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# Audre Lorde and the Archetypal Back to Africa Movement

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## Abstract

**Purpose**: This paper examines how Audre Lorde, one of the most prominent black woman poets of the 21st century, is concerned about the horrors of racism and attempts to erode it through her poetry. As a black, she is excluded from the dominant white society. As a black woman, she is "other" in a patriarchal culture.

**Methodology**: The paper employs the Myth and Archetypal Approach propounded by Carl Jung, Northrop Frye, and Mircea Eliade to examine how Lorde seeks to create a community among blacks using African archetypes. In this regard, Lorde uses a pantheon of mythological and legendary archetypes from the ancient Kingdoms of Dahomey, Ashanti, and Benin to create self-esteem and unity in her people. These archetypes can serve as sources of intellectual enlightenment and models for ritual and cultural behavior.

**Findings**: Lorde sees mythical archetypes as an authentic form of ancestral worship more accommodating than the Christian culture of the West. Such archetypes allow blacks to understand identifiers that contravene Western culture's xenophobia and create unity among blacks across the world. She invokes primordial history to show that blackness and femaleness are not "other" but affirming qualities. Recognizing that blacks had assumed the polarised dialectics of Western culture, Lorde tries to reconnect them to their lost spiritual cord. The archetypes she invokes would appeal to blacks because archetypes are innate.

**Unique contributor to theory, policy and practice:** Thus, by invoking African mythic archetypes, she brings the black community into contact with their lost spiritual history. The paper ends with the caveat that the Back to Africa movement, which has seen a boost in momentum in the last two decades, is a result of the work of poets like Lorde, who, through their poetry, triggered the search for the lost link between blacks in the diaspora and the African continent.

**Keywords:** *Audre Lorde, black, difference, African archetypes, community*

## Introduction

Audre Lorde believes that freedom and self-esteem for blacks, women, and homosexuals can be achieved by reaffirming and reconnecting with African myths and legends. In this regard, Lorde uses a pantheon of mythological and legendary archetypes from the ancient Kingdoms of Dahomey, Ashanti, and Benin to create self-esteem and unity in her people. These archetypes can serve as sources of intellectual enlightenment and models for ritual and cultural behavior. Lorde sees mythical archetypes as an authentic form of ancestral worship more accommodating than the Christian culture of the West. Such archetypes allow blacks to understand identifiers that contravene Western culture's xenophobia and create unity among blacks across the world.

Lorde's mythical and archetypal patterns are portrayed in poems in which she raises ordinary women who are scape-goated into sacrificial heroines; on the one hand, and the other hand, she presents strong and assertive women who function as quest heroines, pathfinders who pave the way toward a more accommodating worldview. By presenting women who are raped, victimized, and killed, she uses their deaths, which she sacralizes by comparing them to spiritual sacrificial heroines. Being black and woman-identified, or simply being a woman in a racist and sexist society, is tantamount to difference, and this breeds various forms of oppression. To be a black and a woman is to suffer the peril of imminent destruction in all subtle and overt forms. Blacks and women meet violent death because of their color and sex, and Lorde's role is to sanctify them, using their blood as a sacrifice that energizes women toward a more united front. However, not all these women are scapegoats. Some of them are quest heroines who challenge the hegemony and risk life to overturn the imbalance. We, therefore, have two paradigms: the sacrificial scapegoat heroine and the quest heroine. The sacrificial scapegoat hero or heroine is someone with whom the welfare of the tribe or nation is identified and must die to atone for the people's sins and restore the land to fruitfulness. Bodkin analyses Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and identifies the hero as a sacrificial hero. He identifies the emotions of pity and fear that we, the audience, experience at the death of Hamlet as reminiscent of primitive man's exultation at the offering of a sacred animal (21). On the other hand, the quest hero or heroine is a savior or deliverer who undertakes some long journey during which he or she must perform impossible tasks that would enable him or her to overcome some insurmountable obstacles to save his or her people.

