



## Race, Gender, Multi-Ethnicity and Cultural Poetics/Politics of Audre Lorde



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### **Abstract**

African American women poets, throughout the centuries have always defined themselves and their community in their works. It has been more apparent in literature, especially in poetry. Audre Lorde is an African American writer, radical feminist, womanist, and civil rights activist. Writing poetry was a responsibility for her as it was necessary for her survival and the survival of others. This study considers race, gender, multi-ethnicity and cultural politics in the select poems of Audre Lorde to the exclusion of the other layers integral to the texture of her poems.

“The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives.” (Lorde, *Making Sense* 248). Audre Lorde says this, ruminating on the plight of the Black associates and helplessly retaliates with angry poetry. Her anger may be politically correct and her perceptions are poignantly fed as they are by a hurt and seething sensibility lived by autobiographical experience.

The twentieth-century African American women poets, while representing Black woman wanted to transform the quality of light by which a Black woman looks at the world and



Audre Lorde is one among them. She was born in Harlem on February 18, 1934 to West Indian immigrants Frederick Byron and Linda Belmar Lorde. She was partly African American and partly German. She had grown up in Harlem although she was too young to remember its writers or events personally. She was an introverted child who did not speak until she was five years old. When she began to communicate, she answered questions with poetry that she had memorised.

Even at the age of twelve, she started to compose her own verse. Lorde attended a Catholic elementary school where she was the first African American student. She suffered in an environment hostile to her own culture.

Her first volume of poems was The First Cities. Coal, another book of poems written by Lorde was the first of her volumes to be released by a major publisher. Lorde's, The Black Unicorn written in 1978, is considered her most complex and successful work. Lorde's prose includes Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power (1979); The Cancer Journals (1980), a record of her courageous struggle against breast cancer; Zami: A New Spelling of my Name (1982), an autobiography about growing up in the 1950s that Lorde called a biomythology, 'a fiction'; Sister Outsider (1984); and A Burst of Light (1988). Audre Lorde received National Endowment Award for the Arts Grant. She also won the Creative Artists Public Service Grant (1972 and 1976) and the Broadside Poets Award (1975). In 1975, she was named Woman of the Year by Staten Island Community College. She received the Borough of Manhattan President's Award for Literary Excellence (1987), the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation for A Burst of Light (1989), a Walt Whitman Citation of Merit, and two Lambda Literary Awards for Lesbian Poetry: in 1993 for Undersong and in 1994 for The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance. She was named poet laureate of New York in 1991. A staunch internationalist, she connected women across the U.S.A., the Caribbean, Europe, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. She died in 1992 after a courageous struggle against breast and liver cancer.



In the 1960s, Audre Lorde involved herself with Black Arts Movement. By the mid 1970s, the Black Arts Movement had started losing its charms by the dramatic cultural and political shifts that marked the transition of the United States. The influence of Black Nationalism diminished and the Black Arts Movement's androcentricism was challenged by Black American women writers and also by Black women poets. The next twenty years saw a plethora of Black women poets writing about the subjectivity of the Black female. Such poems raised their voice against the very roots of conventional notions of the relationship between race and gender. In many ways, her verse falls into the feminist expansion of the Black Arts Movement. In the time in which feminism was run by White middle-class women, Lorde campaigned for a feminist movement that would be conscious of both race and class.

Audre Lorde advocates poetry as a means to address the conflicts that lead to cultural separation and to alleviate the pain of emotional isolation and displacement. Her poetry evokes images of African culture and it depicts racial intolerance and urban blight and emphasises pride and anti-victimisation among African and American women. She blends elements of mythology and history and celebrates the difference among social groups. Her poetry reveals human experience in her life from having given birth to a child to the crimes committed in Black society. Often associated with the Black Arts Movement, the poetry of Audre Lorde is fiercely political. Lorde's poetry touches on so many aspects of life; from lesbianism to Black liberation, to encouraging women's empowerment. Her pioneering spirit is quite evident in her poetry.

