

TRICKSTER AESTHETICS IN AUDRE LORDE'S *ZAMI: A NEW SPELLING OF MY NAME*

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“They transform the meaningless into the meaningful, not by becoming saviors, but by remaining ambiguous, facing both ways on every boundary” (Pelton 234).

Abstract:

The paper examines the much neglected female trickster in African American novel. The novels of Audre Lorde exhibit a new approach to the novelistic tradition that is rooted in the distinct and diverse cultural traditions of the African Americans. She has weaved in myths and folk tales in the narratives as a resistance to the west inspired empirical worldview. Tricksters in her novels resurface not just as a disruptive figure but also as rhetorical principle. The trickster motif in the novel however has been used before by earlier black female writers like Zora Neale Hurston. But the trickster figures in the contemporary writings by black female authors like Lorde no longer resort to subterfuge and subversive strategies that was earlier regarded as necessary to create a niche for the African Americans in the white society. The female tricksters in her novels act as a binding force that revitalizes the community by making space for contrasting voices and perspectives. The trickster in her novels becomes the symbols of black identity and cultural strength by blasting monolithic stereotypes about African American women.

Key Words: *Trickster, African American, biomythography, Eshu, boundaries.*

Trickster, the Jungian archetype, appears in religious and social literature of all cultures. The diabolical character is found among the indigenous groups and has a special attraction for mankind. The trickster figures of myths are akin to but not similar to the folkloric trickster figures. But an insight into the traits of his personality and the patterns of his actions will help us comprehend the actions of folkloric and neo-tricksters. The mythic tricksters were of ambiguous and paradoxical nature inducing change with their disruptive character and penchant for playing pranks. They are often responsible for some major cosmic events when the established order is being reversed. Therefore, he is often regarded as a culture hero. The mythological tales of all cultures abounds with the tricksters and the actions attributed to them involve devising creative solution to conflicts. Paul Radin's *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* recounts the amoral exploits of the North American Winnebago trickster before he evolves and is socialized. This book introduced the fascinating trickster 'Winnebago' to Western consciousness which at first regarded Hermes as a far more thrilling trickster. Hermes, the Greek God of communication and language, was a popular trickster due to the pranks he played since his childhood and due to his ability to escape being caught owing to his linguistic dexterity and trickery. Few popular mythic tricksters occurring in various other cultures are: Legba or Eshu, the master of crossroads, presiding over the destiny of men, belongs to the Yoruba tribe, the largest surviving African ethnic group; the trickster and the master manipulator god Krishna who is worshipped by the Hindus; Susa-no-o, the God of storms provided mankind with daylight, fire and water in Japanese mythological tales. With the passage of time the trickster symbol has seeped into the folktales of disparate cultures and in modern times has emerged as a literary figure but has retained its “ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and

paradox” (Hyde 7).

Due to the ever existing oppression in our society, the trickster character has managed to survive from myths to contemporary literature. The most popular and recurrent cultural icon in African American literature has been the trickster. The trickster figure is multifaceted and its role varies within the ethnic groups. The trickster archetype encountered in the African American folktales is cunning, paradoxical, polytropic and liminal. Some of the most engaging and celebrated trickster figures in African American folktales are Brer Rabbit, Anansi, the Spider and the Signifying Monkey. These trickster figures are the metamorphosed versions of wily and comical rabbits, spiders and monkeys of African folktales, who have been transported to the American and Caribbean soil during the Trans Atlantic slave trade. The behavioral traits of these tricksters reflect the transformed and transmuted moral and cultural values of the Africans, conditioned by the hostile American environment. The trickster tales circulated in the slave quarters demand that we suspend not only our disbelief but also our moral conscience as the tricksters often engage in acts of violence and brutality. The enslaved Africans in America identified themselves with the cunning and witty tricksters who were often represented as weak creatures that used their tricks to outwit their bullies or oppressors and rebel against the established moral order. The tales acted as safety valves as they gave vent to their frustrations, anger and desire of revenge instilling hope of a better future. Their behavioral traits include a strong appetite for food, greediness and insatiable thirst for sex. They are an admixture of stupidity and cleverness. Roger Abrahams summarizes the social importance of the animal trickster in the slave community:

In the guise of the small (childlike) animal, the negro is perhaps fulfilling the role in which he has been cast by his white 'masters'(the childlike Uncle Tom who is convinced of his simple state and thus needs the protection of his master). At the same time, in this role he is able to show superiority over those larger and more important than himself through his trick, thus partially salving his wounded ego (45).

