



Autobiography and Audre Lorde's Matriarchal Sphere

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Abstract

Audre Lorde, one of the most prominent black women poets of the 21st century, is concerned about the horrors of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia and genuinely attempts to erode them through the power of art. Audre Lorde's life and work are inspired by an arsenal of powerful women, both cruel and kind, who give her the energy to strive in a world wrought with suffering, pain, and ostracism. Lorde celebrates women of her immediate maternal descent: her mother's sturdy female relations; she celebrates her friends and lovers; seeks sustenance from a pantheon of mythic goddesses from West Africa; and finally celebrates legendary women who have stood for the women's cause. This paper explores how these women influenced her poetic production. Her predominantly maternal and matriarchal influences become evident when one places her within the political and intellectual background. Her life and work are not generated by the normative patriarchy that permeates Western institutions but by a self-proclaimed matriarchy. The paper employs new historicism in investigating the impact of Lorde's family and social heritage, a heritage that was predominantly maternal and matriarchal. Lorde's family lineage comprises an arsenal of influential female relatives and ancestors. Lorde's family is replete with maternal influences, beginning in her immediate family, where her mother was a real matriarch, and extending to her grandmother and great-grandmother. These maternal influences will push her in the long run as she matures to research women in history and myth. Discovering that the image of powerful and assertive women met with opposition in America, Lorde discovered that the erasure and silencing of women were orchestrated by patriarchy to render women helpless and malleable. Lorde, like other radical feminists, was influenced by the powerful and creative force of the mother, and she sought throughout her struggles to re-inscribe the woman into the center of the body polity.

Keywords: Lorde; racism; sexism; heterosexism; homophobia; matriarchy

Research on black literature in America highlights serious issues related to gender and race and shows how these influences affect black people's minds, consciousnesses, and self-esteem. Unresolved issues like these might cause self-loathing emotions. In America, black people's skin tone was the primary criterion for judgment. Blacks were denied mental faculties by the white supremacist society, just as women were deprived by patriarchy. For black intellectuals, it became critical to acknowledge and disclose these demands to the broader public. Black writers address these issues and try to find solutions as visionaries. Most people believe that organizing and building self-esteem can result in societal change.

Audre Lorde highlights the inconsistencies between the highly praised theory and reality of American culture, utilizing evidence from her trauma and a variety of experiences. Minority populations experience a variety of sorts of dread, including Native Americans, African-Americans, Hispanics, and homosexuals. Lorde committed to reintegrating these marginalized communities into American culture, where they had previously been excluded. Lorde believes that black people, women, and gay people can find liberation and self-worth by affirming or reestablishing connections with feminine African myths and legends. To establish subjecthood for her people, Lorde draws on a female pantheon of mythological and legendary typologies from the ancient Kingdoms of Africa. These typologies can be used as models for ritual and cultural conduct and sources of intellectual power. According to Lorde, mythology is a more inclusive and genuine ancestor worship than Western Christianity. Because of these powerful symbols, black people can comprehend identifiers that go against the racist, sexist, heterosexist and homophobic aspects of Western civilization.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several critics have focused on Lorde's myth and matriarchal appropriations, and prominent among them are R. B. Stepto, Mary K. Deshazer, Mary J. Curruthers, and Margaret B. McDowell. Stepto's (1980, pp. 316) "The Phenomenal Women and the Severed Daughter" compares Lorde's standing as an accomplished and talented poet against Maya Angelou's paltry collection *And Still I Rise*. However, what is of particular interest here is the fact that Stepto lauds Lorde's success because she creates a fresh new world. As he notes: "What Lorde and Wright share, beyond their abilities to create a fresh, New World Art out of Ancient Old World lore, is a voice or an idea of a voice that is, essentially African in that it is, communal, historiographical, archival, and prophetic...". Stepto further exposes the underlying mythic images that embellish Lorde's Black Unicorn poems.

Exploring Lorde's matriarchal imagery, Mary K. Deshazer (1986), in "Inspiring Women: Reimagining the Muse," makes an exciting classification of Lorde's maternal muses. According to Deshazer, Lorde first celebrates as muses the women of her immediate descent: her mother, her mother's West Indian relations, and her sisters. Second, she pays homage to the women lovers she had, who helped her discover the marvelous nature of the erotic urge. Third, she seeks sustenance from a pantheon of West African goddesses: Yemanjá, Seboulisa, Oya, Mawulisa, and others. Finally, Lorde invokes legendary black women who have stood for blacks and women. However, Lorde's desire to break the silence and rename the subaltern is underlying this panorama of potent imagery. As a marginal being, she uses this imagery to relocate herself in a society that ostracizes her.

In her article "The Black Woman as Artist and Critic," Margaret B. McDowell (1987) situates the works and criticism of Margaret Walker, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison within the black literary tradition. Using the standards of Donald B. Gibson and Trudier Harris, she shows how their works move from works that strive toward a verisimilitude of black society to more experimental works. What is particularly important in McDowell's analysis is the exploration of the historical and maternal influences on these

authors' work. All these authors stress the spiritual link with the ancestors, who are predominantly female. To Margaret Walker, who emphasizes spontaneity in literary production, the idea of the soul is very important for creativity. This springs from a close link with the ancestors. As McDowell asserts: "Walker said that she cannot conceive of a god who does not embody a female as well as a male principle" (86). Lorde uses this union of male/female principles --Mawulisa in her poetry, an image she draws from Ancient Dahomey. Lorde, therefore, conceives of the world, as Margaret Walker does, as more gender inclusive than that which is presented by patriarchy. McDowell shows how the ancestral inspiration that touches Lorde and Margaret Walker equally applies to Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. She talks about Alice Walker's confession that she does have visitations from long dead ancestors who help her guide her work. She reports that as Alice Walker wrote *Meridian*, a Cherokee Indian ancestor offered her help as she sought to understand the Indian consciousness. These women, McDowell concludes, maintain close links with their ancestors.

