

Contextualizing Gender
Prof. Rashmi Gaur
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee



Lecture - 10
Gender and Power Politics in Audre Lorde



Good morning, dear friends and welcome to this module. In the previous modules, we have seen how intersectionality is an important critical intervention. As we move towards our contemporary understanding of gender, we find that intersectionality was the critical tool which for the first time alerted us to the possibility that exploitations are multifaceted and the categorization of people into uniform ones, perhaps is not justifiable. Continuing our argument, today, we would look at the work and contribution of Audre Lorde. Audre Lorde is a famous American poet.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:09)

Audre Lorde (1934-1992)

- American poet, essayist and novelist. Poet laureate of New York (1991-1992).
- First volume of poems, *The First Cities*, was published in 1968
- Adrienne Rich, "Lorde writes as a Black woman, a mother, a daughter, Lesbian, a feminist, a visionary; poems of elemental wildness and healing, nightmare and lucidity."
- Olson, Lester C. comments that Lorde's writings are based on the "theory of difference", that the binary opposition between men and women is overly simplistic; "although feminists have found it necessary to present the illusion of a solid, unified whole, the category of women itself is full of subdivisions" ("Liabilities of Language: Audre Lorde Reclaiming Difference").
(Quarterly Journal of Speech, 84:4, 448-470, DOI: 10.1080/00335639809384232)



2

She is also a novelist as well as an essayist. She was also designated as poet laureate of New York in 1991. Unfortunately, her life ended in 1992 owing to her long ailments. Her first volume of poems, *The First Cities*, was published in 1968. She had lived through various roles. She was a black woman, a mother, a daughter, a feminist; by her sexual choices and preferences, she was a lesbian.


She was also a visionary and as Adrienne Rich has commented her poems have “an elemental wildness as well as the capability to heal, they include the nightmare as well as

lucidity” simultaneously. Lorde had adopted what has been come to be known as “theory of difference”. The idea is that the binary opposition between conventional genders of men and women is over simplistic.

As Lester Olson has commented in his article that “though feminist have found it necessary to present the illusion of a solid, unified whole, in the context of these two categories”. The category of women and by extension, the category of men is also full of subdivisions and Lorde sensitizes us to this fact.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:40)

- Lorde criticizes the tendency of categorizing people, to imply "a pretense to a homogeneity of experience" of diverse individuals within communities, through the very process of categorizing them together. This is exemplified by the terms, "sisterhood" or "woman" (Olson, Lester C.) .
- The "inseparable" oppressions of diverse communities should not be defined in ways that are misleading, and suggest artificial distinctions such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Lorde mentions a tendency toward "ignoring and misnaming of those differences" which impacts people:
 - "Difference" translates into devaluation and distance, a justification for exclusion and lack of communication, and a rendering of others as silent and invisible.
 - "Difference" translates into complex hierarchical dynamics of political power, moral judgment, and social privilege.
 - "Difference" provides a rationalization for assigning responsibility for working across the difference to members of the less powerful group, a practice which often takes a form of blaming the victims of oppression.



IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 3

Lorde has reviewed the contemporary feminist tendencies of categorizing people, together grouping them under the “pretense that perhaps there is a homogeneity of experience”. It overlooks the fact that the individuals, who are being categorized in a single manner; in fact, belong to diverse backgrounds. They belong to diverse communities with different types of racial histories for example.

So, if we put them together, this becomes an unjustifiable pretense and she tries to continue this argument by looking at these categories of being a woman or the tendency to merge women into this concept of sisterhood. She says that the diverse communities have inseparable operations which are different in their own ways and to group them together would be a misleading attempt. She also suggest, that the artificial distinctions such as racism, sexism or homophobia should not be ignored and she suggest that a

tendency towards “ignoring and misnaming of these differences” impacts people and she explains it further.


“Difference” according to her translates into devaluation and distancing, it justifies the exclusion of certain categories of people from the main stream and results into a lack of communication. And therefore, it renders the suppressed sections of the society and transfers them into silent and almost invisible entities.

“Difference” also results into hierarchical dynamics in the context of political power, institutional powers, moral judgment translating into different types of social privileges. It ultimately provides a rationalization for assigning responsibility for working across the differences to members of the less powerful group, a practice which often results into a form of blaming the victims of operation.

And therefore, categorizing people into inseparable segments and overlooking the inherent differences is a wrong tendency which was being adopted by major contemporary feminist dialogue.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:12)

- Took multiple dimensions of identity formation together: identified issues of race, class, age and ageism, sex and sexuality and, later in her life, chronic illness and disability; the latter becoming more prominent in her later years as she lived with cancer (*The Cancer Journals*, which won the Gay Caucus Book of the Year award for 1981).
- She wrote of all of these factors as fundamental to her experience of being a woman.
- She argued that, although differences in gender have received all the focus, it is essential that other differences are also recognized and addressed.
- Primarily known as a poet, but has written in various genres. Her novel *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), is noted for its explicit and evocative imagery and its treatment of mother-daughter relationship.
- Her other prose volumes include *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984) and *A Burst of Light* (1988), which won a National Book Award.
- Her last volume of poetry, *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance*, was published posthumously in 1993.



IT KOOBEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 4

In the works of Lorde, we find that she has been able to identify different issues. She has looked at the issues of race, class, age and ageism, sex and sexuality and later in life, she has also looked at the issues of chronic illness as well as disability. Her illness and

disability concepts became more prominent in her later years as she was grappling with cancer.


She also says that all these factors are fundamental to her experience in essence of being a woman and no single aspect or no single perspective can be given more preference in comparison to others. She also says that although it is true that in feminist concerns, it is this aspect of gender the differences in conventional genders that have received all the focus. But still, it is necessary for us to recognize other differences also and address to them.

