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UNRAVELLING THE MASTER'S NARRATIVE, WRITING BIOMYTHOGRAPHY IN ZAMI

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***ABSTRACT**--Audre Lorde's Zami (1982/1993) has occupied a unique place in Black literature as an autobiographical work, discussing lesbian relationship among women of different races, by a black lesbian writer. Her autobiography is a biomythography, which subverts the concept of life-writing as a genre using only facts and posits the necessity of life-writing to be done with an awareness of the power relations within which human social identity is situated. To this end, Lorde employs many strategies, namely examining the race, gender, sexuality as a nexus within which her identity is situated, rewriting demeaning myths and stereotypes of black lesbians, breaking the linear narrative pattern to re-script the black lesbian 'I' and inscribing black lesbian self in actual spaces (the 'lesbian bar culture') and discursive spaces (the print culture) where it is silenced. In Lorde's hands, life writing is radically re-envisioned. She transforms autobiography from a writing of identity to a writing of self with the objective of imagining change.*

***Keywords**--Audre Lorde, Zami, Life-writing, biomythography, black lesbian.*

I. INTRODUCTION

AudreLorde's*Zami*(1982/1993) has occupied a unique place in African-American literature as the first full length autobiographical work by an established black lesbian writer. It is a biomythography exploring the life and struggle of a black lesbian in sexist and racist American society. In *Zami,* Audre Lorde(1982/1993) reveals the silenced and oppressed black lesbian identity. Sheunravels her social identity, which is that of a cursed black lesbian through the autobiography form. She recreates her lesbian identity into a celebration of blackness and sisterhood. In her hands, the autobiographical narrative becomes biomythography, and she envisions and invites her readers into a different space where neither blackness nor lesbianism is disregarded. Here, difference is critically examined and embraced. The text portrays the journey of a woman and a poet reading the pieces of self made up of racial and gender identity.

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II. BIOMYTHOGRAPHY AS A RADICAL REENVISIONING OF BLACK LESBIAN SELF IN ZAMI

Lorde invents the genre of biomythography, which subverts the concept of life-writing as a genre using only facts. If autobiography works to present the impression that it is accurate, stable and chronological representation of the events, then for Lorde, biomythography refers to the self-conscious act of undermining such conventional dictates. Biomythography at once invokes, interrogates and celebrates the possibilities present within myth, dream and history. Writing biomythographically calls for a unification of "history, historiography, self-reflexivity and creativity" (Russel, 2011, p. 60).While all autobiographies as narratives are a melding of facts and fiction since the very act of composing require us to pick and choose life events to render in print, biomythography demands that we do so with an awareness of the power relations within which human social identity is situated. It becomes a framework through which oppressive social narratives and how they mould identities can be deconstructed and more egalitarian alternatives are proposed.

In her work, Lorde (1982/1993) pulls apart racial and gender codes present in American society. She portrays how white American society has used physiology to subordinate non-whites and arbitrarily classifies them in social hierarchy. Race is a social construction, not a biological one, and Lorde presents this before us by narrating her school years. She understood the discrimination between the whites and herself as her class was divided between "Brownies", who were the blacks, and,"Fairies" who were the whites (p.27). However, she never surrenders to this domination. When the school organises an election to select the president and the vice-president among the students, Lorde narrates that she participates in the election though her mother tries to stop her. She loses the contest but she never regrets her loss(p.64). Here we see how Lorde binds together a narrative of oppression and a narrative of hope. In a single episode, that of participating in the election, Lorde reveals to us both domination and resistance.

