AUDRE LORDE’S EXPLORATION OF HER MULTIPLE SELVES IN HER BIOMYTHOGRAPHY “ZAMI: A NEW SPELLING OF MY NAME

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ABSTRACT

Eurocentrism, or to be specific, Eurocentric feminism has always disregarded the female experience of the “Other”—be it the socio-political context or the philosophical undercurrent or, as this paper attempts to discover, the mythological projections of African heritage. Audre Lorde in her life writing has radically endeavoured to explore her multiple selves, her radical female subjectivity. African Orisha, i.e the androgynous, ambiguous, trickster, mythological figure is re-invoked in her writings, especially in her poems and her “Biomythography”. Lorde successfully establishes her Afro-centric female identity by discarding the Graeco-Roman mythological tradition as a totalising telos.

Keywords: Female subjectivity; Bildungsroman; Kunstlerroman; Autobiography; Revisionist Myth; Dahomean / Fon; Afro-centrism; Biomythography; Self-inscription; Multiplicity

INTRODUCTION

African – American / Black women thinkers and writers have always tried to assert their radical black female subjectivity. In order to situate their struggle and self-impression, they are calling for new tools because in the words of Audre Lorde, “the master’s tool will never demolish / dismantle the master’s house”. (Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches). This proves that writers of the African provenance are not only critiquing western hegemony, they are also constructing in fact reconstructing their own subjectivity, in terms of new tropes and terminology and identity. In doing so they have recognized the centrality of multiple, simultaneous, diverse, fluid identity – Paradigms to articulate their “difference” and Audre Lorde(1934-1992) makes this the theme of her biomythography Zami: A new spelling of My Name (1982) to emphasize her emergence as a black female radical subject who refuses to fit in within the white male patriarchal socializing norms and who encompasses all the parts of herself – which make her a politically incorrect personality and an outsider. As Lorde consciously asserts in the Prologue to Zami: “I have always wanted to be both man and woman […]”(p.7)

Keeping in mind the strategy used by Lorde to inscribe the collective black female experience, I would like to analyze Zami as an autobiography of an artist as a “young black woman”, as a bildungsroman and as a kunstlerroman. It is a novel about the growth of an artist, interestingly Lords subverts the normative ‘male’ space of autobiography. The artist presents here an alternative model of female development and female creativity. Barbara DiBernard refers to the work of Maurice Beebe, Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts: The Artist as Hero in Fiction fromGoethe to Joyce, In this major study Beebe asserts that the artist he finds through his study is definitely male and remains in an exiled state. Zami shows the woman artist fully engaged with others. She is an artist–in-relation rather than the “artist-as-exile” posited by Beebe. Moreover, in white women’s kunstlerromane, male definitions supersede the primary, female connection of the pre-Oedipal bond causing a disruption of the female continuity. According to DiBernard the feminist critics have analyzed white women’s autobiographies
to point out that the mother has been socialized into the norms of patriarchal society and takes “vengeance” for socializing her daughter into these norms. Linda Huft gives examples of Avis’s aunt Chloe in Elizabeth Stuart Phelp’s The Story of Avis and Esther’s mother in Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar. This imposes a disjuncture in the psyche of the artist and creates a conflict between her artist “self” and her woman self. Never once in Zami does Lorde express a conflict between herself as a woman and herself as an artist. As a woman artist, she never really surrenders her primary emotional and erotic intensity to a man.