Although, she is primarily known as a poet, she has also written in various genres. I would particularly refer to her novel *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* which is noted for its explicit and evocative imagery and its treatment of mother-daughter relationship. Her other prose volumes include *Sister Outsider, Essays and Speeches* and *A Burst of Light*, which won a National Book Award. Her last volume of poetry was published posthumously in 1993 under the title of *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance*.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:54)

Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press.

- Lorde founded “Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press” in 1980 – an active feminist press - with writer Barbara Smith and other friends: women working together and without relying on “inheritances or other benefits of class privilege”.
 - The name referred to the kitchen as the heart of every home and also a space traditionally assigned to women. Not only a press, but also a resource network for women of color.
- Barbara Smith explained the need of the press, “As feminist and lesbian of colour writers, we knew that we had no options for getting published except at the mercy or whim of others—in either commercial or alternative publishing, since both are white dominated.”
 - Published nearly a dozen titles, including the anthology coordinated by Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa *The Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1984), Lorde's *I am Your Sister* (1986), *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* (1983) by Moraga with Alma Gomez and Barbara Smith's *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*.



IT KOOKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 5

Lorde has also been an activist along with some friends and writer Barbara Smith, she had founded an active feminist press “Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press”. The name refers to the kitchen as heart of every home as well as eye space which is traditionally assigned to women. It was not only a press, but so long Lorde was alive, it was also a

resource network for women of color. Lorde published various titles under this press including her own collection of poetry, 'I Am Your Sister'.

Lorde has produced several poetry collections as well as several other books. Today, I have taken up those poetry collections and other aspects of her writing which are more important for us to understand in the context of intersectionality. In this context, I would first of all take up, 'The Black Unicorn', her poetry collection which had come out in 1978.

(Refer Slide Time: 08:04)

The Black Unicorn (1978)

- It explores Lorde's relationship with womanhood as she provides insight on the interwoven nature of oppression, sexism, African culture, sexual and spiritual awakening, and race, affirming that feminism necessitates focusing on each element.
 - A collection of poems by a woman who, Adrienne Rich writes, "for the complexity of her vision, for her moral courage and the catalytic passion of her language, has already become, for many, an indispensable poet."
- Audre Lorde utilizes intersectionality as the feminist aesthetic in this volume.
- She establishes agency and empowerment through a retrieval of spirituality, autonomy, sexuality, and race.



Source: Norton



IT ROOKIE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 6


Black Unicorn has explored Lorde's relationship with womanhood as she has provided insight into the interwoven nature of different types of operations, sexism, she has talked about African culture, the sexual and spiritual awakening as well as the issues of race, affirming that feminism necessitates focusing on each of these elements. I would refer to Adrienne rich again, who had suggested that it is a collection of poems by a woman who is known for the complexity of her vision, for her moral courage and the catalyst passion of her language.

Lorde had utilized intersectionality as the feminist aesthetics in this particular book, establishing agency and empowerment of women through a retrieval of spirituality, autonomy, sexuality as well as racial pride.

(Refer Slide Time: 08:59)

Spirituality and Womanhood

- Spiritual empowerment is a reoccurring theme in Lorde's *The Black Unicorn*, unveiling the oppression of African culture and its belief systems.
 - European domination eradicated any religious beliefs that contrasted European Christianity through a defamation of traditional religions.
- Lorde's spirituality honours the ancient strength and grace of goddess culture through her allusions to high priestesses, solstices, full moons, and pagan worship. Her invocation of the goddess illustrates a time when women were worshiped for their natural life cycles and sexuality.
 - The image of the moon in "The Black Unicorn," "A Woman Speaks," and "Meet"; symbolizes sanctity of womanhood, as the moon's common association with women derives from ancient beliefs that a woman's menstrual cycle matches the duration of the moon's cycle, and pregnancy mirrors the waxing and waning of the moon.
 - Imagery of the priestess exemplifies the lives of women who have been oppressed alongside their goddess culture.



IT ROORKEE | NFTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 7

When we look at the concept of intersectionality, in the context of Lorde's poem, we find that she has woven a tapestry of spirituality, womanhood and racial operations very lucidly. Spiritual empowerment and its combination with womanhood is a recurring theme in Lorde. It is also exhibited in this poetry collection 'The Black Unicorn'. It also unveils the operation of African culture and the belief systems associated with it.

European domination had eradicated the African belief systems as it had contrasted with the European Christianity, the dominant religion of the slavers. Lorde's spirituality honors the ancient strength and grace of African culture.


She celebrates the priestesses, the solstices, the full moons as well as pagan worship. Her invocation of the African goddess illustrates a time when women were worshipped for their natural life cycles as well as sexuality. Image of the moon in several poems in this collection including "The Black Unicorn", "A Woman Speaks" and "Meet"; symbolizes sanctity of womanhood, as the moon's common association with women has derived from the ancient beliefs that a woman's menstrual cycles as well as her pregnancy mirror the natural rhythms.

Imagery of the priestess also exemplifies the lives of those women, who have been oppressed alongside the goddess culture which has been eradicated under the European dominance.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:44)

- Lorde alludes to the ancient West African religion of Vodoun as she refers to “*witches in Dahomey*” in “A Woman Speaks” and “Mawulisa,” in “Meet.” Dahomean Vodoun believe that Muwalisa is comprised of “Mawu” and “Lisa,” who have been recorded as the male and female principle, occasionally reported as androgynous same-sex deities. 40% African-American people claim ancestry to it. (Marie Nemeth*)
- Lorde’s images of Dahomean Vodoun elicit memories of slavery, colonization, and the aftermath of dehumanizing oppression.
- Yet, Lorde’s lamentation over the persecution of ancient African and goddess cultures instills a haunting image of rebirth and renewal wherein Lorde grants agency to the goddess, reviving her spirit through women.

