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# The Feminism of Afro-American in Audre Lorde's Selected Poems

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**Abstract**—This research aims to discover the feminism of Afro-Americans in the selected poems of Audre Lorde by understanding the meaning and elaborating it with Lorde's attitude towards feminism. The research employed a descriptive qualitative method and structuralism is the determined approach to process the data. Therefore, this study is not only concerned with the structure of the poems but also combined with the feminism theory. The result of this research indicated that the objects contained several poetical elements: figurative language, imagery, diction, and tone, that have a main function in enriching the meanings and semantic atmospheres in order to disclose the feminism issues inside the poems. Therefore, the analysis of poetical devices shows how significant the author treats feminism inside her selected poems.

**Index Terms**—feminism, Afro-American, structuralism, poem, Audre Lorde

## I. INTRODUCTION

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Feminism has always been a serious topic to discuss, and its current struggles have yielded remarkable results for women's independence and gender equality in society. Several countries in various parts of the world are still struggling to achieve a better life for women. They pursue various goals for their prosperity, and one of the goals of the movement is to fight violence against women. While the types of violence vary, such as physical, sexual, and mental violence. In addition, one of the determining factors is ethnic background. Racial discrimination is something that is sensitive for women, which affects their existence in society.

African Americans in the Colonial Era: From African Origins through the American Revolution explains that the history of racial discrimination against black women has been going on for a long time, even in a liberal and multicultural country like the United States. In the Civil War (1860-1865), blacks were freed from slavery, but whites still treated them unequally because whites felt superior and saw blacks as inferior. Wright (2017) argued that Southern White racism descends into evil and absurdity (p. 228). African-Americans have different perspective way to define the racism in the novel. They cannot live in a free society on par with white people because of their claim of racial inferiority. Stereotypes such as "wooly" hair, snub noses, thick lips, and physical appearance make them subordinated in a society dominated by white people. Despite these conditions, some African-American writers in the 1960s such as Lorde had presented their works to show their emotional expression and complement the issues of racism, classicism, sexism, and homophobia and highlight what black women faced. Today, this is a part of minority cause the feminism of this novel (Lorde, 1977a, p. 20). She began to emphasize the ideology of feminism itself. Furthermore, she also emphasized the importance of understanding the essence of women's struggles in fighting civil and social injustices that she observed throughout her life. Most of her poetry and prose generally address issues related to feminism, civil rights, and the exploration of black women's identity. However, she developed the term "women" from the ideology of feminism as a perspective of social change based on the problems and everyday experiences of black women and other women from minority demographics. In this study, to reveal the intersectionality inside, the researcher decides to select the poems of one of the influential female authors, Audre Lorde (Azis et al., 2022, p. 6).

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. Authors use literary works as a unique tool to record social and historical facts at a time. As historical documents, literary works are a reflection of society that represents culture and tradition (Taylor, 1981, p. 2). This is related to Plato's idea that poetry is a mirror. On the other hand, Aristotle also states the relevant thing. In his *Poetics*, he defines poetry as an imitation with his statement, "Epic Poetry and Tragedy, as well as Comedy, Dithyrambic poetry, and the playing of the flute and the playing of the harp, are all viewed as a whole, the mode of imitation". Plato and Aristotle's explanation is similar to Abrams' Theory of Mimesis, which was developed with the concept of imitation. Thus, it can be implied that literary works and the universe are interrelated and related.

There have been several previous researchers who have written on topics related to feminism and racism or intend to express the same object as well. They are Mardanus (2016) and Suryanti (2015). Mardanus studied *Feminism in Maya Angelou's Selected Poems* in 2016. In this thesis, he aims to investigate how Maya Angelou expresses her feminist aspects in her works and her attitude towards feminism and women. The researcher uses Genetic Structuralism to analyze some intrinsic aspects by uncovering poetic devices. Then, another research related to this was written by Suryanti entitled *Feminism in Miles Franklin's My Brilliant Career* (2015). This thesis raises feminist issues presented by female characters that reflect the image of women in the third wave of feminism. Like the two previous studies, this thesis also uses a Structuralism approach, specifically the Genetic Structuralism approach, and applies Female Eunuch, a radical feminist theory by Germaine Greer.

In this study, the researcher tends to express African-American feminism in selected poems by one of the most influential female poets and writers while Lorde's attitude is based on the feminism found in the novel. One of the reasons is that she pays attention to her literary works about the women's place even though racial issues in society and their ethnic background, both issues, should be sensitive issues nowadays in a multicultural place like Indonesia. This study is expected to be able to empower women's self-awareness which is crucial but is always in the subconscious.