Similar pattern can be found in other episodes too. Consider, for example, Lorde's narration of Gennie's suicide, which mourns a beloved friend and protest the victimisation of young women in heteronormative society. The narrative presents Gennie as a very close friend whom the teenager Lorde considered as her first true friend (p.87). Lorde is devastated when Gennie commits suicide (p.101). She has an affair with a white boy that results in a pregnancy, which she aborts at home (p.109). Here we find Lorde presenting the difficulty of being a young black and lesbian in twentieth century America. She cannot claim her soulmate openly and seeks to situate her identity though heterosexual relationship. However, because it crosses racial lines, Lorde has to bear the consequences of her relationship, and she is left to mourn for the child who cannot be born. Lorde finds solace in poetry and in the friendship she has with women—both white and black. This episode weaves pain and hope together. She juxtaposes domination and survival, heteronormativity, racism and cross racial sisterhood, death and creativity. Lorde loses her teenage love and her baby but receives the gift of poetry and sisterhood from women. She writes herself as a survivor and carries on the legacy of her black female foremothers who from the time of slavery have recognised that for black women victory is often times surviving inspite of sexist and racist society that refuses to give them worth.

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Lorde seeks to break binaries through her narrative. In her prologue, she makes it clear that she desires a mythical life of unification with all of creation which is beyond binaries of gender. She wishes to go beyond limitations ofbeing man or woman and writes in *Zami*(1982/1993):"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" (p.7). The Prologue then announces her intention to employ a different structure in her autobiography—one which interweaves a mythic narrative of self with realistic life events. This novel approach to life writing radically re-envisions the possibilities of the form and transforms autobiography from a writing of identity to a writing of self with the objective of imagining change.

It also calls to mind Michelle Wallace's(1999) assertion that black women have been oppressed through white dominant society' articulation of them as "superwoman" who have "inordinate strength" and"an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work" (p. 107). Wallace puts forth the bias against black women in white society, which comes through the myth of the black 'superwoman'. Lorde (1993) hopes to tear apart this myth and makes her a flesh and blood creature. For Lorde, autobiography is not always a subjective story. The myth making process changes the confessional nature of self authorisation. She explains in an interview with Claudia Tate (2004): "biomythography has the elements of biography and history of myth. In other words, it's fiction built from many sources. This is one way of expanding our vision" (p. 99).Autobiography has the tendency to focus on one's plight. However, myth-making is concerned about more than the self.Herbiomythography suggests the collective representation of black female lesbian self in an oppressive world. Lorde does not simply focus on the black lesbian self but includes the general condition of black women in her biomythography. For example, she narrates the episode of how her mother was negatively evaluated by her teacher and how her mother's tears made her realise the racial nature of the interaction (p.85).Lorde knows subjectively and from history how black women are denied rights and she feels the necessity of highlighting these issues. Lorde illustrates the racial and gender biases in society and by putting them before us, she unveils their assumptions of being the norm. Her work charts the unequal power relations in society and shows the way out of them by rewriting the racist and sexists myths.

A good example of this is the word 'zami', which forms the title of Lorde'sautobiography**. '**Zami' is a Carricaou name. Heather Russel in the book *Legba's Crossing*(2011) mentions Carole Boyce Davies' observation that, in the Eastern Carribean,'zami' is conventionally a derogatory term meant to be demeaning (p. 62).It specifically refers to the community of women, who when left by their husbands for long periods, create a network of friends and lovers among themselves. Carole Boyce Davies(2008)interprets 'zami' as more than sexual queerness. She finds Lorde as rewriting the "derogatory naming of lesbians, derived from '*les amies*'" into a politics of hope where naming herself 'zami' becomes a way to pay cognisance to and bring together her sexual and ethnic identities. She says to this effect that "the integration of ethnic and sexual identities is behind the author's positive appropriation of the Carribean creole word 'zami' for her self-naming" (p. 999). By making this phrase her title, Lorde centers 'zami'—a curse used to demean black lesbians—and she makes it a celebration of sisterhood. In Lorde's hands, zami becomes a"Carricou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (Lorde, 1982/1993, p.255) and she celebrates ideas of blackness and lesbian sisterhood. For Lorde, 'zami' signifies many

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things: she is a woman thoroughly suffused with eroticism. Lorde describes them as survivors; they are women who can live without men because they can love and depend on each other. Thus, 'zami', comes to mean an alternative way of life that helps women grow and survive.