*<https://journalwomenwriters.wordpress.com/2015/02/25/intersectionality-as-the-feminist-aesthetic-in-audre-lordes-the-black-unicorn-poems/>




IT ROORKEE | NFTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 8

As many as 40 percent African-American people claim ancestry to a particular religion and that is the Dahomean Vodoun. Lorde refers to this ancient West African religion in several of her poems in “Witches in Dahomey”, in “A Woman Speaks”, in “Mawulisa”, and in “Meet” she has referred to the Vodoun. Under the Dahomean Vodoun beliefs, it is regarded that Mawulisa is comprised of Mawu and Lisa, who have been recorded as the male and female principle and are also occasionally reported as androgynous same-sex deities.

Lorde’s image of this particular religion elicit memories of slavery, colonization, the aftermath of dehumanizing operation as well as the richness of the African culture which has been lost to its people in the current generations. Still when we look at Lorde’s poetry, we find that her lamentation over the persecution of ancient African and goddess cultures also instills a haunting image of rebirth and renewal, wherein Lorde grants agency to the goddess reviving her spirit through women.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:06)

- The goddess is an ageless emblem of divine feminine strength, immortalized through women's resilience that Lorde asserts deserves veneration.
- In her poems the image of the goddess evolves from a figure of worship to a symbol of rebellion by which women's freedom of expression empowers them.
- Lorde infers that reclaiming ownership over the victimization of women and the goddess, lessens the power of the perpetrators of oppression.
- Lorde's *The Black Unicorn* reclaims ownership over the degradation of African religion and women through her assertion that both will rise from the ruins with "*magic [that] is unwritten.*"



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 9


In her poetry, we find that goddess has become an ageless emblem of divine feminine strength, immortalized through the resilience of African women that Lorde asserts deserved veneration. The image of the goddess evolves from a figure of worship to a symbol of rebellion also, by which women's freedom of expression empowers them.

Lorde also infers that reclaiming ownership over the victimization of women and the goddess lessens the power of the perpetrators of operation. So, we can say that this poetry collection, 'The Black Unicorn' reclaims ownership over the degradation of African religion and women through her assertion that both will rise from the ruins with "magic that is still unwritten".

(Refer Slide Time: 13:00)

Eroticism: Lorde's poems also pair spirituality with eroticism. It enables her to further her proclamation that freedom of self is revolutionary. She identifies the erotic only as a feminine power, which invalidates the dominance men claim over female sexuality: to experience the erotic is to "do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal and anti-erotic society".

- Erotic empowers but deference becomes paralysis when silence, separation and lack of dialogue reign among women. Female empowerment necessitates liberation from male-defined conceptions of sexuality, spirituality, and femininity.
- As Lorde introduces eroticism without the accompaniment of the male gaze, she becomes fully autonomous through her sexual empowerment.
 - "Meet" advances women's sexual sovereignty through Lorde's vibrant descriptions of lesbian eroticism.
 - Sexuality reveals creativity that is "...female and self-affirming"
- *The Black Unicorn* epitomizes the folly in modern conceptions of women while suggesting that they should claim ownership of their sexuality in feminist retaliation.



IT ROORKEE | NFTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 10

Another thing which Lorde has touched upon in this poetry collection is eroticism. Her poems pair spirituality with eroticism which enables her to further her proclamation that freedom of self is revolutionary. She has identified the erotic only as a feminine power and never as a masculine power too and her combination of the erotic with feminine power invalidates the dominance which men have traditionally claimed over the female sexuality.

According to her, to experience the erotic is to "do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal and anti-erotic society". Erotic according to Lorde empowers, but difference also becomes paralysis when silence separation and lack of dialogue reign among women. Female empowerment necessitates liberation from male defined conceptions of sexuality, spirituality and femininity.


So, Lorde has introduced eroticism without the accompaniment of the male gaze and she becomes fully autonomous through her sexual empowerment. It is also revealed in many of her poems in this particular collection. For example, we can refer to meet which advances women's sexual sovereignty through her vibrant descriptions of lesbian eroticism. Sexuality according to her reveals creativity that is female as well as self affirming.

Black Unicorn in this way suggests that women should claim ownership of their sexuality in feminist retaliation.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:47)

Intersectionality

- The intersectionality aesthetic of *The Black Unicorn* examines sexism within the black power movement and racism within the feminist movement.
- Lorde's "A Litany For Survival" introduces people living in shadows, between doors, unable to enter the world of acceptance. It outlines the enduring effects of racism before it poignantly ends with the lines, "So it is better to speak/ remembering/ we were never meant to survive."
- Lorde also exposes the deep-rooted psychological trauma of being "imprinted with fear" at a young, vulnerable age. The conditioning to living in fear becomes so ingrained that, Lorde contends, it becomes part of her identity as she "emphasizes the direct, causal relationship between racism and internalized racism."
- Deleterious effects of slavery or mental slavery (conscious and unconscious acceptance of racial hierarchy) is a theme which Lorde has touched upon, even though critical inquiry about the concept has started to emerge only recently.



IT ROORKEE | NIFEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 11

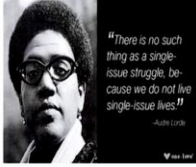
Another theme which has been thoroughly investigated into in 'The Black Unicorn' by Lorde is sexism within the black power movement and racism within the feminist movement and this approach makes her poetry truly intersectional. For example, her poem "A Litany for Survival" introduces those people who are living in shadows, between doors unable to enter the world of acceptance.

It also outlines the enduring effects of racism before it poignantly ends with the lines, "So it is better to speak/ remembering/ we were never meant to survive." The very fact that the afro American race has survived is a testimony to their resilience and bravery. Thus, we find that Lorde has been able to expose the deep-rooted psychological trauma of being imprinted with fear at a very young and vulnerable age.