Critics Sagri Dhairym (1992), Anna Wilson (1999), and Anitai F. Avi-ram (1986) try to situate Lorde within the literary canon. Dhairym's elaborate and scholarly paper explores Lorde's standing as a multicultural poet from various standpoints. Using mainly the poem "Coal" and the collection *The Black Unicorn*, she regrets that Lorde is often found in feminist anthologies not as a poet but as a feminist activist. He presents Lorde as a prominent African-American poet and lauds her efforts at reconciling the idea of difference. Dhairym acknowledges the problematic nature of Lorde's inclusion within the Black Power Movement. She considers the inclusion of one of Lorde's poems, "Coal," within the context of the Black Power Movement as paradoxical because the movement was homophobic. The poem's inclusion was considered because "Coal" appears to be openly political, yet Dhairym insists that the poem also lends itself to a feminist and lesbian interpretation. When Lorde talks about speaking up about the essence of blackness, she symbolizes all repressed qualities in the color black.

Dhairym finds the pantheon of mythical typologies Lorde employs in *The Black Unicorn* rather incomplete and sketchy. Yet, she acknowledges Lorde's lead poem in *The Black Unicorn* as a development of the earlier poem "Coal," which writes blackness into the center of her discourse. The black essence in the poem "Coal" is now a feminized unicorn. Dhairym shows how the Black Unicorn, formerly a feminine figure in antiquity, was appropriated by patriarchy, something Lorde deconstructs. He states: "But, in earlier myth, the beast known as the reem, is a lunar symbol of the Mother Goddess and wages perpetual conflict against masculine, solar symbols such as the lion..." (Feminist Studies, 237). Lorde's task at the present is reinventing the past and giving back the unicorn its early lunar and feminine valences. She deplores that a poet of Lorde's talent had to take so long to enter the mainstream. She shows Lorde's tortuous progress from less-known publishers and deplores the reluctance of major publishers to notice her. Her later publications with Norton, *Coal*, *Our Dead Behind Us*, and *Chosen Poems: Old and New* confirmed her incontestable place within the academy. Dhairym regrets that Lorde's work still features not on the English shelves where they belong but under Gender Studies and Black Studies. She cites Amitai F. Avi-Ram's article "Apo Koinou in Audre Lorde and the Moderns: Defining Difference," in which Avi-Ram compares Lorde's rhetorical style with that of Mallarmé, Ezra Pound, and Hart Crane, as a pointer to Lorde's place within the literary canon.

In "Rites/Rights of Canonization: Audre Lorde as Icon," Anna Wilson examines Lorde's artistic canonization and tries to situate her within the white feminist movement. She shows how white feminist critics tried to appropriate colored women's tropes and how their works are alienated from authentic black texts. Looking at *Afreete: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Writing* (1995), which derives its title from Lorde's prose work *Zami*, Wilson emphasizes Lorde's position as a black lesbian icon and mentor for emerging poets. She cites

black lesbian poets Sapphire, Sonia Sanchez, and Jewelle Gomez, who all pay tribute to Lorde as a mother. However, within this spectrum of literary and artistic bonanza, Wilson feels alienated as a white feminist. Although she is drawn to Lorde's mystic power, Wilson regrets that she feels alienated from Lorde's exclusionist vision. Viewing the film on Lorde, *A Litany For Survival*, Wilson finds it completely racist. Lorde's ex-husband Edwin Rollins is pushed to the background, and Adrienne Rich features more as a poet than a white feminist. Furthermore, Lorde's downplay of the award of New York State Poet 1991-1993, according to Wilson, shows how she devalues anything that might bridge differences. Wilson further examines Lorde's battle with breast cancer and her death from liver cancer as a signal of white society's disregard for black women's health. Her move from the United States to St. Croix was also a signal that she was ready to breach any relationship with white feminists. Wilson considers Lorde a thorn in the flesh of white feminists and cites a case in London when Lorde asked white women to leave the hall and give place to black women for whom she wished to speak. Wilson concludes that Lorde's work, however appeals to the white feminist society even though she does not find space in Lorde's world.

LORDE'S HISTORICAL AND INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

Lorde was born in Harlem in 1934, a few years after the 1929 Wall Street Crash. She was, therefore, a product of the post-depression period. Born in Harlem at the center of black consciousness, Lorde matured in a post-World War II climate that ushered in the Cold War and the anti-communist hysteria of McCarthyism. McCarthy's witch hunt that characterized the fifties limited the freedom of various groups. Lorde was by then at Hunter College, and with her group of friends, "the Branded," they rebelled against the restrictions imposed on them. In *Zami*, Lorde discusses how the anti-communist hysteria victimized and destroyed people who, to her, were innocent. She recounts the Rosenbergs' trial and execution as a traumatizing experience. The fact that the U.S. government would later discover that most McCarthy victims were innocent ties well with her fears. She was always frightened that the FBI might arrest her for being a lesbian.

She witnessed the arbitrariness of U.S. Cold War politics during this period. While staying with her friend Ruth Baharas, who worked for the International Worker's Organisation (IWO), a fraternal leftist non-racial organization, she witnessed the deportation of Baharas' mother. In innocently filling out a questionnaire, Ruth's mother accepted that she had formerly been a member of a communist party. The Baharas were immigrants from Ukraine. These events caused Lorde to leave the country for Mexico, believing she could find a more egalitarian society there. In Mexico, she met with a community of U.S. citizens who escaped the hostile climate. Lorde returned to New York after the Supreme Court decided against separate education for Negroes. She shows her exultation in *Zami* (1997, pp. 172) when she says: "The court decision in the paper in my hand felt like a private promise, some message of vindication particular to me".

