

Audre Lorde's *Zami*: A New Spelling of My Name as a Feminist

Bildungsroman

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the attempt of women writers to reconfigure and reformulate established fictional genres to create more responsive genres that better represent the heterogeneity of women's experiences in accordance with the increasing confirmation within feminist literary and cultural studies on women's literature and the rumination of its social function to provide a sympathetic as well as a critical analysis of contemporary feminist fiction. Focusing on the way Audre Lorde incorporates individual and collective memories as well as erotic and traumatic memories in her literary works, I use the literary category of feminist Bildungsroman to examine her biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* in which she presents an alternative model of female development in terms of forming a distinct identity and subjectivity. The paper traces the strenuous personal development and transformation of Audre as a black woman endeavouring to challenge marginalization and resist the various forms and layers of abuse and subjugation practiced against her in a racialized and sexist society. Taking into consideration that the political implications of women's writing can only be theorized when it is related to the cultural and ideological processes that shape it, I employ Rita Felski's analysis of women's modern writing as an context where female political identities and collective consciousness are depicted.

KEYWORDS: Feminist bildungsroman, Audre Lorde, *Zami*, public sphere, marginality.

1. Introduction: Bildungsroman as an Unsettled Genre

To whom do I owe the power behind my voice?

To whom do I owe the symbol of my survival?

To whom do I owe the woman I have become?

To the journeywoman pieces of myself.

Becoming (Lorde, 1982: 5). "All further references to this text will be indicated with page numbers between parentheses".

These are a few lines from the rather transcendental and long passages with which Audre Lorde starts *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* to acknowledge the important roles of the women who have contributed in her writing career and in herself "coming whole and blackened" (Lorde, 1982: 5). Of central importance, to the purpose of this paper is the term 'journeywoman' and especially its connection to the term 'becoming' in the following line. The term journeywoman is "someone who has completed an apprenticeship and is fully educated in a trade or craft, but not yet a master." (<http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/journeywoman>). A similar definition is offered by the free dictionary

where it is defined as: "A woman who has fully served an apprenticeship in a trade or craft and is a qualified worker in another's employ. (Journeywoman: The Free Dictionary) In *Writing the Subject: Bildung and the African American Text*, Gunilla Theander Kester (1997) illustrates the complex relationship Ralph In his novel, *Invisible Man*, Ellison has to two of its literary antecedents: First, the slave narrative exemplified by Fredrick Douglass's *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and; second, the classical Bildungsroman exemplified by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795). Known as a coming-out story or a novel of formation, the Bildungsroman focuses on "the spiritual and intellectual maturation of its protagonist" (Boes, 2012:1) Patricia Alden, cited in Kester, provides a fuller description of the genre in respect to the process through which the protagonist goes:

The genre focuses on the development of a single individual within a particular social world...it is the

history of this individual from childhood up to a point at which the development or unfolding of his or her character achieved; in other words it is the story of apprenticeship rather than a life history (Kester, 1997: 52).

Kester indicates that of all critics applying the term Bildungsroman to describe Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Kenneth Burke notes "some similarities between the lives of Goethe and Ellison and the protagonists they create" (Kester, 1997: 49). Burke discusses, further elucidated by Kester, the "three characteristic steps in the maturation process of Goethe's young hero—Apprenticeship, Journeymanhood, Mastery—and he aligns these three phases with the maturation process of invisible man" (Kester, 1997: 50).

Though the three steps of apprenticeship, journeymanhood, and mastery are clearly featured in Douglass's *Narrative of the Life*. However, Kester points out an important difference in that the protagonist of "Wilhelm Meister pursues a career within a sympathetic society, while the subject Fredrick Douglass's period of apprenticeship primarily teaches him the degradation of slavery," and he must "first escape the American South of slavery" (Kester, 1997: 51), in order for him to reach 'mastery.'

It is this process of maturation with its three steps captured in the classical Bildungsroman and the African American slave narrative that is repeated in Lorde's depiction of her female character who is apprenticed in a society that perceives her as an 'outsider', making her feel "close to crazy with believing that there was some secret thing wrong with me personally that formed an invisible barrier between me and the rest of my friends, who were white" (81). Audre's childhood apprenticeship years progress to be harder as she not only suffers from social restrictions but from familial barriers as well. Stella Bolaki (2013) describes the household where Audre lives for being "unbearable as a result of the

restrictive injunctions adopted by her immigrant mother – injunctions which promote both racial assimilation and heterosexuality" (Bolaki, 2013: 784). Audre's coming of age, thus, coincides with her moving out which signals her journeywomanhood signified by her travel to Mexico.