The conditioning of having lived in fear throughout one's life becomes so ingrained that it becomes the part of the black identity and she emphasizes the direct causal relationship between racism and internalized racism. Where, due to the deleterious effects of slavery, the slavery also becomes a mental fact and people start to think that it is natural for them to be subservient to the masters.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:21)

- A more holistic understanding of each woman's life.
- Individual experience of womanhood is dependent upon sexual orientation, gender, class, age, race, and religion.
- Audre Lorde assesses that the separation amongst women lies not in their differences but rather in *"our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them, their effects upon behavior and expectation."*
- *The Black Unicorn* portrays women's varied lives and identities to acknowledge the necessity of examining each aspect of womanhood through a feminist lens.
 - Lorde's investigation of empowerment through the reclamation of spirituality, autonomy and sexuality, and race provides insight on women's experiences.
 - Through Lorde's critique on hegemony, it becomes apparent that intersectionality is vital to promoting an authentic, unified, and holistic feminist agenda.



"There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives!"
— Audre Lorde



IT ROORKEE | NFTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 12

Through an intersectional investigation of these diverse experiences, Lorde aims at having a more holistic understanding of each woman's life. Individual experiences of womanhood according to Lorde are dependent upon sexual orientation, gender, class, age, race, religion, etcetera and she assesses that the separation amongst women lies not in their differences, but rather in "their refusal to recognize these differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them, their effects upon behavior as well as expectation".

So, 'The Black Unicorn' portrays the varied lives of women and their varied identities and it acknowledges the necessity of examining each aspect of womanhood through a feminist lens.

So, her investigation of empowerment through the reclamation of spirituality, autonomy and sexuality as well as race provides insights into the variegated experiences of a black woman. If we evaluate her critique on hegemony, it becomes apparent that intersectional approach is vital to promote an authentic unified and holistic feminist agenda.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:47)



Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982)

- A *biomythography* by Audre. An unconventional work, *Zami* pioneers a new genre of writing. Audre called it "a *biomythography*", which is really fiction, with elements of biography, history and myth: "In other words, it is fiction built from many sources. This is one way of expanding our vision."
- "Zami" is "a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers", noting that Carriacou is also the Caribbean island from which her mother immigrated.

– A bildungsroman, narrative of recognition and naming, a severing from an old identity and the community associated with it, and the adoption of a new identity and thus a reconnection with a new community. Yet, community is more important.

– Home for her is the land of origin, a mythologized land she can not reach.

– Race is equally crucial to Lorde's considerations of feminist spaces of contestation and contradiction.



Source: Modern Classics

IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 13

I would refer to another publication of Lorde that is 'Zami: A New Spelling of My Name.' It is popularly understood as a novel or an autobiography. However, Audre has termed it as a biomythography. *Zami* is a very unconventional work though initially I have also identified it as a novel because that is how it is conveniently and popularly known, but it still it is an unconventional work.

It pioneers a new genre of writing. Audre herself has called it a combination of elements of biography history and myth even though it is really fiction. In other words, we can say that it is fiction which has been built from many resources and according to Lorde, it is her way of expanding the vision. "Zami" is a word from Carriacou language. It signifies women who work together as friends as well as perhaps as lovers. She also tells us that Carriacou is also the Caribbean island from which her mother had immigrated.

Sometimes, it is understood and responded to as a bildungsroman as it is a narrative of recognition and naming is a testimony to how Lorde has been able to sever from an old identity and community associated with it and has been able to adopt a new identity and revive connections with her new communities. Still, we find that various, bildungsroman focuses only on an individual's achievement. In Lorde, we find that community is throughout very important more important than the individual.



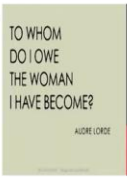
So, we term it is a novel or as a bildungsroman, but we have to be aware of this aspect that it is a very unconventional book, it can be termed as a fiction; but in fact, the proper

word for it is biomythography. It is a bildungsroman; but at the same time, we have to understand that it focuses not only on the individual, but also on the community.

Another theme which becomes very important in our understanding of this book is that home for Lorde is the land of origin. It is a mythologized land, she perhaps can never reach and in all these dialogues we find that race is equally crucial to her considerations of feminist spaces of contestation as well as contradictions.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:36)

- The book details Lorde's life growing up in Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s as a child of West Indian parents in a society that, despite its growing diversity, still dreaded deviations from perceived norms.
- Growing up “fat, Black, nearly blind and ambidextrous in a West Indian household” (Lorde 2003, 14), Lorde experiences societal mechanisms of exclusion from a very early age.
- Lorde declares that she has drawn much of her strength from the women in her life who taught her how to harness her power. Majority of the book is devoted to stories of other women whom she celebrates.
 - Emphasizing women in her life, Lorde subverts masculinist authoritative discourses and turns to matrilineal subjectivities, or mothers, friends, lovers, sisters and working-class women for guidance and support.



IT ROORKEE NITEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 14


‘Zami’ presents before us to begin with a record of the growing up years of Lorde, as she was growing up in Harlem in 1930s and 1940s as a child of west Indian parents in a society which had started to have certain diversities; but still, it upheld perceived norms and dreaded any deviation from it. Lorde unfortunately had to experience societal mechanisms of exclusion from a very early age. As she was growing up in her own words as a fat, black, nearly blind an ambidextrous child in a West Indian household.

She also declares that she has drawn much of her strength from the women in her life, who have taught her directly or through their own examples how to harness her power. Majority of this book is devoted to stories of other women, whom she has celebrated. Thus, we can say that she has been able to subvert masculinist authoritative discourses and has turned to matrilineal subjectivities to mother, friends, lovers, sisters and other working-class women for guidance and support.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:00)

- Intersectional arguments dominate the structure. Lorde tellingly writes: "I always felt that I cannot be categorised. That has been both my weakness and my strength" (Lorde 2009, 161).
- The narrative ark of *Zami* contains several tropes.
- Her tumultuous relationship with her mother. She also pays tribute to other women whose portrayal metaphorically signals the erasure of black women by a society that privileges whiteness.
- Several historical contexts underscore the fears of being the other, in terms of race and sexual preference -- Great Depression, WW and resultant anxiety, the Red Scare.
- Further, Lorde's descriptions of her lovers affirm her conceptualisation of feminist alliances permeated with ambivalences and contestation.