The real incident of the death of Emmett Till is narrated by Lorde in the poem "After images". Considering herself as a dragon fish which survives the horrors of living, Lorde inherits Emmett Till as her own son and identifies herself with the boy's mother. Emmett Till, a fifteen-year old Black from the North who was visiting relatives in Mississippi, whistled at a



White girl. Some of the local White men saw this as an insult to White womanhood, and Till was taken away, murdered and mutilated. Lorde focusses on both Emmett Till and a lower-class White woman who has been caught in a flood and lost everything but chided by her husband when she tells her state to the media; Lorde exhibits sympathy for both of them, even though the woman belongs to the oppressor's race. The major focus, however, is on the tragedy of the murdered child. She compares the newspaper photographs of Till's "black broken flesh" to the face of a raped woman. The parallels between murder and the sexual act are boldly juxtaposed. In this way, Lorde equates murder with the White male sexual act, a horrendous and psychologically telling insight. She points out how an insignificant event had been made a serious event resulting in lynching and the death of a Black boy. The poet focusses on the grief and helpless state of the mother. The boy was taught that whistling was a manly thing. But when he did it for a White girl, he was not simply punished, but was brutally and senselessly killed for that action:

A black boy from Chicago  
whistled on the streets of Jackson, Mississippi  
testing what he'd been taught was a manly thing to do  
his teachers ripped his eyes out his sex his tongue  
and flung him to the Pearl weighted with stone  
in the name of white womanhood they took their aroused honor  
back to Jackson and celebrated in a whorehouse  
the double ritual of white manhood confirmed. (CPA 340)

In the pretension of protecting the honour of White womanhood, a Black boy's life was taken. Thereby the Whiteman's double standards were exposed. For Blacks, the reality of death had become an integral part of their very being and mourning had become a common practice in their lives. Through this poem, Lorde points out the inhumanity of the American mainstream society.

"A Litany for Survival" is a clarion call to the Black community against their common enemy—Fear. Black people are imprinted with fear like a faint line. Fear is their genetic



inheritance, nourished by their mother's milk. This kind of fear is only an illusion. The threatening police hope to silence them because they are afraid and silent. She attacks the disparity in justice to the Blacks. The Whites are dealt with more leniently than the Blacks. At the time of arrest, indictment and conviction, police often treat the Blacks harshly than the Whites. She points out that fear is a feeling to be eliminated:

And when the sun rises we are afraid  
it might not remain when the sun sets we are afraid  
it might not rise in the morning when our stomachs are full we are afraid  
of indigestion when our stomachs are empty we are afraid  
we may never eat again when we are loved we are afraid  
love will vanish when we are alone we are afraid (CPA 255)

The feeling of fear dominates them. When their stomachs are empty, the Blacks are afraid that they may never eat again. Even in love, Blacks are afraid that love will vanish. But when they are silent, they are still afraid. Finally, the poet says that it is better to be brave and speak, remembering they can never survive if they are afraid. In the poem "Coal", she uses coal as a symbol through which she celebrates her Blackness and seeks to instill a sense of pride and self-love in the African American community. Coal is a kind of Black essence without self-consciousness. She celebrates coal as staple fuel:

Is the total black, being spoken  
From the earth's inside (CPA 6)

which becomes in its idealized form, the jewel, diamond. For the poet, it means a call to a poetics of Blackness which emphasises the role of poet as an activist and leader and the role of poetry as an expression of a Black vision. The poet celebrates her identity with coal. The total black staple fuel is dug from the earth and the fuel is sabotaged. The coal in the later stage becomes diamond. A diamond signifies luxury and privilege, but coal remains as fuel, a symbol of need and material comfort. Although it is celebrated as an essential commodity, it is also open to connotations of rape and the associated violence of forcible extraction. The black coal inside the Earth is thus also a feminised symbol for the womb,



both receptive and violated. The poem's final line adjures enigmatic openness, knowing its double value. Though the poet is the 'jewel in the open light', one can agree in the violations perpetrated upon the poet as both Black and woman. But the paradox here is that if those violations are not carried on her, she will be left unknown in the silent recesses of earth. And such silence leaves Lorde again, as Black, woman and poet, outside a literary tradition that continues unchallenged. The poem "Coal" helps the poet to carve a niche for Blackness in White tradition.

