
Articulation of Identity through the concept of Difference in Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*

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ABSTRACT

The theoretical concept of intersectionality within the framework of feminist discourse attempts to analyse and address multifarious oppression. The resulting activism and feminist praxis advocate the roots of gender marginalization. The paper analyses the contribution of Black lesbian feminist writer, Audre Lorde, who is associated with a multi issued feminist movement. Being a representative writer of all woman, she stressed the need to map feminism through intersectional lens. The writer established a well-based canon of poetry and prose tradition to explore difference and victimization at multiple levels. Her bold and practical attempt to turn silence binding intersectionality into language is highly commendable. The study positions Lorde's theory of difference as explicated at length in *Sister Outsider*. Lorde proposed that women should bring their whole selves and full involvement in their attempt towards emancipation. The core principles that guide and govern feminism are appropriately based on differences and inclusionary concepts. Lorde centers her writings catering to two victimized groups in particular- Black and Woman. Located within the fringes and borders of society, she brought out and copied instances of injustice more sharply and poignantly than anyone else. Lorde's theory of difference gets documented through her work *Sister Outsider*.

Introduction

The present society is not being liberated from the bondages of patriarchal dominance despite the evolvement of feminism across the ages. The concept of intersectionality as emphasising the notion of difference among women has channelised the visibility for women and leads to an egalitarian identity. The historical grounding of politics as governed by male centred dictates is a stumbling block to feminisation of politics. An alternate to this structured model is the involvement of women to dismantle the stereotype. For Lorde, increased visibility alone is unproductive as it guarantees oppressors to retain their hierarchical position; she says “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 1984). However, feminisation of politics is a fundamental and collective way to carve new demarcations of power.

The evolution of feminism into a critical discourse marks the advancement of Feminist Studies as an analysis of the nexus between power and ideology in determining the social constructs. The formulation of ideology that lies dominant within the concept of gender are dependent on the social identities and it establishes principles for the praxis of feminist discourse. The drive towards change, liberation and empowerment influence feminist dimensions which radically challenge and oppose hierarchy and power nexus. The coalition of gender with other determinants of society like race, sexuality and nationality accentuates and re-establishes new forms of identities dismantling the established ideology of power-oriented patriarchy. Feminist discourse thus negotiates and blur the borders and boundaries of gendered assumptions and hierarchical power structures in varied contexts. The branching out of feminism into various realms as Gender Studies and Women Studies critically analyse issues of women from interdisciplinary or multi- disciplinary perspective. The oppressive nature of gender is emphasised by Eckert;

Whereas the power relations between men and women are similar to those between dominated and subordinated classes and ethnic groups, the day-to-day context in which these power relations are played out is quite different. It is not a cultural norm for each working-class individual to be paired up for life with a member of the middle class or for every black person to be so paired up for life with a white person. However, our traditional gender ideology dictates this kind of relationship between men and women. (253-254)

The interconnections and undertones that accelerate and widens between social imbalance and exploitation are crucial for a feminist analysis which chart out the progressive ways and path for societal

development. The collaboration and alignment of feminism with the theory of intersectionality can bring out power critique for action. The visible change as a comprehensive analysis of the various factors is analysed at length. Connell examined those social practices has been influenced by gender on two different levels. The first category places gender under explanatory stage which channelises the persons to build their social practices. The second level ensures the role of gender as constituting the basis of social activities and relationships. Such a practice imposes restrictions on males and females regarding roles and practices.

Concept of Intersectionality and Difference

The shortcomings of Second Wave Feminism as distanced from the concept of intersectionality is raised by Audre Lorde. She has influenced Feminist Organisations and has been credited with the introduction of the concept of intersectionality in to feminist discourse. The experience of overlapping expressions being faced by women is highlighted by intersectionality and it evolves from a mere theoretical concept to practical aspect which marks the essence of women empowerment. Baumgardner (2005) addresses this transition as “central sites for creating activism and furthering feminist praxis”.

The concept dovetails multiple discriminations and the resulting multiple identities and how it demarcates distinction between rights and opportunities. The multidimensionality of women’s lives voicing against inequalities enable them to move from margin to the centre of mainstream society. Like Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga and Barbara Smith, Lorde articulated through an all-compassing voice giving due representation to every women. Morgan (2003) has pointed out that Black Feminist theoretician, Kimberle Crenshaw explains intersectionality as “a means of capturing both the structural and dynamic (eg: active) aspects of multiple discrimination, thus affecting both theory and practice”. Lorde (1984) clearly states that “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not lead single-issue lines”. Considering the historically grounded pillars of racism, oppression and homophobia, Lorde (1984) has carved out the theory of difference through her speech and writing; “The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new identities of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us.”

Lorde (1984) has based her premise of difference as contradictory to the Western European historicizing and perceiving “human differences in simplistic opposition to each other”. She clearly brings out that these oppositional means that monitor human differences lead to the formation of

marginalized section. To her inferior groups comprise the people of colour, people of the global south, working class people, older people, and woman. The differences attribute to Lorde's identity and labels herself as 'deviant.' Lorde's further argument concerns around the challenging nature of human differences and how it seems to be not properly accredited thus shadowing the reality to a greater extent. Thus, differences are rejected at any cost and is manifested through unawareness and annihilation. The members of the victimized or racialized groups who represent American society determined to eradicate the mistakes committed by the oppressors. To Lorde (1984), each oppressed group is entrusted with a responsibility- "Black and Third World people are expected to educate White people, women are expected to educate men, lesbians and gay are expected to educate the heterosexual world". This predefined agenda with the aim of redefining has the capacity to modify the present and construct the future. The members of the profit economy under the leadership of Lorde have approached difference in three different ways- ignore, copy if it seems to be dominant and destroy if it is subordinate. Differences negate the concept of equality and are often misrepresented. Reluctance to recognise differences disrupts human behaviour to a considerable extent.