-- Deeply affective moments in *Zami* form yet another counter-narrative to the white supremacist and misogynistic culture and reclaim the female body while challenging normative constructions of wholeness and femininity.





IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 15

The structure of *Zami* is dominated by intersectional arguments. Lorde herself has written that she had always felt that she could never be categorized and she terms this inability to be categorized neatly as both her weakness and strength. The narrative of this book also contains several tropes. It tells us of her tumultuous relationship with her mother and as we have seen earlier, it also pays tributes to other women whose portrayal signals the erasure of black women by a society that had privileged whiteness.

In addition to her racial exploitations and difficulties, the book also refers to several other historical context which underscored the fear of being the other in terms of racial as well as sexual preferences. The book gives us the background of the great depression, the World Wars and the resultant anxiety amongst the young people as well as the red scare impacting the political climate of the days. Further, Lorde has also given detailed descriptions of her lovers which affirms her conceptualization of feminist alliances which is also permeated with certain ambivalence and contestation.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:26)

- The transformative role of myth in creating spaces of contestation and transformation:
 - *Zami* ends as Lorde merges with Afrekete, the Afrocentric figure of the Black Mother/Goddess, or the unifying force which transcends restrictions and reclaims “the poet” as the source of inspiration and knowing beyond Western masculinist discourses.
- The beginning of *Zami*, written as a Prologue, contains a dedication to *Afrekete* and anticipates her women-centred ending: “To the journeywoman pieces of myself./ becoming./ *Afrekete*” (pg. xv).
- Similarly, the Epilogue again pays tribute to the women in Lorde’s life, forming her empowering and compelling matrilineal genealogy.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 16


Another major theme in this book is the transformative role of myth in creating spaces of contestation as well as transformation. ‘Zami’ ends as Lorde merges with Afrekete, the Afrocentric figure of the Black Mother or Goddess or the unifying force which transcends restrictions and reclaims “the poet” as a source of inspiration and knowing beyond western masculinist discourse.

The beginning of ‘Zami’ is written as a prologue. It contains a dedication to Afrekete and anticipates the women-centered ending. To quote, to the journey woman pieces of myself, becoming, Afrekete unquote. Similarly, the epilogue also pays tribute to the women in Lorde’s life forming her empowering and compelling matrilineal genealogy.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:20)

Diversity

- Lorde emphasizes differences and contestations as integral parts of feminist alliances and sisterhoods, and necessary prerequisites for strategizing against oppression.
- It is precisely this vision of togetherness that frames the beginning, end and the affective core of *Zami*: diverse women sharing experiences, learning and growing, continually enriched by their differences - women who live and work together as friends and lovers.
 - Lorde's empowering feminist genealogy, consisting of her vexed, ambivalent and energizing relationships with diverse women, exemplifies the ongoing nature of feminist activism and social transformation.
- For Lorde, feminist alliances are premised upon dismantling and de-centring whiteness and its oppressive reproduction in feminist politics, thereby enabling a genuinely intersectional and transformational feminist activism built on multiplicities.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 17


In Lorde's work, we find that feminist alliances are premised upon dismantling and decentring whiteness and its repressive reproduction in feminist politics which in our opinion would enable a genuinely intersectional and transformational feminist activism which should be built on multiplicities. She emphasizes differences and contestations as integral parts of feminist alliances as well as the concept of sisterhood.

She thinks that it is necessary to have differences and contestations for strategizing against oppression as it provides us a certain richness of background experiences. Ultimately, we find that *Zami* is informed by a vision of togetherness, diverse women sharing their experiences learning from each other and growing together, continually being enriched by their differences - women who live and work together as friends and lovers.


(Refer Slide Time: 25:29)

Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (1984)

- Collection of 15 individual essays and speeches dating from 1976 to 1984.
 - Focuses on her identity of Black woman, poet, lesbian, mother, activist, cancer survivor and feminist.
- Western societies have created false binaries, "human differences in simplistic opposition to each other".
 - Identifies a similar problem within feminism and other political movements, pointing out that participants are often expected to present only a small part of their whole identities—disguising or downplaying their race, sexuality or familial relationships etc.
 - The introduction to the book was written by Nancy K. Bereano, Lorde's editor, who founded the feminist press Firebrand Books.
- The paradoxical title expresses Lorde's commitment to her identity based on multiplicities.



Source: Penguin



IT ROORKEE NPTL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 18


Another book which is significant in this context is her 1984 publication ‘Sister Outsider, Essays and Speeches’. The title itself is very intriguing. It is a collection of 15 individual essays and speeches dating from 1976 to 1984. This collection also focuses on her identity of a black woman, a poet, a lesbian by choice, a mother, activist as well as cancer survivor in feminist.

Western societies, according to Lorde, have created false binaries, “human differences in simplistic opposition to each other”. She is able to identify a similar problem within feminism as well as other political movements. She points out that participants are often expected to present only a small portion of their complete identities, they have to either disguise other aspects of their identity or downplay several of them including sometimes perhaps their race, sexuality or familial relationships etcetera.

The introduction to the book was written by Nancy Bereano, her editor who founded the feminist press Firebrand Books. The paradoxical title also expresses her commitment to her identity which is based on multiplicities.

(Refer Slide Time: 27:02)

- Institutional dehumanization: a pattern in a given society of devaluing the individuality of its members in favour of other ideals.
- White, heterosexual, patriarchal society discourages the expression of traits that do not fall into its norms. It values profit over human interests, exacerbating problems created by racism, sexism, and other prejudices.
 - Groups that are marginalized by prejudices are further marginalized because they have little economic power.
 - Even minorities internalize the skewed system of values that teaches that any aberration from the norm is dangerous, which leads to infighting among minority groups.
- Lorde urges her readers to view the world around them in a less fractured way, and insists that political progress will be made only when individuals' differences are viewed as natural strengths rather than irreconcilable divisions. Differences as empowering.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 19


Through these essays that is speech collections, we find that Lorde desensitizes us to what has been termed as institutional dehumanization. It is a pattern according to her in the given society which devalues the individuality of the members within an institution in favour of certain ideals. White, heterosexual, and patriarchal society, for example, discourage the expressions of traits that do not fall into its norms. For example, it values profit over human interest and it adds to the problems which have been created by racism, sexism and similar other prejudices.