Like a magical, mysterious bearer of fantasy in the poem "The Black Unicorn", Lorde identifies herself with unicorn. She says that the Black unicorn is greedy and impatient. The White people misapprehend that it is just an insignificant symbol or shadow. They all mock at her without knowing her power and strength. She furiously says:

It is not on her lap where the horn rests  
but deep in her moonpit growing. (CPA 233)

The Black Unicorn is restless and unrelenting and finally it is not free. The image of her unicorn indicates that she is aware of the fact that she belongs to Africa. She vehemently expresses her anger on society. Along with this self-prescribed stance of a female poet, Lorde shows an intense desire on the part of the writer to learn more about the ancient matriarchal myths of Africa; in doing so, Lorde wants to learn more about her own heritage, to search for her own identity.

In the poem "Eulogy for Alvin Frost", the death of Alvin Frost whom she admired and loved is lamented. It is a motherly address to the son of Alvin Frost. This Alvin Frost was her childhood school mate who died unexpectedly at the age of thirty-seven due to sudden psychic disorder and died an unnatural death. She begins the poem by saying that Black men are bleeding to death inside. Inside their bodies, stomachs and their heads, there is:

a hole  
as large as a dum-dum bullet  
eaten away from the inside death at 37. (CPA 263)



She wants to plant him on the earth but the earth is frozen. She recollects her memories of how they both passed the hall way silently at the same time fighting. He congratulated on her latest book in a Black Caucus meeting. He was unique by his genuine laughter. His name reminds her of another boy with the same name 'Alvin' who also died young. The poet feels that the sufferings, trials and tribulations of Black people clog the walls of their hearts. Those mental problems create ulcers inside their stomachs from which they explode to death. She says that she is tired of writing memorials to Black men. Alvin Frost stands for all Blacks lost too soon. She says bitterly:

I am tired of writing memorials to black men  
whom I was on the brink of knowing  
weary like fig trees (CPA 265)

In the poem, "Equinox", Lorde gives an account of the deaths happened in the United States in the year in which her daughter was born:

The year my daughter was born  
DuBois died in Accra while I marched into Washington  
to a death knell of dreaming which 250,000 others mistook for a hope  
believing only Birmingham's black children  
were being pounded into mortar in churches  
that year some of us still thought  
Vietnam was a suburb of Korea.

Then John Kennedy fell off the roof  
of Southeast Asia and shortly afterward  
my whole house burned down with nobody in it  
and on the following sunday my borrowed radio announced  
that Malcolm was shot dead and I ran to reread  
all that he had written because death was becoming  
such an excellent measure of prophecy (CPA 63-64)



In the poem entitled “Power”, Audre Lorde is wondering what she must do in the face of her rage over the acquittal of a White police officer, who shot and killed a ten-year old Black boy in Queens, New York. She wonders what she is supposed to do with her sadness. The mother of the boy was a Black woman. She was helpless before the jury, when it voted unanimously for the acquittal of that police officer. There are two options for her. Either she can use the power of the rhetoric to incite the other young Blacks to rage and kill or to use the power of poetry to find an alternative. Lorde expresses the anger as well as her compassion for the Black woman, who said:

Today that 37-year-old white man with 13 years of police forcing  
has been set free by I I white men who said they were satisfied  
justice had been done and one black woman who said  
“They convinced me” meaning

they had dragged her 4'10" black woman's frame  
over the hot coals of four centuries of white male approval  
until she let go the first real power she ever had  
and lined her own womb with cement  
to make a graveyard for our children. (CPA 319-320)

Lorde tells herself that unless she learns to know the difference between poetry and rhetoric, her power will become corrupt as poisonous mould to lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire. Once the event has occurred, one can write about it or one can try to prevent a similar event from occurring. In either case, it is not possible to undo the unjust event. Lorde suggests that in a society, people must learn from their errors and their failures to care for the people.