Similar to the Fredrick, the protagonist in *The Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*, Audre must first deal with the racist, patriarchal and sexist ideologies of her society in order for her to fulfill mastery. As mentioned earlier, the term journeywoman in Lorde's opening passages has a special importance in relation to the term 'becoming,' in the sense that Audre goes through a journey from childhood into maturation. Hence, the use of the basic definition of journeywomanhood is to describe the way Audre completes an apprenticeship and becomes fully aware of the ideological and cultural perceptions and values of her community.

The three steps mentioned above have helped Lorde in first, attributing a level of authority and mastery to the protagonist which can be noticed primarily in Audre's capacity as a narrator, and mastery as a focal character. Second, utilizing the three steps of apprenticeship, journeymanhood and mastery help the writer in tracking the process of her protagonist's development. Lorde, hence, places her work within the traditional discourses of self-writing or autobiographically-structured stories and the Bildungsroman of course with changes and reconfigurations which will be further discussed in the current part of the study.

It is important to explore the ways in which Lorde tries to distinguish and separate her novel as a modern writing received with the boundaries of modern feminist discourse from the traditional realistic fiction. It is also important that the construction of a form, i.e., a genre that best addresses and represents women's needs and interests is pivotal to the contemporary feminist fiction as a context of

female self-realization. Investigating the social implications and functions of feminist literature, Felski argues in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* that:

Because many women writers of the last twenty years have been concerned with addressing urgent political issues and rewriting the story of women's lives, they have frequently chosen to employ realist forms (Felski, 1989: 79).

In her discussion, Felski presents two primary categories: the 'confession' novels and the novels of 'self-discovery' that she further divides into two groups: the novel of 'awakening' and a 'feminist Bildungsroman.' Despite the differences between the traditional genres of autobiography and the Bildungsroman and the forms administered by Felski, she has developed the category of self-discovery "to designate all those texts by women writers which trace a clear narrative of female emancipation through separation from a male-defined context" (Felski, 1989: 20). For its construction, *Zami* is primarily built on veiled autobiographical aspects. The power of the text depends on the fact that it describes the interplay between personal and political aspects of Audre's life. Thus, in reading of the text as a novel of female development, it is important to take into consideration the political meanings of feminist thought. Establishing that the social credibility of feminist literary production including narratives of female resilience and the Bildungsroman, Felski writes:

On the one hand, it is autobiographical, exploring woman's changing perception of self; on the other, this examination of subjectivity acquires a representative significance through the superimposition of transsubjective pattern of meaning, a narrative of emancipation derived from the political ideology of feminism (Felski, 1989:

83).

Discussing the uses of truth in Lorde's narration, Wilson refers to Sidonie Smith's reading of *Zami* as fiction. Sidonie focuses on the ways *Zami* combines elements of both fiction and fact that is external and internal agency to create truth and subjectivity:

Lorde stops the narrative short before— were this actually autobiography— Audre/Lorde would become a mother: Zami ends in a transcendental evocation of Black lesbian sexuality and community that makes no gesture toward such heterosexual or heterosocial possibility (Wilson, 2001: 102).

'Pinning' Lorde's text into its generic place becomes more complex and problematic with Lorde's own definition of *Zami* as a biomythography. In an interview with Claudia Tate (1988) Lorde describes *Zami* as a "biomythography which is really fictive. It has elements of biography and history of myth. In other words, it [is] fiction built from many sources" (115). Lorde returns to this definition in more than one place, for example, in an interview with Joseph F. Beams (2004), she calls *Zami* a "biomythography because it's made up of myth, history, and biography, all the ways in which we perceive the world around us" (Beam, 2004: 128) Despite Lorde's 'neologism' and despite the fluidity of its form and its generic instability, *Zami* has been read largely as "either autobiography or – a category that overlaps the first but that has generic expectations of its own coming-out story" (Wilson, 2001: 99). Much of the criticism dealing with the formal properties of *Zami*, however, have focused on Lorde's dominant autobiographical voice as a way to construct black female identity that was, in Lorde's own words, invisible in the white American society of the fifties.