Another narrative strategy that Lorde uses to situate her black lesbian self is the breaking of linear form. Linear form has been predominately associated with realism as well as men's writing whereas non-linear form is seen as a characteristic of women's writing, evident in *le ecriture feminine*. Lorde's 'biomythography'in its narrating of a life from childhood to adulthood seems to be deceptively linear and chronological. However, she interrupts the narratological flow with italicised passage that appear to be narrated in dream time, employing a hybrid prose-poetic form. For example, she starts her autobiography using italic letters saying, "*To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood from under the bruised skin's blister?*" (p. 3). Here the tone is one of questing rather than of certainty because what is being narrated is the becoming of a self and the various possibilities associated with it. This gestures to dialogism inherent in transformation of spirit. Through prose that sounds more like poetry in its evocative beauty, Lorde is informing us of her metamorphosis from a victim, who is imprisoned by social stereotypes, into a person blooming with possibilities.The repeated use of 'I' in the passage situates the self, while references to 'blood,' 'bruise' and 'blister' bring forth the trauma of being black and lesbian, which becomes grist for spiritual energy and spiritual growth. Plain prose, caught in binds of cause effect logic, cannot express such cornucopia of meaning. Lorde uses prose that is poetic in rendition. She situates her poetic-prose differently, using italics, and she makes us cognisant that something significant is being said. Hence, Lorde rejects specific codes and convention of so called authentic representation. Many times in the narrative, she writes her name in block letters: "I used to love the evenness of AUDRE LORDE at four years of age" (p. 24) and also "I bent my head down close to the desk that smelled like old spittle and rubber erasers, and on that ridiculous yellow paper with those laughably wide spaces I printed my best AUDRE" (p. 25). The use of all capitals to print her name, which is a breaking of accepted conventions of writing, suggests her co-joining theme and form. Since the "master's tools will never dismantle master's house," traditional modes of writing cannot express the valuing of lesbian black self (Lorde,1984/1993, p.112). Lorde utilises various strategies to move beyond narrow social realism, positioning the self in a realm of poetic possibilities. In doing so, she carries with her the legacy of black foremothers who have strived to situate the black female self through the genre of female slave narratives.

The practice of writing about the self through autobiography was started by St. Augustine and his *Confessions of Sin and Salvation*(398-400AD/2008). When Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote his own *Confessions* between 1764 and 1770, he also followed the pattern established by Augustine but *Zami* never follows their the same pattern. In *Zami*, Lorde has written her autobiography not as a redemption of soul but celebration of her identity. In this,*Zami* is a continuation of the tradition of black women's life writing like slave-narratives that has explored the impact of slavery, race, and sexism in black women's life. The slave narratives provides the blacks an opportunity to reveal their consciousness as human being. When black women wrote slave narratives, their writings included their bondage stemming from their being black and woman. Consider, for example, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*, (1861/2009)whichnarrates her struggle to assert her sexual choices as a black female slave against

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the power structure of plantation slavery which codifies her as a body for use by her white master.Jacobs has to negotiate the codes of white womanhood with its emphasis on purity and fragility of the (white) female body, which she as a female slave cannot practice. Moreover, these codes were patriarchal inventions to categorise the female body in a specific way in accordance with male desires and viewpoints. Jacobs references these codes but presents them to be untenable in her case by revealing the harrowing life of a black female in slavery. Her virtue is threatened by her master. She narrates her fear and revulsion and that puts the blame on the master and not the slave for her breaking the codes of chastity. Her example shows that black women's slave narratives are protest against white patriarchal views of black womanhood and becomes a space where black women write themselves into a new identity. in this regard Stover's (2009) analysis is important :

The power and influence of the black woman's autobiography that emerged out of nineteenth-century America was sociopolitical as well as literary. And of all the literary genres, autobiography is the one that best lends itself to historical as well as literary approaches. As creative nonfiction, autobiographysuggests the importance that place and time have on the development of the author; writers of autobiography re-interpret "self" for the reading of others(p. 4).