Lorde's resistance against the government and its institutions is again demonstrated when she refuses to participate in civil defense drills against air raids. During the period that led to the Cuban missile crises, there was fear of a possible air raid. Lorde was supposed to partake in this activity as a civil servant, but she refused, giving her the impression of a particular political act (De Veaux, 2004, pp. 70). She was against U.S. involvement in international affairs and was openly critical of the Vietnam War. Her resistance saw her participation in the Civil Rights Movement, which gave rise to a decade of sexual revolution and subsequently included homosexuals and women, among other minorities, who wanted equal rights as a gateway to a possible erasure of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other ills.

At the height of the tension from the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Lorde feared for the fate of her unborn child in the event of a nuclear holocaust. She gave birth to her first child,

Elizabeth (Beth), on March 16, 1963, and was forced by conditions to join the civil rights demonstrators in Washington, DC, in August 1963. The poem "Equinox" captures her uncertainty within this period, as she doubts the fate of her newborn child. She states: "I lay awake in stifling Broadway nights afraid / for whoever was growing in my belly / and suppose it started earlier than I planned /who will I trust to take care that my daughter/ did not eat poisoned roaches / when I was gone" (64). In Washington, D.C., she would be filled with awe at the 250,000 crowd, and to her, it fulfilled a dream for a better future. Martin Luther King's speech at the gathering remains a milestone in the history of human rights.

An outgrowth of the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement was the Black Arts Movement. Lorde was plunged into all these events as she grew slowly into an eloquent activist. Led by the black dramatist and poet Le Roi Jones (Amiri Baraka), the movement was the spiritual and aesthetic sister of the political movements. It included a series of writers who are contemporary with Lorde. These included Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, Don L. Lee, Ed Bullins, and Larry Neal. The Black Arts Movement created avenues for publication for emerging black writers. Some of these publishing outlets included: "Negro Digest," "The Journal of Black Poetry," "Soul Book," and "Black Dialogue," among others. However, at this time, Lorde was more prevalent among feminist circles than within the black mainstream patriarchal organizations. De Veaux explains that Lorde's identification as an out lesbian delayed her recognition within the mainstream black community. With her more influential role, however, in feminist and lesbian associations, she was going to be recognized later.

Lorde's increasing militancy within gay circles was to take her to Washington, this time as a speaker for the National Coalition of Black Lesbian and Gay Men. Attending the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, which took place on October 14, 1979, concretized her standing as a representative of Black homosexual society. She presented grand statements on behalf of the Black homosexual society.

Apart from this fight for Civil Rights that characterized the 1960s, the Feminist Movement was also a significant outgrowth of this movement that fought for women's rights. Unlike some white feminists who could belong only to the feminist movement and ignore the other movements, Lorde was at the center of all. As a black woman and a lesbian, she suffered from all forms of oppression. Lorde's role within the feminist movement would include all her other struggles. Together with other black feminists like Barbara Smith and Gloria Joseph, they would define a black feminist ideology that included the struggle against oppression.

A brief history of Lorde's involvement with the feminist movement will be necessary here. Lorde started frequenting gay bars in the 1950s. By then, gay bars were the only venues where black and white women could unite without tension (Deveaux, 2004, pp. 56). As a lesbian, she began feeling more at ease with white partners than black ones. This was probably because most black lesbians were still closeted. Most of her lesbian partners were white. This openness with white women would pave her way into the core of the feminist movement.

Lorde's meeting with Adrienne Rich while she taught at City College, opened the way for a long friendship and collaboration not short of sexual attraction. Apart from their academic interests, Lorde was willing to have Rich as a lover. Rich was of Jewish descent, but her father, Arnold Rich, a professor at the Medical School of the University of Baltimore, did not identify with his Jewish people. Rich's family was, therefore, isolated by the Jewish community. This made Rich sympathetic to the cause of minorities. She had read Lorde's work and loved it. Lorde had published *First Cities* by then and was familiar with Rich's work *A Change of World* (1951). By this time, Rich was already an acclaimed writer. At this point, she was writing books consistent with what the mainstream wanted. Her later books were going to become more woman-identified.

Apart from Rich, Lorde was at the center of the lives of most feminists. She used her position as editor of "Chrysalis," a feminist quarterly based in Los Angeles, to publish promising feminist poets. De Veaux (2004, pp.178-179) quotes Lorde's editorial policy in which she saw women poets as warriors, an identity she appropriated from the legendary Amazons of Dahomey. In this capacity, she helped to publish poets like Patricia (Spears) Jones, Jodi Braxton, Sandra Maria Esteves, Sara Miles, and Lois Elain Griffith, among others. She used her position to publish her friends Adrienne Rich, June Jordan, and Diane di Prima.

Lorde greatly influenced younger Black women poets by supporting and sometimes scolding them. She would try to protect and, at times, infuriate the young poets. Alexis De Veaux exposes Lorde's experiences with June Jordan and Pat Parker as particular cases. Lorde met June Jordan at the SEEK program, organized by Mina Shaughnessy, who invited gifted poets to teach at City College. Jordan shared a similar background as Lorde. Her father wanted a son and not a daughter. She grew up an outsider; her parents were also from the Caribbeans. Jordan, unlike Lorde, would not openly expose her sexual orientation as a lesbian. Because of this, Jordan was accepted by the mainstream black community long before Lorde. Lorde, as a sign of solidarity, helped to publish Jordan's poem in "Chrysalis" in 1971.

