

Redefining Resistance: Revolutionary Women in Audre Lorde's "Who Said It Was Simple"

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Abstract—Audre Lorde's poetry, especially "Who Said It Was Simple", vividly illustrates her lived experiences as an African American lesbian woman navigating intersecting prejudices of racism, sexism, and homophobia. This study aims to analyze how Lorde's poem reflects and critiques societal norms that perpetuate inequality, particularly for Black women, and explores the poem's role in feminist discourse. The research employs a qualitative descriptive analysis with a focus on textual analysis. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the study interprets the thematic elements of Lorde's poem, examining how linguistic elements and symbols convey Lorde's experiences and societal critiques. The analysis reveals that Lorde's poem addresses the systemic barriers faced by Black women, emphasizing how these barriers stem from the interplay of race, gender, and sexuality. The poem illustrates the isolation and marginalization Lorde experiences, both within her own community and in broader society. It concludes by highlighting the persistent divide in societal acceptance of diverse identities. This study contributes to the understanding of intersectional feminism by illustrating how Lorde's poetry encapsulates the complexities of identity and resistance. It enhances the discourse on Black feminism by highlighting the unique struggles faced by Black lesbian women and how these struggles are articulated through poetic expression.

Index Terms—revolutionary women, Black feminism, Audre Lorde, Simone de Beauvoir

I. INTRODUCTION

The classification of literature is predominantly based on its categorization as either fiction or non-fiction, as well as its genre as poetry or prose. Alternatively, works may be further differentiated based on larger forms, such as dramas, short stories, or novels. Additional categorization may consider the historical time period to which a literary work pertains, or the extent to which it conforms to certain aesthetic features or expectations. The significance of literature transcends its status as a mere historical or cultural artifact. The literary medium offers an opportunity to explore novel experiences and environments. The field of literature comprises three major genres, namely prose, poetry, and drama. The art form of poetry serves as a means of attaining artistic expression through various avenues. Poets adhere to specific forms and patterns during the creative process of composing their literary works. Poetry constitutes a facet of literature that frequently embodies artistic expression. In the realm of artistic expression, conveying meaning through non-literal means is considered a key endeavor. The inherent aesthetic value of poetry can indeed be effectively merged with the integral virtues of honesty, thus culminating in a harmonious and aesthetically appealing composition. The genesis of poetry can be traced back to the marginalized members of society who experienced oppression. The poetry produced by oppressed individuals can be regarded as aesthetically pleasing literature owing to its ability to convey profound artistic expressions (Fernandes, 2017).

The emergence of the idea of feminism in African-American literature is one of the implications that is not only caused by gender oppression against women, but is also influenced by racial issues constructed by society (Rahman et al., 2022).

Black women face discrimination in all areas of life and fight against both sexism and racism. In the 19th century, black women writers used their writing to speak out against these oppressions and seek self-expression. They aimed to reconcile societal expectations with their true selves. Race and gender were central themes for black women writers in the 1970s, shaping Afro-American literature by addressing their desire to express themselves and reconcile societal stereotypes with their true identities. Black women poets of the late twentieth century rejected societal pressure to ignore female issues and rethought assumptions about identity that prioritize African American males. African-American women writers express women's issues and marginalization they experience daily (Ahmad & Sheikh, 2022). Studies in Black literature in the United States highlight significant issues of race and gender, illustrating their impact on Black consciousness, self-esteem, and mental well-being. If these issues remain unaddressed, they may result in self-loathing, inferiority complexes, and, in severe cases, mental breakdowns. Therefore, acknowledging and addressing these pressures is an urgent priority for Black writers (Marisa et al., 2020).