Thus, black women's autobiography works as their self-expression where they raise their voice against all kind of oppression. Desiring individuality is unacceptable, which becomes very prominent in the case of black lesbians who as 'other' very often become outsiders.Speaking the black female body's desire and closeness with another female body becomes socially unacceptable practice. This silencing of black women by heteronormativity again puts the black body—now the lesbian black body—at the centre of oppression. Lorde's *Zami* (1982/1993) emphasises on the lesbian 'I' to help the lesbian voice speak its identity.

For black women to reveal same-sex desire is a volatile act within the black community.Their sexual orientations differ from mainstream heterosexuals and so they often take great pains to hide their sexual identity. Abena Busia (1993) writes that black lesbians are alienated figures in the community and even among black feminists. She says: "anger has been a critical trope for me, a black woman, ex slave, poet lesbian trafficking among enemies. During the early days of 1980s, I felt myself and other black lesbians many times being 'cancelled out' as feminists" (p. 220). Busia describes the silencing of the black lesbian voice that Lorde too describes in her narrative. In *Zami,* (1982/1993) Lorde remembers thinkingthat she and her friend were the only black lesbians in New York Greenwich Village: "it seemed that loving women was something that the other black women just didn't do. And if they did, it was in some fashion and in some place that was totally inaccessible to us, because we could never find them" (p. 179). What Lorde writes as autobiography, parallels views found in later scholarship around black female lesbian identity. For example, Hammond (2002) suggests that, regarding black lesbianism, "we have a situation in which black women's sexuality is ideologically located in a nexus between race and gender, where the black female subject is not seen and has no voice" (p. 308). Denise Fitzer (2000) indicatesin his article "Audre Lorde's Expansive Influence on Black Lesbians: Jewelle Gomez, Cheryl Clarke, and Kate Rushin" thatLorderecognises that when black lesbians choose to hide aspects of their identity out of the fear of not being accepted, the horrifying result is silence. Furthermore, when African-American lesbians silence themselves, they are rendered powerless (p. 4). Her observations aligns with what Lorde writes in *Sister Outsider*(1984/1993)where Lorde asserts, "We have been

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socialised to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us" (p. 44). AudreLorde's *Zami* (1982/1993) protests this silence and by narrating her life story, the work turns it into speech. Her biomythography highlights the absent black lesbian experience and inspires the individual black woman to create work that can connect to those black women who are unaware of their rights.

In order to situate the black lesbian self and give it voice, *Zami* (1982/1993)explores the nuances of blackness in context of same sex desire. She examines the various discursive pairings her contemporary society imposes on her such as self/ other, white/ black, black/ lesbian, black/ black lesbian, and she seeks answers to the question: what does it means to be black and lesbian? What gateways does it open into praxis that can build a society beyond these either/ or constructs? In order to answer these questions, Lorde explores difference in terms of race and gender and its implications for a subject who is black and lesbian and therefore resides in a space of non-belonging in terms of race and sexuality.

Through Muriel, *Zami* (1982/1993) shows the seductive logic of considering lesbianism as a social collective beyond race. Yet the numerous instances of racism narrated in *Zami* suggests the danger of absencing race because it is a very real concern in the lives of black women, regardless of their sexual orientation. Muriel, though a white woman, tells the narratorthat "We're all niggers," (p. 203). She believes that her queer identity trumps race because"as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsider hood" (p. 203). Lorde is discomfited by Muriel's erasing of racial oppression as an important marker of identity for the black lesbians because it forces her identity to be not black and lesbian but lesbian and therefore belonging to 'outsider hood.'

