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**“BETWEEN MULTIPLE SELVES” STRUGGLE TO ASSERT MULTIPLE IDENTITIES AS A  
BLACK LESBIAN: A STUDY OF AUDRE LORDE’S TESTIMONIO**

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**ABSTRACT**

The present paper tries to scrutinize the significance of asserting identity for a marginalized woman, especially for a Black lesbian woman in America. The subjugation and oppressions that a Black lesbian confronts is presented in Audre Lorde’s work, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. The triple levels of marginalization are portrayed using a new genre that of the biomythography, which also gives the reader the impression that, her work itself is amalgamated into a new genre. Lorde finds a new self, which has all the characteristics of the other selves at the same time, detached from all others. She juxtaposes the personal history with the cultural history of America. Lorde’s writings address the multiple levels of readers including black, woman and same-sex. The work juxtaposes historical facts, myths and fiction and deals with Black women’s multiple oppressions.

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The autobiography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, has been described by the author as a ‘biomythography’, and this term indeed suggests an amalgamation of autobiography, myth and history. Lorde has invented a name for the book’s new, collaged genre: biomythography. In her work, Lorde attempts to record a personal journey for self-assertion which she achieves with great difficulty in a male-dominated, white heterosexist society. She has been seen as an outcast by the white society because of her race, gender and sexual orientation. *Zami* portrays blackness, womanhood and lesbianism positively. In her work, Lorde illustrates the different stages of Black women’s lives, and how most black women are marginalized in different sections of the society. Lorde articulates the identity crisis she faces being a black, a woman and a lesbian. As Black, she is segregated and oppressed; as a woman, she is expected to remain politically passive; and as a lesbian, she is a socially unacceptable individual. A combination of the three leads to Lorde’s personal inability to socially reposition her identity until she is emotionally equipped and capable of filling the missing spaces, of giving voice to the cultural silences.

Audre Lorde’s work is important as it documents the history of triply marginalized group in America: Black lesbians. By designating her work as ‘biomythography’, Lorde might be focusing on the testimonial or in

other words, representative aspect of her work. She does not imply on the individual self 'I', as in autobiographical genre, or mythology; but includes all the themes. Lorde's work can be read as an autobiography; as Lorde's experiences is narrated in her own words. She also fills the work with stories and West Indian myths that she heard since her childhood from her mother and sisters. The work also contains the history of being and becoming a lesbian in America during the 1950s.

Lorde's writing speaks up for the people who are in the peripheral of society; who are not a part of mainstream public. AudreLorde's autobiographical work stands distinctive from Maya Angelou's as the double marginalization of Black woman for being Black and woman; has increased to triple marginalization, Lorde being a Black lesbian woman. Racial and sexual discriminations sideline Black women culturally, politically and socially. Audre Lorde in her autobiographical work documents the further marginalized condition of Black women who are homosexuals. Black lesbians are further marginalized within Black women's group also, which makes their life even hard.

"Each black woman possesses an image of herself as an individual person and as a member of the Afro- American community and of society which influences her general attitudes and demands towards life and, what is more important, towards herself. Their autobiographies show an attempt to define a personal life journey through the evocation of their most intimate consciousness" (Calle).

Audre Lorde argues that Black women like herself possess multiple identities and if any one identity becomes prominent that does not mean the absence of other identities. She says, "when I say I am Black feminist, I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my Blackness as well as my womanness, and therefore my struggles on both these fronts are inseparable" (Lorde: *I Am Your Sister*, 4). She says that she is a black lesbian feminist but that does not mean that she hates men. Black women possess different identities and it is difficult to assert themselves into one self or identity. The multiple levels of oppression are visible in her life as well as in her work. She tries to co-opt every identity to reveal her consciousness.