Audre Lorde (February 18, 1934 – November 17, 1992) was an influential American poet, essayist, and autobiographer renowned for her writings on lesbian feminism and racial issues. Born to Grenadian parents in New York City, she attended Hunter College, earning a B.A. in 1959 and a master's degree in library science in 1961. She married in 1962 and balanced her career as a librarian at the Town School in New York with writing poetry. Lorde also taught English at Hunter College. In 1968, her first poetry collection, *The First Cities*, was published. That same year, she briefly left New York to serve as poet-in-residence at Tougaloo College in Mississippi (Britannica, 2024). Growing up in Harlem, Audre Lorde matured during the Cold War and McCarthyism, facing many restrictions. At Hunter College, she and her friends rebelled against these constraints. Fearing FBI arrest for being a lesbian, she moved to Mexico seeking equality. Returning to New York, she became a vocal critic of U.S. policies, actively participating in the Civil Rights Movement and advocating for equal rights (Njeng, 2023).

Lorde's poetry and career were driven by rebellion against racism, sexism, and white supremacy. As an African American visionary poet, she aimed to liberate Black people from white misogyny and xenophobia, promoting blackness, femininity, and homosexuality. She believed reclaiming Black ancestry and culture could foster greater tolerance in white society. Her feminism framed lesbianism as a political challenge to male dominance. Growing up in a tension-filled environment, Lorde recognized that "difference" was the root of conflict, experiencing racial and gender inequality firsthand. As an outspoken woman, she understood that she had to fight for acceptance in American society. Rejected by white society for being Black, marginalized by Black men for being female, and ostracized by the Black community for being a lesbian, Lorde sought a community that accepted her "true self". She found solace in West African mythology, which connected her to her roots and empowered her to educate and uplift Black women in America, reminding them of their historical roles as warriors and leaders. This connection strengthened their fight against oppression (Marisa et al., 2020).

In this paper, the researchers purposely intend to analyze the portrayal of revolutionary women in Audre Lorde's poem "Who Said It Was Simple". Lorde's poems address various aspects of life, including racism, sexism, and identity. The researchers are particularly interested in this poem due to the significant relationship between women's struggles and Lorde's work. This study reveals how Lorde uses metaphors to depict the origins of anger stemming from racism, sexism, and homophobia, highlighting the struggles and resilience of marginalized individuals. It also contributes to a broader understanding of societal dynamics and personal identity, highlighting how many of Lorde's poems examine feminist issues and the experiences of Black women.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative descriptive research. The focus of this research is to describe and analyze a poem of Audre Lorde "Who Said It Was Simple". The researchers employ qualitative content analysis approach, particularly textual analysis as a part of descriptive analytical methodology to analyze the poem. The qualitative research methodology refers to a non-quantifiable data such as people's lives, experiences, behaviors, emotions, organizations, social movements, cultural phenomena, relationships, and nations. Qualitative research gathers non-standardized data and analyzes texts and pictures to examine subjective meanings or socially created topics, events and practices (Rahman, 2020). Content analysis groups text based on related categories and identifies similarities, differences, patterns, and associations. It reveals valuable information about phenomena (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). The utilization of textual analysis is a research methodology that entails comprehending the linguistic elements, symbols, or visual depictions contained within written or spoken discourses, in order to elicit insights into the manner by which individuals construct meaning and communicate their experiences of life. The comprehension of communication can potentially be guided by cues emanating from visual, written or spoken messages. Frequently, the interpretation of messages is perceived as being affected by and emblematic of broader societal frameworks. For instance, messages possess the ability to both reflect and potentially challenge the cultural, historical, ethical, and political contexts within which they are situated. Thus, it is imperative to possess a comprehensive comprehension of the wider societal frameworks that shape the communication within the textual material that is being scrutinized (Hawkins, 2017). The method of textual analysis holds paramount significance in the realms of literary studies. Most research in this field requires an in-depth analysis of textual materials, such as novels, poetry, narratives, or dramas (Caulfield, 2022), and utilizes a close reading methodology to gather reliable and verifiable empirical evidence (Huwari et al., 2024).