In another poem “The Brown Menace Or Poem To The Survival of Roaches”, Lorde addresses the time in which ‘Race’ was ruling America with great power. ‘Roaches’ symbolically represents the Black Americans. The poem cries out a warning to those who hate the Blacks and attempt to destroy them:





I am you  
in your most deeply cherished nightmare  
scuttling through the painted cracks  
you create to admit me into your kitchens  
into your fearful midnights into your values at noon  
in your most secret places with hate  
you learn to honor me by imitation  
as I alter— through your greedy preoccupations (CPA 149)

Lorde uses a compassionate tone to tell people about the devastation caused by the racism of the Whites upon African Americans. She mixes historical fact with political reality, emphasising the disjunction that sometimes occurs between the two. Lorde's children lack the luxury of nature's protection, and in their terrifying victimisation through the barbaric cruelties and indifference of the modern world, they shine as the incarnation of God in judgement, angels of a lost God.

Her poem "From the House of Yemanja" deals specifically with the Yoruban culture of Western Nigeria. Yemanja is the mother of all other Gods and Goddesses in the Yoruban belief system. Such a culture would be very appealing to Lorde, who most likely experienced many of the remnants of a once absolutely male dominant society and some of which still remain so till this day. From the House of Yemanja, Lorde conjures the images of two mothers, one kind and nurturing, the other existing solely for the purpose of denial. These two mothers are perhaps the two faces of Lorde's mother and accordingly, are virtual opposites. The first mother is dark and rich and hidden in the other mother, who is White. Here, we immediately have an archetypal contrast of light versus dark; white historically represents purity and integrity, whereas black has a cultural connotation of evil. Lorde directly contests this blatant fallacy.

In her poem, the dark mother's breasts are the huge exciting anchors in the midnight storm. The other mother, who is as pale as a witch, has symbolically devoured the dark mother.



Lorde refers to the first mother as dark and rich which is Africa and the other is pale as a witch which is America. Lorde is expressing to the reader, a new perspective fitting for a Black woman; she points out that black can be good, that white is not necessarily always better. However, in this case, it seems that the evil pale mother has won, having metaphorically swallowed the first mother. This poem seems to tell Lorde's idea of motherhood or even about her own mother. Lorde closes the poem by saying:

Mother I need  
mother I need  
mother I need your blackness now  
as the august earth needs rain.  
I am the sun and moon and forever hungry  
the sharpened edge where day and night shall meet  
and not be one. (CPA 235-236)

These concepts of day and night and the impossibility of oneness between the two suggest to the reader that the union of the two mothers is impossible. The differences are just too strong; Lorde herself seems to feel caught in the middle amidst these differences. She feels that she has to bear the burden of two mothers on her back. Anyhow, she prefers to be an African. As every Black poet, Lorde talks about race and heritage in the poem.

In her essay "In Search of Mothers Gardens", Alice Walker defines 'womanist' as a woman who loves other women, sexually or non-sexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tear as a natural counter balance of laughter) and women's strength, sometimes loves man sexually and non-sexually, committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. In this sense, Lorde can be called a womanist.

Naming herself as a Black feminist lesbian mother poet, Andre Lorde expresses love, anger, pride, sexual racial and class oppression and personal survival. Through her poems, she provides a hope for better humanity by expressing the Blacks' anger against racism and sexism that have marked the history of the United States of America; her poems



introduce the themes of violence, hunger, silences, struggles for voice, desperate hope and painful survival.