She met Pat Parker during a reading tour in Los Angeles and San Francisco. She was introduced to her by Wendy Cadden – a graphic artist and typesetter. Cadden was a lesbian, and so was Parker. Parker was born into a poor family in Houston, Texas. She had married and divorced and had a post-graduate degree from San Francisco State College. Lorde would play the role of godmother to Parker, encouraging and, at times, extending financial help to her. Parker's poetry gained pre-eminence over the years. Pamela Anna's article "A Poetry of Survival: Unnaming and Renaming in the Poetry of Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich" attests to this fact.

Barbara Smith (1982, pp.185) would play a vital role in Lorde's life as a black feminist critic. Smith introduced Lorde to black feminist criticism. Several years Lorde's younger, Smith, was born to a poor working-class family in Cleveland, Ohio, into a family headed by influential mothers. Smith's family was woman-identified, and she grew up as an out lesbian. Earning degrees from Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts, Smith was well poised to face the world. Her milestone article "Toward a Black Feminist Literary Criticism" shocked her audience at the Howard University National Black Writers' Conference. The essay, as De Veaux declares, "...was the first to insist publicly upon the experiences of black lesbian writers, their critical relationship to the larger community of black women writers, and the homophobia aimed at silencing their very existence". Smith would co-edit with Gloria T. Hull and Patricia Bell Scott, the seminal black feminist reader – *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. As De Veaux states, this book legitimated black women's studies as a viable field of scholarship (186). Smith would have a long and durable correspondence with Lorde as a black feminist and activist. Her entrance into Lorde's life led Lorde to rupture her ties with the white mainstream feminist circle to which she had formerly belonged. At the time of their meeting, Lorde was already losing faith in how white feminists reacted to black texts.

Smith played a significant role in many programs that would help to expand the cause of blacks and lesbians. She helped women to protest against the exclusion of lesbian papers during the Berkshire Women's History Conference, which was a response to the male-dominated American Historical Association, stressing the development of women's studies in the academe. Smith's organized protest led to the inclusion of a panel for those interested in the history of sexuality. This opened a venue for Lorde to present her paper "Uses of Erotic. The Erotic as Power", which linked women's erotic urge to creativity. Smith's and Lorde's collaboration helped advance the cause of women's studies. Apart from this, she kept Lorde informed of the murders of women in Boston, where she lived. Between January and May

1979, thirteen women were murdered within a two-mile radius of Boston. Twelve of these women were black, while one was white. The murders were an emotional shock to Smith, Lorde, and many other black feminists. Smith helped to organize women against the murders. They convinced the Combahuee River Collective, and through meetings and consultations, the collective published pamphlets against the murders. Lorde's poem "Need: A Choral of Black Women's Voices" was her poetic response to these murders. Dedicated to Patricia Cowan and Bobbie Jean Graham, the two last women to be murdered, Lorde immortalized the horror of these women and exposed the peril of women's existence. The Black men's role in these murders is spelled out.

Smith and Lorde, as we have analyzed, collaborated to foster the cause of black feminist lesbians and, indeed, the cause of all people. Together with other black feminists, they founded "The Kitchen Table Press". Smith and Cherrie More proofread Lorde's prose work *Zami*, and Smith defended the image of Lorde when "The Publishers Review" made a racist and biased review of Lorde's work *Zami* and *Chosen Poems: Old and New*. This was a sign of the solidarity that lesbians believed they needed to withstand the homophobia that sought to silence them.

Gwendolyn Brooks was also an influence, although not directly. In an interview with Karla M. Hammond, Lorde accepts that Gwendolyn Brooks, Elinore Wylie, Edna Millay, and Margaret Walker influenced her work. Gwendolyn Brooks wrote the foreword to the Anthology of black poets Langston Hughes edited, including a poem by Lorde. Brooks, together with other black writers, was part of the core of the Black Arts Movement. In 1968, as De Veaux remarks, Lorde's poem "Naturally" appeared in the *Negro Digest* alongside the works of Gwendolyn Brooks, Sanchez, and Le Roi Jones, all acclaimed writers. This was a mark of distinction for Lorde as she paved her way upward as a poet (116).

Lorde also made friends with Barbara Christian, who was an emerging feminist critic by then. She met her alongside Toni Cade Barbara, Addison Gayle, Adrienne Rich, June Jordan, and others at the SEEK program at City College (103). Christian later reviewed Lorde's work in *The Women's Review of Books*. Reviewing Lorde's *Sister Outsider* and *Zami*, Christian saw the two pieces as tracing "important concepts of Lorde's development as a black feminist thinker... reflected in her emphasis on the erotic and her analysis of the concept of difference" (346). Barbara Christian remains one of Lorde's greatest critics. Her text *Black Feminist Criticism* has three chapters that examine the work of Lorde as central to Black Feminist Criticism.

Alice Walker was also a sister with whom Lorde collaborated. In 1974, Lorde's collection *From A Land Where Other People Live* was nominated for the National Book Award. Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, and Allen Ginsberg were also nominated. Lorde, Walker, and Rich had known each other as sisters within the feminist movement. They decided that whoever won won for all parties. When Rich and Ginsberg won the award, Lorde joined Rich, who made a statement on behalf of all of them in recognition of women:

...we symbolically join together in refusing the terms of patriarchal competition and declaring that we will share this prize among us to be used as best we can for women. We appreciated the good faith of the judges for this award, but none of us could accept this money for herself, nor could she let go unquestioned the terms on which poets are given or denied honor and livelihood in this world, especially when they are women...(133).