A. *The Revolutionary Women*

In general, calling someone a feminist is revolutionary enough in today's world (Mackay, 2014). Charles Fourier coined the term "feminism" in 1837, marking the beginning of a global movement for gender equality. The revolution eventually reached England around 1890 and America by 1910. The perception and application of this phenomenon vary across nations. There are three stages recognized in western countries. The categories are specifically referred to as the initial wave, secondary wave and tertiary wave. The initial stage of the revolution began in the 19th century and extended until the early years of the 20th century. In this particular time frame, the significance of women in the realm of politics was recognized, and they were granted their right to vote. The time frame commonly referred to as the second wave is classified as spanning from 1960 until 1980. Throughout this era, women's organizations launched a campaign against the unequal treatment of men and women in government workplaces, as well as the distinct legislation created for each gender. The female demographic remains underdeveloped despite the ongoing third wave (Barik, 2019).

In her book, "The Second Sex", Simone de Beauvoir has passionately and eloquently conveyed the predicaments and obstacles faced by women in society, along with potential remedies. In the book, she portrays society as labeling men as the primary sex and women as the secondary sex. By writing this book, she motivated women to achieve equal rights and equal footing in society, similar to that of men. Philosophers have categorized feminism into multiple schools including Black Feminist, Lesbian Feminist, Marxist Feminist, Psychoanalytic Feminist, Indian Feminist, Radical Feminist and Eco Feminist (Alqaryouti et al., 2021; Alqaryoutia & Ismailb, 2019; Barik, 2019; Saeed, 2024).

B. *Black Feminism*

Black feminism is essentially a movement aimed at advocating for women's rights through speech, writing, and action, with the primary goal of promoting their growth and advancement. The various forms of feminism showcase women's struggles and efforts to thrive in society. They act as the voice for women worldwide who suffer exploitation at the hands of a male-dominated society. Feminism perpetuates the segregation of feminists based on their country of origin, religious beliefs, and ethnicity. Black feminism pertains to a brand of feminism that focuses on the challenges faced by women of color. The term "Black feminism" asserts that racism, classism, and sexism are inherently interconnected. Black women face a unique disadvantage, as they are both susceptible to racial discrimination and gender-based abuse or exploitation. This results in double oppression and segregation, stemming from both their race and gender (Saima, 2018). Black feminism is still significant in the United States. The demographic of African-American women is one that experiences systematic disadvantages and discrimination. Black feminism will continue to be necessary as long as Black women remain oppressed due to a complex interplay of factors including race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality (Widyaswara, 2022).

C. *Audre Lorde*

Audre Geraldine Lorde, born in 1934 in New York City, rose to prominence as an African-American poet and essayist, boldly addressing topics surrounding race, gender, and sexuality. While studying, she supported herself by working at Hunter College. Following her graduation in 1959, she pursued further academic accomplishments and successfully obtained a master's degree in library science from Columbia University in 1961. She completed her studies at Hunter High School, where she held the responsibility of editing literary publications. From an early age, Lorde had a strong association with poetry. In the 1960s, Lorde participated in the civil rights, antiwar, and women's liberation movements while also sharing her poetry in various magazines and anthologies. Lorde's creations are distinguished by their potent portrayal of African-American cultural heritage, as well as their incorporation of weighty subject matters, including but not limited to racism, sexism, and violence (Puspitasari, 2022).

During the 1960s, certain African-American authors, including Lorde, displayed their emotions and examined the themes of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia through their writing. This allowed them to bring attention to the specific challenges faced by Black women. Lorde began to give more importance to the belief system of feminism. In addition, she underscored the significance of comprehending the fundamental nature of women's hardships in combatting inequalities on both societal and governmental levels, which she witnessed throughout her lifetime. The focal point of her creative works primarily revolves around the themes of feminism, civil rights, and the quest for understanding the identity of Black women (F. Rahman et al., 2022).

D. *"Who Said It Was Simple" Related Literature*

"Who Said It Was Simple" by Audre Lorde explores the intersecting realities of race, class, and gender. She describes women preparing for a march at Nedicks, highlighting the irony of white women planning liberation strategies while employing non-white women for domestic work. This underscores the oppressor-oppressed dynamics within the feminist movement. Lorde continues with a scene where a nearly white counterwoman serves white women before a "waiting brother," highlighting racial and gender discrimination. The women do not notice or reject this preferential treatment, reflecting the ingrained sexism and racism in society. Lorde uses terms like "mirror" and "bed" to represent her identity as a black lesbian woman, showing how she cannot separate her experiences of oppression based on race and gender. This stanza underscores the complexities and interwoven nature of societal challenges that Lorde witnesses and experiences (F. Rahman et al., 2022).