While Lorde does not discount the social truth of 'other hood' asserted by Muriel, she presents many episodes of racism in her narrative that establishes her identity as black and queer. Lorde remembers particularly those events of her life where her family is oppressed for being black. She writes how her mother could not continue her job because she is black. She writes, "In the winter of 1928, my mother developed pleurisy and almost died. While my mother was still sick, my father went to collect her uniforms from the teahouse to wash them. When the owner saw him, he realised my mother was Black and fired her on the spot" (p. 9). In another episode, Lorde and her family wanted to have ice-cream but were denied service in the hotel because they were black. Lorde writes, "the waitress moved along the line of us closer to my father and spoke again. 'I said I kin give you to take out, but you can't eat here. Sorry.' Then she dropped her eyes looking very embarrassed, and suddenly we heard what it was she was saying all at the same time, loud and clear" (p. 70). Lorde narrates acts of racism, which connects her narrative to the black communal experience of racism, and makes her story as a part of black communal story. In her autobiography, remembrance is a form of politics, as is telling of it. This again becomes explicit in the episode where she is asked by her Principal to give up her "braids" and "comb … hair in a more "becoming" fashion, since I was too old, she said, to wear "pigtails"" (p. 59-60). By dismissing Lorde's braids as unbecoming and infantile, the white Principal is demeaning black culture because combing hair in braids is a part of black folk culture. It is significant that Lorde remembers and centers this episode among many that has happened in her life and records it in print. This episode is subjective and communal alike because it signifies the aspects of oppression, folk culture and resistance that conceptualises blackness and bears on Lorde as a black. It also informs us that what is

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remembered and what is forgotten in Lorde's biomythography depends upon her major concerns and what she wants to express.Hence history and personal and collective memory is constantly being written, revised and rewritten. What we get is Lorde proclaiming her blackness and her queerness, refusing the either or choice that society seeks to impose on her.

Lorde suggests that while traversing colour lines is fraught with fear and anxiety, it is necessary to do so. However we need to remember that race and gender both shape identities, and we cannot choose one as overarching. We need to avoid the either/ or binary. Lorde's encounter with white women are infused with anxieties about her own blackness. In Mexico, she shares room with a white woman Rhea about whichshe writes: "it was at times difficult and new-learning to live with Rhea, learning to share space with anyone, and a white woman, too, especially since I had no deep emotional bonds with her, only warm and casual pleasantries" (p. 148). Lord describes Mexico in terms of brownness and finds comfort in it (p.173). This is significant because brown is but an amalgamation of red, black and yellow. It is the colour of nature present in wood, soil, and tree bark—things which fall apart in order to recreate and renew themselves. The hope of growth and new life beyond binaries existing in the colour brown has its parallel in Lorde's experiences in Mexico. In Mexico, she feels free to live her life. She succeeds in making relationship with different women, white or black(p.173). Muriel becomes her soul sister and they both start living their life fully (p.190). Here is the lesbian community that Lorde seeks and she encounters sisterhood and unity in relationship.

Lesbians in *Zami* cross racial boundaries in a time when such behaviour was largely considered taboo. As Lorde observes, "lesbians were probably the only black and white women in New York City in the fifties who were making any real attempt to communicate with each other" (p. 179). These gay-girls not only engage in interracial sex, but participatein intellectual discussions, offer emotional support, open their homes, and, in the case, of Audre and Muriel, make lives together across racial lines. In *Zami*(1982/1993), Lorde writes her queer sexuality hoping to give rise to communities that cross borders of essentialist identity. She narrates her friendships with diverse women "young lesbians, white except for Flee and I, who hung out together, apart from whatever piece of the straight world we each had a separate place in" (p. 179). These women break colour lines and become sisters. They "not only believed in the reality of sisterhood, that word which was to be so abused two decades later, but … also tried to put it into practice, with varying results" (p. 179).Thus, in *Zami* (1982/1993),relationship between women are at the centre of the work. For Lorde, being queer is also social activism. Lorde explains her life as a 'gay-girl' and her bonding with other female friends which is a resistance to other contemporary institutional oppressions:

I wasn't just playing around anymore, gay-girl. I was living with a woman and we were lovers. I had done, silently and easily, what I had longed and feared to do, I had made a commitment which was irrevocable. Without conscious articulation of why, I knew together meant forever for me, even though there was no troth plighted, no wedding ceremony, no paper signed. Muriel and I were united together by our loving and our wills, for good or ill (p. 201).

