

***'The Tyranny of Silence': The Uses of the Erotic in Audre Lorde's Poetry***

Swarnika Ahuja, Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies, India

The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2023  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

The idea of passion and pain becomes important to understand the erotic in Lorde's poetry. It is soaked with a fearlessness with which she demands other women to speak. The notion of the erotic which has always been seen in the mainstream as closely aligned to the idea of the sexual act, finds a new freedom in the works of Lorde. For she passionately pleads for precisely this ability to pour out without feeling shame, disgust or fear. We are programmed to hide or to show but never truly be ourselves- free to be seen and heard as we want. The silences that we yearn to break but are forced to keep against our will. It is in these terms she articulates fear which she primarily understands as a fear to be seen, to be visible in a society that has taught us to be anything but our true selves, that has always prescribed only certain ways of existing. My paper will examine how resisting this 'tyranny of silence' is a battle for space, for representation, a battle to be heard and to break the silences within the archive of women's writing. Through this unrestrained capacity to speak, to initiate dialogue with the feminist movements that have remained silent on Black women's rights, the erotic is transformed into an act that no longer allows invisibility but rather the erotic becomes something of a tool at our disposal that brings us freedom from the isolation caused by our silences.

Keywords: Erotic, Silence, Lorde, Self

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum

[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## **Introduction**

Before beginning a discussion on the idea of the erotic in Audre Lorde's poetics, I must quote a comment here by Joan Martin who writes, 'one doesn't have to profess heterosexuality, homosexuality, or asexuality to react to her poems [...] Anyone who has ever been in love can respond to the straightforward passion and pain sometimes one and the same, in Lorde's poems' (Martin, 1983, p.277).

Through a close reading of her poetry, we can observe how the act of writing poetry itself becomes a call to break silences. The use of the erotic becomes a very powerful strategy to counter the structures that impose these silences.

## **Breaking Silences : The Uses of the Erotic**

This idea of passion and pain becomes important to understand the passion with which Lorde's poetry pours. It is soaked with a fearlessness with which she demands other women to speak as well. The notion of the erotic which has always been seen in the mainstream as closely aligned to the idea of the sexual act, finds a new freedom in the works of Lorde. For she passionately pleads for precisely this candour, this ability to pour out without feeling shame, disgust or fear. She doesn't talk about the act of hiding what a woman doesn't want to show, for even the assertion to visibilise our own hiddenness is taken away from us. We are programmed to hide or to show but never truly be ourselves- free to be seen and heard as we want. The silences that we yearn to break but are forced to keep against our will. It is in these terms she articulates fear which she primarily understands as a fear to be seen , to be visible in a society that has taught us to be anything but our true selves, that has always prescribed only certain ways of existing.

In 'A Litany for Survival' (Lorde, 2000, p. 326), Lorde expresses the hesitance and indecision that we face when we want to speak, be heard, love and be loved the way we want to. She traces the anxiety that keeps us from making these desires visible. In our everyday struggle to barely survive, she beautifully expresses the silences we teach ourselves to keep. She lays bare the fear and the anxiety that constantly haunts us. And it is precisely this argument that she counters- this fear garbed as decency that we adorn to keep our own desire to speak, love and live in check. She breaks the illusion of the safety and the comfort sought in obedience and being careful about loving 'in doorways coming and going in the hours between dawns' and never openly and explicitly. According to Lorde, the White Male never forgives our crime of being woman. Or Black. Or Lesbian. Therefore she questions this fruitless attempt in seeking some kind of refuge and peace in staying silent, of following the rules. And always hiding our true selves out of necessity and fear, constricting the flow of our desires.

### **A Litany for Survival**

For those of us who live at the shoreline  
standing upon the constant edges of decision  
crucial and alone  
for those of us who cannot indulge  
the passing dreams of choice  
who love in doorways coming and going  
in the hours between dawns

looking inward and outward  
at once before and after  
seeking a now that can breed  
futures  
like bread in our children's mouths  
so their dreams will not reflect  
the death of ours;

For those of us  
who were imprinted with fear  
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads  
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk  
for by this weapon  
this illusion of some safety to be found  
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us  
For all of us  
this instant and this triumph  
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid  
it might not remain  
when the sun sets we are afraid  
it might not rise in the morning  
when our stomachs are full we are afraid  
of indigestion  
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid  
we may never eat again  
when we are loved we are afraid  
love will vanish  
when we are alone we are afraid  
love will never return  
and when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard  
nor welcomed  
but when we are silent  
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive

Through this poem she traces a convincing argument of why we should not let our desires die an untimely death. She simultaneously marks this different identity, 'like a faint line in the center of our foreheads,' of how, owing to this difference we were never meant to survive in a world that demands us to be either white, male and heterosexual or not exist at all.

