specifically looks at Aunt Jennifer's Tigers. It uses interpretative analysis, which can lead to different interpretations. The focus is on Foucauldian and feminist approaches, and other methods are not considered.

6. Data Collection

This research is based on qualitative textual analysis and uses both primary and secondary sources. The primary text analyzed is Aunt Jennifer's Tigers from Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law. Specific lines, symbols, and poetic devices are examined to interpret the rhetoric of post-truth and power relations. Secondary sources include theoretical works by Michel Foucault, like Power/Knowledge and The Archaeology of Knowledge, as well as critical texts such as Critical Theory Today by Lois Tyson and Beginning Theory by Peter Barry. Additional sources include scholarly articles, journals, and books on feminist criticism, post-truth theory, and discourse analysis. Data was collected through library research and online academic databases like JSTOR and Google Scholar.

7. Textual Analysis

7.1 Patriarchal Discourse as Constructed Truth

Andriea Rich's poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" resonates with the famous dictum of Simon de Beuvoir's 'women are not born; they are made so' and attempts to reveal out that patriarchy has shaped its universal truth by considering female as a secondary sex and male the primary one to control the former. The power-structures of the ideology of patriarchy has been internalized and universalized in the society. The fabricated truth of gender roles is carried out into the characters of females in the society. Aunt Jennifer exposes that the married life is enchain in frustration and suppression and not allowed to create her own narratives. She is not having the freedom to construct her own truth. The trembling hands of Aunt Jennifer discloses the dominance of patriarchy entailed in her mind profoundly. She further reveals out that the marriage symbol are the shackles of patriarchy discouraging her effort of creation not only when she is alive but also when she dies. The text itself validates the point in the following lines:

"The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band, Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand" (Rich lines 7–8).

The 'wedding band' is a symbol of institutional authority. While society views marriage as a institution of fulfillment and stability, the poem unravels it as a tool of control and oppression. The word 'massive' indicates the heavy burden of it. It also hints that the marriage often hides underlying suppression, tensions, frustrations, and worries.

However, she points out that there is no permanent and everlasting truth and hence the truth constructed by patriarchy is not universal. A Foucauldian perspective uncovers that patriarchal norms are deliberately structured to make them accept as a universal truth and they are to be internalized by individuals. Aunt Jennifer's subjugation is an example of patriarchy. She reinforces the idea that discourse constructs the truth. It is power-made-narrative. The powerful patriarchy fabricates its norms for upholding its interest and makes itself privileged, and prominent. She rejects the notion of truth of patriarchy and creates embroidery: her own truth of tigers-figures that are prancing across screen. She states:

"Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen, Bright topaz denizens of a world of green" (Rich lines 1–2).

7.2 Embroidery as Counter-Discourse

Andriena Rich opposes the patriarchy in the poem 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers'. The depiction of these tigers embroidered on tapestry as vibrant and fearless is remarkable in the poem. They don't get afraid of Man. The subordination and suppression of females burst out as boldness and fearlessness in the representation of tigers as fearless and brave in the poem. The poet expresses her emotion in the following lines:

"They do not fear the men beneath the tree; They pace in sleek chivalric certainty" (Rich lines 3–4)

The Poet reveals out the tigers' bravery and confidence that are absent in Aunt Jennifer. The phrase "do not fear the men" is directly in against Aunt Jennifer's fear of patriarchal authority. Through her embroidery, Aunt Jennifer creates an artistic space where power dynamics are reversed, and freedom is shown. This act of creation functions as a different kind of reality, challenging the dominant narratives imposed by patriarchal society. Foucault points out that "where there is power, there is resistance" (History of Sexuality 95). Aunt Jennifer's embroidery penetrates that the resistance emerges against and even within oppressive structures.