If the African American narrative of Bildung, in a similar manner to the slave narrative and the classical Bildungsroman, describes the relationship between an individual and his or her world (Kester, 1997, 6), then,

the African American female narrative of Bildung differs from the classical model not only “through the use of female protagonists as central characters but also through the striking use of narrative voices which rarely can be narrowed to a single subject” (Kester, 1997, 92). The African American female narrative of Bildung turns ‘the narrative into a communal, unhierarchical space for many voices’ (Kester, 1997: 92). The emphasis on rearrangement and reconfiguration has become a need for women writers in terms of responding to women’s changing interests and needs. In her study of contemporary women writers of colour, Heejung Cha formulates the term ‘transcultural Bildungsroman’ to describe a novel that “narrates the developmental process of a [woman] caught between intensified cultural boundaries” (Cha, 2006: 23). Cha goes on to say that this narration “is part of a healing process to recover from a historically and culturally traumatized sense of self by ideologies of whiteness and patriarchy” (Cha, 2006: 25). Discussing the structure and form of this variant, Cha further argues that:

Women writers of color reconfigure the general pattern of a literary genre and reinvent a subversively transformed genre to counter-narrate predominant cultural and historical assumptions which constrains women’s existence. (Cha: 2006, 1).

Cha’s definition and argument are most exquisitely applicable to Lorde’s *Zami*, in which the reconfiguration and reinvention of the genre is, to a great extent, one of Lorde’s best literary achievements. As a novel written by a woman, *Zami* is based on implicit autobiographical elements and it is about a female protagonist and is received within the context of feminist literature. This gave importance to the text and its power is laid on the autobiographical voice, as well as, on the description that is used in the text and specifically on the interaction and tension between

the categories of the personal and political. Thus, female maturation has special importance in the texts that deal with the political ideology of feminism.

2. Overview of *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

The story traces Audre’s journey cataloguing her development from childhood to maturation generally and her relationships with women specifically. Audre’s journey is never meant to be easy as Lorde describes in *Zami* that “it was hard enough to be Black, to be Black and female, to be Black, female and gay, to be Black, female, gay and out of the closet in a white environment” (224). As the story unfolds, the reader learns about little Audre’s physical disabilities, her inability to speak and see, isolating her from her surroundings as well as her family from whom she receives very little warmth and affection. Her two older sisters, Phyllis and Helen, though very close to each other, are very detached from Audre and are rarely mentioned in the story. Her parents and other adults, especially her mother, constantly attempt to discipline her for what they perceive as rude and disrespectful.

Despite her near-sightedness, Audre managed to learn to talk and come to realize that all stories are “about people who were very different from us. They were blond and white and lived in houses with trees and had dogs named Spot” (18). She confirms her childish anti-sentiment about this racial fact, without actually understanding it, by adding “nobody wrote stories about us” (18). Starting a sight-conversation class in the local school, Audre learns how to read and write from her school’s kind librarian. However, failing to “follow directions,” in her teacher’s terms, she is taken to the Catholic school. Though admitting she has “no words for racism,” Audre feels she is not treated like other children. Unable to understand her teacher’s covert acts of racism, she describes how the class is divided into two groups, the Fairies and the Brownies. The mature narrator, however, notes the

racist attitude behind this division saying that “in this day of heightened sensitivity to racism and colour-usage, I don’t have to tell you which were the good students and which were the baddies” (27-28). Though Audre manages to make it to the Fairies for short periods of time, she is always taken back to the Brownies, “because either talking too much, or...breaking [her] glasses, or...perpetuat[ing] some other awful infraction of the endless rules of good behaviour” (28). Patronizing Audre and underestimating her educational abilities, the teacher suspects Audre can do her homework properly all by herself thinking “that was too much coming from a Brownie” (29). However, despite her initial troubles with speaking properly, Audre soon displays strong verbal talents, especially in writing, from an early age and this talent is more polished as grows up. Growing up, nevertheless, proves to be especially difficult for Audre, who constantly feels alienated from her family, school and society.

