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# ***Critical Space®***

A Peer-reviewed (refereed) International Journal  
in English Language and Literature

**Special Issue**

on

**Transformation in Language, Literature,  
Society and Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**Guest Editors**

**Dr. Milind Desai**

**Mr. Vithal Rote**

**Dr. Suvarna Patil**



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## **GUEST EDITORS**

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Amit Babaso Patil

14. **The Relationship between Job Satisfaction and Socio-Economic Status of M.I.D.C. Employees** 77  
Shri. Anil Balaso Balugade
15. **Hierarchy of Urban Centres Based on Centrality Index in Belagavi District: A Geo-spatial Analysis** 87  
Dr. Arun. B. Patil  
Miss. Sunanada I. Kittali
16. **E (Mobile) –Wallets in India** 91  
C. J. Bharasakle
17. **Changing Structure of Kolhapur Leather Industry** 107  
Dr. Prakash Y. Burute
18. **Water Utilization of Major Projects in Upper Krishna Basin of Maharashtra** 117  
Jadhav Krishnat Rajaram
19. **A Study of Teachers' Job Satisfaction and Its Impact on Their Performance** 123  
Mrs. Kalpana Balwant Patil
20. **Role of Women Entrepreneurs in 21st Century India : Challenges and Empowerment** 129  
Dr. Malini Nair
21. **A Software System For Effective Growth of Co-operative Sugar Industry** 135  
Mr. Sudhir V. Patil
22. **Changing Nature of Rural Society in 21 Century: A Study in Kolhapur District** 139  
Shri. K. M. Desai
23. **Audre Lorde's *Zami* : A Critical Study** 145  
Dr. Smt. Londhe Mangal Vishnu
24. **Identity Crisis In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*** 149  
Dr. Milind S. Desai
25. **Religion and People: Reflected in Rajan Gavas's Novels** 155  
Dr. Pramod Akaram Ganganmale



## AUDRE LORDE'S ZAMI : A CRITICAL STUDY

Dr. Smt. Londhe Mangal Vishnu

### Abstract:

America has struggled with identity crises since the earliest days of this country. The American ideal promises a united & common culture for each American citizen, regardless of race, creed, or religion. Americans have fought hard to fashion their identities out of a common culture, often experiencing frustration and exclusion in the process. As America has not in all cases "welcomed" its citizens, its different people have often turned to its their ethnic culture and racial identities for a sense of belonging. For many people the past involved a return to the old community, the family and the familiar surroundings. For the African-American the past involved slavery, which in many ways established a firewall between the African-American and his distant past, his roots, his "village"? With this perspective we see the term identity.

In the tradition of Black autobiographies we have women autobiographers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou etc. These autobiographers developed the question of their identity in their autobiographies. The term identity is associated with self-esteem which means a sense of personal worth and ability, that is, fundamental to an individual's identity. "Who am I?" is the question to understand the meaning of identity. Personal identity reveals the personality of man. It includes the self respect or dignity. Personal identity is a set of attributes, beliefs, desires or principles of action. Personal identity is shaped by group identity, social identity, and cultural identity. Audre Lorde represented this shaping of her identity in her autobiography. She has described her autobiography as "Biomythography". She described herself as 'myth' in the autobiography. Describing herself as a "black, lesbian feminist warrior poet,"

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Lorde derives the impetus of her poetry's force, tone, and vision from her identity as a black woman who is both a radical feminist and an outspoken lesbian, and as a visionary of a better world.

In the 1960s, many black people who spoke of black identity suffered because of it and were silenced in many ways. In the mistaken belief that unity must mean sameness, differences within the black community of colour, sex, sexuality and vision that were sometimes mislabeled, oversimplified, and repressed.

The biomythography: *Zami A new spelling of my name*, traces Audre Lorde's life from her childhood in Harlem through her discovery and acceptance of herself as a Black. *Zami* reads like musical poetry. In the third chapter of *Zami* when Audre was of four years she did not like the tail of the 'Y' hanging down below the line in Audrey and would always forget to put it on, which used to disturb her mother greatly. She used to love the evenness of AUDRELORE. But for her mother she kept it was.

Audre was fat, so the children in the class called her fatty. She wrote the name on the width of the note book means she was trying to search the personal identity. Her class was divided into two groups, the fairies and the Brownies. In this day of heightened sensitivity to racism and with usage, Audre told that the Brownies were never called up to the front of the room. In early chapters of '*Zami*' we noticed that this was the start of her being a myth. She was searching herself. In her autobiography she wrote "How I become a poet" (31). She writes of her mother as, "When the strongest words for what I have to offer came out of me sounding like words I remember my mother's mouth ---" Her mother had a special and secret relationship with words. She expressed, "I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers" (31).

Her mother's anger helped her to devise her to develop and to proceed further for the search of black identity. She had two sisters. They were close to each other but they were away from her. The fact that she was clothed, sheltered, and fed better than many other children in Harlem in those depression years.

In chapter No. 8, Lorde discussed the colour complex. The conversation between Lorde and her mother expressed the meaning of "colored". Phyllis, her sister illustrated, "The nuns are white, and the short-Neck store-man is white, and



father Mulvoy is white and were coloured" (58). On that occasion she couldn't understand the meaning. In this chapter we come across another incident of election. Lorde thought that she was the smartest girl in the class; she stood for the election in the classroom. But she was not elected. She got only one vote. She was not elected as a vice-president in the classroom. After this election she became conscious of her black identity. She cried, "It wasn't the election I cared about so much really, just that it was all so unfair" (65). When this family came to Washington, D.C. they faced the problem of racism. American racism was a new and crushing reality that her parents had to deal with every day of their lives once they came to that country. Her father tried to avoid the word "Negro" and used the word "Colored". Lorde said, "I always hated the forth of July, even before I came to realize the travesty such a celebration was for Black people in this country" (69). In her family they were proper caravan, mother bright and father brown, the three girls step standards in between. When the family was rejected by the waitress she said, "The waitress was white, and the counter was white, and the ice cream I never ate in Washington D.C. that summer I left childhood was white, and the white heat and white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer made me sick to my stomach for the whole rest of that trip and it wasn't much of a graduation present after all" (71).