## LORDE'S ARCHETYPAL IMAGES

Lorde's mythological and legendary poems are replete with images of the sun, moon, water (rivers, seas, oceans), the serpent, and the color black.

## WATER IMAGERY

As Guerin explains in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, Jung posits water or the sea as the most typical unconscious symbol. No doubt, then, that Lorde takes recourse to this symbol as she attempts to create racial solidarity among her people. Poems that portray this

water/sea image include "Between Ourselves," "Coping," "Meet," and "A Woman Speaks." This water image is vital to Lorde because of her West Indian Island ancestry, where water and fishing are permanent images. Blacks also had to traverse the Atlantic to reach America; many fell aboard and created a heroic archetype of rebellious sacrifice that preceding generations could use to create their unique identity.

Lorde uses this water imagery in the poem "Between Ourselves" as she links the enslavement of the black folk to their greed for wealth. Slavery would not have been had blacks not participated in the trade. When she evokes the image of the slave post, "Under the sun on the shores of Elmina," we imagine the ranks of slaves that were being packed in ships to be carried along the Atlantic. She further develops this betrayal in these lines:

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 coins

that shone in the evening sun

….

his tongue clicks like yellow coins

tossed up on this shore

where we share the same corner

of an alien and corrupted heaven. (223)

The betrayal of blacks through their greed displaces them from the shore of Elmina (Africa) and takes them to "an alien and corrupted heaven." In this poem, therefore, Lorde tacitly alludes to the image of the sea and the middle passage that led to the long history of African Americans. Recognizing a shared guilt and working toward eradicating self-loathing is thus mandatory for their survival. The sea image, therefore, connects blacks to their history.

This archetypal image of the sea as the center of consciousness is more manifest in the poem "A Woman Speaks." The poem opens with Lorde reclaiming her West-Indian heritage of water:

Moon marked and touched by the sun

my magic is unwritten

but when the sea turns back

it will leave my shape behind. (234)

As these lines suggest, Lorde reclaims an atmosphere characterized by the moon, the sun, and the sea. The sea is dominant because it is what leaves her mark behind. Lorde's prose work *Zami* celebrates the independent character of island women who assume masculine roles because their men are always absent. The sea marks her, therefore, as an independent and creative woman reclaiming her roots. She will get this by connecting with her sisters in Dahomey. The sea is essential and the sole route that can retrace their history. It is the very crucible of her identity as she states: "and if you will know me / look into the entrails of Uranus / where the restless oceans pound" (234). By alluding Uranus, who in Greek mythology is the earliest supreme god, the speaker shows her affinity with the spiritual world. She is reclaiming her lost African spirituality by reverse journey via the sea.

The poem "Oshun's Table" implicitly invokes the image of the river. Oshun is a river goddess, and the poem suggests the idea of harmony derived from her worship. In Yoruba religion, Oshun is typically associated with water, purity, fertility, love, and sensuality. Here, the image of "Oshun's Table" invokes a kind of kitchen table on which the speaker and her partner cook, eat, and then make love:

> How the fruit lay at your feet
>
> how you dressed the wine
>
> cut green beans
>
> in a lacy network
>
> we ate pom and fish rice
>
> with a fork and spoon. (453)

The first stanza captures the preparation of food, which turns out to be food that can be gotten only in inundated areas -- "Pom" and "fish rice." These foodstuffs it can be argued, must grow with the aid of Oshun, goddess of the river. The second stanza becomes erotically charged as the actors move into another phase:

> A short hard rain
>
> and the moon came up
>
> before we lay down together
>
> we toasted each other. (453)

"Oshun's Table" is used as an image to suggest Lorde's affinity with water as a resourceful and creative force that reinforces the independence of women. The moon rises after the rain as they lie together after toasting each other. The verb "toast" here suggests heated emotional, sexual contact between the partners. Just as bread is toasted by being heated at a high temperature to make it taste better, the speaker and her lover heat each other in a lesbian encounter. Oshun, as the goddess of

the river, provides both food as a life source and then engenders warmth that arises from lesbian intercourse. Therefore, Oshun offers a haven to women seeking her, freeing them from patriarchal bondage.