The poem “Need: a Choral of Black Women’s Voices” deals with the issues of race as well as gender. Lorde assumes the role of the witness to the Black man’s sexual crimes and the spokesperson for his victims ‘whose blood is shed in silence’ because of society’s indifference. The shedding of blood denotes the waste of Black lives and the failure of love in a social environment divided by racism and sexism:

I: Dead Black women haunt the black maled streets  
paying the cities’ secret and familiar tithe of blood  
burn blood beat blood cut blood  
seven year old child rape victim blood blood  
of a sodomized grandmother blood blood  
on the hands of my brother blood  
and his blood clotting in the teeth of strangers  
as women we were meant to bleed  
but not this useless blood (CPA 350)

With great poignation, she presents the unrecorded and unremembered murder of a young girl who was raped and murdered in a public place.

In another poem “Chain”, Lorde illustrates how a young girl is facing even greater danger of sexual assault in her own home. From the newspaper report of the case of two girls sent to foster homes as they had borne children by their natural father, Audre Lorde recreates the story in her own poems. In an imaginary dialogue with the mother figure, Lorde makes the girl explain how their father coerced them into having sexual intercourse with him:

but he said if we did it then we would be his  
good children if we did it then he would love us (CPA 247)

Lorde also points out the girls’ consequent confusion about their identities and their relationships with each of their parents and with children, they bore their father:



Am I his daughter or girlfriend  
am I your child or your rival  
you wish to be gone from his bed?  
Here is your granddaughter mother  
give us your blessing before I sleep (CPA 247)

In addition to the sexual exploitation of Black girls and teenagers, the sexual harassment and rape of adult Black women in contemporary society is a frequent theme in her poems.

In the poem "Hard Love Rock # 2", Lorde questions the male nationalists who devalue and subordinate the sexual exploitation of their racial sisters. She doubts the Black male's ability to improve the condition of their race by slogans or by rhetorical questions. She sarcastically refers to the men's frequent distortion of the popular slogan 'Black is beautiful' as an excuse to satisfy their lust. Her female speaker expresses her anger against this distortion and the sexism it hides:

Black is not beautiful baby  
beautiful baby beautiful  
lets do it again It is not  
being screwed twice  
at the same time from on top  
as well as from my side. (CPA 125)

The poet vehemently attacks the hypocrisy and the lust of the Black nationalists, who have promised the Blacks for freedom. She also points out the lack of cohesion and order in the Black community.

The poem "Call" features a speaker who is deeply interested in recovering a history, an effort that will require something more than simple remembrance and sentimental nostalgia. The poem is a politically charged articulation of what has been lost in the recordings of history about Black women. As the poem opens with a desire for this



'forgotten' history, it carries within its tone, issues of responsibility and questions why and how this particular history was subsumed She, the poet herself, invokes:

Oya Seboulisa Mawu Afrekete  
and now we are mourning our sisters  
lost to the false hush of sorrow  
to hardness and hatchets and childbirth  
and we are shouting  
Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer (CPA 418)

She invokes the deity in her name and most of her sisters:

On worn kitchen stools and tables  
we are piecing our weapons together  
scraps of different histories (CPA 417)

She brings her best while asking for continuing power to do her work as woman and poet. She is blessed to become the collective voice of her sisters. Rather than simply substituting one for the other, she moves towards a program of gendered history that embodies the power and political activism of Black women like Rosa Parks and Winnie Mandela, and this is an act that requires more than the recovery of Aido Hwedo's faces and names; it requires an ongoing recognition of those women who endure warring sometimes outside this historical entity. The energy and action of the poem revolve around womanhood. There is no mention of men, except as 'sons of my daughters', so the work that is to be done; the recovery project, is solely in the hands of women who can loosen their tongues and offer up voices that revive Aido Hwedo. The speaker, and other women like her, are preparing for an engagement that will be fought with scraps of different histories history-wielding warriors demanding truth and recognition.

Towards the end of the poem, the speaker becomes a medium for various voices:

my mother and Winnie Mandela are singing  
in my throat (CPA 418)



This singing is a polyphonic testimony to the strength, endurance and history of Black women. Lorde does not define Black womanhood in 'Call'; rather she works with a silenced history to revivify the historical importance of Black women's dedicated activism, and this endeavor is complicated by the historical legacies of biblically supported slavery and cultural loss.