Audre’s understanding and awakening to her status as a black female appears in her description of the unfair treatment and ‘downright’ hostility of the Sisters of Charity at St. Catherine’s School. Holding elections for two class presidents, one boy and one girl, Sister Blanche declares that anyone can run and that voting should be based on “merit and effort and class spirit,” but that the most important thing she adds ‘would be marks’ (61). Audre, who is sure she is “the smartest girl in the class,” decides to run and never considers failure. The elections, however, end up with Ann Archdeacon, “the most popular girl in the school,” and “the prettiest,” winning for the girls. Audre describes this as one of the most painful experiences of her childhood and comments on the racism of Sisters of Charity as “unadorned, unexcused, and particularly painful because I wasn’t prepared for it” (59). In another scene, the teacher answers Audre’s complains about notes left on her desk that say ‘You Stink,’ by saying that “it was my

Christian duty to tell you that Colored people did smell different from white people” (60). In a trip to Washington D. C., in the summer when Audre “was supposed to stop being a child,’ Audre and her family desired to have some vanilla ice cream at a Brayers’ ice cream. As they seated themselves one by one at the counter, the waitress told the father ‘you can’t eat here. Sorry” (70):

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 the 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).

The mature narrator relates her family’s feelings of embarrassment, anger and shock saying “this wasn’t right or fair.” Thus, what started as a graduation gift trip, ended up as a frightening nightmare for Audre and her family. Lorde, in a powerful pun and imagery, plays with colour usage and elaborates a contrast between black and white. Despite the omnipresent occurrences of racist acts during this era that she and her family members encountered in their daily life, Audre’s mother always attempts to shield her from it: for instance, when white people spit at them during Audre’s childhood, her mother would belittle those people for spitting into the wind.

At the age of fifteen, Audre makes friends with a small number of non-Black girls, called "The Branded" at Hunter College High School and is elected as a literary editor of the school's arts magazine when she starts writing poetry. After her graduation, Audre leaves home and shares a flat with a few friends and ends any form of contact with her family. Following her father's death, she returns to NYC and starts a relationship with Bea, whose heart she ends up breaking when she decides to move to

Mexico where she goes to university and works as a secretary in a hospital. There, she meets a number of independent women, mostly lesbians; and quickly builds a relationship with one of them, Eudora.

3. Challenging Marginality

The public-sphere, according to Felski (1989), is a model coined by Jürgen Habermas in his influential essay entitled, *Structural Changes in the Public Sphere* (1962). The term refers to a “historically determined formation which emerges from the specific conditions of late seventeenth- and eighteenth century society” (Felski, 1989: 165). The main participants of the public-sphere, according to Felski are “male-property owners and the enlightened aristocracy” (Felski, 1989: 165). The public sphere is the context where individuals meet and exchange productive discussions, the individuals and groups existing within such frameworks, have claimed various levels of power and control over the less powerful marginalized groups. In an interview with Joseph F Beams, Lorde comments on her work with the ‘Black Kitchen: Women of Color Press’ as an important manifestation of the success of black feminist public sphere. With the ‘we’ referring to women of color, Lorde indicates that:

We need to build our own institutions. When we create out of our experiences, as feminists of color, women of color, we have to develop these structures that will present and circulate our culture. We have to be able to publish those things that would not be published otherwise, or be available to the different communities of women of color (230).

Discussing a number of works of fiction and film, Anna Wilson, formulates the notion of a ‘visible margin’ and believes that a margin, the counter-public sphere, “does function as a means to contestation, that texts produced from a culturally marginal position are potentially subversive of

centrally defined norms” (Wilson, 2001: 95). Considering the recent history of American political movement, evidence of the ‘efficacy’ of action based on collective identity defined as marginal, Wilson describes Lorde’s *Zami* as an ‘apotheosis’ of marginality-as-resistance and a text that defines Lorde’s iconic status in feminist criticisms.

Writing about African American feminist theories and literary criticism, Robert J. Patterson (2009) elucidates the important connection between the black feminist movements as a black counter-public sphere, and black women’s writing: “in fact, the black feminist movements paved the way for black women’s writing to be recovered and later institutionalized in the academy, as well as, the emergence of black feminist literary theory” (Patterson, 2009: 89). Patterson illustrates that it is black feminist literary criticism that both studies and recovers “black women’s history of writing, inscribing them into historical narratives and resisting their marginalization” (Patterson, 2009: 102). The tendency of black feminist criticism to focus on black women’s writing as forms of resistance glosses Wilson’s description of *Zami*’s function as ‘a signifier of marginality’ in feminist criticism when she persuasively argues for the text’s rendering of “the history it writes” and the reader’s sense of the “the cultural moment it addresses” (Wilson, 2001: 98).