Water as an image is also featured in her South African poem, "The Evening News." While describing the terrible situation in South Africa, Lorde talks about Ganvie women who are fisherwomen. She contrasts the macabre description of the killing in Soweto with the Ganvie fisherwomen, who are busy with their role of nurture.

I am kneading my bread Winnie Mandela

while children who sing in the streets of Soweto

are jailed for inciting riot

the moon in Soweto is mad

is bleeding my sister into the earth

is mixing her seed with the vultures

greeks reap her like olives out of trees

she is skinned like salt

from the skin of a hungry desert

while Ganvie fisherwomen with milk-large breasts

hide a fish with the face of a girl

in the prow of their boats. (337)

The last four lines are placed in direct contrast to the macabre situation of the apartheid system that unleashes death and smears blood everywhere. These lines can be interpreted to suggest Lorde's belief that life must go on, albeit all that is done to stifle it. Ganvie fisherwomen will continue the struggle of catering to the young and feeding them milk from their "milk-large breast" and the fish they steal. Life must continue; women cannot resign to oppression.

In "Afterimages," Lorde juxtaposes a flood that inundates Jackson and makes a white woman helpless against the murder of Emmett Till, who is killed for whispering at a white girl.

A black boy from Chicago

whistled on the streets of Jackson, Mississippi

testing what he'd been taught was a manly thing to do

his teachers

ripped his eyes out his sex his tongue

and flung him to the Pearl weighted with stone

in the name of white womanhood

they took their aroused honor

back to Jackson

and celebrated in a whorehouse

the double ritual of white manhood

confirmed.

The helpless woman, just like the helpless girl, had no hand in Emmett's murder. They are victims of a patriarchal order that does not work on their behalf but works only to safeguard the fears of men 4. Women, both white and black, are subsumed under a common denominator. None of them decides the course of justice. Emmett Till's ghost seems to cause the flood, "now the pearl river speaks its muddy judgement / and I can withhold my pity and my bread." Lorde uses the flood here to suggest a kind of retribution that avenges the murder of Emmett Till.

Emmett Till rides the crest of the Pearl, whistling

24 years his ghost lay like the shade of a raped woman

and a white girl has grown older in costly honor

(what did she pay to never know its price?)

now the Pearl River speaks its muddy judgment

and I can withhold my pity and my bread.

"Afterimages" captures the lynching of a black boy whose body is dropped in the Pearl River in Jackson. Lorde is here suggesting that the rivers in America are cemeteries inviting blacks to reconnect to their waterways, which will lead them to freedom.

"October" is another poem that captures Lorde's use of water/sea as an archetype. As an "abnormally born," Lorde seeks to have contact with other sisters like her:

Spirits of the abnormally born

live on in water

of the heroically dead

in the entrails of snake. (346)

She invokes the goddess Seboulisa to transport her across the water to another shore where she can fit better. She exhorts the goddess to:

Carry my heart to some shore

that my feet will not shatter

do not let me pass away

before I have a name

for this tree

under which I am lying.

Do not let me die

still

needing to be stranger. (346)

Lorde recognizes her deviance and leadership position that leads her to connect across continents. She is familiar with water because her ancestry witnessed a traumatic passage over water. Only a reverse journey back through water can lead them to selfhood.