In "Scar", Lorde explains the intense constructive power of the Black female gaze when they recognise with one another. It emphasises the ways that Black women locate one another. Lorde proposes that the subject is marked as Black woman when other Black women recognise her as such. Their acknowledgement is in turn based on their recognition that she displays the traits and participate in the rituals that defined their own emergence as African American women. When one Black woman recognises another, it brings a lot of happiness. In that crucial moment, they indirectly acknowledge that they share a common place origin. The communal displacements are not so critically prominent. Perhaps by now, they are so familiar. Lorde dedicates this simple poem to:

... the mothers sisters daughters  
girls I have never been  
for the women who clean the Staten Island Ferry  
for the sleek witches who burn  
me at midnight in effigy  
because I eat at their tables  
and sleep with their ghosts. (CPA 220)

The emphasis in this poem is upon the ways in which Black women invent each other. Lorde provides a scene of men dancing together by moon light as an allegory for the transmission of the traits of Black womanhood among the women of the same generation. For African American women, bonds based on relationship play a significant role in their resistance to the White oppression.

In the poem, "Dahomey", Lorde creates an African American identity using African myths. Lorde traces the Amazon's origin in African community in which women were considered



as symbols of power and strength. In the Amazon warriors, who cut their breasts willfully, Lorde finds the source of Black female power. By providing these examples of African models, she sees the Black woman's struggle as a continuation of a long tradition. She has also achieved a spiritual bonding with an ancestral and mythic past. The Amazons and warrior queens of Dahomey and the Orisha of the Yoruba religious pantheon have given her a family that cannot fail:

It was in Abomey that I felt  
the full blood of my fathers' wars  
and where I found my mother  
Seboulisa standing with outstretched palms hip high  
one breast eaten away by worms of sorrow  
  
magic stones resting upon her fingers  
dry as a cough. (CPA 239)

Thus, Lorde creates a new vision of African American female subject to replace the old notion of Black womanhood.

Lorde moves toward self-love and self-awareness and toward a revolution of consciousness in her poems which suggests the beauty and wisdom of Black women. Self-definition is a common theme in Black American poetry. In the poem "A Woman Speaks", Lorde defines herself:

I do not dwell within my birth nor my divinities  
who am ageless and half-grown and still seeking  
my sister witches in Dahomey  
wear me inside their coiled cloths  
as our mother did mourning.  
  
I have been woman for a long time  
beware my smile I am treacherous with old magic



and the noon's new fury with all your wide futures

promised I am woman (CPA 234)

Writing honestly requires acknowledging the particulars that construct the self. This seems to be the message of "To the Poet Who Happens to Be / Black and the Black Poet Who/Happens to Be a Woman", a title that places sarcastic weight on the word 'happens' and a heavy disapproval on those poets who discount their race and gender. The beginning of the poem records her first birth:

I was born in the gut of Blackness  
from between my mother's particular thighs  
her waters broke upon blue-flowered lineoleum  
and turned to slush in the Harlem cold  
10 PM on a full moon's night  
my head crested round as a clock  
"You were so dark," my mother said  
"I thought you were a boy." (CPA 359)

She recounts the first sister touch, a joyous birth of a woman which wrote into her body a welcome home. As a result, Black woman was born. She says:

I cannot recall the words of my first poem  
but I remember a promise I made my pen  
never to leave it lying  
in somebody else's blood. (CPA 360)

Writing with the ink of her own precisely claimed blood keeps Lorde from using her pen like a ghostly white pencil to spill the blood of others.