## II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### A. Poetry

Apart from novels and plays, one of the most popular forms of literature is poetry which is generally made using word choice. Etymologically comes from the Greek word '*poiesis*' which means 'to make, form, create (in the word), or the art of poetry, or poetry'. As noted in Oxford Dictionaries, this is a work in which concepts are given intensity through the use of a distinctive style and rhythm and given expression of feeling. Equally relevant is Wordsworth's definition (1970) that "poetry is the spontaneous outpouring of one's strong feelings" (p. xviii).

In addition, Bode (1991) also states that one of America's greatest poets, Emily Dickinson, in *Highlights of American Literature* states: "If you read a book and it makes my body very cold and no fire can warm me, I know it's poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head has been ripped off, I know it's poetry" (p. 90).

Poetry attracts the public's interest with a language package consisting of selected words to help show its aesthetic value and meaning. The right word composition in poetry helps the reader to interpret the author's purpose by creating it. Furthermore, based on Abrams' framework (Abrams, 1971, p. 97) these works become the author's way of communicating his ideas and experiences which are called Expressive Theories.

To help understand the meaning in the interpretation of poetry, the writer uses several poetic devices in his work. In addition, readers also need to pay attention to the elements of poetry.

#### 1. Figurative Language

As a writer's stylistic tool for aesthetically amplifying their work, figurative language makes sound work enjoyable. In a sense, this device is similar to the connotation that deviates from the conventionally accepted definition to convey a higher effect. Overall, it is divided into several general types.

#### 2. Imagery

Imagery can be defined as the representation of sensory experience through language with visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, kinesthetic, and organic or subjective images. The author uses it when trying to describe something so that it appeals to our senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, or influence. This creates a clear description for the reader's understanding. In addition, imagery is built on other literary devices because writers use comparisons to appeal to our senses, such as similes or metaphors.

#### 3. Diction

Diction refers to the choice of words. It refers to the writer's linguistic choice to convey ideas and points of view. In literature, word choice can help the writer form a clear point and style. This means that a poet in the process of creating poetry will definitely choose certain words and eliminate words that are considered not to meet the artistic construction of the creation. The choice of words is closely related to the expression of an artistic idea so that the creation process is not a spontaneous process.

#### 4. Tone

According to Perrine (1983, p. 10), tone in literary works, especially poetry, can be interpreted as the way the author relates to the subject, to the reader, or to himself. Tone is the emotional color or meaning of the author's work and is an important element of the overall meaning.

### B. Feminism

The use of the term 'feminism' has developed successfully and has become commonplace in society. It correlates with several meanings such as the women's movement, women's ideology, women's liberation in the social, economic, and political fields. Some authors refer to the term as historical political movements in the United States and Europe, such as women's suffrage or political legislation and consent. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony,

and Wilhelmina Drucker were some of the influential figures behind the movement (Puri, 2015, p.118; Paglia, 2008, p. 20).

There are also those who refer to the term 'feminism' with the belief that there is oppression that occurs against women as a gender phenomenon in social construction. According to feminists, oppression is the main problem faced by women from their unequal relations with men and the fundamental goal of this movement is to elevate women's lives above it (Leon & Schmidt, 2021, p. 112).

This movement was born as a reaction to the belief that women have experienced oppression, subordination, and marginalization in society for more than a hundred years. In a patriarchal society, women have been socialized to become victims of the ideology of male domination. As a result, the influence of their experiences and inequalities has an impact on social institutions, political systems, the economy, the family, and religion. Thus, feminism aims to change the ideology of women to become aware that they are oppressed by using the concepts of patriarchy and gender to examine the oppression of women (Taylor, 1998a, p. 242).

In the history of the feminist era, the basic idea of feminism was combined with several big and crucial things in society, one of which is racial or ethnic background (Chakraborty, 2021, p. 1612). This struggle was initiated by African American women for their freedom, justice, and equality despite the effects of colonialism and double slavery (Higginbotham, 1992, p. 60). Furthermore, the history of feminism in the United States is marked by two distinct periods or waves that are directly linked to two key movements in African-American history (Reger, 2012, p. 118; Taylor, 1998b, p. 26). The first was the abolitionist movement which culminated with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment by suffrage in 1920. The second was in the 1970s Title VII and Title IX of the 1964 Civil Rights Act i.e. civil modern rights movement that refers to adoption (Halpern, 1995, p. 45).