Lorde, in an interview with Deborah Wood during the Second Conference of Afro-American Writers, discusses the award as a setup to pit them against each other in hostile competition, something which they refused: "And I felt that it was a kind of a set-up particularly since the National Book Award...the whole structure was under attack for various reasons. It was like a compromise" (14). Deciding to refuse rivalry and antagonism, the prize was donated to a women's group -- Black Single Mothers. Lorde's attitude towards awards remained very

controversial. When she was honored with the rare Poet Laureate of New York award, her statement showed her distrust for awards generally. She found it contradictory that an African-American Feminist lesbian poet should be honored in a society without respect for blacks. Walker will later write an essay on Lorde, "You Thought Trees Were Green Clouds," that celebrates Lorde's legacy as a poet. In it, Walker pays her respects to a poet who could tell even the most secret of her emotions and experiences.

Lorde, in many interviews, repeats the immense debt she owes Diane Di Prima, a woman she met at Hunter College. Di Prima pushed her to write her first collection of poems, *First Cities*. She provided her with a desk to work on. Diane Di Prima was head of "The Poets Press," an independent press Prima founded with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. She urged Lorde to submit something, knowing Lorde's talent from their experience as "the Branded" at Hunter High School. She was to serve as Di Prima's midwife for her daughter and would publish Di Prima's poem in "Chrysalis" to pay back. Di Prima gave Lorde her start as a poet.

Lorde's Recourse to Female Typologies

Lorde (1997) opens her novel *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*: "To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood under the bruised skin's blister"? (03). She answers by pitting the faint image of her father against that of a plethora of women ancestors:

My father leaves his psychic print on me, silent, intense, and unforgiving. But his is a distant lightening. Images of women flaming like torches adorn and define the borders of my journey, stand like dykes between me and the chaos. It is the images of women, kind and cruel, that lead me home. (03)

Lorde's work is inspired by an arsenal of powerful women, both cruel and kind, who give her the energy to strive in a world wrought with suffering, pain, and ostracism. Mary K. Deshazer(1986), in "Inspiring Woman: Reimagining the Muse," explores Lorde's maternal heritage and explains Lorde's arsenal of women. According to her, Lorde celebrates (1) Women of her immediate maternal descent: her mother's sturdy female relations, (2) Her friends and lovers, (3) A pantheon of mythic goddesses from West Africa, and (4) legendary women that have stood for the women's cause. Appropriating Deshazer's classification, this paper explores how these women influenced her poetic production. Her predominantly maternal and matriarchal influences become evident when one places her within the political and intellectual background. Her life and work are not generated by the normative patriarchy that permeates all institutions but by matriarchy.

Women of her immediate maternal descent:

Beginning with Lorde's immediate descent, we discover that Lorde's maternal bent is inherited. Her parents' Caribbean descent is characterized by powerful women who are often the sole parents. Lorde's maternal relations include her mother and her sisters and her mother's sisters, Henrietta and Lila. Her grand mother-Elizabeth Noel (Maliz), had an elder sister--Annie. Ma Liz was going to impart to her daughters a strong work ethic. She lived on Noel's Hill Greenville, Grenada, where she engaged in agriculture. Her great-grandmother taught her daughters the healing power of herbs and had a brother whose whereabouts were unknown. The family was light-skinned and looked down on dark-skinned people.

The Belmar brothers courted the two Noel sisters--Portuguese seamen who settled in Carriacou, an Island off Grenada. They got married to the two brothers. Whereas Annie followed her husband to Carriacou, Liz stayed with her husband in Grenada. Ma Liz's husband died at sea, leaving her alone to raise the children. She had to work hard to keep the children and provide them with an education. Never beaten by hardship, Ma Liz was indeed a powerful

woman. In her absence, the elder sisters assisted the junior ones. Color discrimination was passed down in the family, and they were warned not to meddle with dark-skinned people. Linda Belmar, who could pass for white, internalized this lesson. This would be a point of contention between herself and the young Audre Lorde.

Linda Belmar married Byron Lorde after a long courtship. Byron Lorde was dark-skinned compared to Belmar. Little was known about Byron Lorde except that he had run away from his father, who had apprenticed him as a tailor and sought a mother who did not want him. The couple lived in Greenville, where Linda managed a store Byron Lorde bought while he worked as a police constable. They sold out the store and left for the United States in 1924, where Linda's other sisters were. They settled in New York, and with the help of relatives (Lorde's aunts mostly), they started settling down.

Audre Lorde was born the third and last child of the Lorde family on the 14th of February 1934. She was a post-depression child, a product of migration. As a child, Lorde was peculiar; she had poor eyesight and needed glasses, she needed corrective shoes because of her bad feet, she was tongue-tight and could only stutter, and she was left-handed. She was dark-skinned in a family who hated dark-skinned people. Lorde's attachment and nurture in her predominantly female family were largely hostile, but as she says, it developed in her a strong personality. Her mother was the law in the household, while her father was a silent shadow. The mother meted out punishment. Lorde's characterization of her mother is well documented in *Zami*.

Her parents believed their stay in America was temporal, though it lasted till death. Lorde's mother always told stories about Grenada; she never took New York to be home. Lorde listened to these stories and believed that one day, she would go home. This was going to push her later in life to make a survey of her West-Indian heritage, exploring the anthropological construction of the West Indian woman. Since she was an outsider within the family, such stories for her fulfilled a dream of a home to come. Lorde then began to feel like an outsider within her own home. In the poem "Legacy— Hers", she writes: "When love leaps from my mouth / cadenced in that Grenada wisdom / upon which I first made holy war / then I must reassess / all my mother's words / or every path I cherish" (424). Grenada would remain, for her, a dreamland.

When she started school, she mainly attended girls' schools, which made her grow used to their company. Boys in her early years were featured as frivolous characters who mete out pain and suffering. At eleven, she recounts how a boy forced her to have sex, threatening to break her glasses (*Zami*, 75). She was traumatised by this for a long time. Her first love relationship with a boy named Peter would not be sexually fulfilling and ended in a pregnancy and abortion at eighteen (*Zami*, 107).