For she truly sees this freedom from fear as a liberating force – a force so powerful and energising that it becomes erotic in the sense, there is nothing holding us back anymore. Nothing stopping us from reaching out deep within and touching the creative energies bursting within us that we have taught ourselves to conceal. In 'The Transformation of

Silence into Language and Action' (Lorde, 1984, p.40), she further says, 'where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognise our responsibility to seek those words out [...] and examine them in their pertinence to our lives. That we not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own.'

Thus she espouses for a continuity which is creative for it is ever-flowing and mutually nourishing. She transforms language into poetry, makes it that umbilical chord that refuses to break and seeks to establish connections. Rather than turn our everyday struggles to survive and exist as we would desire into muted sufferings and silences. She pleads to make visible, to say anything, to pour simply, even if fearfully. She makes this very fear that silences us, as the tool to liberate our voices. For if we have been marked by the system to not survive, what more can go wrong if we do speak after all. In Audre Lorde's poetics, nothing is denied, no feeling forbidden. For she feels too long, feeling has bowed down to rationality similar to the ways black mothers to white fathers.

Instead, through this unrestrained capacity to speak, to initiate dialogue, she encourages a release. That feeds into us the courage to no longer allow invisibility- to be so passionately charged and moved by an unbridled, unabashed desire to speak, to be heard and seen, to feel – Lorde transforms the Erotic into something of a tool at our disposal that brings us freedom from isolation and alienation. And find sweet relief from the structures that try to silence us. - in, 'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action' (Lorde, 1984, p.40), she says,

Yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust? Or another,"She's a white woman and what could she possibly have to say to me?" Or, "She's a lesbian, what would my husband say, or my chairman.?" Or again, "This woman writes of her sons and I have no children." And all the other endless ways in which we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other.

We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialised to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition z and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.

The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilises us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.

Speech becomes that gap the fills the awkward space between two isolated individuals. Erotic intimacy flows not only when skin touches skin but when words mingle and icy silences are melted. And it is here, that Martin's remarks gain full meaning for even the meaning of The Erotic is no longer part of one discourse –that of physical desire and intimacy but also becomes inclusive of the Asexual. It is this warmth, this fire that Lorde's poetry hopes to spark. To be passionate and fiery enough to speak in many voices coming from various kinds of people. The Erotic is not something of a luxury experienced only within closed bedrooms but an outburst of feelings that flow even out of the everyday. The form of poetry itself lends to this 'everydayness' and ordinariness. In 'Age Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference' (Lorde, p. 114), Lorde says,

Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labour, the least material, and one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper.

This limitless, boundless way of existing becomes a cause for a certain kind of excitement in Lorde's poems that is erotically charged. The excitement that is fuelled by the knowledge that there are no walls, no boundaries, no locks on our mouths, no cloaks wrapped around us. Luce Irigaray in 'When our Lips Speak together' talks about the joy of breaking boundaries.

You speak from everywhere at the same time. You touch me whole at the same time. In all senses. Why only one song, one discourse, one text at a time? To seduce, satisfy, fill one of my 'holes? I don't have any, with you. We are not voids, lacks which wait for sustenance, fulfilment, or plenitude from an other. That our lips make us women does not mean that consuming, consummating or being filled is what matter to us.

Kiss me. Two lips kiss two lips, and openness is ours again. Our 'world.' Between us, the movement from inside to outside, from outside to inside, knows no limit.

There is a happiness and joy that flows as a consequence of being free to move. To play. As fear dissolves, possibilities emerge- the possibility to finally be anything without any fear- black or white, gay or lesbian, male or female. In *Writing Ourselves Whole: Using the Power of Your Own Creativity to Recover and Heal from Sexual Trauma*, it is pointed out how survival itself can become a creative act.

We are taught to do what others expect from us, what makes others comfortable or happy. If we are female, we're taught to act small, get quiet, and stuff our voices down while baring our bodies for the viewing and approval of others; if we are male, we're taught to get loud and big, force our voice into a room, take what we want and stuff our emotions down. If we are genderqueer, well, we're mostly just taught to disappear. We are—all of us—taught that what other people think of us is more important than what we think of ourselves. And we are taught that being ourselves, if that self is at odds with the expectations of our community or those in power, can get us hurt. Our survival instinct kicks in and teaches us how to follow, even if following chafes.

