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Audre Lorde: Myth Harbinger of the Back to Africa Movement

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This paper titled "Audre Lorde: Myth Harbinger of the Back to Africa Movement" examines Lorde's mythopoetics as she creates self-esteem in the black community as necessary to fight racism in the United States. Recognizing that blacks had assumed the polarised dialectics of Western culture, Lorde tries to reconnect them to the lost spiritual cord by suggesting a spiritual back to Africa axis. In this regard, Lorde uses a pantheon of mythological and legendary typologies from the ancient Kingdoms of Dahomey, Ashanti, and Benin to create unity for her people. These typologies can serve as sources of intellectual might and models for ritual and cultural behavior. Lorde sees myth as a dominant and authentic form of ancestral worship more accommodating than the Christian culture of the West. Such potent symbols allow blacks to understand identifiers that contravene Western culture's racist, sexist, heterosexist, and homophobic nature. The mythological pantheon would appeal to blacks because archetypes are innate. Invoking this pantheon and making the black community contemporary with it creates sacrality and puts an end to chaos and profanity. She identifies the void of a spiritual link in the black experience as the root cause of the black lack of selfhood. Slavery and colonization severed black people from their sacred home and only a reconnection with this spiritual past can offer blacks self-esteem. This spiritual reconnection applies equally to all blacks on the continent and in the diaspora. A new religious experience based on their mythological past will create unity among people of African descent.

Lorde's status as a visionary and her rebellion against racism and sexism are all grounded in her mythology. Her whole career as a writer is governed by rebellion and assertion. She rebels against white supremacy, against patriarchy, and racism. As a mythopoet, she tries to free all blacks from the fractures of white misogyny and xenophobia while asserting that blackness, femininity, and homosexuality are standard. Blacks can reclaim their ancestry and culture and thus enlighten the white race into being more accommodating. Feminists can have the lesbian option as a political weapon that will enlighten the heterosexist hegemony into recognizing the place of women. African mythology is the answer that can nurture this search for a more accommodating environment.

Born in a family and society wrought with tensions, she learned early that difference is the leading cause of conflict. She learned, firstly, that she was black and, as such, could not have an equal place with whites, even when she proved to be intelligent. Later, she discovered that as a female, she could not have equal opportunities with males. Lastly, her emergent gay sexuality was going to ostracize her in a predominantly heterosexist society further. Lorde's society would not accommodate her as an independent and vocal woman. Rebelling against such injustices that plagued blacks, women, and homosexuals, she craved an environment that could accommodate and accept her differences. The white American environment denies her -- she is black, the black male community downgrades her -- she is female, and then the black heterosexual community persecutes her -- she is a lesbian. Her search for a community that could accommodate her became, for Lorde, an urgent and mandatory requirement for survival. In her ceaseless search, she recovered West African mythology. Her West-Indian ancestry had remnants of West African myth handed down orally in her family. Harold Courlander and Lawrence W. Levine discuss this diffusional nature of myth in their books *A Treasury of Afro-American Literature* and *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, respectively, when they show how Yoruba myths survive in the Caribbean and the