Lorde’s first connection with poetry and creativity begins through her interaction with her mother—Linda Lorde, a Grenadian and homesick black lady. She imposes a “maternal silence” on Lorde and her sisters by keeping quiet about the racial reality in America. It is through her silence that Lorde learns the possibility and strength of language and speech. Throughout the early sections of Zami, her mother’s silence is associated with the linguistic distortions surrounding the U.S. racial discourse and with the Eurocentric masculinist standards. During her childhood her parents speak as “one unfragmentable and unappealable voice” (p.15) Her mother uses language defensively, because she cannot change the aspects of racist U.S. culture she decides to ignore it—it becomes her survival strategy—for an instance the “nasty glob of grey spittle” (p.17) that often lands on her garments is depicted (though not accepted) by her as the bad manners of low class people; never does once she tell her daughters that it is an expression of racial hatred. She never mentions racial issues at home and thus as a child Lorde is unaware of the connotation of the word “colored.” (p.58) Barbara DiBernard assumes in her article Zami: A Portrait of an Artist as a Black Lesbian that Lorde, unlike the protagonists of white women’s autobiographies (Esther etc.) finds her relationship with her mother ultimately affirming. Yet by the end of the book there is little connection between the mother and daughter—it is a bond of possessive love and commitment from which the artist must move away in order to develop her individuality. Lorde writes after her father’s death “[…]I began to see her as separate from me, and I began to feel free of her.” (p.143) Yet Lorde acknowledges what she has learned from her—her gift of poetry from the mother “My mother had a special and secret relationship with words […]” (p.31) and “I am a reflection of my mother’s secret poetry as well as of her hidden anger.” (p.32). For Barbara DiBernard Lorde’s early interactions with her mother reflects that she is able to connect poetry and erotic together, and especially the erotic connection between women. In “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (Sister Outsider), Lorde strengthens the bond between female eroticism and creativity. For Lorde Poetry and Eroticism are both female resources within us, we do not have to look outside to find a source of creativity. The erotic is not simply the sexual, but “an internal sense of satisfaction to which once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire.” (erotic,54). Zami shows this ‘erotic’ connection in the chapter “How I Became a Poet”. In one scene the mother is combing her hair. She is sitting between her mother’s legs “I remember the warm mother smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of our physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain […]” (p.33) and it becomes “the rhythms of a litany, the rituals of Black women combing their daughters’ hair.” (p.33)

Lord’s final, open, fluid, dissolving yet affirmed identity as Zami, the black female poet, is formed through her relationship with other women. Lorde describes a female version of an initiation ritual into story telling – she learns form her sister Helen that she can tell her own stories. Helen is the first of the three women to whom Zami is dedicated, “To Helen who made up the best adventures”. It is in her stories, and imagination that Lorde catches the first glimpse of the possibility of multiple role playing, And denied entry into the secret story telling sessions of her sisters, Lorde takes a firm decision “Right then and there, before anybody else woke up, I decided to make up a story of my own.” (p.48)

Gennie’s friendship with Lorde is crucial to Lorde’s growing sense of agency, of herself as a creative and significantly political person. The first creative writing of Lorde’s included in Zami is a poem she wrote after Gennie’s death. (p.100)
Ginger, Lorde’s first woman lover does not seem to be a direct source of creativity but provides essential moral support. She is the bridge between Lorde and Muriel, the white woman lover, who shares with Audre the creative zest for poetry writing. Their creativity remains an important part of their relationship. Even about Bea, another woman lover, Lorde writes “Our most impassioned shared connections were our love of guiter and old music.” (p.151). And she breaks of cruelly with her as “I had made a desperate bid for self -preservation (p.153)” – too much emotional dependence might be harmful for the growing artist. With Eudora, the Mexican woman, a creative journalist, Lorde starts feeling at home in Mexico. When Eudora distances herself from Lorde it becomes a sublime moment, a sudden realization of truth, an epiphany: “Eudora had acted directly towards me…and in that moment…I felt myself pass beyond childhood a women connecting with other women in an intricate, complex and ever widening network of exchanging strengths” (p.175). From Eudora Lorde learns how to transform her experience into language, Eudora taught her “how to love and live to tell the story and with flair”. (p.209) Lorde’s love for Muriel, is based in a feeling of possessiveness and after this relationship breaks, Lorde suddenly experiences another sublime moment. It provides Lorde an inner liberation that will ultimately lead to a rewriting, reconstructing of her “self”. According to Jennifer Browdy De Hernandez (“Mothering the Self”) “This second sublime moment of the text marks Lorde’s movement away from the type of relationship exemplified by the mother – daughter relationship, based on power, - control and possessives, towards the freer, more positive, self accepting type of relationship that she demonstrates with Afrekete, the final love affair detailed in the autobiography”. Lorde represents here a revelation of the name of the black women collectivity. The new spelling of her “name” will be precisely “Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers”. (Epilogue p.255)

Kitty / Afrekete the last lover is crucial to this journey to Lorde’s ‘self’ as she incorporates all the different parts of the woman that Lorde is. In writing about her, Lorde draws on the heritage of African Dahomean myth. Afrekete, the trickster figure, cunning with language, helps to bring home the fact that black women must not be silent, arrogant and separated from each other if they want to survive.