One of the key features of the tricksters is the ambiguity of their gender, yet the trickster is almost always conceived as a man. Lewis Hyde explains why he believes “All the standard tricksters are male” (335) as there is hardly any female mythic or folkloric character that has “an elaborate career in trickery” (335). While considering the absence of mythic or folkloric female trickster we must also take into account the fact that the society in which the trickster was conceived and operated was patriarchal. The critic Landay in *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature* sites another probable reason for the absence of the female trickster: [I]n a sexist society, the male trickster clearly has the advantages of masculinity: mobility, autonomy, power, safety” (2). Tricksters continually evolve in all ages. The female tricksters originated in the late 19th century conditioned by the perpetual unequal social relationships as women broke the stigmas and stereotypes attached with their gender. African American authoresses have deployed female trickster characters in their novels to question and upend the social conventions. These trickster characters have the ability to manipulate the power structure and the established social order to express themselves and thereby advance their agendas. The female tricksters' domain of action in the works of African American writers includes both the domestic sphere as well as the material sphere usually occupied by men.

Audre Lorde qualifies as a trickster author due to her radical writing style that challenges the phallogentrism in literature and displaces the static perspectives and brings in plurality. Lorde, born in 1934, was the daughter of West Indian immigrants, Fredric Byron and Linda Gertrude, during the Depression-era in Harlem. After earning her BA degree from Hunter College, she did her MA in Library Science from Columbia University. She worked as a Librarian in City University, New York for several years. She published her first book of poetry *The First Cities* (1968) just after the dissolution of her interracial marriage. The turning point in her life was receiving a grant from National Endowment for Arts which enabled her to give up her Librarian job and become a writer-in-residence at Tougaloo College in

Mississippi. For the next twenty years she continued publishing poetry, essays, novel and a memoir. Her major books of poetry are *From a Land Where Other People Lived* (1973), *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974), *Between Our Selves* (1976), *The Black Unicorn* (1978), *Chosen Poems Old and New* (1982), *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986).

Audre's description of herself as "Black, lesbian, feminist, poet, mother and warrior" resonates the multiplicity of her identity and her claim for recognition and affirmation of the differences among people that is necessary for a progressive society. Through her engagements in black lesbian feminist circles, she developed a radical theory for mitigating class, gender and racial differences by celebrating and acknowledging them, insisting that the future depended on cooperation among women. Her non-fiction works *The Cancer Journals* (1980) and *A Burst of Light* (1988) records her battle with breast cancer. Her work convenes the cancer patients to unite despite their differences in order to support each other in their battle against the deadly disease and to spread awareness about it as it is shrouded in silence. She acknowledged undergoing mastectomy and refused to wear prosthesis as it could be detrimental to her health. In the collection of essays *Sister Outsider* (1984) she confronts issues such as class, homophobia, sexism, ageism etc that induces differences that call for a need for social change. Her best known work *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) was written while she was undergoing treatment for breast cancer. The West Indian word 'Zami' stands for the women who "work together as friends or lovers" (*Zami* 255). It is both a kunstlerroman and a coming-out-of-the-closet account that defies the generic boundaries and celebrates plurality.

Lorde in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* analyzes layers of her identity exposed by her relation to her mother, friends and lovers. The text is punctuated by snippets of her mother Linda's oral poems and her own poetry. Lorde has traced her creativity back to her mother, Linda. Linda had first introduced her to language: oral and visual. Lorde has quoted several of her mother's oral poetry which has a link to her native place Carriacou, an island in the southeastern Caribbean Sea. Lorde has inherited the love of West Indian culture and tradition from her mother Linda and was greatly influenced by her mother's transnational perspective. Lorde recognizes, "I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers" (*Zami* 32). Lorde moves from her mother's oral poetry to written ones based on her own emotions and intuitions. With the ability to write her own verse dawns the realization of her own identity that is unique and discrete. Her ways of survival, self-gratification and radical experimentation through which she resisted social conventions irks her mother and becomes a perennial source of tension between them. Lorde has to move away from the overbearing and obliterating shadow of her mother to create her own free identity. She wrote "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive" (*Learning* 137). But at the end of the biomythography, with the help of Afrekete, Lorde revives her links with her mother and the matrilineal lineage as an independent woman. Carriacou, Linda's homeland, comes to have a mythic significance in Lorde's life. It is a place that creates a sense of self-fulfillment. She has been empowered by the various women who connect with her in "an intricate, complex and ever-widening network of exchanging strengths" (*Zami* 175). This has encouraged her to articulate and acknowledge the differences in an attempt to form an inclusive feminist community.