Lorde's immediate female relations played a far more critical role in her life than male relations. In *Zami*, she recounts her mother's marvelous stories of Greenville. These stories included the beauty and splendor of the tropical Island and the lineage of powerful women. Lorde presents this heritage when she states:

The Noel girls. Ma-Liz's older sister, Anni, followed her Belmar back to Carriacou, arrived as sister-in-law and stayed to become her own woman. Remembered the root-truths taught her by their mother, Ma-Mariah. Learned other powers from the women of Carriacou. And in a house in the hills behind L'Esterre she birthed each of her sister Ma-Liz's seven daughters. My mother Linda was born between the waiting palms of her hands. (13)

In Lorde's lineage, few male relatives feature. From Ma-Mariah, to Ma-Liz to Lorde's mother, we have only the birth of daughters. Lorde shows how Carriacou women, whose husbands must go to sea for long periods, are self-sufficient, catering for everything. She states:

Her Aunt Anni lived among the other women who saw their men off to the sailing vessels, then tended the goats and groundnuts, planted grain and poured rum upon the earth to strengthen the corn's growing, built their women's houses and the rainwater catchments, harvested the limes,... Women who survived the absence of their sea-faring men easily, because they came to love each other, past the men's returning. (14)

Lorde inherits the wonderful survival traits of these women. She calls her mother powerful, even though she says the word powerful was not associated with women by then. To her, her mother was more than a woman, different from other women, yet was not a man (16). She saw her mother cry twice, and Lorde recounts her horror at seeing her cry. Part of Lorde's maternal bent comes from her mother and her ancestry. Their powerful, domineering attitudes over the men, surviving them and leaving a mark on the children, fed Lorde's status as a warrior.

Lorde's Friends and Lovers

The following arsenal of female figures that influenced Lorde were her female friends and lovers. These include women she had desired and could not have, platonic friends, and real lovers she had erotic encounters with. Lorde's principal lover from whom she learned the power of the erotic was her mother. She was a source of infantile eroticism, and she developed what can be termed an oedipal complex:

I remember the warm mother smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of our physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain like a nutmeg nestled inside its covering of mace... her large soft breasts beneath the flannel of her nightgown. Below, the rounded swell of her stomach, silent and inviting touch. (*Zami*, 33)

Lorde would sneak into her parents' bed on Saturday mornings after her father left the bed to fuddle her mother. To her, the desire to love other women springs from the mother, corroborating Jane Flax's (1988) argument in her article "Mother-Daughter Relationship: Psycho-dynamics, Politics, and Philosophy" both males and females continue to long for the female body: "Our relation with our own body is mediated through our continuing ambivalence about separating and differentiating from her" (*The Future of Difference*, 23). Lorde's many lovers who helped shape her must begin with this erotic charge she had for the mother.

Lorde's desire for someone to love and be loved arose very early. She wished to be loved by her parents and two sisters but could not have their love. As a deformed child, Lorde's many anomalies made her an outsider in the family. Her two sisters were closer to each other in age and united against her. Lorde then had to live in an imaginary world, praying and, at times, magically invoking a little sister. This dream did come true, albeit temporarily, when she met a girl named Toni. Toni appears to her like an angel from heaven, and she immediately feels a deep erotic attachment towards her. Lorde's lesbian bent, as she demonstrates, is essentialist. As soon as she meets Toni, she works on her body.

My hands were shaking with excitement. I hesitated a moment too long. As I was about to pull down her panties I heard the main door open and out of the front hallway hurried my mother adjusting the brim of her hat as she stepped out onto the stoop.

I felt caught in the middle of an embarrassing and terrible act from which there could be no hiding. Frozen, I sat motionless as Toni looking up and seeing my mother, slid nonchalantly off my lap, smoothing down her skirts as she did so. (*Zami*, 40)

Lorde's almost miraculous meeting with Toni is interrupted by her mother, and she will never meet Toni again. Here, we see Lorde's lesbian identity already taking root as she rapidly

engages in a sexual encounter with little Toni. Her guilt at being caught in the act clearly shows that Lorde knew very early what it meant to love another woman. Reveries of this encounter stayed and grounded Lorde's lesbian character.

Her next intimate friend was Genevieve. Genny would greatly influence Lorde; her suicide was a trauma that carried an unhealing ulcer in her heart. Lorde regrets that she and Genny never consummated the love that existed between them. What is particular about Genny's suicide is that it could have been motivated by a sexually oppressive father. Her parents were separated, and when Genny met her father at 15, she was captivated by his handsome personality. She moved in with him to share his small apartment with a stepmother, as Lorde recounts, "(Genevieve was fifteen when she first met her father. She was two months short of sixteen when she died)" (91). Lorde's mother's warning, "that man call himself father was using that girl for I don't know what," indicates that Genny suffered from her father's sexual abuse. Genny's death was to have a lasting effect on Lorde. All of Lorde's memorial poems are dedicated to her. These poems capture the deep sense of love and, at times, her guilt for being unable to help. If Genevieve had slept over at the Lorde's on the day she died, her story would have been different. In "Memorial II," she imagines Genevieve as she looks her in the eyes and finds her radically altered: "Are you seeking the shape of the girl / I have grown less and less / to resemble." Genny had to die because, as a natural rebel, she could not live in a suffocating world; Lorde is guilty that she went on living even when she knew Genny was victimized.

Lorde was about sixteen, too, when Genevieve died. Soon after, at 17, she moved out of her parent's home and began her upward search for independence. From then on, she would meet various female lovers who would leave their mark on her. As she says in the epilogue of *Zami*: "Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me ..." (255). We will select her major women lovers and show how these relationships helped map her vision of herself and society.