7.3 The Rhetoric of Silence and Erasure

Aunt Jennifer creates fearless and prancing tigers on her embroidery in the poem. However, she remains tragically silent and marginalized. Her identity is hidden through her speech or voice. On the other hands, she is identified with symbols used in the piece of poetry as needlework and the wedding band. Aunt Jennifer's identity is rubbed off by the power politics of the patriarchy. The phrase "her terrified hands" is an argument that what she creates on the embroidery with the needle is an outcome of scaredness of dominant patriarchal power that has traumatized her up-to her inner being. If she goes against the power, her hands get terrified. She has lived the life of no freedom and loss of identity. Furthermore, she has been controlled and tamed by the dominant norms of society as being the subsidiary being. To come out of the snares of Patriarchal power is impossible in her life and afterlife as well. The idea of the loss of identity can be noticed in line given below:

"When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by" (9 -10)

Aunt Jennifer's life has endured sufferings, frustrations, and subordination by dint of power-dynamics over her. In the context of post-truth, she is excluded from the mainstream to voice by the dominant class so that she might not her own narratives. In addition to, she has encountered various ordeals put before him by the society. Moreover, the weight of the wedding band signifies the metaphorical meaning of married life that the powerful system has imposed boundary upon her not only in the lifetime but afterlife too. The oppressive setup has thwarted her individuality and suppressed her. Besides, the oppressive system maintains its power by its organization and institutions. The marriage is the means by which the

power functions. It does not let other discourse emerge against it lest it should not lose its existence.

7.4 Art, Memory, and the Persistence of Alternative Truths

On the contrary, Aunt Jennifer is existentially non-existent or silent; her art is immortalized. It creates an antithesis with the idea that the poet as an individual is dead, but her tigers are lively, prancing and unafraid. The tigers needled on tapestry are moving, surviving and lasting. The art makes them immortal. Furthermore, Aunt Jennifer has endured a life of marginalization and sufferings in marriage life. Her identity has been non-existent under the burdens of marriage-norms. She passes through ordeals in her married life. However, with her artistic vision, she creates a rebellion and liberty against the patriarchy. Aunt Jennifer reveals her resistance and freedom as follows:

"The tigers in the panel that she made, Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid" (Rich lines 11–12).

From a Foucauldian viewpoint, this can be seen as a way of resisting the main truths that are in control. Literature helps create and keep alternative ways of talking that go against the main popular narratives. It lets for new ways of thinking about the world and rebelling the existing power structures. Owing to this, there is no single, fixed and everlasting truth. On the other hand, the dominant narratives are replaced by the other way of telling the truth. Throughout the process of creating and reshaping these stories, the influence of power and politics remains strong.

8. Discussion

The post-truth rhetoric is presented in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" works through various associated methods. First, the poem presents the way how patriarchy is engraved as natural and unchangeable in society. Through the depiction of marriage as a burden rather than a source of happiness, Rich opposes the stereotypes of women in society. Second, the poem brings into limelight the lack of recognition for woman's lived experiences. Aunt Jennifer's silence and her existence being overlooked shows that the powerful influence the truth and prevent the subordinate from creating the narratives of their own truth. Third, the poem shows how art can be a way to resist. Aunt Jennifer's needlework creates a space for her to express a different understanding of the world. In this way, the poem supports Foucault's view that truth is not something stable, but rather something that is always being changed and shaped. By showing how truth is made and kept, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" reflects the patterns seen in post-truth culture.

9. Conclusion

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" vehemently makes a criticism of the political aspects of how truth is created in a patriarchal society. When investigated through a Foucauldian perspective, the poem discloses how powerful groups establish and maintain certain truths about gender, while suppressing other perspectives. At the same time, the poem highlights the possibility of resisting these forces through art.

Aunt Jennifer's act of embroidery creates a space for different kinds of truth, opposing the authority of mainstream narratives and offering new ways to think about identity and personal power. At present time, when the idea of truth is often questioned, Rich's poem is still important. It reminds that truth involved more than facts, is shaped by power, what people communicate, is the expression of power and the ability to resist oppression, is also fabrication of new truth, keeping in mind that there is no truth in the era of post-truth where truth gets changed in different viewpoint.

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