Lorde describes the novel *Zami* as a "biomythography". The neologism attempts to capture the hybridity of the work. The cocktail of autobiography, history, myth and fiction, traces the role of real and fictional women in Lorde's life. Black women are doubly marginalized. They are oppressed both racially, a situation that they share with the black men, and for their gender that links them to the women of the world. The black autobiography has its origin in the slave narratives which were written for anti-slavery propaganda to discourage slavery during the antebellum period. The act of writing for the black people was an attempt to prove their humanity in the eyes of the white Americans. For the black women writers the autobiography emerged as the site for articulating their bicultural self (African and American) engaged in a matrilineal kinship with fellow sisters, united in their solidarity and responsibility. The black women's

concept of autobiography thus differs considerably from the western male tradition where the self is characterized by its unified subjectivity. It also differs from their male counterparts as their text revealed an involuntary attempt to conceal one's nature in order to fit into the customary discourse of the society. In an attempt to forge the public and private image in their writing, there occurred a spilt in the narrative voice. The other two recurrent motifs discerned in the genre are journey and home. The journey to foreign places away from one's native place are often undertaken in an attempt to delve inwards in search of an united self that can stimulate a positive social change. The home is a mythic place for the Afro Americans. The idea of their native place is transferred to them by their parents. The place implanted in their memory by their forefathers has the elements of a magical land to which they are connected by a part of the culture that constitutes one half of the protagonist's bicultural self. Their native land is the source of their perpetual nostalgia and alienation in a land where their identity is not recognized by the majority of white population.

Audre Lorde has remodeled the genre and named it 'biomythography'. She has distanced herself from several of the constraining aspects of autobiography thus liberating the form and the narrator. Just like the trickster of the crossroads, Eshu, she reconciles two dialectically opposite facets, bringing about equilibrium in the relationship between the public and private image of the narrator. Biomythography, the new genre devised by Lorde, compiles the experiences of life(bios), writing(graphe) and myth. The clamping of the term 'myth' in the new genre revokes the limits laid down by its predecessor. *Zami* is not a linear record of Audre Lorde's life experiences but an unrestricted and unintimidated attempt at self-exploration. Lorde does not hide herself in her writing but blossoms forth with her poetic voice. Her writing is more than the juxtaposition of authentic accounts. The book shows that the self is comprised of historical facts, practical experiences, myths of one's own making, poems, songs etc. which cannot be listed chronologically nor its validity tested by western empiricism. The neologism "biomythography" shows that it has reconnected itself with the slave narratives. The usual practice among the slaves involved taking up of a new name after regaining freedom. The title of the work *Zami: A New Spelling for My Name* presents Lorde's attempt to free herself from the shackles of the dominant culture's prerogative to name her or presuppose an identity on her behalf. The biomythography by blending real characters with fictitious ones and with touches of dreams and poetry has transcended the clearly defined boundaries of autobiography and has become a celebration of plurality and differences. Despite the homophobic framework of the society, Lorde derives the root of her lesbian identity from her mother's Caribbean cultural heritage and wants to develop a tradition of 'women for women' both emotionally and physically. She has experienced racism, sexism and classism within the lesbian circle that she frequented. Lorde calls out to explore and express the multiplicity and plenitude of one's identity without the fear of repression or dominance. The word 'Zami' essentially defines the loving bond shared between women.

The trickster author, Lorde's capability to dwell in and embrace myriad peripheries is best manifested in her own claim to be "black lesbian mother poet feminist"; likewise her novel subverts the hegemonial discourse by escaping from the convention and limitations of framing the story within a single genre. Lorde rejects and problematizes the binaries associated and promoted by the western culture especially the gender binary. The trickster trope in this biomythography is not a disruptive force but one which helps to reclaim one's own body by recognizing the desire to forge the differences that are generally categorized into systems of binary. Lorde expresses her desire to exist and experience the world both as a male and female figure:

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. I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered-to leave and to be left-to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving. I would like to drive forward and at other times to rest or be driven. When I sit and play in the waters of my bath I love to feel the deep inside parts of me,

sliding and folded and tender and deep. Other times I like to fantasize the core of it, my pearl, a protruding part of me, hard and sensitive and vulnerable in a different way (*Zami* 7)

Lorde felt the need to subvert the existing codes and her eventual success finds her at crossroads, a place of intersection where enforced binary systems coalesce. The crossroad happens to be the domain of the trickster god Eshu who figures repetitively in the poems of Lorde. Lorde also alternatively refers to him as Afrekete. The variations in the name add to his multidimensional complexity. A frekete figures in *Zami* as a like-minded woman whom Lorde meets and later forges a relation with.