Americas. These myths and legends of West African culture offer her a community where she can live or employ to validate her differences. This newfound ancestry, this new link with her roots, would give her the voice to inform her black community, her fellow black sisters and lesbians on developing self-esteem and self-reliance. This is because West African Mythology recognizes the beautiful role of the goddess. John A. Lambo, in his article "Wole Soyinka's 'Idanre': A Study in the Archetypal Image of the Woman and God," portrays Soyinka's depiction of the power of the female deity in Yoruba mythology. Oya, the river goddess, engenders the creation of earthly life by creating a rivalry between Ogun and Shango. What Lambo suggests, therefore, is the universal fact that female deities played a significant part in creation; this fact, he argues, is a recurrent archetype throughout the world. Lorde appropriates West African myth because it does not exclude women as Western mythology does. Recourse to African myth would remind women that they were warriors, heroines, and priestesses in African history. In her book *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, Diane Purkiss notes the place witches have in feminist discourse. This is because the symbol of the witch offers women role models. She states: "The figure of the witch has been central to the revival of women's history over the past two decades…. Witches are among the few women given any space whatever in pre-feminist history" (9). In this way, it offers women the ammunition to combat oppression. For Lorde, the mother bond is fundamental for survival. Human beings must pay allegiance to motherhood because maternity is the oldest form of family. Wilfred L. Guerin, in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, states that: "Lorde asks us to seek the Black mother in each of us, that is, to rely on intuition rather than analysis, to place private needs over others, and to see African culture's emphasis upon the mother-bond as an alternative way of thinking in a white patriarchal culture" (207). Guerin goes further to state that feminist myth critics center their discussions on the Great mother and other female images and goddesses, viewing these figures as the radical "others" that can offer wholeness against patriarchy's oppression of women. Prominent feminist critics define myth as the key critical term for women. They criticize male myth critics for leaving women out of their classification. Guerin cites Annis Pratt and Adrienne Rich as prominent myth critics who insist that patriarchy downgrades and oppresses women because men fear the terrible and beautiful powers of women. Annis Pratt's "Overview" on myth in *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States* upholds this view. She states:

Although the Christian church and the European ruling classes tried to destroy common people's access to myths and legends that celebrate nature; the human body; and the sexual, medical, and military prowess of women, traces of European pagan culture remained in folklore, literature, and the arts. After hundreds of years of religions repression and suppression of indigenous cultures by imported classicism, many Europeans and Euro-Americans are unaware of their mythological and religions heritage. (600)

Audre Lorde, then, in invoking the goddesses and legendary figures of West Africa, stresses the woman's primary role. Myth can teach women how to empower themselves and help minorities to reorganize and re-orientate themselves within the dominant culture. Annis Pratt states:

Stories about mythic goddess and legendary magicians, adventurers, and warriors empower women by suggesting apatriarchal psychological possibilities for women's lives. They invoke women's inner strengths in response to patterns of behaviors that are radically different from the gender norm of twentieth-century American patriarchy. (599)

Pratt acknowledges Lorde as one of the pioneer feminist poets to employ myth in the fight for female emancipation.

Lorde's mythological poems have two main themes: 1) The portrait of the void of the ancestral and spiritual link and invoking the goddess. The portrayal of the void of the black ancestral link with the ancestors and the spirits is developed in the poems "Between Ourselves," "125th Street and Abomey", "Solstice," and "Call." Invoking the goddess as a powerful guardian who can offer self-esteem and self-reliance can be perceived in the poems "12th Street and Abomey", "The Winds of Orisha," "From the House of Yemanja," "Dahomey," and "The Woman Speaks."

LOSS OF SPIRITUAL AND ANCESTRAL LINK

Lorde portrays the void of the spiritual link that severed black people from their ancestry and rendered them dry and empty. Blacks, like modern men in general, live in what Mircea Eliade terms a "desacralized world" (13). He goes ahead to explain this phenomenon that characterizes modern man thus:

For our purpose, it is enough to observe that desacralization pervades the entire experience of the non-religious man of modern societies. Consequently, he finds it increasingly difficult to rediscover the existential dimensions of religious man in the archaic societies. (13)

Lorde seeks to rescue the black community from this spiritual malaise by creating sacred space and thus reconnecting it to its ancestors. She becomes the threshold, a portal that links the profane to the sacred. The white-dominant community forces Blacks to take up a religion that works against their freedom and self-determination. Noticing this evident weakness in her people, she tries to capture their hollowness, while at the same time offering a reliable solution. Linking them back to their roots can reconnect them by triggering the archetypal images underneath their psyches. Jan Knappert deplores this apparent destruction of African religions and mythologies. He sees the turbulence in Africa resulting from the rupture between the people and their primordial archetypes, something Lorde tries to reinstate. Lorde takes recourse to what Tala I. Kashim terms "hierophantic myths"—these are concerned with sacred time and place as opposed to profane time or place. In this case, she invokes the period "illo tempore" to replace the profane present. In the poem "Between Ourselves," she recalls the betrayal that led to the enslavement of black people. Greed for money was at the core of this betrayal, leading to their loss of selfhood. She states:

Under the sun on the shores of Elmina
a black man sold the woman who carried
my grandmother in her belly
he was paid with bright yellow coins. (223)

She goes ahead to capture the common guilt that blacks share in the slave trade. This guilt leaves them empty because by participating in the slave trade, they sold away their culture and religion. A void then came to exist among black people, which she tried to fill by resorting to myth. Lorde can punish the defaulters by invoking the gods to punish them. Still, she chooses not to: "But I do not whisper this man's name / at the shrine of Shapona / I cannot bring down the rosy juices of death upon him / nor forget that Orishala / is called the god of whiteness…"(224). By stating that she will not whisper the names of the man who sold her grandmother near the Shrine of Shapona nor allow Eshidale's priests to bury her enemies, she is invoking the gods of Africa and connecting them with her people. Shapona punishes defaulters whose names are whispered near his shrine by plaguing them with the fatal disease -- smallpox. Eshidale's priests bury those who commit suicide. In their cultural setting, therefore, these gods are seen to intervene directly in the lives of individuals when solicited and serve as sources of justice and harmony. Tacit in this is Lorde's willingness to forgive and, at the same time, share the blame for their enslavement. She will, therefore, not kill her brothers, which will be a form of suicide.

Lorde's visit to West Africa and her contact with the slave port in Ghana informed this poem. Her first-hand contact with the monumental setting of the slave past was going to inform her decision about forgiving the atrocities of the past and working toward a better future. This mood of forgiveness is captured in these lines: "Humility lies / in the face of history / and I have forgiven myself / for him / for the white meat we all consumed in secret / before we were born / we shared the same meal" (224). As De Veaux explains, "El Mina felt sacred to Lorde and she could write neither about it or Cape Coast in her journal: "'The pen in anything but poetry' she summarised her feelings, 'would dwarf it'" (146). Underlying this experience is the fact that blacks must see their part in their enslavement as a necessary step toward the construction of an identity. Recrimination and rancor at the continental Africans for the responsibility for slavery will only engender division and powerlessness.

In the poem "125th Street and Abomey," Lorde appeals to the Goddess Seboulisa to rescue her. Seboulisa is the goddess of Abomey – "the mother of us all" (332). A local representation of Mawulisa, she is considered the world's creator within her setting. History and geography separate them: "Half earth and time splits us apart / like struck rook"; slavery and the slave trade left a distinct scar of difference and distance between them. She invokes Seboulisa to fill this distance that leaves her dry and hollow:

Take my fear of being alone like
my warrior sisters

who rode in defence of your queendom
disguised and apart
give me the woman strength
of tongue in this cold season. (241)

She is a “severed daughter” who seeks a reconnection with her deity. Seboulisa is the mother of all other gods and goddesses in the Dahomean pantheon, and by invoking her Lorde is assuming some of her spiritual qualities and, at the same time, transmitting them to her audience. The goddess is engraved in her psyche and stands as the bridge between herself and her warrior sisters, who can offer an alternative worldview in which women are powerful and hold political positions. This connection can only be effected through the power of ritual. It is only by ritual offering that the goddess can be invoked. She states:

…
and I poured on the red earth in your honor
those ancient parts of me
most precious and least needed
my well-guarded past
the energy-eating secrets
I surrender to you as libation
mother, illuminate my offering
of old victories
over men over women over ourselves
who have never before dared
to whistle in the night (241)

This connection with the goddess can be had only through a determined effort to embrace the goddess through sacrifice.