The groups which have been marginalized by these and similar other prejudices are further marginalized because they also have little economic power. Even minorities unfortunately according to Lorde are able to internalize the skewed system of values that teaches that any aberration from the dominant norms is dangerous, and it often leads to infighting among minority groups.

Lorde suggest that one should be able to view the world around us in a way which is somehow less fractured and that political progress can be made only when the differences within individuals' are viewed as natural strengths rather than irreconcilable divisions. Differences, according to Lorde, are empowering, never a constraint.

(Refer Slide Time: 28:42)

- Some of these deeply felt concepts are compressed in the poem, "Sister Outsider," after which this volume is named. The poem had also appeared in Lorde's *The Black Unicorn* (1978) which uses as one of its central motifs the ancient wisdom of West African people. Throughout the collection of essays, Lorde probes into this ancient wisdom.
- Other themes she takes are sisterhood, power of erotic and her concept of difference and connection.
- Sisterhood: Lorde's insisted on a 'sisterhood,' which embraces the 'other' and ourselves at the same time.
 - The phrase "Sister Outsider" emphasizes the stark alternative between being an isolated individual and an active participant in a community.
 - Her writing around the issue was typified by concerns that a retreat from the community would leave her vulnerable and oppressed.



IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 20

Some of these deeply filled concepts are compressed in the poem “Sister Outsider”, after which this volume has been named this poem had also appeared in her previous poetry collection, *The Black Unicorn* which uses as one of its central motives the ancient wisdom of West African people. Throughout the collection of essays Lorde probes into this ancient wisdom. Other themes she takes in this volume are sisterhood, power of erotic and her concept of difference in connection.


Lorde had insisted on this idea of ‘sisterhood’ which embraces the ‘other’ as well as ourselves at the same time. The phrase “Sister Outsider” emphasizes the stark alternative between being an isolated individual and an active participant in a community. She also considered that her sexual choices and preferences have also made her an outsider within the black feminist community. Her writing about the issue, she also feels that a retreat from the community would leave an individual as vulnerable and oppressed.

(Refer Slide Time: 29:58)

- In defining the erotic, Lorde goes back to the Greek word, eros, "the personification of love in all of its aspects -born of Chaos and personifying power and harmony."
 - Each part of this definition is critical to her discussion of the uses of the erotic: trusting of self, the Chaos not fully understood but from which creativity and harmony spring, the power that the passion for life has, to move us towards action.
- Erotic is the source of that "sharing of joy", which provides a deep connection between persons who are different. The erotic is one way that difference among people can become a source of creative dialogue, rather than a threat.
- Lorde asserts, we have come "to distrust that power from which rises our deepest nonrational knowledge."
- A continued theme.

The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation.

Judith Lorde



IT ROORKEE | NIFEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

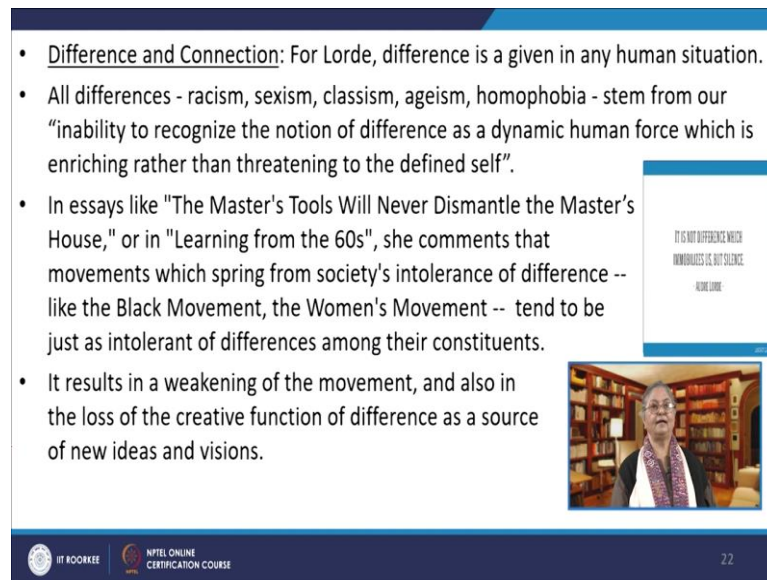
21

In her interpretation of the word erotic, Lorde has gone back to the Greek word, eros, which is “the personification of love in all of its aspect, it is born of chaos and personifies power and harmony.” Each part of this definition is critical to her discussion of the uses of the erotic which include trusting of the self, the chaos not fully understood, but from which creativity and harmony would ultimately spring. The power that the passion for life has to move us towards positivistic action.


So, according to Lorde, erotic is the source of that sharing of joy which provides a deep connection between persons who are different. So, it is one way that differences among people can also become a source of creative dialogue rather than a threat. She also suggests that we have come to distrust that power from which rises our deepest non-rational knowledge and we find that this theme is continued in various other writings of Lorde.

(Refer Slide Time: 31:10)

- Difference and Connection: For Lorde, difference is a given in any human situation.
- All differences - racism, sexism, classism, ageism, homophobia - stem from our “inability to recognize the notion of difference as a dynamic human force which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self”.
- In essays like "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," or in "Learning from the 60s", she comments that movements which spring from society's intolerance of difference -- like the Black Movement, the Women's Movement -- tend to be just as intolerant of differences among their constituents.
- It results in a weakening of the movement, and also in the loss of the creative function of difference as a source of new ideas and visions.