The West African people worship Eshu as the divine messenger between man and god. His symbol is the crossroads and he resides at the gateways. Eshu offers choices, opportunities and possibilities and thus safeguards the principle of freewill. A very interesting Yoruba (West African tribe) tale narrates Eshu's role in breaking up the friendship of two men who swears to stay friends till death but do not acknowledge Eshu. Thus one day Eshu arrives to test their friendship. He walks on the dividing line between their fields, wearing a cap that is black on one side and red (or white in some versions) on the other. He saunters between the fields, exchanging pleasantries with both the men. Afterwards, the two friends get to talking about the man with the cap, and fall to violent quarreling about the color of the man's hat, calling each other blind and crazy. The neighbors gather about, and then Eshu arrives and stops the fight. The friends explain their disagreement, and Eshu shows them the two-sided hat--all this to chastise the friends for not putting him first in their doings. The story reveals why the trickster Eshu is widely recognized as a representative of multiplicity and fluid transnational existence. What baffles the readers is that his fluid identity sort of makes knowledge multifaceted.

In Lorde's work, trickster Eshu, is relevant as she attempts to forge a communication between varied groups that do not interact, such as men and women, blacks and whites, homosexuals and heterosexuals etc. He is a figure of doubtful gender and sexual identity that refuses to settle with a fragmented identity. He resists the discourse that attempts to naturalize the differences integrated in gendered, racial and sexual hierarchies. Audre Lorde in a conversation with Judy Grahn traces the origin of Eshu and Afrekete (another predominant trickster in her works). According to Audre, the origin of Afrekete dates back to the old religion preceding the Yoruba culture and their religion. Afrekete is essentially the feminine personification of Eshu. Eshu is generally associated with masculinity and undertones of bisexuality. Lorde explains in *The Black Unicorn* that Eshu does not have any priest and in the religious rituals his "part is danced by a woman with an attached phallus" (*Black* 120). Henry Louis Gates in *Signifying Monkey* has also acknowledged that Eshu is the male counterpart of Afrekete, one of the few Gods or spirits of Africans, who had re-established his home in South America. Gates explains:

Eshu is the sum of the parts, as well as that which connects to parts. He is invoked and sacrificed to first, before any other deity, because of this: "He alone can set an action in motion and interconnect the parts." This aspect of Esu cannot be emphasized too much. The most fundamental absolute of the Yoruba is that there exist, simultaneously, three stages of existence: the past, the present, and the unborn. Esu represents these stages, and makes their simultaneous existence possible, without any contradiction," precisely because he is the principle of discourse both as messenger and as the god of communication (42).

Afrekete, like Eshu, springs from Mauw Lisa, the goddess of crossroads, as related by the Yoruban mythology. Afrekete is also at times regarded as the 'bisexual personification' of Mauw (the moon, female) and Lisa (the sun, male). Afrekete has imbibed in herself both the efficacy of the female and male gender. She is nurturing as well as philosophical; qualities that are essential for dwelling in borders and crossroads.

Whether it is the trickster Eshu or Afrekete, they both disrupt the rigid social and sexual boundaries. The female trickster Afrekete has helped Lorde to create a niche in African Diasporic Literature as a black warrior poet through her crafty use of language. The critique Ann Louise Keating has noted how the discovery of Lorde's matrilineal connections has empowered her: "By replacing her Judeo

Christian world view with one which validates her African roots, she affirms her identity as a Black woman warrior poet...By reclaiming figures from African mythology in these poems and others, Lorde simultaneously redefines herself and celebrates her access to language's transformative powers"(28).She has infused her writings with plethora of transnational identities: Carribean, African and American.

Afrekete plays the same role as Eshu in Lorde's life. She integrates Lorde by helping her to acknowledge her past, accept her present and build a future based on the bonding of women. Lorde's identity as a "black lesbian feminist poet" has been vastly shaped by the women in her life who have helped her to rediscover her "home" and to form an everlasting bond with the Carribean culture. Her subsequent works have also been an attempt to acknowledge the differences of race, culture and sex and accordingly to unite them and accelerate the liberation movement of the minority groups instead of using them as weapons for destroying each other. The role that Lorde plays in the biomythography is similar to that of Eshu or Afrekete who functions as an interlocutor, defining multiplicities and helping to build a coalition without confrontations.