Lorde (1984) defines "mythical norm" as "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure". Mythical norm regulates powerless whose identity is synonymous with all sorts of oppression and distortions. The definition of women when complies alone with the involvement of Whites excludes Black women as "other." The agents of societal control recognised only one major aspect of human difference that is the one that exists between women and men. These differences are tolerated to a considerable extent by the oppressed and they take it for granted as matter of their survival. Hall and Jefferson (1976) have rightly observed that dominant groups exert influence over subordinates by placing them within the "key institutions and structures which support power and social authority of the social order. It is, above all, in these structures and relations that a subordinate class lives its subordination".

Theorising rejection is likely to create misrepresentations of society and build a hindering block in the representation of women's struggle for equality. It is in this context Lorde aims to give recognition and reimagination to human difference with an attempt to shift power and change. Engagement with every form of identity is crucial to decode different forms of oppressions. Lorde's identity and her dedication to combat against infringement of race and sex is highly suggestive. It is clear that difference gets proper acknowledgement by the emergence of intersectionality in feminism. The interrelated oppressions in the name of gender, race, class, sexuality is analysed at length by

intersectional approach and attributes a sustainable positioning for identity. Lorde's approach thus instigates an identification of difference and it connects oppressing experience with the mainstream discourse.

Audre Lorde's affinity to intersectionality stems from her association with Black lesbian feminism, establishment of a literary canon, theory of difference and diverse marginalization. Her theory of difference left a space for the future generations to abide. Lorde (1984) defines racism, sexism, heterosexism and homophobia as "forms of human blindness stem from the same root-an inability to recognize difference as a dynamic human force, one which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self, when there are shared goals". Lorde's marginalized identity as Caribbean immigrant, Black woman and lesbian are categorised as adequate intersections throughout her work. Located at the fringes of society, Lorde has experienced and witnessed levels of injustice and criticised White women's activism.

The feminist involvement of personal and political without considering difference of race, class and sexuality is treated as incomplete representation. Lorde comments on the indomitable influence of racism, sexism, and homophobia in American society. The urge and impulse of women to nurture each other has been rediscovered by Lorde and the patriarchal world fears this change. The biological ability to reproduce is viewed as the only social power exclusive to women in patriarchal structure. Interconnectivity between women is a way to freedom and creativity. In the essay "The Master's Tools," Lorde (1984) has observed: "Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic." The interdependency of difference that emanates from this coalition has the power to engender courage and support to work in a borderless scenario;

Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged (Lorde 113)

Lorde's statement is that women were conditioned to forgo differences or to approach them with utmost hostility rather than treating them as agents of progression. For the co-existence of individuals,

the communities must choose a path that does not erase differences or rather abolish differences. Black women are positioned beyond the standardised notions of recognition; they are treated unfairly in the name of difference. They too need to survive in society through accepting differences and treating them as forte. The line of separation that divides black women from others will affect those who support master's act at any cost.

Marital slavery and prostitution have weakened women of color in myriad ways. Inappropriate representation of black women in American Feminism leads to indifferent attitude to oppression and she labels it as "racist feminism." The failure to foreground and accommodate difference as a crucial strength is in fact a shortcoming bounded by patriarchal force. The platform to ensure opportunities, privileges and possibilities will come only through defining and empowering; not through conflicts and conquest. The age-old practice of keeping the oppressed within the domain of oppressor or master's concern must change. The White women must tolerate the existence of differences and acknowledge Black women to realise their potential and contribution to joint survival as women. As part of advocating a verbal protest against racism and homophobia, Lorde exhorts women to explore deeper side of her self and realise the impact of negating difference. It is this stance that makes Lorde's visionary goal towards fulfilment of transcending all restrictions.

Conclusion

Audre Lorde re-shaped and re-formulated feminism by prioritizing intersectionality as a central tenet in establishing difference as an envisioning concept towards the path of liberation and empowerment. She exhorts that future survival of women must be shaped along the contours of equality striving towards a social change and dismantling the conventional patterns of oppression. The differences that exist among women should not be judged as inferior or superior rather must be employed to share collective goals which strive to exhibit vision. Lorde's entire perception and argument is built upon an impulse towards wholeness. The contradictions that characterise Black and White Feminisms are pragmatically approached and analysed through an insistence on the notion of "sisterhood" which includes the "other" and "ourselves." Having spoken against the institutionalized rejection of race, gender and class differences, Lorde urges to erase silence regarding oppressive measures affecting marginalized groups against the distribution of powers in society. Her writings propagate a strategy of survival among various discriminatory practices.

What is there possibly left for us to be afraid of, after we have dealt face to face with death and not embraced it? Once I accept the existence of dying as a life process, who can ever have power over me again? (Lorde 1984)

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