The poem "Who Said It Was Simple" depicts many reasons for women's anger and liberation. She compares it to a tree which shatters before it bears. She describes a woman's rally with hired girls. They are marching on the road, shouting their slogans. They do not seem to understand the meaning of their rally. They never seem to notice the pleasures as well as pains of their oppression:





But I who am bound by my mirror  
as well as my bed see causes in colour  
as well as sex and sit here wondering  
which me will survive all these liberations. (CPA 92)

Lorde expresses her anger over political issues; the cruelties and injustices in one's life. But what preoccupies in her poetry is sexual and racial oppression.

In another poem "A Meeting of Minds", she describes how a woman is not even permitted to dream or to speak, although other women are chatting:

she stand in a crystal  
all around other women are chatting  
the walls are written in honey  
in the dream she is not allowed  
to kiss her own mother the agent of control  
is a white pencil that writes alone. (CPA 387)

Denied access even to her sleeping consciousness, this woman cannot see her past or future, nor can she fully know and constitute herself. Prohibited even to converse, she cannot speak to other women. She is allowed to look at the world, only through the crystal, a kind of visual separation. Even there is restriction in their verbal sharing with others. Crystal, a gem used by women for vision, protection, and the transmission of healing energy, becomes cold, imprisoning stone whose properties only enhance her torment and isolation. Kissing her mother, her own and not a step mother would reinstate the first and most basic contact in a touch that embraces and validates the self. But even this simple right is not allowed.

This pencil which signs the woman's ultimate alienation is, first of all, white and, second, self-contained and propelled. Its colour is the blank neutrality of the dominant world, and there is no visible author to own its powerful prohibition. Lorde feels that the need to share is a fundamental one that all people feel. Unfortunately, the prevailing attitudes of American society preclude true expression of individualism: If people do not fit into the norms or



expectations of the dominant system of values, they are deemed abnormal or deviant. Lorde voices against the hypocrisy of American values.

Audre Lorde herself says in her essay, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference”:

Black women and our children know the fabric of our lives is stitched with violence and with hatred, that there is no rest. We do not deal with it only on the picket lines, or in dark midnight alleys, or in the places where we dare to verbalize our resistance. For us, increasingly, violence weaves through the daily tissues of our living- in the supermarket, in the classroom, in the elevator, in the clinic and the schoolyard, from the plumber, the baker, the saleswoman, the bus driver, the bank teller, the waitress who does not serve us.

(Sister Outsider 119)

Lorde’s poetry reflects the many contradictions of her life. She writes a complex verse which was both intensely personal and militantly social. Lorde’s poems try to showcase her politics; a mixture of interracial socialism and African American cultural nationalism. They show acutely, the oppressive conditions of the then American contemporary society. Her poetry grew out of her keen sense of injustice – racial as well as gender. When she talks about the death of Emmett Till, she also pities the White woman’s oppression by the White man. Like Brooks, she also mourns the deaths of common Black folk as well as Black national leaders like Malcom X and John Kennedy. Both Brooks and Lorde express their concern for the future of Black children. Unlike Brooks, Lorde expresses a strong desire to break through silence and politeness to bold protest. The seeds of her poetry lay in the current events that happened in the then society. She picks up the events of her time and records them in her poems. Thereby, she tries to create an awareness of the ills of the society. She desires to affect the society through the message that has the power to alter



perceptions and minds of the readers. Though she also writes about racial oppression in her poems, her poems on gender outshine racial poems.

When it comes to her gender-oriented poems, she creates a space for women to be complex individuals committed to liberation on an international level. In the American society, if women do not fit into the norms or expectations of the dominant system of values, they are deemed as abnormal. In her poems, Lorde argues against the hypocrisy of American values defined for women. She freely writes about lesbianism and redefines sexual myths and stereotypes of mainstream American society. She often identifies herself with African models of Amazon warriors who were never subservient and passive. Thus she redefines the image of African American womanhood which was wrongly understood by the White Americans. As a woman of colour, she praises the beauty and sexuality of women. She also describes the sexual love among women and points out the variety and complexity in the female consciousness. Her poems address not only Black American female but also all Black female all over the world. On the whole, she expresses the feelings of being dismissed in an American society that is predominantly White, male, heterosexual and middle class.