The key incident in the 'biomythography' is Lorde's meeting with Afrekete who teaches her to reside in boundaries and ultimately frees her from the loop of 'love followed by disappointment' by imparting her knowledge about her own self that transforms Lorde into a proud Black Lesbian. Lorde meets her in a gay bar and the little talk they have is mundane. It is only when they began to dance that Lorde is stuck by how rhythmic their movement is and she connects with Afrekete immediately without the need to exchange any words: "Our bodies met again, each surface touched with each other's flame, from the tips of our curled toes to our tongues, and locked into our own wild rhythms, we rode each other across the thundering space, dripped like light from the peak of each other's tongue. We were each of us both together" (249). This is the state of bliss in which all the shards of her acknowledged as well as unacknowledged self integrated. Thus Afrekete switches with ease from being the African American lesbian lover with a "broad lipped beautiful face" (*Zami* 247) to the African God who through sexual intimacy awakens Lorde to the deep secrets of her own body that were previously unknown. The sexual intimacy with Afrekete regenerates Lorde and introduces her to the essence of her own female consciousness. Sexual intimacy and eroticism becomes a powerful tool for self exploration. Lorde believed that eroticism 'is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and unrecognized feeling" (*Uses* 53). The most important aspect of eroticism is "the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual" (*Uses* 56) that transforms it into a life force and an embodiment of sexual and spiritual liberation.

The final union between Lorde and Afrekete is described in spiritual terms such as mass, prayer, ritual and transubstantiation. They unite upon a "mass of green plants that Afrekete tended religiously" (*Zami* 250) and their foreplay imitates the sacred rites preceding the worship of a deity: "squeezed the pale yellow-green fruit juice in thin ritual lines back and forth over and around your coconut brown belly... massaged it over your thighs and between your breasts until your brownness shone like alight through a veil" (*Zami* 251). Their union echoes the prayers of all women to master the strength to overcome their sufferings: "Afrekete, Afrekete ride me to the crossroads 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"(Zami 252) The crossroad signifies the scope for myriad relations between women involving the spiritual and sexual urges. Union with Afrekete brings together all the disjointed personalities of Lorde. Afrekete has not discarded the aspects of Lorde's personality that she failed to make sense of unlike Lorde's other lovers. In fact they both understand how these differences put them in a condition where they are "committed without choice to waging or campaigns in the enemies' strongholds...and how our (their) psychic landscapes had been plundered and wearied" (*Zami* 250).She understands that African women must come together and bond in order to survive in such adversary conditions. But the search of community only brings to the fore the categories

that are present even in the black community: "Black 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 dykes together was not enough. We were different" (*Zami* 226). But community limits one's freedom with definite politically defined terms. Lorde's experience with Afrekete changes her and she understands that she has imbibed the inheritance of her mothers and sisters in her own self: "Mawu-lisa, thunder, sky, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become" (*Zami* 55). Afrekete has taken Lorde back to her African roots. The reclamation of the history of slavery, violence and sexual abuse speeds up the healing process and the transformation into a powerful and creative woman who lives and thrives.

It is unclear whether Kitty or Afrekete is a real life lover of Lorde as she is in her biomythography. She mysteriously leaves the town with only a message that she has "gotten a gig in Atlanta for September, and was splitting to visit her mama and daughter for a while" (*Zami* 253). The trickster goddess fades away as Lorde emerges to take her place pulsating with the new lessons she has learned from Afrekete. We realize that her biomythography is written from her revised viewpoint as she has found her own voice as a black lesbian and realizes that all the women in her life: cruel or supportive, have helped shape her consciousness. Her self-naming at the end is an affirmation of her successful quest for self-interpretation. She has rebirthed herself as the *Zami* (Caribbean word for a collection of women working and loving together) and has also integrated within herself the trickster Afrekete who helps her to delve into the repressed powers of sexuality that boosts her writings. The ambiguity, multiplicity, acceptance in the trickster concept has enabled Lorde to initiate the transformation of the oppressive ethno and phallogocentric practices. She has successfully created an alternative concept of community free of the stereotypes protecting the various power-structures of the society. The trickster Afrekete has become the symbol of survival for the indigenous and queer groups. She has highlighted the middle passage between the rigid boundaries and concepts of sexuality.

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