Being a black feminist and lesbian, this world of marginality has been very painful for Lorde. It is through writing that Lorde, in Sandi Russell’s words has taken “pain, alienation, anger, and frustration deep inside herself, to bring a new reading of its definition” (Russell, 2002: 180). In *Sister Outsider*, Lorde describes this marginal world with an ‘unblinking vision,’ to use Russell’s terms, and with a great passion when she says:

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden...Within these deep places, each one of

us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. (Lorde, 1984: 36-7)

Lorde, thus, confirms that as a writer, she has always endeavored to build contexts, even if marginal, through which women can express their creativity and feelings. In a similar manner, in her interview with Karla Jay, Lorde indicates that the vectors to write *Zami* were not only aesthetic but political:

There are stories that had to be told, not only my stories, but stories of many black women raising children, raising daughters, stories of black lesbians on the street in the '50s, stories that just weren't being told. I felt a real connection within my own life and what I had seen (Hall, 2004: 109).

Celebrating the phenomenon of the “highly successful, critically acclaimed, and widely read novels by women of color in the US,” Landry and Maclean (1993) comment on the importance of a collective identity for black feminist agency. They demonstrate that “women of color, accustomed to being politically subjected according to their racial and ethnic identities, in addition to their gender, understood all too well the importance of thinking and acting collectively, not individually” (Landry and Maclean, 1993: 109). *Zami* presents numerous situations in which Lorde manifests and anticipates black women’s need for oppositional institutions from which they can ‘think and act collectively:’

We tried to build a community of sorts where we could, at the very least, survive within a world we correctly perceived to be hostile to us; we talked endlessly about how best to create that mutual support which twenty years later was being discussed in women’s movement as brandnew concept (170).

Deprived from an influential contribution into the different contexts of her society on the ground of her race, gender, class and sexual orientation, Lorde and

her fellow black women attempted to look for alternative counter-public spheres to build and exchange support and interdependence. The feminist movement, challenging the political structures and the patriarchal beliefs and practices, became an active form of resistance and oppositionality since its first emergence in the late nineteenth century. Considering such challenges as forces for change and transformation in social and political values, Felski defines the concept of a feminist counter-public sphere as:

A model for the analysis of diverse forms of recent artistic and cultural activity by women in relation to the historical emergence of an influential oppositional ideology which seeks to challenge the existing reality of gender subordination (Felski, 1989: 164).

The feminist public sphere presents a critique of social, political, and cultural values from the point of view of women as a marginalized group within society. The feminist public sphere “constitutes a discursive arena which disseminates its arguments outward through such public communications as books, journals, the mass-media, and the education system” (Felski, 1989: 167).

Audre views events like the Rosenbergs electrocution as becoming “synonymous with being able to live in this country at all, with being able to survive in a hostile surrounding” (149). Thus, Audre leaves for Mexico and describes how “moving through streets after streets filled with people with brown faces had a profound and exhilarating effect upon me” (154). Mexico, for her, becomes the “land of color and dark people who said negro and meant something beautiful, who noticed me as I moved among them” (155). It is in Mexico that she breaks her “life-long habit of looking down my feet as I walked along the street” (156). It is in Mexico that she experiences the feelings of “being accepted...bold and adventurous and special” (154). And it is in Mexico that she sees

her "color reflected upon the streets in such great number," and where Audre "had never felt visible before, never even know [she] lacked it" (156).

Audre's progress and awakening in Mexico give her a form of hope in the future of America, especially after reading in a Saturday paper that the "SUPREME COURT OF U.S. DECIDES AGAINST SEPARATE EDUCATION FOR NEGROS" (172). Written, not even as a headline, but in the lower front page, this statement gives Audre 'hope,' that though not expecting "to alter radically the nature of my living, but rather it put me actively into a context that felt like progress, and seemed part and parcel of the awakening process that I called Mexico" (173). This new turn in Audre's life represents a new dimension in her process of maturation. This becomes further evident in her relationship with Eudora, a forty-eight intellectual from Texas. The narrator explains how meeting with Eudora "gives life to a new reality within me, some half-known self-come of age, moving out to meet her" (67). With Eudora, Audre feels herself "pass beyond childhood, a woman connecting with other women in an intricate, complex and ever widening network of exchanging strengths" (175). Even when Eudora decides to put Audre out of her life, Audre says "I was hurt, but not lost" (175), showing the strength she has obtained from her life in Mexico and her relationship with Eudora. Back in NYC, Audre explores the lesbian bar scene, moves in with lover Muriel, then another lesbian, Lynn, moves in with them and ends up leaving without warning and with their savings.