Now we will see how this new ‘naming’ process will actually lead to a revisionist myth-making in Zami. It will further lead to reshaping of identity. This “new spelling” of Audre Lord’s name, according to Ana Louise Keating (“Inscribing “Black”,Becoming…Afrekete”162), suggests continuity and change simultaneously. She refers to Carol P. Christ (Diving Deep and Surfacing) who defines such transitions in consciousness as “awakenings”. Christ asserts that unlike traditional religious conversions that entail the seeker’s self–abandonment, the protagonist in the woman-authored texts finds, locates herself. Christ further associates this linguistic power with social change. For Keating, this naming process bears an additional, historically specific implications for women of African Heritage. There occurred a dehumanized naming process during the enslavement of African people in U.S– Keating terms it as ‘disnaming’. This Americanization caused a cultural severance destroying the African name, kin, linguistic and ritual connections. Keeping in mind this violent disjuncture, we can see how Audre’s “new naming” directly precedes her encounter with Kitty / Afrekete, Lorde’s own personalized version of a West African linguist / trickster figure. Afrekete serves the purpose of developing an Africanized ‘Blackness’- crucial for the reconstruction of Lorde’s identity. Although in Zami Lorde describes Afrekete as “the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become.” (p.255), in Dahomean and Fon myths, she is generally portrayed as a highly masculinized figure named Eshu/Legba. Like Afrekete this Orisha is the divine linguist and trickster. Lorde further explains in the The Black Unicorn “But Eshu/Legba has no priests, and in many Dahomean religious rituals, his part is danced by a woman with an attached phallus.” (119-120). This Eshu/Legba is a perpetually liminal figure, he/she symbolizes the disruption of sexual and societal boundaries. Legba defies rigid structures in Fon metaphysics. Similarly, in Yoruban cosmology Eshu represents the transgressing figure who leads to a never ending process of transmutation and transformation.
Thus identifying Afrekete, and later herself with this divine, trickster figure “Lorde underscores the transformational power of language, as well as her own linguistic authority” (Keating, 165). Lorde too is a liminal figure, a player with language who loves to disrupt boundaries with words, making change happen in individual and collective level. She affirms that every woman writer is and should be trickster figure. And in case of Lorde, the trickster figure multiplies itself continuously, without giving predominance to any one level of multiplication of identity. Lorde, basically dismantles and problematizes the genre of writing autobiography. And she has found her own tools as... Lorde writes in the Prologue to Zami “I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered [...].” (p.7) In a way by renaming herself Afrekete, Lorde fulfills these desires. Because the divine trickster figure is ambiguously gendered, Lorde further destabilizes the binary systems of gendered meaning. Her desire to be “Both Man and Woman” (p.7), destabilizes the male-centric / patriarchal bias and heterosexist logic. And Keating suggests that Lorde’s revisionist myth “destabilizes any self-contained, purified configuration of identity.” (Keating, 174).

This is how, by the end of the book, Lorde emerges as “Women forever”. (Prologue, p.7). And she dedicates the book to: “[...]To the others who helped, pushing me into the merciless sun – I, coming out blackened and whole”. She is the “Journeywoman”, “Becoming Afrekete”. (p.5)