Even in a poem like 'Movement Song', (Lorde, 2000, p. 120) which takes up the tense moment of two lovers breaking away as its central subject- the words of the poem defer that final breakage. They begin to cling even as they refuse to withdraw and let go. The awkward silence that accompanies the end of a relationship is filled with the movement of sounds, of words in Lorde's poem. For the speaker of the poem, fills the tense silence of breaking off into 'opposite directions' without even saying so much as a goodbye with ways of remembering, with last thoughts, hasty instructions for the estranged lover. And even then, promises to be a fellow rider even if they are being rewarded with journeys away from each other. That final fissure in their now clearly terminated relationship never occurs in the poem even till the end. For the speaker of the poem refuses silence to take over and by the time the poem ends, the estranged lover is still speaking, is still mid-sentence even if to say they can no longer 'waste time' together.

## Movement Song

I have studied the tight curls on the back of your neck  
moving away from me  
beyond anger or failure  
your face in the evening schools of longing  
through mornings of wish and ripen  
we were always saying goodbye  
in the blood in the bone over coffee  
before dashing for elevators going  
in opposite directions  
without goodbyes.

Do not remember me as a bridge nor a roof  
as the maker of legends  
nor as a trap  
door to that world  
where black and white clericals  
hang on the edge of beauty in five o clock elevators  
twitching their shoulders to avoid other flesh  
and now  
there is someone to speak for them  
moving away from me into tomorrows  
morning of wish and ripen  
your goodbye is a promise of lightning  
in the last angels hand  
unwelcome and warning  
the sands have run out against us  
we were rewarded by journeys  
away from each other  
into desire  
into mornings alone  
where excuse and endurance mingle  
conceiving decision.  
Do not remember me  
as disaster  
nor as the keeper of secrets  
I am a fellow rider in the cattle cars  
watching  
you move slowly out of my bed  
saying we cannot waste time  
only ourselves.

This is what characterises the Erotic in Lorde's poem. For she chooses a most unerotic moment- the end of a relationship-to show that the erotic is not simply a part of the discourse of sexual intimacy. Even in the sourness of a relationship between two lovers, something stays- a connection, a chord, the thin trail of memory, of past erotic love that conjoins the two. The words of the poem show a reluctance to withdraw, to slip away into silence and impressionistically continue to linger even when the poem apparently ends. For as long as there is the force of a longing, the power of the erotic cannot fade.

In 'If You Come Softly' (Lorde, 2000, p. 39), this passionate desire to reconcile is voiced through simple acts of tenderness evoking erotic intimacy as an image that can heal the broken as nature does even between the most estranged of lovers.

### **If You Come Softly**

If you come as softly  
As the wind within the trees  
You may hear what I hear  
See what sorrow sees.

If you come as lightly  
As threading dew  
I will take you gladly  
Nor ask more of you.

You may sit beside me  
Silent as a breath  
Only those who stay dead  
Shall remember death.

And if you come I will be silent  
Nor speak harsh words to you.  
I will not ask you why now.  
Or how, or what you do.

We shall sit here, softly  
Beneath two different years  
And the rich between us  
Shall drink our tears.

In the midst of the end of erotic desire, at precisely the end of the sexual act where desire begins to ebb away – Audre Lorde daringly pens a poem that spills over and brims with words. And dares to speak in a situation where nothing can be said. She leaves 'Movement Song' as an erotic engagement in the place of indifferent silence and strikes an intimacy by evoking shared moments of past desire.

Therefore, 'Movement Song' is also a movement in its own right that refuses to move away from the other, that tries to overcome differences and seeks a kind of alliance and affirmation even from the most indifferent. In this case an indifferent lover and hopes for a connection, reconciliation as a fellow rider. It sees poetry as a creative process that replenishes and refills the wounded, the shattered and the broken. This erotic creativity becomes a way surviving by shaping oneself and the other.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, poetry, emerges as many kinds of voices, becomes a necessity rather than a luxury. It is a strategy to keep our violently shattered faced whole, something that must flow out of us unapologetically. This eroticity that flows into poetry is then not just a way of

looking for salvation in bonding with the others but our own selves, our deeply denied desires which are more like requirements that must be tended to everyday.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Eric Gagnon for his constant support and encouragement.



## References

- Cross, J. (2017) *Writing Ourselves Whole: Using the Power of Your Own Creativity to Recover and Heal from Sexual Trauma*. Mango Media.
- Irigaray, L. (1985). *The Sex Which is Not*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.
- Lorde, A. (2017). *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*. Silver Press.
- Lorde, A. (2000). *Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. W.W. Norton.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. California. The Crossing Press.
- Martin, J. (1983). The Unicorn is Black: Audre Lorde in Retrospect. In Mari Evans ( Eds.), *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, (p. 277- p. 291). New York. Anchor Press.