IT IS NOT DIFFERENCE WHICH
HUMANIZES US, BUT SILENCE.
- AUDRE LORDE



IIT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 22

Another intersectional trope which Lorde has taken up in this collection is the theme of difference in connection. She feels that difference is a given fact in any human situation and these differences ultimately are a product of our inability to recognize a notion of difference as a dynamic human force which enriches us rather than threatens us. So, these differences of racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia etcetera are ultimately linked to the possibility of a dynamism.


In essays like “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” or in “Learning from the 60s”, she comments that movements which spring from society’s intolerance of difference like the Black Movement or the Women’s Movement also tend to be just as intolerant of differences among their constitutes and this intolerance results in a weakening of the movement and also, in the loss of creative possibilities.

(Refer Slide Time: 32:18)

"In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower." :

If "women" are defined as white, heterosexual, young women whose class position enables them to see certain aspects of life as the only ones that demand change, then what is lost is the knowledge of women of colour, older women, and poor women, of lesbian.

- If we succumb to the master's most effective tool, the pitting of people against one another by using the threat of difference, we can never dismantle the master's house.
- Woman-hating in Black communities diminishes all Black People and the black man's use of the label "lesbian" as a threat is an attempt to rule by fear. Acknowledges tragedy of anger that black women direct toward each other or their history of bonding.




IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 23

Her motto is that “in our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower”. If “women” are defined as white, heterosexual, young women whose class position enables them to see only certain aspects of life who demand change, then what is lost is the knowledge which is produced by women with certain difference. For example, women of color, older women, poor women or women with different sexual preferences.

She further acknowledges the tragedy of anger that black women sometimes direct towards each other or their history of bonding. She suggest that if we succumb to the masters most effective tool that is the pitting of people against one another by using the threat of difference, we would never be able to dismantle the masters house. By it, she means the dominant ideology which create difference.

(Refer Slide Time: 33:20)

- She reminds white women that “anger between peers births courage, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal but a sign of growth.”
- She reminds black women who attack lesbianism as antiblack of “the sisterhood of work and play and power” that is a part of our African tradition, and of how we have been taught to see each other as “heartless competitors for the scarce male, the all-important prize that could legitimize our existence.”
- This “dehumanization of the denial of self,” she asserts, “is no less lethal than the dehumanization of racism to which it is so closely allied.”



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 24


Lorde also reminds the white women that “anger between peers births courage, not destruction, and the discomfort in sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth”.

She also reminds black women who attack lesbianism as anti black as the sisterhood of work and play and power that is a part of the African tradition and she suggest that we have been taught to see each other as “heartless competitors for the scarce male the all-important prize that could legitimize our existence” and we have to unlearn it. This dehumanization of the denial of self is no less lethal than the dehumanization of racism to which it is so closely allied.


(Refer Slide Time: 34:13)

A Burst of Light: Essays (1988)

- Last collection of essays, won American Book Award, 1989.
 - These essays have poetic qualities combined with her great sensibility and powerful insight into living with liver cancer and its meanings.
 - Takes the struggle with cancer as “another face of that continuing battle for self-determination and survival that Black women fight daily, often in triumph” (49); in a way, it is “an act of political warfare” (131).
- Announces need for a radical politics of intersectionality. It begins with an interview conducted by Susan Leigh Star, discusses sadomasochism as “an institutionalized celebration of dominate/ subordinate relationships” in the lesbian-feminist community; the impact of which reverberates beyond the personal life. (14).
 - Power struggle born of it permeates all areas of participant’s life: it is not possible to remove sexual aspects of life from other aspects within ourselves.



Source: Jen Keenan, Broadside Press



IT ROORKEE NFEEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 25


Another publication, I would refer to is her 1988 essay compilation ‘A Burst of Light.’ This is her last collection of essays for which she was awarded the American Book Award in 1989. This collection begins with an interview which had been conducted by Susan Leigh Star and in this she has discussed sadomasochism as an institutionalized celebration of dominate subordinate relationship within the lesbian feminist community.

According to her, the impact of these practices reverberate beyond the personal life. She suggest that sadomasochistic relationships generate a power struggle and this power struggle permeates all areas of the life of participants because it is not possible for us to remove the sexual aspects of life from other aspects within ourselves.

Further, she talks about her experiences of life living with cancer and what she had learned during this struggle. She had refused to be operated on and considered that her struggle with cancer is another face of that continuing battle for self determination and survival that black women fight daily often in triumph.

(Refer Slide Time: 35:40)

- Gender and Race Politics: In the essay "I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities", Lorde takes the reader on an eight-page journey of who she is and reminds her reader that she is a Black Lesbian.
- In this essay, Lorde is reaching out to straight black women and declaring that they should not be threatened or feel repulsed by Black Lesbians but should unite together as Black women regardless of sexual preferences.
- In "Turning the Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986" Lorde shares her concern of raising children as lesbian parents, as in a society of stereotypes and bigotry, they have to face harsher challenges.
- In the essay "Apartheid U.S.A." Lorde relates apartheid in South Africa to her vision of African-American expendability and suppression in America.
- Lorde claims that black people in America are as worse off, if not more so, as those in South Africa. Some critics termed her views as "peculiar and counter-productive" (Sarah King)*




*http://www.amsu.edu/~lms/audre/audre.htm

IT ROORKEE NIFEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 26

In her essay, “I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities.” Lorde has taken the reader on an eight-page journey of who she is and reminds a reader that she is a black lesbian. Lorde reaches out to straight black women and declares that they should not be threatened or feel repulsed by black lesbians rather they should unite together as black women regardless of their sexual preferences and choices.

In “Turning the Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986,” Lorde shares her concerns of raising children as lesbian parents. She feels that in a society which is governed by stereotypes and bigotry, their children face harsher challenges. In the essay entitled “Apartheid U.S.A”, Lorde has related apartheid in South Africa to her vision of African-American expandability and suppression in America. She has suggested that black people in America are worse off. However, some critics have termed her views as peculiar and counterproductive.