During these two monumental historical periods, the third wave that followed was the countless black women activists who had developed a feminist consciousness and who provided them with an institution to fight for empowerment in their own way. Furthermore, collectively their feminism was more expansive than the agenda put forward by white women, especially in certain social, economic, and political issues facing the African-American community that were fed into the theoretical paradigm we now call Black feminism. This movement had emerged in African American women's scholarship and activism during the late second wave of feminism in the 1970s and led to the third wave in the 1980s and 1990s (Taylor, 1998a, p. 240).

### III. METHODS

The methodology of this research includes methods of collecting data and methods of analyzing data. The analysis is categorized as qualitative research, which presents the object of analysis descriptively outside using scores in quantitative aspects. The primary data for this research is taken from The Collected Poems of Lorde's reprinted with the permission of Charlotte Sheedy Literary Agency and W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. The titles are A Woman Speaks, Coal, and Who Said It Was Simple. The secondary data to support the analysis are obtained from books, articles, journals, and other resources about poetry, feminism movement, Afro-American life, or other related subjects (Taylor, 1998a, p. 237).

### IV. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Poem Analysis

##### 1. A Woman Speaks

Moon marked and touched by sun my magic is unwritten but when the sea turns back it will leave my shape behind.	1
I seek no favour untouched by blood unrelenting as the curse of love permanent as my errors or my pride	5
I do not mix love with pity nor hate with scorn and if you would know me look into the entrails of Uranus where the restless oceans pound.	10 15

This poem begins with allusion attributes in the use of the word 'moon' and 'sun' in the first line. In some references related to ancient myths around the world such as Greece, Roman, Old Norse, and Paganism, their ancestor cultures beliefs that there are goddesses represented as lunar deities. Besides, in Sanskrit-related languages (e.g., Latin, Greek, French, Italian, and Portuguese), the terms moon and sun have definite gender. For example, in French and many other Romanic languages, *Le Soleil* (the sun) is male and *La Luna* (the moon) is female. This is also similar to German and

other Germanic languages, *die Sonne* is male and *der Mond* is female.

Therefore, an allegory also comes up within the first <sup>21</sup> the fourth line. Lorde (the poet) represents women and their efforts to get a better place in this world as she writes “**Moon marked and touched by sun /my magic is unwritten**” (line 1-2). In these first two lines, the author is implying the social environment in natural illustration. She begins the poem with her ideas that women are affected by stereotypes or negativities constructed by society and it makes the common cause of their inability to express their <sup>1</sup>elves. Then, the dictions of the next two lines are still dealing with nature attribute as the use of word ‘sea’ inside “**when the sea turns back /it will leave my shape behind**” (line 3-4). This part illustrates that even if she was gone, her words and efforts still have a lasting effect on her goal to seek equality.

The writer also expresses a sense of being <sup>3</sup> unknown and her differential uniqueness as an outcast across the diaspora as she stated belong with the similes “**I seek no favour/untouch<sup>9</sup>ble by blood/unrelating as the curse of love/permanent as my errors/or my pride**” (lines 5 – 9). Further, he calls attention to the need for understanding and action rather than feeling sorry for this omission in lines 10 to 12, “**I don't mix /love with pity/or hate with scorn**” (lines 10-12). Belonging to Zeugma, he uses and continu<sup>9</sup> to tell his readers about his infinity by others in his contradictions with the common people. The lack of voice she describes can be attributed to historical discrimination against women in the workplace and the lack of political representation for queer women in the context of American society in the late 70s to early 90s when Lorde was an activist and poet (Lorde, 1997b, p. 59).

In the last two lines of the first stanza, the author suggests her self-esteem as a black woman that she does not reveal any negative sentiment towards those who discriminate against her, but disclose that <sup>1</sup>ere is more to her than her physical looks. Lorde writes it in the lines by hyperbole and visual imagery at once, “**and if you would know me/look into the entrails of Uranus/where the restless oceans pound**” (line 13-15). She noted that women are underestimated in society but they are more powerful and influential than people think. Besides, the use of visual imagery and the dictions within these lines claim an interpretation that women can still have an impact on the world even if they are not recognized as Lorde uses the diction of ‘Uranus’ which refers to one of the largest planets in our solar systems and ‘restless oceans’ which is referred to geology and oceanography terms of ocean water movement circulation. The words contribute a massive meaning to the author’s imagery.

