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# The Other Tongue: Audre Lorde's Textual Authority in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

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**Abstract:** Audre Lorde, popularly known for her speeches and commanding voice on women role, life, rights and

revolutionary attitude, was also a great 'autobiographer'. Apart from her excellency in the debatable position as a feminist, and civil rights activist, her works have paved a greater voice to the audience. Audre Lorde was self-described who was "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet," ..... "dedicated both her life and her creative talent to confronting and addressing injustices of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia." Similarly, *Zami* (1982) became a receptacle for all her self-described thoughts. The autobiography fuses myth, history, personal thoughts and reminiscences into a flashback style that carries the readers to her informative-memory lane. *Zami* (1982) stands appropriate to the title "A New Spelling of My Name" as through her prolong quest in society both as a writer and as an activist, she had transformed her thoughts to a dignified freedom struggle. In *Zami* (1982), her new style (bio-mythography) and technical mastery has been successfully able to present reader a memory lane that is crooked, rough, unpolished, savaged, and bruised of emotional expressions. The unheard tales of society brings out anger and outrage in the her that is delt with positivism and good comprehension. In this particular work, Lorde, throughout her life, talks not only as an artist but as a random being who presents her life, raw, unheard and abled. The narration is filled with flashback, personal notes, pauses with stark delivery that makes the work more powerful. *Zami* presents through this powerful text, a voice that awakens readers, to identify and accept oneself as it is formed and improvise it with time. This can be justified by her words: "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive." The intricated narration through 'acceptance' and 'remembrance' makes this work a voice for 'black feminist', 'lesbian-feminist', and feminist of her time, but lay everlasting influence on tradition of literature. Lorde and her *Zami* (1982)

stood out in terms of style, emotional expression and conviction to all people in search of an identity.

**Keywords:** *Acceptance, identity, silence, powerful, embracement, empowering, racism.*

## Introduction

*"I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own."*

— Audre Lorde

Audre Lorde stood out among all visionary voices of 20<sup>th</sup> century because of her remarkable speeches, orientation, subject and vision. She stood against the white feminists who portrayed her as 'a black lesbian-feminist voice'. The emphasis here does not lie on the accusations made by Others, but by not accepting of what she had been portrayed. The focus is on 'accepting oneself' and 'not fit to the undesired roles' with rationality and equality. Lorde, therefore, becomes an exemplary visionist who allowed women not to follow 'Other' instead listen to their sown self and stand out. She laid emphasis on voicing out issues of any kind. But the urge is always to break the silence that will cripple identity and society in general. As strong as her personality, as strong as her mind, remains her bio-mythography, *Zami* that influences its readers on: "Your silence will not protect you." The strong notes on identity, feminism, desire, lesbianism, motherhood, sisterhood, illness and disability, institutional deformity, societal pressure and rigidity have been presented raw and delicate out to readers.

Audre Lorde was upfront and logical against the oppression of black women. She believed every woman need to confront

issues that led to anxiety, remorse, depression and even deaths. Clearly, Lorde in her essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House", raised her voice against racism within feminism that affected a lot of lives. When a spectrum has raised their voices for women, and in that spectrum, there is lack of hope and darkness for few sections, then the spectrum of feminism becomes questionable. Feminism was disintegrated into blacks and whites. The white feminists disregarded the black women, which itself makes feminism interrogative. Lorde in this essay, explains the unrecognized battle that creeps between women of color and race. It is necessary for a woman to set dependency on herself. Similarly, Lorde in *Zami* talks of the 'categorization of woman' by radical women itself. There cannot be any lasting change, if one is not united by thought. In *Zami*, as a reader witnesses, Lorde tries to explain ways a woman can lead improvement in society that is dominated by binaries. Binaries like men-women, black-whites etc have no unification but disintegration. In order to set a collective society, acceptance of oneself is necessary for them. In the words of Lorde in *Sister Outsider*, "Black women sharing close ties with each other, politically or emotionally, are not the enemies of Black men. Too frequently, however, some Black men attempt to rule by fear those Black women who are more ally than enemy." The significance of her approach in writing the bio-mythography interrogates 'true identity' and how *Zami* becomes a rallying cry to confront arguments against identity in the black community. The idea is to enforce 'freedom' and eradicate racist politics. It is fruitful for reader to identify *Zami* (1982) as a guidance and encouragement towards freedom.

## **Zami (1982), a counter strike**

*“A choice of pains. That's what living was all about.” — Audre Lorde, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde founded Kitchen Table in 1981. The Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press would encourage women to raise voices, define their identity, lay issues heard and find a source of encouragement towards a free living. *Zami* (1982) is a beautiful narration that has been pillared with facts and information, set to encourage woman towards free living. Lorde did not step back from celebrating who she is and it is through her celebration and acceptance of self, that marks a difference in her presence. From her childhood, she has been a keen observer of people. During her childhood, Lorde kept dwelling upon issues related to race, womanhood, color, identity and, freedom. Clearly from her autobiography, she calls herself being a proud black writer and a feminist. Not only does she celebrate her own identity but struggles to shape her identity amidst the rigid and tough society. Gradually, as she narrates her adulthood, where she gets to meet varied identities in her life, she crumbles down to stay opaque. The major issue of identity is setting a fearful spectrum in front if you and allow society to see you through their eyes. Therefore, she talks of identities who allowed her to shape her life and celebrate who ‘she really is’. In order to stay true to one’s identity, it is necessary to find oneself from one experience to another. The identity can be found by setting certain connections within the society that is presumable tough. And lastly, the authority of oneself to speak and frame from this lived experience.

Lorde had understood that ‘identity is conflicted’. One cannot wholly present in its true form and therefore, conflict with self begins. The idea behind is to accept one’s form in its truest

sense. It does not have to fulfil the criteria of what the society demands. The distinction can be made when one is able to unite with one's choice, desire and needs. These needs and demands do not necessarily structure within social conformities of race, religion, color, gender and other preferences. Women need to act with necessity and rationality. There cannot be any segregated group called white women and black women. A woman needs to be identity irrespective if race, community, color, religion, language and sexual preferences. A woman needs to broadly hear the issues and problems present in the society as a collective whole. Therefore, every woman needs to act with caution and with act of need. *Zami*, here shares some similarity, as it is a Carriacou name indicating women who are willing to work together as family, friends and lovers; standing beside one another. And *Zami* (1982) clearly has strong references to powerful and strong women that Lorde encountered in her life. Largely, it is her mother to whom she constantly refers back, allowing reader to signify her mother's impact in life.

Audre Lorde belongs to a West Indian family, a small family. Her family have been playing a major role during the growing years of Lore's life. Her mother potentially stands out when it comes to giving opinions and raising her children. Her family is more practical than emotional. Lorde's bond with her two elder sisters, Phyllis and Helen, is close and comforting. Their association with parents was less strong than what they hold. Lorde, had difficulty with her vision and began speaking at an age of four. Apart from her physical defects that she struggled from early childhood, she came across racial differentiation and hatred that whites had for blacks. As such, the landlord felt so disgraced of allowing rental to Lorde's family, that he decided to hang himself that led to his death. Besides, in Harlem streets and markets, whites bullied black with comments and racial remarks that affected the little sisters largely. Lorde's mother was extremely strong and never

reacted to daily harassment that she and her children went through. Thus, she was strict and practical most of her time. She believed in making her children, especially Lorde stronger. She discouraged them to succumb to social drawbacks and maintain their dignity as a girl/woman and always look up in fulfilling one's own desires. She emphasized more on education, learning and setting an identity of one's won self. Being brought up by her mother within an environment that fights back racial and social differences, allowed Lord to stand up for causes that she felt is unjustifiable, as she grew up. Society often spitted to the blacks to which Lorde's mother disparaged by spitting into the wind.

From her autobiography, she was an extremely talented student. She began writing poetry from her high school. She had the curiosity to know more and was interested in writing. Her creative vent of mind allowed her articulate her thoughts in the form of poetry. As she grew up, and completed her graduation, she began to stay detached from her family, and chose to stay distant independently. During her time of living independently, she comes across few people and it became easier for her tp understand the mindset of people living in the society. She meets a boy named Peter. They both became good friends and built a bond beyond friendship but did not last long. The white boy, leaves Lorde as soon as he finds out that she is pregnant. Lorde disappointedly gets an abortion. She leaves for a better living to Connecticut. The situation, therein turn opposite as the work at the factory proved unfavorable and atrocious. Several turns come in her life and meanwhile her father dies. The new left her crumbled and shifted to Cuernavaca. In this place, she encounters few independent women who are rebellious in attitude and have holds no contentment in building a lesbian relationship. From New York to Cuernavaca, she meets independent women who have had close bond with Lorde but was not ever lasting. Each

woman, she encountered in her life, gave her certain lessons and made her stronger. Just like struggles in any human life, Lorde's life was no different. She struggled to get settled with a woman of love and raise an egalitarian understanding among all. While the people are struggling to create a recognition within 'perfect societies', the condition of a woman experience a dystopian bent. The 'perfect societies and its counterparts cause undue stress, destruction and derangement driving woman to rebel against the society it lives in. Slowly, Lorde witness exaggerations of disorder and anomaly.

*Zami* (1982) attempts to configure, that writers are affected by the activities and events of the society they live in. writers are painstakingly making efforts to create a better society over a perfect society. It takes into consideration the socio-political condition of the time when people started to utilize the boon of industrialization and the rapid spread of industrialization leaded people towards urbanization. Moreover, the advancement in science and technology also created a sense of hope for a better future for the contemporary people. This could be considered as one of the reasons why the writers were having a dystopian and egalitarian bent of mind. Secondly, in general sense, human beings try to imagine or dream about the things that they don't have in their real life (woman finding solace, fundamental rights and freedom). From another perspective, it can be assumed that by comparing the exaggerated world with the material world makes the characters capable of evaluating the world that they live in.

*"I forgot what we were celebrating. Because we were always celebrating something, a new job, a new poem, a new love, a new dream."*

— Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

Lorde struggled to structure her social vision, and she did so by self-consciously distancing herself from the intellectuals of her time. It is important for one to craft work those endeavours at transforming the society. *Zami* (1982) provides an understanding of the ills of a society that subscribes to and is fixated with masculinity, allow women to confine within her world of acquaintance, and revive and rejuvenate their forms of thinking. *Zami* in odd ways, is a response to every patriarchal hypocrisy that went over women since centuries. It celebrates the re-appropriated religion, womanhood, motherhood and colour that exist without presence of any man. *Zami* becomes an activist in itself just like its writer against odds of patriarchal and societal structure. She brings recurring activities, setting a representation to people that have had been rejected under societal models. It maligns creating possibilities for women, and also men within a changing society. It helps expands the significance and celebration of feminine such as motherhood and childcare; sexuality without a man; independent living that can be done without the presence of a man and limiting the patriarchal pleasure believing women are oppressed, resisting female archetypes. Through Lorde's life, the narration presents a poignant social document examining the terse portraits of the Black middle-class family. It questions the pathos and sufferings infringed on black women that could be reinterpreted by giving a humanistic and compassionate glimpse of black life that is celebrated beautifully by the black women. Here, the concept of race becomes a burden to everyone in common just in case the concepts of living 'a world without man' acts as a burden to the society. *Zami* becomes an enigma.

## **Zami: an idea of self, acceptance and remembrance**

*"I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own." — Audre Lorde*

Lorde laid her interest in 'identity crises and 'existentialism'. She necessitated the understanding of 'who I am in the society?'. Therefore, an individual need to be guided by the desire, interest and idea behind the purpose of living. Whether man or woman, each cannot be categorised based on certain traits and acceptable contours of society. There cannot be categorised work, norms and ideas associated with man and woman. The idea is to have a unified thought process and utilising the most of innate qualities, skills and talents. The idea is not deflated identity but 'to explain it rationally and more balanced way'. Identity cannot be formed on a sunny day. It is a process which needs a rational shape as one seeks to build. Individuals, especially women, need not be objectified rather considered as a subject for. A form whose traits, skills and characteristics can lay a benefit to the society. Inequality paves through when an individual remain in a society unwillingly. Therefore, categorisation need to be reduced or declined in giving a qualified shape to every individual possible. The problems that women of Lorde's time faced was stepping out from one's adequate information about one self. Women were guided by social categorisations, categorisations that were forced and gradually made a belief. The belief needs to be broken those bridges change and development among women. Women, can set one self-free when they realise how to be free. Freedom can be acquired through challenges that earlier they were scared of. Challenges can bring forth fruits of freedom and acknowledge that they been long lost for women. Audre Lorde, therefore, stood strict and sharp when she took a powerful form. She became a voice for all the voiceless. She

became a pedestal for women to stand and identify truly with oneself. She made shaping an identity easier and more available. She intended to educate women on how identity can shape and influence behavioural patterns. Lorde educated women of the power, skills and opportunities that they could have. According to the 'Identity theory' propagated by Stryker in 1968 lay stress on human behaviour. The theory emphasis to understand the influence that society can have on an individual. It seeks to identify the layered society and how it impacts social behaviour in an individual. Similarly, Lorde do not exercise the power of society that affect 'individual role' and choice. Society cannot set rules for men and women and how each shall set feet to meet expectations. The categorization needs to be made easier, accessible and acceptable of one role.

*Zami* becomes a centre of individual "mechanisms" that is disrupted due to chaotic social order. *Zami* helps to rationalize the social order. However, the story is of a black child growing up stronger and stricter against the social malfunctioning. The work of art focuses on racial identity. Identity when formed out of race has certain interrogation by its opponent. These interrogation does not rely on the inner feelings and reactions of one race but a conflicted state of inquiry. It takes a least consideration of the Supreme Being and greater of a binary-dominant and marginalised. The interrogation begins with an unending answer that results in a battle. The true self and recognition of an identity then becomes debatable. Both *Zami* and Lorde becomes arguable. Here, through her portrayal, readers are brought back to the recurring theme of how to achieve an identity of own. *Zami* becomes a process of realisation, through which reader grapples with 'remembrance' and 'acceptance' enweaving to become a functional being.

The idea behind Lorde is fighting through her voice in the form of writing. In *Zami*, the narration is a weave of emotions,

feelings and chaotic 'identity crisis'. The term 'identity' is debatable as it does not fall under singular contour with global cultural differences. The emphasis is to embrace identity of all forms irrespective of gender, caste, sex, religion and race. The formations of identity across East and West has always been a matter of discussion. Identity crisis is consistently occurring in the thematic concerns and elevating self-awareness. The awareness is possible through the implications and influence of the writing form and style of different writers. A work cannot be persuasive without sincerity and impressive without articulation. With the use of right diction, figures of speech, idiomatic expressions, fluency, oratory, form, appeal, intention, and delivery, a work from mere content becomes a masterpiece. A writer needs to have the idea of flair, eloquence, rhetoric and form to let the content speak. Rightfully, [Roman Jakobson](#) introduced six major functions of language. The communicative functions of Jakobson help to understand the process through which a message is sent from sender to receiver. The model allows to understand how communication can be established. Jakobson has been able to deliver his idea in his influential essay on linguistics and poetics. It helps a writer to identify distinguished six communication functions with associated factors to form a communication process. Thereby, when a writer is communicating non-verbally through a book or a piece of writing, it becomes an indirect way of conversation between writer and reader. The receiver's intention is set in the form of structure containing words that help in articulating the thought and emotions to the writer. But, Lorde rightly is able to persuade the reader to believe the idea and inculcate the learning through reading creating an impressive impression on the minds. Certainly, the idea of great writers was to highlight the social ills and injustices. A work of art depends on logos, ethos and pathos as an appeal to emotional response. It is important for a writer to convince its readers to

connect with the emotions and intentions set towards the work. A writer initiates a conversation with readers through different styles of writing by creating an emotional response. And successfully Lorde does through her bio-mythography.

Embracement is an opportunity to allow free space of acceptance where one is within a circular bound that ends with liberty death. The circle here is life that sets experiences for an individual to achieve and function. There is a conscious and subconscious adaptation of actions and events that cultivates our mind with people and society. The dynamism of living life within a boundary that birth produces can be negated with the course of lifetime. The ancestral boundary one carries cannot be definite that consciously exceeds to an edge of conflict if not embraced properly. social, political and economic conditions are changing, therefore, our choice and interest. One needs to be encouraged to follow what life sets in by slowly amalgamating with ideas like culture, religion, race, gender, ethnicity, language and others. These ideas cannot be made static and dominant over one due to biological and ancestral boundaries and regions.

## Conclusion

Literature of any kind surveys time and its issues to debate on various grounds of studies. The studies that literature sets for its readers for all generations are aligned with its own time, space and boundary. These boundaries of time set a study, a form of debate and discussion for readers of the next generation imprisoned with their own ideologies and representations. These studies move in circular bounds that are embraced by various minds and therefore, 'varied perspectives. Literature cannot be in a state of denial in its artistic form of poetry, fiction, non-fiction and so on. The panoramic view presented through character, plot, climax and subsequent portraiture of society becomes relevant for all

times to come. Lorde contests with time and its social representations bringing unknown facts and information to readers. She does not follow a temporal frame of critical discourse but futuristic implications embraced by readers. It retrieves the social, local and national narratives that feed the mind of a writer of discourses on oppression, colonialism, imperialism, identity-crisis, historical transformation, racial disintegration, feminism, emphasising on issues from identity to ethnicity.

The discourse engages reader with emotions of pain, trauma, happiness, injustice in varied versions that are emancipated when embraced and accepted by readers. Spanning from subaltern, feminism, LGBTQ, minority, the "Alter-Image" discarded by societal convention has been left on the edge of literary contours. The alter is the actual representation of what society has earlier not confronted with. This alter image through alter-mainstream readings, readers are able to the odds of society that has been brought to interrogation. The zones of contest have now broadened with new studies catering to building an 'egalitarian' rule. The dominance that "acceptable society" sets for people has been battled in studies like African-American, Indian, South American and other studies. The contest was and is never to enforce the idea of one over the other but to "the approval of homogenous idea" culminating to a "regulated idea of commonality". The commonality of people is now differentiated with race, sex, gender, colour, religion and ethnicity with a governing motif of "dominance and supremacy".

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