In the Prologue to her work, she says, "I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/ into me- to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks" (Lorde: *Zami*, 7). Lorde; right from her childhood; fights for an assertion of self. There seems to be a constant fight between her selfhood- for being a heterosexual, bisexual or a lesbian. Throughout her life, she is in constant search of her true self. Lorde wants to be a man and a woman at the same time, having the qualities of both. Lorde gets the impression that; the word powerful has not been combined with the word 'woman' and so 'powerful woman' means extra ordinary woman other than from simply 'woman'. She says, "It certainly did not, on the other hand, equal 'man'. What then? What was the third designation?" (15). She tries to acquire the third designation throughout her life and through her writing. She does want all the rights of a man and also all the powers of a woman; which made the foundation of being bisexual or lesbian.

Lorde feels suffocated in her womanish self, for having been controlled by men and elders. Her wish to be both man and woman shows her ultimate wish to break the same old tradition of patriarchy restricting a woman. She hates to be dictated and be ruled; for she moves away from her family at a very young age. The power and rights to be a man has been shown by Lorde by shifting her house.

Lorde thinks about herself in multiple ways. She is a Black, a woman, and a lesbian and she deviously incorporates each of these identities in her consciousness. Lorde continually states that she claims the different parts of herself-"I am lesbian, mother, warrior"-speaking through difference. It is her credo, a way of living, that all people, but particularly those said to be marginalized, must refuse to be divisible and schizophrenic" (Wallace: 235).

Throughout her work, Lorde portrays her difficulty in attaining a self and a community to which she can wholly belong. As black lesbian and an activist, her identity differs and she feels segregation from each of the group. She searches for her people for very long time, but fails to fall into any category alone. "In responding to each of these audiences, in which a part of her identity lies, she refuses to give up her

differences. Being black, woman and lesbian, Lorde searches for the sources of real connections of herself through her writings" (Chandra: 71).

In her book, *Cancer Journals* also, Lorde narrates the difficulties to identify with white women who have had mastectomy. She wants to be with her fellow beings- Black lesbians and she has been searching for Black lesbian who has had mastectomy. She feels that, only her Black lesbian sisters can understand her pain and suffering completely. She says, "I wonder if there are any Black lesbian feminist in Reach for Recovery?" (Lorde, 1980: 42).

"Yet without community, there is certainly no liberation, no future, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between me and my oppression" (Lorde, 1980: 11). Another characteristic part in her identity is that, she feels comfortable in her newly attained self of being a Black lesbian with one breast. The asymmetry of her body has been taken as a newly formed identity and Lorde refuses to have prosthesis saying that she is ready to accept her new self. Lorde feels more courage and strength after mastectomy that she sees herself as an Amazon warrior of Dahomey. "It is said that the Amazon warriors of Dahomey have their right breast cut off to make themselves more effective archers" (34). She perceives her days of suffering as "rewarding and strengthening journeys towards a deeper self" (59).

The assertion of identities is significant for Black women for their survival and for their reformation. Without denial of any self, Black women needs to be defined and identified.

#### **HUMILIATIONS CONFRONTED BY LORDE BEING A LESBIAN**

In her autobiographical work, Lorde narrates the lives of black lesbians in New York City during the years of 1950s. Through her work Lorde is able to celebrate and critique the lesbian community of which she was a part. She gives an account of experiences within lesbian community and the oppressions of being Black in lesbian groups and being lesbian in Black women's group. Before analyzing the autobiographical work of Lorde, it is suitable to have a brief introduction to the lesbian literature and lesbian movements in America.

Lesbian women had been active in the earlier suffrage movement and reformist campaigns. During the 1970's, "there emerged a felt need to identify sexual orientation as a significant factor in their oppression as women" (Whelehan: 88). Lesbianism had its roots in feminism but broke away eventually to become a part of an autonomous Lesbian and Gay movement and then aligned itself with queer movement, says, Subhash Chandra (1). The Lesbian and Gay movement was focused on the issues concerning gays and marginalised lesbians. But within the group, lesbians had been set in the margins as: "Gays were considered intellectual and chic and hogged all the attention. Being masculine carried benefits which were denied to lesbians as women. Besides, lesbians are vulnerable to sexual harassment and rape which gays are not" (Chandra: 1). Therefore, lesbian critics argued that lesbianism were neither gayism, nor queer. Lesbianism had a distinct identity. They believed that lesbian existence had been erased by co-option of lesbians in the gay population. Such co-option wiped out the distinctiveness of the lesbian experience.