Lorde was talking about racism in chapter No. 10 in *Zami* "American racism was a new and crushing reality that my parents had to deal with every day of their lives once they came to this country" (69). Her father and mother thought that they would protect their children from the realities of race. Audre described the preparation of food. The use of black pepper and green pepper was in that preparation but she said that she hated the pepper-skin. She compared the pepper-skin with Negro skin and represents black identity. She called her mother as "Mommy". This pronunciation also gives us the importance of her mother in her life. In this autobiography she is more connected with her mother than her father.

Audre described her school friends as "The Branded" (81). They were not talking about Black and white but everybody with any sense deplored racial discrimination, theoretically and without discussion. She said, "We could conquer it by ignoring it" (81). In her adolescence age she had discovered a new world called voluntary aloneness. She wanted to separate herself from the family



members by closing door of her room. But her mother did not allow her that separation, while doing homework she would close the door and after wards she should open it. A request for privacy was treated like an outright act of insolence. But television gave her chance to keep her privacy. But when she slept alone she had the nightmares like black and white pepper. This consciousness turned her smell of tears and the sweat of terror.

The incident between Lorde and a guidance counselor at school had given us the inner voice of Lorde about the unhappiness in family. The counselor was the head of English department. She asked her about the trouble in home and Lorde poured out her heart. She told all her unhappiness about her mother's strictness and meanness and unfairness at home. Mother did not love her because she was bad and fat. She did not well-behave like her two sisters. She wanted to leave home but her mother didn't want it. That counselor told all the narrative to Lorde's mother and her mother was shocked. She was crying. There was no fury in her voice, only heavy, awful pain. Lorde said, "At home, it all seemed very simple and very sad to me. If my parents loved me I wouldn't annoy them so much. Since they didn't love me they deserved to be annoyed as much as possible within the bounds of my own self-presration. sometimes when my mother was not screaming at me, I caught her observing me with frightened and painful eyes. But my heart ached and ached for something I could not name" (85).

In 'Hunter' while taking education she met a black friend Gennine. She taught her dancing. She called her a true friend. Gennie was slim and Audre was fat. While they both became the workers and she described the difference in cloths of different workers. The relationship with Gennie also proved tearful to Lorde.

"We did not weep for the thing that was a child  
did not weep for the thing that had been a child.  
did not weep for the thing that had been  
nor for the deep dark silences  
that ate of the so-young flesh,  
But we wept at the sight of two men standing alone.  
Flat on the sky, alone,  
shovelling earth as a blanket  
to keep the young blood down.



For we saw ourselves in the dark warm mother-blanket  
Saw ourselves deep in the earth's breast-swelling-  
no longer young-  
and knew ourselves for the first time.  
deed an alone.

We did not weep for the thing –weep for the thing  
We did not weep for the thing that was  
once a child" (97).

In 'Hunter' Bandits, Gypsies, foreigners of all degree recide. They wore different costumes. As Lorde and Gennie decided to be workers, they wore loose pants and packed their shoe-dyed lunch boxes, and tied red bandannas around their throats. When they decided to be hussies they wore tight skirts and high heels. When they were African they wrapped their heads in gaily printed skirts and talked their own made language. When they were maxican, they wore full skirts and peasant blouses and huaraches. Once they exchanged the world "fuker" for "mother" in a whole day's conversation. This changing attitude proves that these characters are in search of their own identity.

In political movements she became active leader, she was a poet and also an activist. This black psyche was also with her everywhere. She came across the white bird selling boy Jeromeo, and the 'gay –girls'. But she was aware of her political movements and consciously used these girls in her movement. She met Eudora who talked about "lesbian" rather than "gay". The sexual relationship of Audre Lorde with Eudora gives us the account of black. They both worked together and lived together. The condition of black workers we observe in the movement and her work. She described the Black sisters. She asked them to collect the money and to buy a hot comb and straightening iron to straight their hair. When they would become crazy that white girls would look at them.

The encounter of thoughts between Audre and Muriel explained the fact of Blackness. Muriel seemed to believe that as lesbians, they were all outsiders and all equal in their outsider hood. "We're all niggers", Muriel used to say and Lorde hated to hear her say it. It was wishful thinking based on little fact; the ways in which it was true languished in the shadow of those many ways in which it would



always be false. Audre said, "--- I remember the curl of Muriel's finger and here deep eyes and the smell of her buttery skin. The smell of basil---" (103). This was another gay couple.

Different incidents like the election in the school, the interaction with the boy in the adolescent age, the mother's attitude, the father's relationship with the family, mother's understanding about the 'Colored' persons, the political movements and the gay-girls involvement, the sexual relationship with the 'gay'. The active leadership in the social activities shows the consciousness of Audre Lorde in search of identity. This was Black Psyche, Black consciousness. When her Gennie died and when she was in the house of Afrekete she described her mixed ideas of black consciousness & black identity

"I remember the full moon like white pupils in the centre of our wide irises. The Moon went out, and your eyes grew dark as you rolled over me, and I felt the moon's silver light mix with the wet of your tongue on my eyelids. Afrekete ride me to the crossroad and where we shall sleep, coated in the woman's power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters, that the discarded evils, abandoned at all crossroads, will not follow us upon our journeys" (252).

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