In her poem "Who Said It Was Simple", Audre Lorde highlights the complex challenges of being a black, gay woman in a society filled with racism, sexism, and homophobia. She argues that the fight for equality is arduous and risky, drawing from her personal experiences and the historical oppression of African Americans. The title suggests that overcoming these deep-seated discriminations is far from simple. Lorde connects contemporary African American anger to a long history of suffering, using the word "roots" to reference the enduring legacy of slavery and mistreatment. She writes, "There are so many roots to the tree of anger that sometimes the branches shatter before they bear," illustrating the depth of this historical anger. She vividly depicts the struggles of black women, showing their efforts to achieve freedom through solidarity, as seen in gatherings at places like Nedicks, organized by the National Black Feminist Organization. This emphasizes the importance of collective action against oppression. Lorde identifies sexism, racism, and homophobia as major barriers to equality, feeling isolated by both her black community and broader society. She describes this isolation as being "bound by my mirror as well as my bed," recognizing the intersectional nature of her oppression. Lorde longs for a life free from all forms of discrimination, based on mutual equality and respect. She realizes her struggle is against a system designed to undermine her humanity and dignity, making her daily life a continuous fight for recognition. Through this poem, she calls for an inclusive movement addressing the diverse needs of all marginalized individuals, emphasizing that true liberation requires confronting all forms of oppression (Hummadi, 2020).

In her poem "Who Said It Was Simple", Lorde passionately advocates for the survival and emotional recovery of her audience, particularly those who have been silenced by their suffering. It is clear that she has a strong desire for transformation as she refuses to give up any element of who she is, despite facing challenges. She achieves this by using provocative imagery and openly expressing the pain, which removes the "bandage of silence" and enables the individual healing process to start, ultimately leading to a collective change (Morris, 2021).

III. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This study examines the complex themes of resilience and resistance amidst a landscape shaped by hardship, struggle, racism, and sexism in society. Exploring the dynamics of ethnic allegiance and social isolation, it delves into the barriers to freedom and equality, revealing the irony of liberation and the intersectionality of identity. Additionally, it explores the pivotal role of community and solidarity in navigating these complex socio-cultural dynamics.

A. Resilience and Resistance

The poem begins by employing a metaphorical device to elucidate the portrayal of an individual coping with the intricacies of life, akin to a tree nourished by numerous roots of anger. At the outset of the poem, Audre starts by noting that there are "so many roots to the tree of anger". This implies that rage has a wide range of origins. Similar to how a tree's roots nourish it, it draws energy from a variety of sources. The roots also refer to the instances and circumstances in which she experienced oppression due to her race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. This fury is brought on by the struggles and hardships that she endured as a result of sexism, racism, and homophobia.

However, the imagery of the tree and its roots also symbolizes resilience. Despite the anger and frustration that Lorde experiences, she remains steadfast in her resistance to oppression. The tree, though it may shatter at times, continues to grow and draw strength from its roots. Similarly, Lorde's resilience is evident in her determination to speak out, fight for her rights, and strive for justice.

B. Impact of Hardships and Struggles

Lorde continues with the line, "that sometimes the branches shatter ... before they bear," illustrating how the stresses and hardships of life can cause a person to break down. Just as a tree may not withstand all pressures, individuals sometimes cannot endure life's challenges, prompting them to speak out. This highlights how injustice can devastate a person entirely. The poet reflects on the prejudices she faced as an African American woman, emphasizing that because she is a woman, she does not enjoy the same rights as men. Additionally, because she is Black, she does not enjoy the same equality as white individuals. The poem discusses racism and sexism and how they impact everyone. The metaphor extends to suggest that the cumulative weight of these injustices can cause people to reach a breaking point, where the emotional and psychological toll of enduring discrimination becomes too much to bear.