Lesbians never felt oneness towards the white feminist movements, as white women perceived lesbians as betrayals of their group. Because of the classist and racist issues within white feminist movements, feminist group divulged to form Black women's group and Lesbians' group. Lesbian feminist critics and academics had been active with "teaching lesbian literature, establishing networks and support groups, and exploring assumptions about a lesbian-focussed literary criticism" (Zimmerman: 200). Lesbian critics argued that a woman's identity could not be defined only by her relation with the male world; but with the bonds between women also.

"It was at the Second Congress to Unite Women held at the beginning of May 1970 in New York that a group calling themselves Radicalesbians distributed paper 'The Woman-Identified Woman'" (Chandra: 6). The paper marks the separation of lesbians from feminism. They moved out of feminism and organised on their own in the seventies. "Seventies and the following decades, became a crucial period of efflorescence in lesbian struggles and successes, largely in the United States and Canada" (Chandra: 7).

Lesbian literature had been published during the years of 1970. Many books had been published dealing with issues of lesbianism which includes Del Martin and Phyllis Lyons's *Lesbian Woman* (1972), Jill Johnson's *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (1973).

During the year 1979, lesbian articles appeared in *Signs* and *Frontiers*. Lesbian journals like *Sinister Wisdom* and *Conditions* published many articles and criticisms in lesbian studies. Djuna Barnes's *Night wood* (1937), Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), and *Three Lives* (1933), Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918) and *The Professor's House* (1925), also portrayed lesbian situations and relationships (Chandra: 5).

White males, white females, black males and even black females acted as if black lesbians did not exist at all. "All segments of the literary world- whether establishment, progressive, Black, female, or lesbian- do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers and Black lesbian writers exist" (Smith: 168). Black female critics failed to address Black lesbian issues or literature.

Black lesbian writer Barbara Smith is of the opinion that rather than white lesbians; Black gays and Black lesbians are linked together by their shared racial identity and political status; and not white lesbians and Black lesbians by their shared sexual identity. Racial identity seems to be more comfortable than sexual identity. "Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatist demand" (Christian: 23).

Initially, Lorde finds white lesbians as her friends and lovers. Within the group of her white lesbian friends; Lorde gradually feels alienation because of her race. She feels humiliation at public places; when going along with a white girl-friend. She accepts white lesbians' love and friendship, as sexuality take precedence over her race. But gradually, she feels that she is alien in the group of whites. Black lesbians neither feel comfortable with Black women's group nor with the white lesbians. They think that they are the most suppressed groups racially and sexually. Black lesbians like to identify themselves as Blacks rather than as lesbians or by their choice of sex. She often feels "as exotic sister-outsiders who might gain little from banding together" (177).

While staying in Mexico, she gets newer insights into the lives of lesbians; getting in touch with her friend-lover Eudora. In New York City, she has been feeling terrible loneliness being a Black young lesbian woman. She says, "There were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it alone, like our sister Amazons, the riders on the loneliest outposts of the Kingdom of Dahomey" (176). Being with other lesbian friends becomes more comfortable for Lorde. She begins to feel the significance of different relationships with women- of being sister, friend, lover etc.