In another characteristic poem, “Solstice,” Lorde begins by portraying the neglect that blacks have demonstrated because they had to rely on the benevolence of others:

We forgot to water the plantain shoots
when our houses were full of borrowed meat
and our stomachs with the gift of strangers
who laugh now as they pass us
because our land is barren
and the farms are choked with stunted rows of straw
and with our nightmare. (218)

These lines capture a complete loss of independence -- lacking even the means of livelihood, blacks are a hollow race. Not only do they lack the material necessities of life, but they are also spiritually dry:

Our skins are empty,
They have been vacated by the spirits
Who are angered by our reluctance
to feed them. (218)

The poet, however, rises above the docility and naivety of her people by shedding off the weakness that characterizes her people:

My skin is tightening
Soon I shall shed it
like a monitor lizard
like remembered comfort
at the new moon’s rising.
I will eat the last signs of my weakness
remove the scars of old childhood wars
and dare to enter the forest whistling
like the snake that has fed the chameleon
for changes
I shall be forever. (218)

This spiritual emptiness can be overcome when they decide to rise above their weakness and shed off the reluctance to work toward change. By reconnecting to their ancestral myths and legends, they can be empowered

to soar above their object position. References to the "monitor lizard," "the moon," "the snake," and "the chameleon," all indicate recourse to mythological imagery. The snake is believed to be immortal as it sloughs its skin to be born anew. Lorde wishes that her people could slough off their weaknesses and, through mythical vehemence, regain their ancestral rights. Subjecthood can be achieved only when people connect with their collective archetype. She closes the poem with a kind of incantatory prayer:

May I never remember reasons
for my spirit's safety
may I never forget
the warning of my woman's flesh
weeping at the new moon
may I never lose
that terror
which keeps me brave
may I owe nothing
that I cannot repay. (218-19)

A re-connection with the goddess can give the spirit of independence. This independence will only come when the woman's primary role is recognized.

Lorde continues to depict the idea of spiritual aridity in the poem "Call." The speaker appeals to "Aido Hwedo," the rainbow serpent, a representation of all ancient divinities in the Dahomean pantheon, to empower her by filling the void at the center of their lack of selfhood:

Holy ghost woman
stolen out of your name
Rainbow Serpent
whose faces have been forgotten.
Mother loosen my tongue or adorn me
With a lighter burden
Aido Hwedo is coming. (417)

The name of the Rainbow serpent, "Aido Hwedo" is the key, "a password" that Lorde uses against all forms of oppression and falsehoods:

I am a Black woman turning
mouthing your name as a password
through seductions self-slaughter
and I believe in the holy ghost mother. (417)

The constant invocation of "Aido Hwedo" captures the urgency with which the poet requires her intervention. The poet must supplicate the goddess to be able to touch her so that she responds to her call. Lorde tries to embrace the goddess here by reminding her that remnants of her worship persist in the black community. She states:

I have written your name on my cheekbone
dreamed your eyes flesh my epiphany
most ancient goddess hear me
enter
I have not forgotten your worship
nor my sisters
nor the sons of my daughters
my children watch for your print
in their labours
and they say Aido Hwedo is coming. (417)

She has to plead to have the spirit of the goddess come to her. She has to learn how to supplicate her: "we are learning by heart / what has never been taught / you are my given" (418).

The second category of Lorde's mythological and legendary poems involves those that depict the invocation of the goddess or the legendary heroine. Invoking the goddess/witch as a potent primordial guardian involves what Mircea Eliade terms creating sacred space. The incantation of the names of these deities creates sacred space and makes the poet and her audience contemporaneous with the deity's power. These are deities who, because of neglect, have lain buried because patriarchy erases evidence of female spirits and gods. The

poems include: “125th Street and Abomey”, “The Winds of Orisha,” “From the House of Yemanja,” “Dahomey,” and “A Woman Speaks.”