**SUN IMAGERY**

Another archetypal image typical of Lorde's work is the sun image. As Guerin explains, the sun is considered creative energy, law in nature, consciousness, and father principle, whereas the earth and moon are mother principles. Lorde merges the sun and moon image in the mythical symbol Mawulisa, which she appropriates and renders female. Poems that engender this solar imagery include "A Woman Speaks," "From the House of Yemanja," "Dahomey," "Between Ourselves," "Chain," "Oaxaca," "Timepiece," and "Oshun's Table." As we shall discover in these poems, Lorde's solar image is often used to represent Africa or other areas around the equator, like Mexico and the Caribbeans. This solar imagery is contrasted with America's physical winter or the metaphorical evil lurking in capitalists' hearts. Sir James George Frazer, in his great mythological book *The Golden Bough*, analyses the relevance of fire festivals in primitive society and states:

Indeed, when we consider the cold and cloudy Climate of Europe during a great part of the year, we shall find it natural that sun-charms should have played a much more prominent part among the superstitions practices of European peoples than among the Savages who live nearer the equator… (1of 5)

Lorde's adherence to solar imagery in her work springs from her attachment to these equatorial savages Frazer talks about. Her existence in the West is unnatural because she was forced to leave her territory, characterized by sunshine. When she invokes solar imagery, she recalls her ancestral past and charges the sun to melt the frost that African Americans are imprisoned in. Frazer notes this purificatory power of the fire festival when he states: "It remains to consider what may be said against this theory and in favour of the view that in the rites of fire employed not as a creative but as a cleansing agent, which purifies men, animals, and plants by burning up and consuming the

noxious elements" (1-5). Although Frazer talks about fire here, it is good to remember that the sun can be used to signify fire, which burns and purifies while at the same time providing light.

In Lorde's poem -- "A Woman Speaks," she assumes the position of a priestess charged with the power of the moon and the sun. "Moon marked and touched by the sun / my magic is unwritten / but when the sea turns back / it will leave my shape behind" (234). The moon and sun charge her with the necessary vehemence to effect change. In the poem "From the House of Yemanja" she moves ahead to signify the moon and sun by assuming them. "I am the sun and moon and forever hungry / for her eyes" (235). She is like the light and the truth that must be revealed.

In "Between Ourselves," Lorde shows how her history and geographic location reinforce her affinity with the sun. The sun is not used here to mark a purifying or illuminating force but to mark her origin and ancestry:

Under the sun on the shores of Elmina

a blackman sold the woman who carried

my grandmother in her belly

he was paid with bright yellow coins

that shone in the evening sun

and in the faces of her sons and daughters. (223)

Also implicit in these lines is the evident truth that the slave trade was an open and accepted act of betrayal. It was not done under the cover of darkness but in the open light of the sun. African Americans then do not have to treat their history as a disgrace because it is open. Instead, they should start by recognizing their common guilt and retrace their history, leading them back to the sun and the truth. America is not a land of the "sun" and so is cold and hides many evils that should be apparent in a location with the sun.

In the poems "Chorus" and "Coping," Lorde uses the image of the sun as a regenerative force. In "Chorus," she demands the sun to empower her so that she can triumph over the limitations of her society:

Sun

make me whole again

to love

the shattered truths of me. (266)

This power she gets from the sun will empower her to acknowledge the truth:

When I am done

Each shard will spring up

Complete and armed

Like a warrior woman

Hot to be dealt with. (266)

The sun image here is thus one that can offer determination and courage in a limiting society.

In the poem "Coping," Lorde again presents the sun in its reproductive and regenerative role. The poem recounts a situation where rain inundates the earth: "the world is / a round puddle / of sunless water" (267). As a young boy tries to bail water from the garden, he pessimistically states, "young seeds that have not seen the sun / forget / and drown easily" (267). The sun must come then to provide the heat that seeds need to germinate. Lorde's sun is not the patriarchal sun but a female-male union in the goddess Mawulisa.

**BLACK IMAGERY**

In addition to the sun and the sea Lorde employs black imagery dominates her poems. Lorde uses black as a primordial primary image, like in her famous poem "Coal." The color black is considered chaos, mystery, and the unknown. It is also considered as death, primal wisdom, the unconscious, evil etc. Lorde uses the color black to signify primal wisdom and essence. Her poems that use this mythological image include "Coal," "The Black Unicorn," and "From the House of Yemanja", among others.