4. Bildungsroman as an Allegory

Women have historically survived oppression through developing mutual love and support. In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Lorde states that "Zami" is "a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers." (255) Carriacou is the name of a Caribbean island from which her mother immigrated. The name links back to Lorde's

dedication (discussed in the beginning section of this study) indicating the way Lorde owes her power and strength to the women in her life. Lorde keeps returning to this theme of 'bonding together' throughout the body of her work confirming that it is the only way to fight and resist the patriarchal and racist values of any society:

Traditionally, Black women have always bonded together in support of each other, however uneasily and in the face of whatever other allegiances which militated against that bonding. We have banded together with each other for wisdom and strength and support.
(49)

To define the formal properties of *Zami* within the confines of feminism and feminist literary theory, it is important to examine its relation to the context in which it is written. Insofar as our understanding of a genre as an organizing framework requires examining the relation of a text to existing ideologies, morals and politics, the novel becomes meaningful only when it is read in relation to its national and historical setting. This fact gives Lorde's work an allegorical form. It is important to mention that the relationship between the Bildungsroman and nationality and history is as old as the history of the genre itself. In his study of a lecture by Karl Morgenstern delivered in 1819 at the University of Dorpat when the term Bildungsroman was first coined, Boes argues that the lecture avoids the more recent problematic definition of Bildungsroman as "a genre that stages the development of an individual toward a normative ideal" (Boes, 2012: 5). Instead, what inspires Boes about Morgenstern's lecture is the way it foregrounds three separate elements in defining the Bildungsroman:

An emphasis on change in protagonist, a relationship between this change and the specific national setting in which the protagonist moves, and the positive effect that

the depiction of change will have on the reader (Boes, 2012: 5).

This is what Boes calls a 'performative' understanding of Bildungsroman. The idea of the novel of formation as a literary response to a changing context is also argued by Boes (2012) when he defines Bildungsroman as a type of novel that represents "an image of men growing in national-historical time" (Boes, 2012: 6). Boes is interested in the allegorical nature of the Bildungsroman and defines it in terms of nationality in his study of the genre as a reflection of German national consciousness. Boes contemplates the possibility of reading Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus in a way that conceptualizes the relationship between allegory and the novel of formation. He asserts at the conclusion of his study of Mann's text that:

The contemporary global Bildungsroman insists on its poetic fidelity to the historical rhythm of the community from which it has ostensibly sprung, but in the very act of this insistence also acknowledges the different conditions under which it was actually created and will inevitably also be consumed (Boes, 2012: 181).

Regarding the allegorical nature of the Bildungsroman, a similar claim is made by Fredric Jameson in 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multi-National Capitalism,' when he describes the Bildungsroman as a 'national allegory' especially when it concerns the third world cultural productions: "All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical...they are to be read as what I will call national allegories...particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel (Jameson, 1986: 69). Discussing the connection between the 'lived experience' and economic science and political dynamics in the third-world literature, Jameson argues that: Third-world texts necessarily

project a political dimension in the form of allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society (Jameson, 1986: 69).

With unmistakable link between Audre's personal story and the historical and geographical context she describes, Lorde believes that personal freedom cannot be achieved without a national integrity and throughout the body of her work keeps returning to the idea of working together toward that goal: In *Sister Outsider*, Lorde never stops coming to this point:

When Black women in this country come together to examine our sources of strength and support, and to recognize our common social, cultural, emotional, and political interests, it is a development which can only contribute to the power of the Black community as a whole. It can certainly never diminish it. For it is through the coming together of self-actualized individuals, female and male, that any real advances can be made. The old sexual power relationships based on a dominant/ subordinate model between unequals have not served us as a people, nor as individuals (Lorde, 1984: 46).

Audre's life is to a great extent affected by and related to the political atmosphere of the American society. In the novel, Lorde describes her protagonist 'deeply involved' in the working with the Committee to Free the Rosenbergs. Lorde writes that despite demonstrations, picketing, stuffing envelopes, and ringing door bells, the Rosenbergs were electrocuted on June, 19, 1953. Audre knows what it means to be judged unfairly, to be treated in a cruel way, hearing the news she walks away with "tears streaming down my face for them, for their sons, for all our wasted efforts, for myself -- wondering whether there was any place in the world that was different from here" (149). Lorde locates the themes of development and

identity-recognition in the difficult historical, social, and political realities that defined the African American experience. In addition to the Rosenbergs electrocution, Lorde brings into play lively allusions to the Bataan Death March and the Fourth of July and starts to realize “the travesty such a celebration was for Black people in this country” (70). *Zami* represents the interaction between personal and public aspects of the life of the characters, between the private responsibilities and public communal commitments. Lorde aims to establish a new meaning of collective public life. Hence, it is safe to argue that the novel has political motivations as well as aesthetic motivations as Lorde builds a means through which she considers the possibilities of constructing her narrative partitions in a way that best change and reformulate the classically identified genre of the Bildungsroman to explore her national aspirations.