#### **BEING A SISTER-OUTSIDER: HUMILIATIONS CONFRONTED FOR BEING A BLACK LESBIAN**

Lorde feels like an outsider among her lesbian friends and she urges for a Black lesbian to share her feelings. Lorde feels difficulty for not being acknowledged by the Black women's group and lesbian group. She says, "In a paradoxical sense, once I accepted my position as different from the larger society as well as from any single sub-society-Black or gay- I felt I didn't have to try so hard" (181). She realizes how difficult it is to stay alive or to be liked or loved by someone or to be accepted in one group or in another. Black women's group feel that Lorde is different as she behaves quite differently from them in terms of her sexual preference. She is not interested in dressing like 'good-white' women; or to straighten her hair like all white women's'. She also does not fall into the trap of patriarchal rules of Black men and does not behave like white women. So she has been often seen as the betrayer of her race and community and is not accepted by Black community. She says, "...when the sisters think you're crazy and embarrassing; and the brothers want to break you open to see what makes you work inside; and the white girls look at you like some exotic morsel that has just crawled out of the walls onto their plate ..." (182). For Lorde being a Black lesbian is altogether a different experience from being a Black woman or a white lesbian.

Lorde feels more comfortable with her black lesbian friend Felicia than with her white lesbian friend Muriel; with whom she was living. Lorde learns that only a Black lesbian friend can share the Blackness of their lives. White lesbian friends of Lorde believe that, there is nothing unique to be a Black lesbian, as all lesbians

are niggers. She says, "Even Muriel seemed to believe that as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsider hood. 'We're all niggers', she used to say, and I hated to hear her say it" (203). And Lorde finds a special relationship with Felicia as they share similar black oppressions. She says, "We acknowledged it in private, and it set us apart, in a world that was closed to our white friends. It was even closed to Muriel, as much as I would have liked to include her" (204). The intimacy she has been feeling towards Felicia differs from the relationships with white women (204).

When compared to white lesbians, Black lesbians are scared to publicize their private lives. She says that it is hard to recognize Black lesbians. For a while; she has been thinking that; she was the only Black lesbian living in the village. But; in fact there are Black lesbians; but they are scared to expose their identity; as their oppression being Black and women will increase when agreeing upon as lesbians. Lorde feels a sense of oneness with Black Lesbians.

Lorde has not been accepted among the group of Black women because of being a lesbian. For Lorde, "I was gay and Black. The latter fact was irrevocable: armour, mantle, and wall. Often, when I had the bad taste to bring that fact up in a conversation with other gay-girls who were not Black, I would get the feeling that I had in some way breached some sacred bond of gayness, a bond which I always knew was not sufficient for me" (181). Lorde confirms the fact that being Black and lesbian is a different experience altogether. A Black lesbian feels different to be in a Black women's group as well as in a white-lesbians group. She needs a separate group of Black lesbians to share her oppressions- double oppression of being Black and being lesbian. While walking with her lover Muriel, Lorde receives stares and titters in the streets; and Lorde wonders, "whether it was because we were a Black woman and a white woman together or because we were gay" (203).

Staying with Muriel, Lorde realizes that she cannot share everything with her, as she was white. "I was Black and she was not, and that was a difference between us that had nothing to do with better or worse, or the outside world's craziness" (204). She has to deal with the Blackness all alone by herself; without the help of her white lover. She says that; though they love each other deeply; this conscious of being black separated them. It remains a fact outside their love. She tries not to think of racial difference; fearing that it might separate them. "I sometimes pretended to agree with Muriel, that the difference did not exist, that she and all gay-girls were just as oppressed as any Black person, certainly as any Black woman" (204).

Being with Muriel; she realizes the racial differences and how people react to white lesbians and Black lesbians. They try to reform the white girl; try to advise her. But they knowing that Blacks are not worth of reforming they keep silent. So she feels it as her duty to protect herself. She says, "For Flee and me, the forces of social evil were not theoretical, not long distance nor solely bureaucratic" (205).

Though she realizes the difference of being black and lesbian together is different from being white and lesbian; she never utters a word in their lesbian group fearing it can be irreconcilable; as Blacks had never been taught to deal with both of them at a time. She finds that; in the lesbian group; she has been losing her individuality and identity. Within the group of white lesbians, she stops thinking about her race and pretend that she is only a lesbian. Though; all her lesbian friends is set apart from the 'other' world, they want to believe that they are therefore free of problems in the 'other' world, including capitalism, greed, racism, classism, etc. They came to believe that; love will cure all problems of racism.