In the poem "Coal," Lorde sees black as more essential than white, which is considered superior. Here, she reverses the connotations popularly attributed to the image of black and white. Blackness is like coal, a fuel essential as a source of energy, while whiteness is decorative and superfluous, like diamond. Diamonds are hardly used for anything except decorations, while coal is essential for energy. Blackness, therefore, is essential, the urge to examine the real issues that undergird society, which are not always pleasant but are nevertheless essential, like hunger, thirst, poverty, and death. As she states:

Some words are open

Like a diamond on glass windows

Singing out with the crash of passing sun

Then there are words like stapled wagers

In a perforated book--buy and sign and tear part

And come whatever wills all chances

The stud remains.

An ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge.

Some words live in my throat

Breeding like adders. Others know sun

Seeking like gypsies over my tongue

To explode through my lips

Like young sparrows bursting from shell

Some words

Bedevil me. (6)

Lorde here posits two colors--black and white. Whereas one is good and acceptable, one is difficult to accept and is in the process of coming out. Blackness is therefore not easily acceptable because it carries a history of guilt and shame both for the whites and for blacks, as captured in the simile "some words live in my throat / Breeding like adders" and in the metaphor which compares words to "An ill-pulled tooth"(6). She is going to assert her blackness in the last stanza by stressing this relatedness between blackness and truth:

Love is a word another kind of open--

As a diamond comes into a knot of flame

I am black because I come from the earth's inside

Take my word for jewel in your open light. (6)

These poetic lines seem to suggest Lorde's desire to portray the essential nature of blackness. It offers truth and is a kind of jewel because it is the truth that must be examined if the world has to shine like a diamond. Blackness is the energy that lends beauty to a diamond.

"The Black Unicorn" furthers the exploration of the importance of blackness. Although various critiques have been made of this poem, it seems to suggest the primary notion of black female eroticism that has been repressed over time. Whereas the Unicorn as a mythological animal is characterized by its horn representing a phallic symbol and its white color, Lorde positions a black unicorn that is neither in the form of a horse nor of phallic representation. Lorde's "black unicorn" is distinguished by its horn, which rests not on her lap but deep in her moon pit, growing:

It is not on her lap where the horn rests

but deep in her moon pit

growing. (233)

The black unicorn can here be argued to be the female clitoris that has suffered all forms of patriarchal control in the hands of patriarchy. The "moon pit" here stands as a symbol of the female genitalia. Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: A Metaethics of Radical Feminism* captures the dimensions

by which men have tried to control this mythic center of women. Since "the black Unicorn was mistaken for a shadow / or symbol / and taken / through a cold country," it becomes "Restless," "Unrelenting," and "is not / free." Lorde posits the erotic center of the black woman as an essential aspect that can engender her creativity and independence. Her essay "Uses of the Erotic" expresses this erotic consciousness as a gateway to female liberation.

In "From the House of Yemanja," Lorde uses the image of blackness as an essential color. African Americans must accept their blackness to be able to develop self-esteem. She captures her family conflict in which her mother had a forlorn desire for light-skinned children. Lorde, as a black-skinned was alienated, but her acceptance of her color made her more successful than her two sisters. When Lorde invokes the goddess Yemanja, she accepts her history and develops an identity her sisters lacked. This acceptance of her blackness comes with her willingness to know her cultural history. Blackness is thus necessary to the construction of black self-esteem.

**SERPENT IMAGERY**

Another mythological image Lorde uses in her work is that of the serpent. Lorde invokes the archetypal image of the serpent in one of her most characteristic mythological poems --"Call" in which she invokes in an incantation, the rainbow serpent Aido Hwedo.