In the last two lines of the first stanza, the author suggests her pride as a black woman that she does not express any negative sentiment towards those who discriminate against her, but reveals <sup>16</sup> there is more to her than her physical appearance. Lorde writes it in lines with both hyperbole and visual imagery, “**and if you would know me/look into the entrails of Uranus/where the restless oceans pound**” (lines 13-15). She notes that women are despised in society, but they are more powerful and influential than people think. Moreover, the use of visual imagery and diction in the lines claims the interpretation that women can still have an impact on the world even if they are not recognized as Lorde using the diction ‘Uranus’ which refers to one of the largest planets in the world. Our solar system and the ‘restless oceans’ are called geology and oceanography, the term circulation of seawater movements. Words give great meaning to the author’s image.

## 2. Coal

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Some words are open	
Like a diamond on glass windows	
Singing out within the crash of passing sun	10
Then there are words like stapled wagers	
In a perforated book—buy and sign and tear apart—	
And come whatever wills all chances	
The stub remains	
An ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge.	15
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.	20
Some words	
Bedevel me.	

Lorde speaks her idea of the open<sup>1</sup>ness of words as language in the second stanza. She goes on to explain and name the words and how some feel like “**an ill pulled tooth with a ragged edge**” (line 15), and how some words feel like “**passing crash of the sun**” (line 10), how “**some words like stapled wagers**” (line 11), until a few words bothered him. The parables and parables show her personal struggles as a black woman and <sup>1</sup>ow society with its power calls someone black or white and judges them based on their origin. Moreover, in line “**In a perforated book—buy and sign and tear apart—**” (line 12), she gained more deep diction to expose the stereotyping effect into discrim<sup>18</sup>ination as the way society recognizes, labels, and offends the black. The meaning continues with the tactile imagery in “**The stub remains /An ill-pulled tooth with ragged edge**” (line 14-15).

In the <sup>12</sup>anza above, Lorde is concerned that not every word will carry the same weight or value as she states in the lines, “**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” (line 15-20). Through the similes she used, Lorde claimed that the different impact of some words on her and, as a result, not everything can be easily said. She could have conveyed the fecundity with the word of ‘breeding’, but the images of ‘adders’ connotes danger, fear, and poison. Moreover, as she states “Some words /Bedevil me” (line 21-22) at the closing of the stanza, she implies dangerous words that must be held in, particularly for reasons of oppression. In contrast, the diction of ‘sun’ also supports substantial meaning as a natural element to affirm its fundamental need in the entire universe. Then, Lorde compares it to baby birds as she uses ‘young sparrow’ both to express their freedom and vulnerability, and as a representative of new life and hope.

### 3. Who Said It Was Simple

<p>1 Setting in Nedicks the woman rally before they march discussing the problematic girls they hire to make them free. An almost white counterman passes a waiting brother to serve them first and the ladies neither notice nor reject the slighter pleasures of their slavery. But I who am bound by my mirror as well as my bed see causes in colour as well as sex</p>	<p>5     10    15</p>
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The author presents the second stanza to find out the intersecting realities and what is happening around them. It follows the narrative line, “sitting in Nedicks/the woman rally before they march/discussing the problematic girls/they hire to make them free” (lines 4-7). Lorde describes the preparatory situation for the women's march that took place at a restaurant called Nedicks. Two pronouns should be underlined in this line, ‘woman’ and ‘girl’. His diction may allude to age or class classification (oppressors and oppressed). More out of context, Lorde makes such satirical statements on the next line, implying bittersweet anecdotes. Those women are busy making liberation strategies for a group of other women, but ironically, they still employ them at home to do some household chores like cleaning or cleaning the house such as take care of the house and caring about their children.

Furthermore, Lorde keeps telling the ironic thing she witnessed. She writes, “An almost white counterman passes / a writing brother to serve them first / and the ladies neither notice nor reject /the slighter pleasures of their slavery” (line 8-11). These lines tell such an overlapped condition of society. Lorde, in her words, pictures the illustration in the same restaurant; there was a bi-racial man who passed another man just because he needs to serve the women who ordered. The word ‘brother’ is used as a term in Afro-Americans to call their fellows. Despite dealing with racial issues, these lines also indicate sexism issues in different perspective in thinking and idealism. The illustration Lorde brought in reflected its fatality of gender concept that society continuing and might be seen even in the smallest area, such as a queue. Therefore, the ladies seem not to feel guilty of the ‘specialty’ they got from the man. It shows the readers that the adage of ‘ladies first’ that has been rooted in society would not create an equality system of gender. The women will always be put as the weakest ones that should get helped and respected at first than men, and this is not what the absolute purpose of the march they held, actually.