The lesbian group of white women reflects "the ripples and eddies of the larger society" and racism was in and out of that group. Some lesbians carve some niche of subordination or domination, or to play roles among lesbian women and to recreate the 'other world' as such. So Lorde says that; she is against such role-playing relationships. Lorde longs to form relationships with Black women and in gay bars she wishes to see them. She admits that every Black woman has been taught to view each other with deep suspicion and it is the same with the lesbians also. Lorde finds it hard to survive as a Black lesbian. She says, "Most Black lesbianism were closeted, correctly recognizing the Black community's lack of interest in our position, as well as the many more immediate threats to our survival as Black people in a racist society" (224).

"It was hard enough to be black, to be Black and female, to be Black, female and gay" (224). In a white environment; it is suicidal to live as a Black female and a lesbian. "And if you were fool enough to do it; you'd better come on as tough that nobody messed with you" (224). There exist even a competition among the Black and white lesbians in the Bar on who could be the most 'gorgeous femme'. The world of lesbians is only slightly different from the outside world; where black women are doubly oppressed because they are black and women.

Lorde says, "Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough, we were different. Being black together was not enough. We were different. Being black women together was not enough. We were different. Being black dykes together was not enough. We were different" (226). It is not easy to settle down in a single definition as each of them is different from the other. One's need is quite different from the others. She has to constantly reassert and re-formulates her identity. She cannot be a static self.

From the many relationships she has had with white women, white lesbians, black women and black lesbians; she learns the need to have a sisterhood with Black lesbians. Instead of getting into the strong holds of strangers or enemies; it is apt to be a part of the battle of same group. Lorde finally gives a new definition to herself; as Zami- "a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (255).

"Within this tradition, *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* represents an extension and achievement of the autobiographical genre because it juxtaposes historical facts, myths, and fiction, and reveals a plural textual self" (Calle). Lorde's autobiography is a revolutionary attempt as it testifies the life of a lesbian; especially a Black lesbian. She beautifully interweaves her life, myths and the histories of two communities: Black women and Black lesbians.

"Audre has fashioned her identity as 'Zami' out of the oppositions embedded in her subjectivity through a bold and candid admission of what has been termed as an aberrant sexuality and an exercise of her literary creativity in critical co-relation with time, place and history" (Chandra: 220).

"Lorde names differences among women, African Americans, lesbians, and other groups as empowering rather than divisive forces and as aspects of identity" (Wallace: 218). Lorde says that the difference within the self is the strength to be called upon. She asks her readers to choose their identity themselves rather than giving it to the outsiders to define them.

## CONCLUSION

African-American women's autobiographies are multi-centred. They present the historical document of their community as well as their personal history. Rather than being individual-centred; the testimonios represent the untold story of the African-American women's history. Angelou's and Lorde's autobiographies; though represents the different communities; Angelou represents African-American women's community and Lorde represents Black lesbian group; African-American culture and identity are imbibed in their consciousness. The struggle to assert their identity from the multiple levels of oppressions can be seen from their writings. The growth of these African-American women is rightly linked with the beginning of their racial awareness, being and becoming African-American women, as writers, as activists and finally identifying themselves as African-American women.

Lorde talks about the multiple levels of oppressions they face. Her experiences of oppression made them to stand against the Black patriarchy and made them rebel. Black community is as important to them as Black women's community or in Lorde's case, Black lesbian community. She never avoids one for the other. She is indeed aware of the need for a separate organisation for Black women or for Black lesbians. Her writing as well as their social activities emphasis the need for reformation of marginalized women's sections. Testimonios serve as the voice of the oppressed sections and a call for the society to consider their issues as well.

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