Lorde dropped out of Hunter College and went out on a job hunt. She left for Stanford, where she worked at Keystone Electronics. This company exploited colored people and exposed them to many health hazards. Here, she met one of her early lesbian lovers--Virginia Ginger Thurman, a divorcee slightly her elder. In *Zami*, Lorde recounts the love they made in which she had to experiment with playing "butch," that is, the male role, while Ginger played "femme," the female role. Her experience with Ginger gave her confidence and concretized her sexual identity as a lesbian. Lorde is separated from her when the company fires her for cheating. She was forced to travel back to New York, where she stayed with Ruth Baharas. With the climate of the 60s becoming more hostile towards communists and gays, Lorde left for Mexico. McCarthyism victimized many East Europeans, and Ruth Baharas' mother was deported to Ukraine (42-43).

In Mexico, Lorde had many significant experiences. She underwent an epiphany that changed and deepened her ideas about poetry and made her believe she was a poet. She wrote a prose work titled "La Llorona" based on account of this revelation 4. In Cuernavaca, she met Eudora Garrett, a lesbian and journalist who was going not only to ground her experience as a lesbian but also to teach her the folk history of Mexico. Mexico strengthened Lorde's strong attachment to women and myth. Studying in Mexico and unable to get a job, she moved back to New York on July 5, 1954.

After Mexico and her experience with Eudora, Lorde flirted with many lesbian partners. However, this period also saw relationships with men. Lorde had had two encounters with boys before that were unfulfilling. Suffering from loneliness, Lorde, at 24, sought the aid of a psychoanalyst, Clement Staff, a Jew whose marriage was on the verge of collapse, and hoped to marry him. Staff's sudden death shocked Lorde. She again lost someone she was willing to

live her life with. Again, she continued seeing female lovers until one of them introduced her to Edward Rollins. Lorde suddenly married Edwin Rollins in an arranged marriage. Ed was a homosexual, and they agreed to give each other the liberty of extramarital affairs. Alexis De Veaux (2004, pp.79) recounts how peculiar the marriage was. She states: "Whereas Audre brought lovers home who were known to Ed, Ed did not, acting out, over time, a closeted homosexuality with strangers that infuriated Audre". Lorde's heterosexual marriage did not stem from a love for Ed, but from the desire to have children: "Although they loved each other and she felt she could handle Ed she was not in love with him... Her own biological clock was ticking, and though she wanted children now, she wasn't sure she was strong enough or stable enough to have them on her own" (75). Lorde's marriage then was a marriage of convenience, and this did not preclude her primary lesbian desire. Women were going to remain her main emotional pull; that is why, after the children, Lorde divorced Ed.

While married, Lorde had kept ongoing sexual relations with Martha, Margie, Neal Eunsein, and Frances Clayton. Clayton and Lorde would unite as a lesbian couple for about 16 years. In her domineering manner, Clayton would be her wife, caring for the children while she toured the world as a poet and feminist activist (De Veaux, 127). She broke up with Frances after 16 years of staying together as partners and took up Gloria Josephs, with whom she kept a relationship until she died in 1992.

Apart from these women she bedded, Lorde desired many other friends and collaborators who did not want her. Among these are Adrienne Rich, Michelle Cliff, and Barbara Smith. Lorde did not believe in the idea of fidelity. To her, an erotic connection with a woman was a sign of trust. Her sexual bonanza is a sign of her creative impetus. Her lack of success in love with Rich, as De Veaux makes us understand, was going to create moments of tension between them. Lorde accused Rich of siding with her enemies.

Lorde's Pantheon of Mythic Goddesses

Another category of women typologies that Lorde makes recourse to is the pantheon of mythic women she draws from her Caribbean and West African ancestry. Lorde's travel to Mexico meets with a mythic revelation. As she recounts in an interview with Adrienne Rich in *Sister Outsider*, she tells us how this epiphany gave her the power to write. In another interview with Karla M. Hammond, she elaborates on this revelation:

On this morning, just before dawn, the sun caught the first shimmer of snow on the summit of Ixtacihual, Sleeping Woman, the highest Mountain in Mexico... Watching dawn break on the Sleeping Woman and then the birds started. I stood on this hill...and for the first time in that one instant I felt that I could be a real connection between the things that I felt most deeply and those gorgeous words that I needed to spin in order to live. (24)

Lorde would write a story on a Mexican myth about this mountain Ixtacihual or the Sleeping Woman. Her search for myth, then, begins in Mexico, where she felt at home because of her likeness with the population: "...I found in Mexico an affirmation. It was the first time that I began to speak in full sentences. First of all, being surrounded by people of color was such an incredible high" (24). From Mexico, Lorde visited Grenada, Barbados, West Africa, and Australia, having intercourse with her people and learning their history, folklore, and myth.

In the Caribbean, this contact is realized primarily on the legendary history of Grenadian women in the mythic constellation of female bonding in *Zami*. Lorde's ancestors are now spirits that can be invoked to give spiritual empowerment. These women are not ordinary; they are women who could live and survive without men. Her visit to Barbados and Grenada widened her horizon about her rich ancestry. Grenada touched her, evoking in her the power of these women: "Madivine. Friending. *Zami*. How Carriacou women love each other

is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty" (*Zami*, 14). Lorde would extend this spiritual power by studying the mythology of West Africa.