The next lines occur to contain Lorde's perspective as she concludes the whole reality around her. She writes, “But I who am bound by my mirror /as well as my bed / see causes in colour /as well as sex” (line 12-15). These lines show ‘mirror’ as a metonymy referring to her physical appearance and position as a Black person, and so ‘bed’ which refers to her sexual identity and role as a woman. Therefore, ‘colour’ is represented as a metaphor for the reality which can be seen in every corner of life. The author also correlates the ‘colour’ with ‘sex’ by the simile she used. This is such a bridge for Lorde to intertwine the cases of real and women's identity in order to show that they are closely related. She tells her readers that she is a witness to the twisted and complicated things that keep evolving within the society, and she cannot separate the layers of oppressions.

#### B. Audre Lorde's Attitude to Feminism

It is interesting to know that Audre Lorde is both a feminist fighter and a poet. Her idealism and attitude are reflected in her works. She is also known as a womanist, librarian, and civil right activist. Her three works are *A Woman Speaks*, *Coal*, and *Who Said It Was Simple* deemed worthy of representing her image with the various predicates she has. And that's Audre Lorde.



Figure.1: Audre Lorde

Audre Lorde was born in New York, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement steeped in African-American identity, and 'Black, Lesbian, Mother, Warrior, Poet' were the words she would use for herself. She recognizes that diversity exists both among people and within them as well, and refuses to deny expression to any part of her. A queer black woman, Lorde came to the feminist movement with very different concerns than her white heterosexual counterparts, and her keen awareness of these differences tells a lot about her politics. One of Lorde's most enduring speeches was made in 1979, during a feminist conference in New York entitled "Teachers' Tools Will Never Destroy the Teacher's Home" (Bowleg, 2021, p. 237). This speech examines and criticizes second-wave feminism led by white and upper middle-class leaders such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem (Anand, 2018, p. 30). At the start of her speech, Lorde announced, "I stand here as a black lesbian feminist", citing her own trademark as a cornerstone and continuing all her qualifications: "I stand here as a black lesbian feminist on the only panel where input from feminists and representing black lesbians" (Oslon, 2000, p. 260).

In the speech and throughout her career as a poet, essayist, novelist, civil rights, and activist, she eloquently calls out the underlying racism within the feminist movement. Furthermore, some of her works are advocated the issues black women faced at the time like ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender, identity, disability, and age. Furthermore, her feminism is based on intersectionality, and the belief that gender oppression is inseparable from oppressive systems such as racism, sexism, classism, transphobia, and heterosexism, among others.

Today, Lorde is sometimes referred to as a "woman", a certain "feminist" field. As an idea, womanism emerged as a social theory that aims to discuss the specific experiences of black women and women from other marginalized or oppressed minority groups. This idea was created by Alice Walker to sideline mainstream white feminists from women of color, and especially to fight Anti-darkness in the feminist movement. In addition, her ideas about this kind of feminism appear in the poems that she writes.

## V. CONCLUSION

The first poem, A Woman Speaks, focuses on ideas about the image of black women as a minority in American society and the struggle to be seen as equal, powerful, and influential as men. Therefore, the author uses figurative language which is part of figurative language as the dominant element in this work to change his idea of identity into female self-awareness despite negative sentiments. Here, Lorde as a writer tries to broaden people's perspectives and stereotypes about black women, besides that she also expresses her independence and black pride.

Coal, in the second poem, the author reflects his personal views with the patriarchal ideology in the society he witnessed himself as a black person, similar to the first poem above, this poem is also a way for him to celebrate his identity and by expressing self-affirmation that his darkness can be the essence which is somewhat worth proudly. In addition, imagery is the most frequently used in this poem to give a clear picture to the reader.

The last poem, Who Said It Was Simple, is concerned with the intersectional issues in the society the author lives such as sex, class, age, and race. By the tone the poet used within, she transforms her beliefs that all of the issues are interconnected and cannot be separated from each other. She assumes that the movements might be successful if they support each other to reach the goals in fight the oppressions.

Based on the discussion, this study shows that Lorde used her poems to show up her feminist ideologies significantly by using specific poetical devices. This is related to herself as one of the feminist poets, figures, and activists.

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