C. Racism and Sexism in Society

The poem addresses the impact of racism and sexism on a broad scale. Lorde observes a group of white women at a restaurant prior to a women's rights march, they discuss the young women they employ and how their employment represents the advancement of women's liberation. She points out that when a girl obtains a job, she gains independence: "Sitting in Nedicks ... the women rally before they march...discussing the problematic girls... they hire to make them free".

Lorde talks about race again as she says, "An almost white counterwoman", it is implied that the counterwoman is abiding by societal standards for serving either the privileged or those of races other than white. This explicitly highlights the social norm of how priority is determined by social class and ethnicity. Lorde's idea of ethnic allegiance is being maintained, and the women who are advocating for women's rights don't "notice nor reject," which is seen as an apparent paradox. As a result, she sits feeling isolated in that environment.

D. Ethnic Allegiance and Social Isolation

Lorde points out the paradox of white women advocating for women's rights while ignoring racial inequalities, leaving her feeling isolated. The poet, likely the speaker, recognizes her difference from both these women and the Black men nearby. She is bound by "my mirror ... as well as my bed," symbolizing the societal constraints faced by women. The mirror represents societal expectations of women to appear presentable for men, and the bed symbolizes traditional roles and isolation. This imagery highlights how women are often confined by their roles and how these roles are further complicated by race and sexual orientation.

The poet, who is most likely the speaker in these lines observes that she is different from these women, she is bound by her bed and mirror "But I who am bound by my mirror ... as well as my bed ... see causes in colour ... as well as sex". Throughout her life, Lorde, a Black woman, faced a multitude of social injustices, she used the words "bed" and "mirror" to refer to the privileges men have in society. Women had traditionally used mirrors to look presentable for men in society or to represent the reflection of women's looks in society and men's eyes, or as a symbol that she isolated in her room due to societal norms faced her mirror and bed Lorde believes that sexism and racism, are the main barriers preventing Black women in general from enjoying freedom and equality with white people. She feels excluded from that environment because she is a Black lesbian woman. She is isolated not just by her black community due to her lesbianism, but also by the white set due to her racial and sexual identity. "See causes in color...as well as sex," she says, pointing out that she is a victim of various prejudices due to her appearance, gender, race, and sexual orientation, as well as how society views her. She feels alone and isolated in her room and views it as a prison, cut off from the outside world.

E. Barriers to Freedom and Equality

Lorde argues that sexism, racism, and homophobia are the main barriers preventing Black women from achieving freedom and equality. As a Black lesbian woman, she feels excluded by both her community and white society. The phrase "See causes in color...as well as sex" reflects her experience of multiple prejudices based on her appearance, gender, race, and sexual orientation. This isolation leaves her feeling imprisoned in her room, disconnected from the outside world. Through these personal experiences, the poet illustrates broader societal issues, showing how interconnected forms of discrimination work to marginalize individuals in multiple, compounding ways.

F. Irony of Liberation

The poem concludes with Lorde contemplating "which me will survive all these liberations," highlighting the irony of her situation. This irony is heightened because the author is aware of the struggles that the homosexual community—and she personally—face in gaining acceptance in society, despite the advances of the Civil Rights and women's rights movements.

The phrase "which me will survive all the liberations" refers to her and the homosexual community's ability to withstand all forms of prejudice without breaking, the speaker implies in the poem's conclusion that even if she achieves independence, not all versions of herself will endure. The world is still divided and can accept only parts of her that conform to their standards and expectations, notwithstanding the Civil Rights and women's rights movements. This final reflection underscores the poem's central theme: true liberation requires the acceptance of all aspects of one's identity, rather than selective acknowledgment based on societal norms.