Here, Lorde is revising the negative impression of the word 'gay' signifying homosexuality in popular parlance. In this extract from Lorde's text (1982/1993), 'gay' becomes being away from 'set-roles' or freedom from

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stereotypical female heterosexuality. These 'gay-girls' want to be away from social evils and show their strength of character. Hence, difference becomes a form of positive identity.

A good example that portrays Lorde's bid towards inclusivity and black lesbian rights is the incorporation of black women in 'lesbian bar culture'. According to lesbian history, the lesbian bar culture played an important role in creation of a lesbian community. In this regard Davis and Kennedy observe in "Oral History and the Study of Sexuality" (1986):

The public bar community was a formative predecessor to the modern gay liberation movement. These bars not only was essential meeting places with distinctive cultures and mores but they were also the central arena for the lesbian confrontation with a hostile world. Participants in bar life were engaged in a constant, often violent, struggle for public space. Their dress code announced them as lesbian to the neighbors, to strangers, on the streets, and of course to all who entered the bars (p.7).

In the 1950s, many bars did not include black lesbians. In*Zami* (1982/1993)we find Lorde several times spending time with her friends in bars breaking these barriers. As written in *Zami*, bar becomes a gathering place where the gays or lesbians could come together. For some, it becomes a sanctuary from the ever-present hostility in home and society(p.187). Lorde describes the bar culture in terms of companionship making it almost sacred—"a ritual of togetherness" that serves as a bulwark against loneliness that comes with being a black and lesbian in white heteronormative society (p. 206). Lorde's writing of black lesbians in white lesbian bar culture makes *Zami* a biomythography that creates a space in print and discourse where black lesbian identity is treasured. Lord never glosses over the trials of being black and lesbian but finds value in being both because being doubly marginalised on account of race and sexuality, she has to dismantle binaries in order to write herself. In the process, she presents before black lesbians the importance of speaking out and of having a sisterhood that negates the 'other hood'.

The many tributes that Lorde receives from countless black women before and after her death for *Zami*situates it a canonical text that is inspirational for many women. These women have credited Lorde with helping them break their silences stemming from multiple oppressions. Lorde's far-reaching impact is illustrated in the works of black lesbians Jewelle Gomez, Cheryl, Clarke, and Kate Rushin, which has been examined by Denise Fitzer (2000). Inspired by Lorde's life and work, these women challenge through their poetry and prose race, class and gender oppression. Fitzer (2000) mentions that Kate Rushin chooses to speak for all African-American lesbians when she says the following: "Audre … cleared a space for us that has never existed before ... especially, she made a space for Black lesbians, a space that has never existed in the history of the world ... We've been blessed to have her imprint on our lives. And best of all, because of her, we have each other" (p. 15). Rushin is implying that *Zami* not only features a strong sense of community, the text constructs a community.

III. CONCLUSION

Therefore, *Zami*begins as a personal story of struggle and pain in a world driven by myths of white heteronormativity, which it challenges and replaces with narratives of love, support among women and a transracial community. Lorde lives with multiple identities—black, female, lesbian, poet, activist and sister to all black women and lesbians. She embraces all these identities as parts of her life. She fights throughout her life against racism and

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sexism to construct a liberal society.Lorde and her work become an inspiration for many black women and lesbians who just like her desire a fear free life; her works suggests all marginalised and oppressed women to stand against the domination and not to forget their identity and individuality.

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