“From the House of Yemanja” opens by presenting Lorde’s family conflict, which made her an unwanted child because she was black-skinned. Her blackness, which her family considered unwanted, led her to develop an enlightened conception of selfhood. Being black meant being evil, which meant identifying with the goddesses who informed her past. Lorde’s outsider position in the family made her a more independent and emotionally stable woman. Alexis De Veaux recounts how Lorde’s elder sister Phyllis was despondent and unhappy because her mother made her too dependent on her. She could not have a husband and had no children by the time their mother was about to die. Lorde’s black skin led her to connect with her spiritual past, as she invokes the deity Yemanja, the mother of all other deities in the Dahomean and Yoruba pantheon.

Mother I need
Mother I need
Mother I need your blackness now
as the august earth needs rain. (235)

By invoking the goddess Yemanja, Lorde becomes contemporary with her and partakes of her sacred potency, giving her assertiveness and creativity. By sharing this ritual invocation with her audiences, she creates a sacred space from which her audience can construct self-esteem and solidarity

In the poem “125th Street and Abomey,” Lorde invokes, albeit in a subtler way, the goddess Seboulisa (goddess of Abomey—“Mother of us all”) by showing her inscription in her archetypal consciousness. Seboulisa is alive in her psyche, even though time and space separate them, represented in the title by “125th Street”--New York, and “Abomey”-- the capital of the ancient Kingdom of Dahomey. She captures Seboulisa’s deep engravement in her psyche by metaphorically comparing her memory with the akai coiffure:

Head bent, walking through snow
I see you Seboulisa
printed inside the back of my head
like marks of newly wrapped akai
that kept my sleep fruitful in Dahomey. (241)

Lorde had her hair plaited in the akai style while she visited Dahomey with her children and partner. As she develops her primordial affinity to this great deity, she asks her to empower her by taking away her fear:

take my fear of being alone
like my warrior sisters
who rode in defence of your queendom
disguised and apart
give me the woman strength
of tongue in this cold season. (241)

Lorde’s resemblance and maternal affinity with this goddess was accentuated when she underwent a mastectomy because of breast cancer and lost one of her breasts like the goddess: “Seboulisa mother goddess with one breast / eaten away by worms of sorrow and loss” (241). Many incidents in her life prefigure Lorde’s spiritual connection with powerful women. Her first natural lesbian liaison is with a one-breasted woman, Eudora Garrett, in Mexico. Eudora herself had something mythic and ascetic about her, living in exile because she could not cope with the oppression in the U.S. It is Garrett who would open her eyes and show her the heart of Mexico, drawing parallels between Mexican and African myth. She states: “She told me how the women in San Cristobal de Las Casas give the names of Catholic saints to their goddesses, so that they and their daughters can pray and make offerings in peace at the forest shrines without offending the Catholic church” (*Redefining Sexual Ethics*, 329). Wole Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World* shows how the desire to replant the displaced racial psyche led to a merger of African and Catholic deities in Brazil and Cuba (17). This is proof of the fact that Africans were bent on keeping their spiritual past alive.

Eudora Garrett was to serve as a bridge in Lorde’s journey toward embracing and assuming the goddess's power. The goddess was always alive, only disguised to fool the oppressor. Lorde’s admiration for the Amazon warriors of Dahomey, who are believed to cut one of their breasts to be good archers, and her love for Seboulisa all prefigure her mastectomy and loss of one breast. This goes to suggest that Lorde had something prophetic and spiritual about her. She is a harbinger of a new religion that is woman-identified and African but needs adherents. In a rather characteristically lesbian passage, she grounds this erotic affinity with the Amazons. As she makes love with Garrett, she foresees her future as an Amazon warrior:

We run up the steep outside steps to her roof, and the almost full moon flickers in the dark center wells of her eyes. Kneeling, I pass my hands over her body, along the now-familiar place below her left shoulder, down along her ribs. A part of her. The mark of the Amazon. For a woman who seems spare, almost lean, in her clothing, her body is ripe and smooth to the touch. Beloved. Warm to my coolness, cool to my heat. I bend, moving my lips over her flat stomach to the firm rising mound beneath. (*Redefining Sexual Ethics*, 329)

This liaison prefigures her later development as a warrior poet and visionary for change. In her essay "Uses of the Erotic," she argues that the erotic is the center of women's power and creative genius. When this vital part is controlled and imprisoned, women become docile because they will lack the experience that is derived from deep erotic contact.

In "The Winds of Orisha," Lorde makes recourse both to Western and African myths. She alludes to the mythical transvestite, Teresias, who was transformed from a man into a woman. Theodor Hopfner's book, *The Sex Life of the Greeks and the Romans from the Beginning to the 6th Century AD*, Part 7, discusses the idea of sex transformation in antiquity. He remarks: "Antiquity found in mythology the first documentation of this phenomenon, that is still observed today again and again" (6-8). He cites the case of Teiresias and gives various accounts of his transsexuality:

The best-known story is that of Teiresias: once when he saw a copulating pair of snakes, he struck them with a cane and became a woman; after seven years he became a man again through the same occurrence. He was supposed to have changed sex seven times and to have been called daughter of Phorbas among the Getans. According to other versions,… (6-8).

Most relevant about this mythic story is that Tieresias enjoyed being a woman more than a man. As Hopfner puts it: "he is supposed to have preferred life as a woman to life as a man" (7 of 8). Lorde alludes to this Western myth to validate women's essence and cautions her sisters: "Tieresias took 500 years to grow into woman, so do not despair for your sons" (90).

In "The Winds of Orisha," Lorde invokes her pantheon of African gods and goddesses: Yemanja, Oshun, Shango, and Oya. These male and female deities work together in harmony in an African milieu. They constitute the Orisha, and their incantation ushers quick results:

When the Winds of Orisha blow
even the roots of grass
quicken. (91)

Lorde shows the connections between myths everywhere by juxtaposing Greek and Roman mythology against the pantheon of African mythology. No mythological repository is superior to another; neither can a community leave its repository for someone else's. Tieresias stands as a symbol of male/female myth and so shows that society is not dominated by males but is an androgynous melange of both qualities. These qualities are not fixed but mutational. Masculinity and femininity are gender ascriptions that can be taken up and played regardless of sex.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen in the analysis above, Lorde uses myth to build solidarity between women, homosexual men, and Black people. She boosts the self-esteem of black people, female people, and homosexual people by citing ancient history to demonstrate that these identities are not "other" but positive traits. However, giving someone self-esteem does not mean becoming the same. When acknowledging that each segment is vital to advancing all, Black people can identify as a group. Adults will need to show respect for and engage in conversation with children, women and men, straight people and LGBT people, and religious and secular groups. Engaging in discourse with diverse dominant cultures is only feasible when such dialogue is feasible. According to Lorde, combating racism in the black community requires fostering self-esteem, and she does this by invoking these deities and legendary heroines. Lorde recounts their sacrality and becomes contemporary with them. As a priestess, she stands as the open portal that links the profane historical world with the sacred and primordial world of the deities. In "Myth and Mythical Thought," Mircea Eliade shows the power of assuming the sacrality of mythological and legendary figures.

By reciting the myths, she recreates that fabulous time and becomes contemporary with the events described, coming into the presence of the gods or heroes. By "living" the myths, one emerges from the profane, chronologically ordered time and enters a time of a different quality – a "sacred" time, at once primordial and infinitely recoverable. (24) Lorde assumes the position of a priestess who links her audience with the sacred and primordial time. The priestess recites sacred words and deeds of the deities, which profoundly affects the worshippers. Lorde, therefore, positions herself as the portal that links the profane and the sacred and invites us to follow.

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