Rainbow Serpent who must not go
unspoken
I have offered up the safety of separations
sung the spirals of power
and what fills the spaces
before power unfolds or flounders
in desirable nonessentials
I am a Black woman  stripped down
and praying
my whole life has been an altar
worth its ending
and I say Aido Hwedo is coming.

Guerin makes us understand that the serpent, as an archetypal image, symbolizes energy and pure force: evil, corruption, sensuality, destruction, mystery, wisdom, and the unconscious. Simone De Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, likens the image of the serpent to the lunar image, which has a spiritual affinity with women's creativity. As she states: "The moon is a source of fertility; it appears as a "master woman"; it is often believed that in the form of man or serpent it couples with

women. The serpent is the epiphany of the moon; it sheds its skin and renews itself, it is immortal" (149). This positive image of the serpent as a spiritual and transcendental animal was distorted by patriarchy to reduce the credibility of women. However, as Njeng argues in "The Genesis and Archetypes of Woman and God," Eve's liaison with the serpent positions her as the first human to demonstrate intelligence. Lorde captures Eve's perspicacity in her poem "All Hallows Eve." A close analysis of Genesis portrays Eve as assertive and ready to break new ground. Whereas Adam is portrayed as dormant and malleable by Eve (he accepts to eat the fruit without question), Eve is a character who dares to break ground. She is the first human who desires to be like "God" to know good and evil. The serpent's relationship with women is, therefore, primordial. Biblical history records it, although, as feminists argue, this esoteric relationship is distorted by patriarchy. Lorde uses the serpent's image in her poem "Call" as energy: pure force, mystery, and wisdom. It can be invoked to give women the strength of independence and proffers an erotic sphere.

Rainbow Serpent

whose faces have been forgotten

Mother loosen my tongue or adorn me

with a lighter burden

Aido Hwedo is coming.

In the poem "Today is Not the Day," the speaker imagines herself uncoiling like a serpent and swimming away into the next world. She uses the image of a coiled snake uncoiling to capture her flight into the next world. Her death will be a transformation from an ephemeral into an immortal world. We read:

I would slip anchor and wander

to the end of the jetty

uncoil into the waters

a vessel of light moonglade

ride the freshets to sundown

… (472)

To return to the sea is to return to the mother. The sea is seen, as Cirlot states in A Dictionary of Symbols, "… not only as the source of life but also as the goal" (281). By taking the form of the serpent, the speaker moves into everlasting life, which is the goal of life itself.

In the poem "Solstice," the speaker must assume the image of a serpent to slough off the weakness of her race. Her people have abandoned their gods and so live in a desacralised state. To

reconnect with the gods, the speaker must take up the image of a serpent to slough off the past. We read:

My skin is tightening

soon I shall shed it

like a monitor lizard

like remembered comfort

…

like the snake that has fed the chameleon

for changes

I shall be forever. (218)

Therefore, the image of a sloughing reptile gives her the power to overcome powerlessness. The anaphora reinforces this: repetition of "like" in successive phrases to capture the act of transformation. Women like the moon and the serpent are constantly being renewed through the cosmogonic forces.

## CONCLUSION

Conclusively, this chapter captures Lorde's mythopoetics as she attempts to create a spiritual arena for her audience. By invoking the mythological and legendary pantheon of West Africa, she creates sacred space and offers an alternative worldview to her people. The paper captures Lorde's search for myth and how she used the pantheon of West African myth to write informed poetry. These movements brought her into first-hand contact with the mythic typologies she needed to construct her conception of the universe. Lorde becomes contemporary with them by embracing the goddesses – Seboulisa, Mawulisa, Yemanja, Oshun, and others. Assuming the stature of a high priestess, she intercedes between the gods and her audience. Portraying the spiritual void in the black community, Lorde stresses that this void is the cause of their backwardness. Having been abducted from their native cultures, blacks could hardly find peace and prosperity. Invoking these mythical and legendary typologies will awaken black self-confidence.

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