G. Intersectionality of Identity

Throughout the poem, Lorde emphasizes the intersectionality of her identity as a Black lesbian woman. Her experiences are shaped by the overlapping and interlocking systems of oppression related to race, gender, and sexual orientation. This intersectionality is crucial to understanding the depth of her anger and frustration, as it highlights the complexity of her identity. As noted in AlTobi and Alnwairan (2023), such multifaceted identity experiences reveal how compounded societal pressures restrict self-expression, contributing to systemic barriers that affect marginalized individuals in unique ways.

Lorde highlights the multifaceted nature of discrimination and marginalization she faces due to her identity, emphasizing how various forms of oppression intersect and compound. This theme is poignantly illustrated in her poem, which begins with a depiction of a white man who blatantly disregards her presence, prioritizing the service of other women instead. These women, in turn, "neither notice nor reject" reinforcing her sense of exclusion and invisibility. This scenario underscores the societal validation of her marginalization. In the poem's conclusion, Lorde explains the underlying reason for this discrimination: it is rooted in both her race and her gender, as she poignantly observes, "see causes in colour ... as well as sex." This line encapsulates the dual axes of oppression that shape her lived experience. Lorde calls attention to the need for a more nuanced approach to social justice that considers multiple dimensions of discrimination and privilege.

H. The Role of Community and Solidarity

Lorde's poem also delves into the significance of community and solidarity in combating oppression. Despite experiencing isolation, she acknowledges the power that arises from shared experiences and collective action. The poem references a "women rally" and a "march", hinting at the potential for unity among women. Additionally, the discussion about the "problematic girl" who seeks liberation through employment highlights the importance of solidarity in the struggle against discrimination faced by women. However, this solidarity is often complicated by racial and sexual

divisions. These themes emphasize the necessity of constructing inclusive movements that consider the diverse needs and experiences of all their members. By advocating for intersectional solidarity, Lorde underscores that true liberation requires addressing all forms of oppression collectively.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study uncovers Audre Lorde's use of metaphors to convey the complex roots of anger arising from racism, sexism, and homophobia. The poem portrays how these struggles and hardships can cause individuals to crumble under life's pressures, highlighting Lorde's personal experiences with oppression as an African American woman and drawing attention to broader societal implications. Additionally, the poem explores the dynamics and paradoxes within women's rights movements, particularly the often-overlooked intersectionality of race, gender, and class. The contribution of this study to feminist literary criticism is significant, as it underscores the importance of examining the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression. Lorde's work serves as a powerful example of how literature can articulate the complexities of identity and the pervasive nature of social injustices. By highlighting the intricate ways in which different forms of discrimination intersect and impact individuals, this analysis provides a deeper understanding of the systemic nature of oppression. Exploring the representation of intersectional identities in other works by Lorde and her contemporaries, along with examining how these themes have evolved in more recent feminist literature, would provide valuable insights. Additionally, investigating the reception and impact of Lorde's work within different cultural and social contexts could offer further insights into its enduring relevance and influence on feminist thought and activism.

In Audre Lorde's poem "Who Said It Was Simple", she poignantly captures the multifaceted challenges faced by an African American lesbian woman, focusing on the intersecting oppressions of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Lorde illustrates that her rights are restricted not only because she is a woman but also due to her race and sexual orientation. The poem exposes how societal norms and priorities are dictated by social class, race, and gender, creating systemic barriers that prevent Black women from achieving true equality. Through her vivid portrayal of personal isolation and discrimination, Lorde emphasizes the complex interplay of identities that lead to her marginalization, both within the Black community and in broader white society. Despite movements toward equality, Lorde suggests that the world remains fundamentally divided, unable to fully embrace the diversity of her identity. The poem thus underscores the ongoing challenges of achieving genuine inclusivity and acceptance in society.

To address the issues highlighted in Lorde's poem, adopting an intersectional approach in activism is crucial, ensuring that the interconnected effects of race, gender, and sexuality are recognized. Educational initiatives should promote an understanding of these intersecting oppressions, and anti-discrimination laws must be strengthened to protect against multiple forms of prejudice. Supporting Black feminist literature and voices like Audre Lorde's will further inspire efforts toward justice and inclusivity.

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