The deviation of *Zami*'s ending from the happy-ever-after ending of the traditional Bildungsroman, further complicates the reader's perceptions of the text's ending as one comes to ask himself how is Audre envisaged in relation to her ethnic society? The answer in *Zami* gets really intricate at the final chapters as Audre mingles between the two opposing extremes of acceptance and refusal in terms of her society's perception of her status as a Black lesbian. Lorde writes that though lesbians, whether white or black, were considered 'outsiders,' Audre insists that:

Moving through the bunches of women cruising each other in the front room, or doing a slow fish on the dancing floor in the back...being an outsider had [nothing] to do with being lesbian... [finding] no reflection in any of the faces there week after week, I knew perfectly well that being an outsider in the Bagatelle had everything to do with being Black. (220)

Putting this in the larger context, Lorde compares the society in the Bagatelle to the American society and

writes that “the society within the confines of the Bagatelle reflected the ripples and eddies of the larger society that had spawned it” (220). Lorde describes a brief relationship with Kitty/Afrekete writing that ‘her print remains upon my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo’ (253). In an essay, Yakini B. Kemp (2004), describes this brief relationship that concludes the novel as transformative for Audre explaining that:

Afrekete is black, unlike all but one of the women lovers Audre has engaged up to this point. Therefore, Afrekete becomes the re-establishment of an emotional connection with "blackness" and, significantly, with Black womanhood. Another point of reconnection resides in Kitty's origins in the American South, the geographical locus of slavery, implying an ancestral connection to Audre's kin who were enslaved in the Caribbean. Also, Kitty is a mother... thus, she compounds all signs... associated with home and exile for Audre: black, southern, rooted, sensuous, mother, immigrant (from the South), and nomadic (Kemp, 2004: 5).

Audre describes their love-making to “elements erupting into an electric storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge, brief and drenching” (253). In the prologue, Lorde emphasizes her life-long belief of the essentiality of interdependency between women. She concludes by saying that “every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me” (255). She also describes her seven years in the Seventh Street as becoming “a bridge and field of women. *Zami*. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers” (255).

The closing pages of the novels take us back to the central theme with which the novels has opened, namely the power of women solidarity. Audre makes references to the source of her power being all the powerful women she has encountered, and she

acknowledges and honours them, especially her mother. Although their relationship becomes problematic and awkward sometimes; her mother was a strict disciplinarian throughout Audre's childhood and adulthood years, they are very connected to each other and Audre credits her with passing inner strength and power through the generations.

5. Conclusion

Through the re-conceptualization of life-writing narratives and the incorporation of childhood memories and erotic memories of her intimate relations, Lorde's *Zami* offers a new model of female development and of female creativity. In her conviction that any previously available generic forms of self-representation will fall short of adequately expressing the life of an African American lesbian, Lorde describes her narrative as a biomythography through which she consciously rejects established canonical notions of a 'pure generic form' to write and reaffirm the tradition of African American and/or lesbian feminist thought and writing. The study has asserted that, deriving from two significant American literary traditions, namely, the African American slave narrative and the classical Bildungsroman, Lorde establishes her coming out story creating not a marginal text, but a text that falls firmly within the tradition of American literature as well as modern feminist writing.

Close formal and thematic discussions of the text have shown that it is a clear example of feminist bildungsroman due to its emphasis on the representation of the maturation processes of female character and her transformation from voiceless victims of ideologies of racism, ethnicity, sexism and class distinctions to a strong independent woman who is fully aware of her identity and self-actualization. This study has highlighted the importance of employing the elements and definitions of the feminist Bildungsroman as part of

the analysis when evaluating the novel. Since the genre has become a direct reflection of the society and its various struggles, it has been argued through the text that feminist Bildungsroman can rightfully be described as a manifestation of women's various agonies as well as aspirations.

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