On July 13, 1974, Lorde, Clayton, Beth, and Rollins left for Africa, visiting Togo, Benin, and Ghana. In Ghana, she met the Akan people, whose culture she loved. The Akan were originally a matriarchal tribe in history, worshipping feminine deities. Robert Graves shows how the Akan of Ghana was originally a matriarchal society worshipping the powerful moon goddess, Ngame. Graves maintains, however, that this female worship changed with the invasion of Northern Nomads from Sudan. Lorde's fascination with the art of the Akan indeed lay in her recognition of their matriarchal past. Fascinated by Akan's craft, she particularly loved the "adinkra" cloth of the Asante. As Alexis De Veaux explains:

The elaborate, traditionally hand-stencilled symbolic designs were individually named and were proverbs encoding historical, allegorical, or magical information. Many of the stamped messages were variations of the phrases she remembered hearing from her mother and other Grenadian Kin. (144-45)

Lorde's visit to W.E.B. Dubois' grave increased her militant stance within her black community. Dubois was and remains one of the most outstanding African-American scholars. Exasperated by the adamant nature of American society, Dubois sought exile in Ghana, where he died. Lorde's visit to his grave was both an honor and an inspiration to her. It reinforced the connection between African Americans and Africa and revealed that the struggle for liberation in America was sometimes futile. Dubois and Richard Wright were frustrated about their dream of a better America. Lorde, however, found inspiration as De Veaux recounts in *Warrior Poet*: "Standing at Du Bois's gravesite just fifty yards away from the Atlantic Ocean, Lorde began to visualise, for the first time, what had taken place on Africa's West Coast three hundred years before" (145). Her visit to Sao Jorge d'Elmina Castle, an infamous slave holding pen by the Portuguese, increased her awareness of the scar of slavery and the slave trade. She became aware of Africa's part in the trade. "Elmina" will feature in her poem, "Between Ourselves," in which she recalls all blacks' common guilt in enslavement.

In Dahomey – Benin, Cotonou, Lorde found the answer to her epic search. At Ouidah, another slave ground, Lorde saw what to her was the spiritual center of Dahomey. She synthesized the variations between the Yoruba pantheon and that of the Dan. This was the center of the religion of her mother's people, and it was her place to record it. She found five prominent goddesses, as De Veaux presents them in *Warrior Poet*. First, we have Seboulisa – goddess of Abomey and mother of all other goddesses and gods. Second, Oshumare, Yoruba's rainbow-snake deity, symbolizes unity between aggression and compassion. Oshumare is Da Ayido Hwedo to the Fon of Dahomey, symbolizing male and female energies. The Fon represents her as twins. Third, we have Yemanja – the sea goddess of the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria. Fourth, Lorde presents Mawulisa, a combination of female and male power. She represents the forces of the moon and sun fused. Fifth, Lorde employs the goddesses, Arekete - the Ewe sea goddesses. She was going to recount in *Zami* how she met and loved a woman she named Afrekete, and this became her signature. She will sign her letters with the phrase, "In the hands of Afrekete", representing her identification with the goddess (151).

Lorde's matriarchal sphere develops from her inner family lineage, extends to her lovers and friends, and then encompasses this arsenal of West African goddesses. It is complete when we look at the legendary historical women she draws.

Lorde's legendary typologies include recent female militants like Rosa Parks, Winnie Mandela, and Assata Shakur (a black panther woman imprisoned) on the one hand, and on the other includes the almost mythic typologies like the Amazon Warriors, Yaa Asantawe, and the South African mythic warrior, Mmamthatisi. Victims of patriarchal and racial injustice are also

given the status of legends like the women in the poem "Chant: A Choral of Black Women Voices" – Patricia Gowan, Bobbie Jean Graham, etc. Lorde uses the example of these women to show how women can survive under duress.

Lorde's life and work were predominantly maternal and matriarchal. Her father died in 1953, while her mother, though older, lived for another 35 years until she died in 1988. Lorde later discovered her father's two illegitimate girl twins he had before marrying Linda Belmar. The fact that her father and mother could keep it secret until her father died in 1953 and her mother for another 35 years, Lorde was to conclude, confirmed her mother's power over her father.

CONCLUSION

Audre Lorde, one of the most prominent black woman poets, is concerned about the horrors of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia and genuinely attempts to erode them through the power of art. As a black feminist, lesbian, and mother, Lorde assumes multiple identities that make her both a member and an outsider in many sub-communities in America. As a black, she is excluded from the dominant white society. As a black woman, she is "other" in the patriarchal society. As a lesbian, she is "other" within the dominant heterosexist American society and the black sub-community. As a mother, she is single, a divorcee, who lives in an experimental lesbian marriage, which she finally abandons. Lorde's task as a writer, as a member and outsider in all these communities, is to dispel the idea of a monolithic society where all people are the same. Instead, she offers a holistic society in which differences are traits that come to colour and empower society. Lorde depicts a society in permanent flux; humanity is always in a "liminal" sphere as our physical and psychic perspectives are altered through education, travel, marriage, sexuality and so on so that there is no fixed identity but an evolving set of identities.

Lorde seeks to create a community among blacks, women, and gays by using myth. By invoking primordial history to show that blackness, femaleness, and homosexuality, are not "other" but affirming qualities, she creates self-esteem in these people. Providing self-esteem is, however, not synonymous with sameness. Blacks can have a sense of community by recognising the various segments as essential to the progress of all. Adults will have to respect and dialogue with the youth, men and women with each other, heterosexuals with gays, and the secular and the religious. Only when such dialogue is possible can they engage with different dominant cultures.

This paper reveals that Lorde's world was predominantly maternal and matriarchal. Nurtured against this background of female ancestors and relatives and empowered by supportive female friends and lovers, she was shocked to discover that her heritage met with contradiction in the predominantly white, patriarchal, and heterosexist society. Rather than acquiesce to the dictates of the prevailing order, she subverts the institutions constructed on patriarchal terms. Matriarchy subverts patriarchy as she unmasks the hidden prejudices that are buried beneath the surface of Western thought.

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