Trinh.T Minh-ha in her Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism tries to investigate the issue of “difference” by referring to Audre Lorde and Lorde’s article “An open letter to Mary Daly” (Sister Outsider). – “As long as words of difference serve to legitimate a discourse instead of delaying its authority to infinity, they are to borrow an image from Audre Lorde, “noteworthy only as decorations” (7). Lorde maintains in her well known letter to Mary Daly that when the white feminists create alternative models of female identity based exclusively on Eurocentric traditions , they replace the Judeo-Christian myths that silenced all women by denying their subjectivity with new myths of a generic woman. Yet these new myths can be almost at detrimental as the old, for they silence the specific historic, cultural or ethnic backgrounds of racially or ethnically marginalized women. Lorde maintains that focusing entirely on Graeco-Roman mythology and ignoring “Afrocentrist” women’s cultural roots, Daly helps creating a division between women. She asserts that Daly “denied the real connections that exist between all of us”—this parallels the maternal silence and subsequent alienation Lorde describes in the opening sections of her biomythography.

Lorde, herself, in her life and in this autobiography as well, insists on open, shifting borders. And she adamantly refuses to allow any one identity or even difference to dominate over others that configure her multiple personality. She even faces ostracism from within the black or lesbian community and asserts faithfully “Non-conventional people can be dangerous, even in the gay community”, (p.224). But this non-conformity provides her with the inner strength, so necessary for an artist in growth: “[...I] once I accepted my position as different from the larger society as well as from any single sub-society...much stronger a person I become in that trying”.(p.181) Lorde celebrates this even further: “Being women together was not enough. We were different … Being Black together was not enough. We were different.” (p.226)

This is how Zami becomes the inscription of not a single, individual self that of Lorde, but the collective inscription, consciously moulded and shows its potency as a narrative of resistance. And Mary E. Modupe Kolawale confirms in her Womanism and African Consciousness that in recreating reality African women writers have not adopted a disinterested attitude or neutrality. The women of African / Black heritage in the Diaspora have made their self-referential process therapeutic through direct self-commentary. Thus Zami draws our attention to a self-naming, self-claiming and self-constructing mode of individualism through the portrait of an artist as a young black woman, a universalized woman. “Every women I have ever loved has left her print upon me [...]”. (Epilogue, p.255) I will conclude with what Audre Geraldine Lorde had to say of the book: “It’s a biomythography which is really fiction. It has the elements of biography and history and myth. In other words, it’s fiction built from many sources. This is one way of expanding our vision.”(Claudia Tate, “Interview with Audre Lorde”)
OBJECTIVES

1. To counter Eurocentric tradition of feminist reading of Greaco-roman mythology.
2. To establish the “difference” celebrated by women of Color.
3. To make the readers acquainted with the “Colored” women’s literary tradition, i.e, self-inscription—or to use the much-used and well-known Francophone/ Anglophone “Ecriture Feminine”, albeit in the terms of a Colored woman.
4. To establish a new notion of subjectivity—a self which is expandable, interchangeable, multiple and definitely non-gendered in the conventional sense.

CONCLUSION

A mention of Julia Kristeva now becomes must as she writes in her “Women Can Never Be Defined” : “In women I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies.”(137) She in another work, “On the Women of China” notes sadly about the Chinese women who nowadays have accepted the homogenizing principles of male society and have become passive enough not to recognize and acknowledge their ancient source of strength—the erotic—just as Lorde had lamented in “Uses of Erotic”. Kristeva finds it remarkable that the modern day Chinese women “whose ancestors knew better than anyone the secrets of erotic art, [are] now so sober and so absorbed...relaxed and austere...the ‘pill’ in their pockets...”(166). Let me now stop from going haywire as a need for the summation of all the critical issues discussed in the introductory chapter and to relate it to the upcoming chapters becomes must. The next chapter, in a progressive train as if this dissertation is, must concentrate upon Zami, as it explains all the apparent eccentricities (like the reason behind Lorde’s complex and strenuous relationship with her mother or her misadventures with various women in search of love) which have a direct emphasis on the poetry she writes. Definitely the book of poetry comes much earlier, yet, it could be assumed that it would be easier to understand the potentials and intellectual-political messages in her poetry by looking at this biomythography first. Secondly, this work clears our conception of African myths and folk-lore and thus we can easily associate with the very African setting of the poems in The Black Unicorn.

REFERENCES

Primary texts:


Secondary Texts:


