

Of Audre Lorde and Her *Biomythography, Zami*

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Abstract

A civil rights activist who fought against hypocrisy and inequity, Audre Lorde (February, 1934 – November, 1992), was an African-Caribbean American writer, or as she identified herself, “a black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet”. In her book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), which she describes as “...an unfolding of my life and loves” and a Biomythography, i.e. an amalgamation of history, myth, and biography, Lorde subtly placed her own story in light of everything that was essentially wrong with America in the fifties (Lorde 190).

Keywords: Audre Lorde, African-Caribbean American writer, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Biomythography.

A civil rights activist who fought against hypocrisy and inequity, Audre Lorde (February, 1934 – November, 1992), was an African-Caribbean American writer, or as she identified herself, “a black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet”. In her book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), which she describes as “...an unfolding of my life and loves” and a Biomythography, i.e. an amalgamation of history, myth, and biography, Lorde subtly placed her own story in light of

everything that was essentially wrong with America in the fifties (Lorde 190).

Lorde's unconventional approach to her autobiography holds its essence in the way she identified and described her romantic as well as platonic liaisons with other women. This paper aims to explore Audre Lorde's experiences in light of Womanism, Black feminism, and lesbianism. Audre Lorde often established the validity of lesbianism in terms of social acceptability to a higher degree than Black lesbianism.

The strife of Black women in America is often overlooked under the socially adequate meaning of feminism. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Lorde said, "Black Feminism is not white feminism in blackface." (60) – Also, readings by many Black feminist writers suggest that feminism was more often than not racially inclined, for its ignorance of the woman of minority and focusing solely on fighting for the rights of the white woman and her position as equal to her male counterpart.

Womanism is a term attributed to Alice Walker, the acclaimed African-American writer and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *The Color Purple*. As a much wider theory encapsulating women of all color, Womanism includes feminism within its basic tenets. Alice Walker in her work, *In Search of our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, defined a womanist as several things:

A black feminist or feminist of color. A woman who loves other women, sexually or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, and women's strength. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist... [she] Loves love and food and roundness. Loves the struggle...Loves herself. Regardless. (Walker xi-xii) A womanist, therefore, became a woman perceptive to the voice of her gender and worldly in her approach to the subject of feminism.

Lorde's treatment of the biographical, intricately laced with myth, separated her sexual experiences with Eudora, Muriel, and Marie, her white lovers, from those with Genevieve, Ginger, and Afrekete. Lorde's belief on being segregated based on her colour rather than her sexual preference, found a pivotal mark in her work. The Black Feminist movement aimed at non-discriminatory feminism. The experiences of the Black woman, irrespective of sexual orientation, demanded a more susceptible critical evaluation of the kinds of treatment inflicted on and at the woman who portrays a deeper minority than being a female, i.e. being of a color other than white. In Lorde's estimation of being a "Black, lesbian, woman", she articulated a clearly defined boundary within the realm of lesbianism that put her on a wrung below those of the same sex who are considered "feminine" as per society's definition.

Feminists like Walker, Adrienne Rich, and Angela Davis fought against the impeachment of the Black woman, and Lorde contributed to their voice with her own sense of individual opposition of marginalization within and about sexual and personal beliefs. She said, "For some of us there was no one particular place..." implying that within social or personal groups, no one position could be assigned to her, not merely a Black woman, not a lesbian, not a woman, not Black (Lorde 226). Her fight against the stature of society left her amongst the masses of women, who could not be identified within a defined sect. Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different (Lorde 226).

Lorde was criticized for her rebellion against society's tendency to fragment and disparage. In an interview with the Editor of *Callaloo*, Dr. Charles H. Rowell, Lorde clarified her position affected by the

anti-sentiment of the American populace by stating that “...Jesse Helms’s objection to my work is not about obscenity...or even about sex. It is about revolution and change.” (Rowell 61). Her natural acceptance of her sexual orientation did nothing to help shield her from the questioning glances of her peers or contemporaries. One of the significant places mentioned in *Zami*, The Bagatelle, a popular lesbian club in the fifties, served as the symbol of the separation of the conventional from the “non-conventional” (Lorde 224). Of The Bagatelle, Lorde wrote, “The society within the confines of the Bagatelle reflected the ripples and eddies of the larger society.” (220). In an effort to define the degree to which she was an “outsider” to the norms of even Black lesbianism, Lorde often drew parallels between her and the other Black women who hung out at “The Bag”. The extent to which the Black lesbian remained aloof, on purpose, to her identity, sought to demonstrate the inferiority of Black women in a pre-dominantly “white environment” (Lorde 224). The continuous division of society on the basis of suitability and convenience pervades the walls of The Bag, in a manner that offended Lorde’s ideologies.

From what I have gathered from my readings, Lorde’s episodic love affairs with various women instilled in her the need for a positive change in the role of Black women in society and their choices with respect to everyday life. As a womanist, in Walker’s definition, Lorde was critical of the reception of the Black woman. Her struggle can be gauged from the following lines from *Zami*, “...It was hard enough to be Black, to be Black and female, to be Black, female, and gay.” (Lorde 224).

In an interview that took place in 1979 with Adrienne Rich, herself a feminist, Lorde talked about her personal trouble with expressing her feelings by way of speech. She said, “...I think, that I didn’t know *how* to talk. I was really busy feeling out other ways of getting and giving information and whatever else I could, because talking

wasn't where it was at.", Lorde channeled this plethora of emotion inside her into her words (Lorde and Rich 714). She wrote of what she thought, and now, her poetry defines her more than the concrete evidence of a life well-lived. Lorde's struggle to voice her thoughts in no other manner but through poetry gave way to an internal fight, one where she constantly argued with the injustice of being a Black lesbian or solely, Black. Her Womanism was focused more towards unraveling the unending litany of personal racial instances that we read sprinkled throughout *Zami*. Born to strict, God-fearing parents, Audre Lorde was persistently and inquisitively aware of right and wrong. Her parents' tendency to ignore the injustice that was done to them, lent itself to Lorde's burning desire to explain and alter the hostility aimed specifically at her family. For instance, the spitting that her sisters and her mother were subjected to mould itself into a tight ball inside Lorde's brain, which then sees its end once she recognizes the why and how of the intent. Where her parents, and her sisters, Phyllis and Helen, chose not to ponder over the issue at hand, Lorde decided instead for a head-on collision.

With the Black Feminist movement the focus shifted from the issues of gender differences to a unified idea of equality amongst people of all races. The subject of feminism being mostly for the rights of the white-American woman, Womanism, as per Walker, sought to address women of minority classes as well as other groups subjected to discrimination based on race, class, and station in society. The noteworthy episode that saw Lorde's heartfelt attempts to stall the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg defined her as a truly compassionate human being (Lorde 148-149). That is to say, she was concerned not only with the persistent need for correcting what adversely affected the Black woman but a wider category of those who were wronged due to ignorance and misconceptions.

Lorde repeatedly takes it upon her to question the tenets of society. She was not appeased when her mother stopped her from participating in the school election, neither did she back down from attempting to erase the differences amongst the girls at her schools and herself by becoming an irreplaceable member of The Branded. In *Zami*, Lorde indirectly or directly acquainted her readers, with the challenges faced by Blacks, be it her landlord, who committed suicide because “he finally had to rent to Negroes” (Lorde 59), or her friend Marie’s mother who saw her as a threat because of her skin (120). Although *Zami* covers the American or “anti-American” sentiment of the fifties, it was written and published in the eighties (Lorde 70). It, therefore, becomes evident that the ideology behind Womanism, which was, by then, gathering momentum, found its way into Lorde’s biomythography.

Her awareness of the changes that took place during that time pervades her work on a macro level. In the same interview with Rich, Lorde said, “I have always had the sense of Armageddon and it was much stronger in those days, the sense of living on the edge of chaos...That we were dying, that we were killing our world-...” (723).

The invention of a biomythography, hence, served as a platform to cleverly yet deceptively convey her take on the unfair treatment of some groups at the hands of a powerful few. Lorde never outwardly exhibited any emotion that was reflective of her frustration with the way things were structured around her. This again can be directly correlated with her ability to successfully transmit her emotion and thought through the power of the written word.

Lorde’s mother had a pivotal role in the makeup of her life and outlook. She closely followed her mother’s actions, yet never ventured to be like her. She was not one to suffer unfairly, neither was she one to abdicate her sexuality solely based on the fact that

it was not looked upon favourably by society. As a writer, Lorde had oft times expressed what she felt during her formative years in her mother's household. Mostly, her strength to fight for what she thought as correct stemmed from what she experienced *prima facie*, for example, her mother's unexplained dislike for her best friend, Genevieve. It, therefore, becomes important to note that Lorde's treatment of her biomythography was seen as an important step towards establishing a shift in the way Black women, or Black lesbians were received in the eighties, i.e. the time when *Zami* was originally published.

A strong, and determined woman, Lorde was inspirational in her stance to never leave behind what she thought was the most important time of her life. To fight for her rights, and to ensure that people belonging to minorities would abandon all fear and stand beside her to fight for what was nothing but basic human rights: to be respected, appreciated, and loved.

Once she moved to Stamford, Connecticut, she soon realized why she was rendered unemployed. Ironically, the only place willing to hire Black women, Keystone Electronics, would eventually become the cause of her cancer. It was the one factory in Stamford that "didn't fire them after three weeks" (Lorde 196). As an independent worker, Lorde experienced her first proper sexual encounter with another woman, Ginger. Realizing the intensity of her feelings for the first time, we see her at a vulnerable station in her life. This encounter willed her to embrace her sexuality and in her later years, this feeling culminated itself into one of pride and determination. Consequently, we see her as a woman who loves another woman in the simplest of ways. From an alternative perspective, throughout her romantic intercourses, Lorde remained extremely sensitive to the differences between herself and her partners. Her relationship with Muriel was one where she was acutely aware of the dissimilar way in which she was often

received, on the streets or inside The Bag. However, with Eudora, away from the apparent “modern” and dynamically piercing gaze of New Yorkers, this feeling of racial difference was rather subdued. In the end, the masquerade that became an inextricable part of their usual haunts was one that proved to be unbelievably much for Lorde’s sanity. These were only a few examples of Lorde’s understanding that each woman in her life had something to contribute to her growth, both as a woman and a poet.

In effect we see that Lorde’s Womanism extended to all those women whom she cherished and loved in her life. Besides her relationship with Peter, which she described as “pretty dismal and frightening and a little demanding”, Lorde’s expressive relationships with the women in her life are enveloped in a somewhat surreal, yet painstakingly beautiful world (Lorde 104). She successfully brought forth a period, wherein women were survivors, strong, independent, and felt free to do as they pleased, even if their society continually shunned them. In one essay from *Sister Outsider*, “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving”, Lorde artfully included some major categories of human folly, namely, sexism, racism, heterosexism, and homophobia, which till date result in the alienation of people who are considered nothing short of detrimental to a “good society”. Of them she said, “The above forms of human blindness stem from the same root – an inability to recognize the notion of difference as a dynamic human force, one which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self, when there are shared goals.” (Lorde 45). According to Lorde, the differences noted in homosexuals, or people in general, based on class, race, sex, or religion, were due to the simple reason that people who believe themselves to be the harbingers of law and order in a society, fail to notice those who are exiled based on their color or sexual orientation. Lorde’s account of Sol, the “old Jewish man”, who owned a coffee shop she frequented, tells us much about the way

in which people who are ensconced in society's shell of ignorance, disregard what they cannot accept (Lorde 182). "But this is all about how very difficult it is at times for people to see who or what they are looking at, particularly when they don't want to." (Lorde 183). Lorde's ability to recognize the deepest human vanities without directly addressing them is exemplary. The accounts, which would normally be termed as harrowing, are comfortably placed within Lorde's masterful writing.

The sleazy comic book shop-owner, Monsieur Brady's pedophilic tendencies towards young Ann Archdeacon or Ilene Crimmons, and the racially charged setting in America in the fifties, did nothing to dissipate her emotionally distressed state and yet she managed to write what is one of the truest accounts of racism and sexism as a semi-autobiography. With her novel, Lorde attempted to define a new kind of lesbianism. Under its boundaries, she ventured to include all those women, who had inspired her, strengthened her resolve to release herself from the shackles of social order, and at the same time loved and nurtured her.

Lorde was not the one to conform to tradition, she was inexplicably rebellious and rightly so. Her mother's insistence on doing everything by the book was not a task she willingly complied with in her later years. She left home when she was merely seventeen, and went on a self-motivated path, to earn for herself for the first time in her life. Her relationship with Genevieve, and Genevieve's subsequent suicide, greatly affected what she believed in, but she continued to learn from her, be it in her relationships, or in her poetry. She had accepted her sexuality, and never once thought to suppress it based on the opinions of those who spat on it, not even her mother. Her sexual orientation and the racial discrimination against her family opened her eyes to the pathetic and morbid state of things. If being refused a mere scoop of ice-

cream taught her anything, it was that she and her family were mistreated, and it was no fault of theirs if they were Black.

Human nature requires us to distinguish and judge, and those who rise above this are truly the ones who are willing to give their all to the cause. To not hope for a complete transformation, as that becomes impossible in a land which needs to feed on human misery for its survival, but to cause a rift or a crack in the walls that surround such a social order that deems a section of the human population unfit.

The Black women, who preferred not to acknowledge the existence of other Black women, existed in a world that was unfamiliar to Lorde. She had always known the strong bonds between her mother and her sisters and her grandmothers, all the Carriacou women, who came together and worked in harmony. The eccentricity behind *Zami* derives from its origins, i.e. "A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers." (Lorde 255). To further explain, in the same essay from *Sister Outsider*, Lorde talks of "Black women who have always bonded together in support of each other..." (49).

Audre Lorde often discussed the differences with which the Black lesbian woman was perceived in the Black community. The Black woman was not considered beautiful in terms of American standards of beauty. That is why they were mostly accepted as "Butch" than "Femme", categories defined within the lesbian environment. Lorde was averse to this kind of conformity to the straight world's rules. The adoption of this paradigmatic structure in the lesbian realm was another of those many things that were unacceptable to her. *Zami*, as part autobiography, part myth, and part history was Lorde's attempt to establish a timeline of her life, to be traced and read cover to cover, for understanding the problems she faced as a Black lesbian in America. She stood for all those women who were not given the opportunity to join hands

and revolt against inequity, as they were and still are bound by domestic duties and their supposed responsibilities as mothers and nurturers in society.

A significant element in Audre Lorde's writing is the fact that her perception of an issue does not necessarily have to be in line with her readers' view. She wrote of what she felt or experienced as part of her own existence in New York, in Mexico, or at her mother's home. The collective voice of the feminist writers of Lorde's time, especially those who sought freedom from oppression besides equality for all women, felt like the backdrop of Lorde's work. Feminist writers are often criticized for they are wrongly believed to be advocating the rights of women over those of men. However, this is an incorrect assumption, as equality between all human beings does not simply imply the literal. An apparently simple feat turns into a challenging journey, due to some who refuse to budge from their pre-conceived ideas about the inability of one gender entirely. Why it becomes important, therefore, to read Audre Lorde's *Zami*, is because it holds much that pertains to the fight for women's rights. It does not, in so many words, exactly lay out the plans on how to do the same, it instead touches upon the ways in which you can begin to understand wrong from right by analyzing the most uncomplicated instances of discrimination.

In Ula Taylor's essay, *Making Waves: The Theory And Practice of Black Feminism*, she carefully laid bare the problems faced by African American women, who became a part of the National Black Feminist Organization (NFBO) for the eradication of sexism and racism. She pointed that these women were unable to bring about a politically adept revolution as they "...had to deal with many issues in their lives and they were not able to generate a powerful political movement around a few issues..." (Taylor 20). The twisted sense of liberation afforded to Black women, was in effect only advantageous to white women. As we can observe through Lorde's

many laborious jobs, the Black woman was underpaid, and overworked, Keystone Electronics being a major example. The choices left to Black women then were either to work for a living or suffer severe injustice in a domesticated setting.

Taylor's essay emphasized the complacency with which Black feminist writers, like Toni Morrison, remarked on the ineffability of feminist thought directed towards a white audience (20-21). Lorde too commented often by way of empirical illustrations, how her being Black was considered more of a taboo than the fact of her sexuality. Taylor's "waves" are discussed as the second and third wave, as a rising curve on a graph that depicts the "rise of black feminist jurisprudence" (Taylor 21). She clarified the definition of Womanism and Black feminism as "nearly interchangeable empowerment theories" (Taylor 26.). She said, "...both theories encourage black women to value and love self, regardless of outsiders' perceptions." (Taylor 26). The debate on whether Womanism and feminism are synonymous or two separate movements is one in constant development. According to Taylor, "Both womanism and black feminism recognize a distinct women's culture..." (27).

Lorde's views on Black feminism as separate from white feminism are at best an example of the similar voice of reason that belongs to the most influential Black feminists of her time. Taylor calls Womanism a "relatively new empowerment theory", as it remains to be understood as to what Walker meant by her ideology behind Womanism (27).

In conclusion, the paradigm of Womanism may not be entirely well-researched, but in light of Audre Lorde's biomythography, it remains a powerful tool that lends its mastery to her words. It is imperative, therefore, to note that Lorde's life and times are celebrated, not only because she was a prolific poet and writer, but because as an activist she attempted to clarify the meaning behind

feminism and what it implied in relation to Black women. A struggle that remains as active today, as it was during the twentieth century, the fight against inequity is an ongoing event in society. With *Zami*, Lorde gave us the chance to get an insider's view into the racial and sexist elements prevalent then. The injustice that is resonated throughout her work can be felt in the deepest corners of our minds. It wills us to pick up and cherish the remnants of her life, which she has left behind in the beauty of her words and her poetry. The following lines encompass everything that can be felt and experienced when one reads *Zami*. I include these lines here in closing, as they are poignant and heartfelt to the point that they illustrate Audre Lorde's journey as a Black lesbian struggling to find herself amidst chaos and disillusionment – "*and in the brief moment that is today wild hopes this dreamer jars for I have heard in whispers talk of life on other stars*". (Lorde 100).

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