Claudia Tate in Black Woman Writers at Work says of Lorde that she “derives the impetus of her poetry’s force, tone, and vision from her identity as a black woman who is both a radical feminist and an outspoken lesbian, and as a visionary of a better world. In stunning figurative language she outlines the progress of her unyielding struggle for the human rights of all people”. (113) Lorde wrote of racism in the Feminist Movement and sexism among African Americans. She not only wrote for herself, but for her children and women as well. She wrote for women who had no voice of their own. She particularly wrote for Black women because she felt there were very few voices for Black women in America. She wrote for the women terrified to speak because they had been taught to respect fear more than themselves.

Lorde offers a new perspective on an individual who must use his/her power and ability to live. She sets out rigorously to combat racism, sexism in her poetry. What is remarkable



about Lorde's insight is the balance that she sought in presenting her views through her poems. On the one hand, her work is intensely personal; it may even be considered self-absorbed at times. Yet on the other, she manages to transform her deeply private pains and joys into universal and timeless concerns. Obviously political in purpose and social in content, her poems request all individuals to understand more deeply the ways in which human lives are organised. Her poetry reveals the complexity of being a Black feminist lesbian poet. She beckons the Black people to take charge of their lives, to confront the tasks at hand. While acknowledging the differences among women which are wide and varied, she observes that Black women's experiences are different from White women's experiences, and because the experiences of the White woman are considered normative, the Black woman's experiences are insignificant.

Viewed stylistically, Lorde's poetry is not transparent. Understanding her poems requires attention, effort, knowledge in African myths and culture. Her poems are rich enough to send one back for new discoveries with each reading. Lorde's own poetry is basically a modernist free verse. Although she does not use rhyme, a strong lyrical quality can be seen. Much of the time, she foregoes standard punctuations. She takes advantage of the patterns of normal speech and allows the line to break where commas or periods would naturally occur. When she needs a pause in the middle of the line, she uses a double space. The substance of her poetry always reaches beyond the individual self into deep concerns for all humanity. Lorde never attempts at developing personae. She is central to her own poetic quest. There are however, moments when she speaks in that voice in situations with dramatic conflict. In some of her poems, her diction and rhythm take on the idiom of dramatic speech.

On reading her poems, one may realise Lorde's voice calls us to witness violence, comprehend oppression, celebrate love, recognise differences and visualise possibilities. Lorde illustrates the significance of self-expression in everyday life. She skillfully depicts racial intolerance and urban blight, and emphasises pride and anti-victimisation among African American women. Her poems are an outcome of an unjust society that allows Black



women to be treated unfairly, and brutal. To quote her own words from her essay, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference":

...As a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong. (Sister Outsider 114).

When it comes to the issues of race and gender oppressions, Lorde states clearly:

Within Black communities where racism is a living reality, differences among us often seem dangerous and suspect. The need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity, and a Black feminist vision mistaken for betrayal of our common interests as a people. (Sister Outsider 119).

Audre Lorde, through her poems asks women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. Most of her poems have women as speakers have the theme of solitude. She reinforces a group identity by trying to redefine the social roles of women, love, failure, work stress and pain of motherhood. This is not for the power of sisterhood. Rather, it invites reflection on the sources of domination and oppression; Racism and Sexism.

Lorde's role in redefining African American culture through her poems is significant. She never mentions nor includes any man for that task. The recovery project is mainly in the hands of Black women. Thus, women become history-wielding warriors demanding truth and recognition. From the history and mythologies of Africa, she borrows images of female Goddesses, witches and other women to reconstruct the image of Black female self. In this role, she dismisses the spiritual powers of White Gods and Goddesses. Lorde identifies herself with the Amazon women of Africa who symbolise Black female power. In doing so, she portrays the contemporary Black women as symbols of physical, emotional and spiritual power. In the process of redefining Black womanhood, she crosses the boundaries of time and space.



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