(Refer Slide Time: 36:51)



The collage features several elements: a portrait of Audre Lorde with a quote, a quote about single-issue struggles, a quote about demanding the most from ourselves, a quote about the necessity of rooting out practices of domination, and a photograph of Audre Lorde in a library.

- Sarah King and Lester Olson also feel that in her attempt to empower the isolated sections of audience, Lorde “belittles” those different from her, labelling their broad categories as “white, thin, male, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure” (116)
- "A Burst of Light: Living With Cancer" is the book's most extended and most personal section, consisting of select passages from Lorde's journal from the three years following her diagnosis of liver cancer.
- Legacy: necessity of rooting out practices of domination people have internalized in their struggle to exist, intersectionality, contribution to the third-wave feminist discourse.

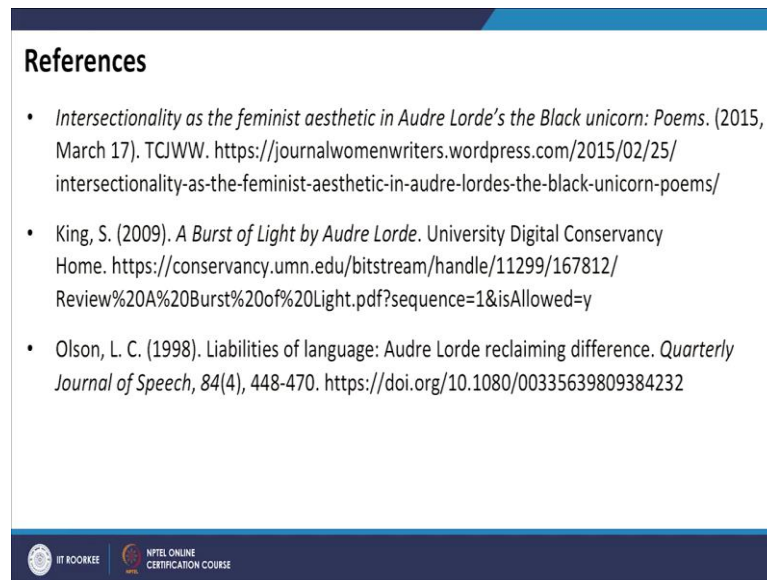
IT ROORKEE | NFEI ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 27

For example, Sarah King and Lester Olson feel that in her attempt to empower the isolated sections of audience, Lorde has ultimately belittled those people who are different from her, labeling their broad categories as “white, thin, male, heterosexual, Christian and financially secure”. “A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer” is this book’s most extended and most personal section, consisting of select passages from her journal from the three years following her diagnosis of liver cancer.

So, when we look at the works of Audre Lorde, we find that she has been able to focus on some most aspects of intersectional attitude in her work. For example, she had suggested that there is a necessity of rooting out practices of domination, people have somehow internalized in their struggle to exist. This is also a major contribution to the third wave feminist discourse which has alerted us to the differences which exist within the larger umbrella term of womanhood.

With Audre Lorde we have concluded our discussion of intersectionality. In the next modules, we would begin our discussion of gender blurring, another important concept to understand in the context of gender as we understand it today.

(Refer Slide Time: 38:27)

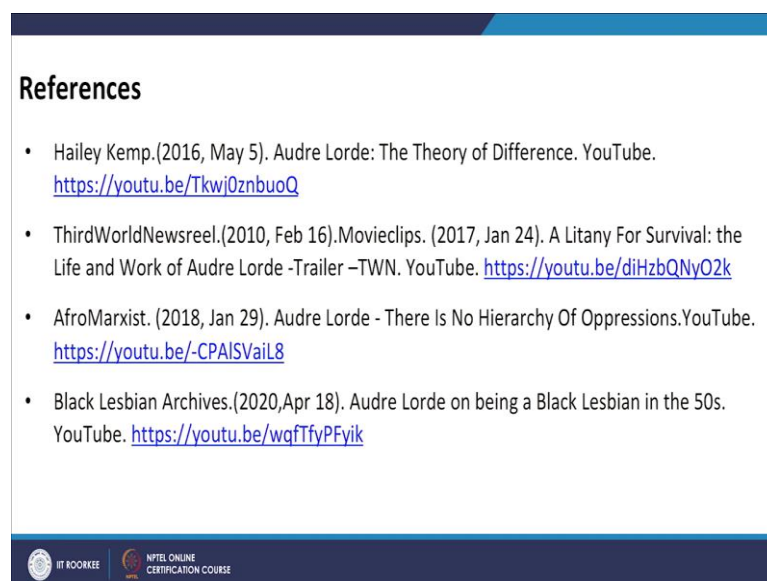


References

- *Intersectionality as the feminist aesthetic in Audre Lorde's the Black unicorn: Poems.* (2015, March 17). TCJWW. <https://journalwomenwriters.wordpress.com/2015/02/25/intersectionality-as-the-feminist-aesthetic-in-audre-lordes-the-black-unicorn-poems/>
- King, S. (2009). *A Burst of Light by Audre Lorde.* University Digital Conservancy Home. <https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/167812/Review%20A%20Burst%20of%20Light.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Olson, L. C. (1998). Liabilities of language: Audre Lorde reclaiming difference. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 84(4), 448-470. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639809384232>

IIT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

(Refer Slide Time: 38:32)



References

- Hailey Kemp.(2016, May 5). Audre Lorde: The Theory of Difference. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Tkwj0znbuoQ>
- ThirdWorldNewsreel.(2010, Feb 16).Movieclips. (2017, Jan 24). A Litany For Survival: the Life and Work of Audre Lorde -Trailer –TWN. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/diHzbQNYO2k>
- AfroMarxist. (2018, Jan 29). Audre Lorde - There Is No Hierarchy Of Oppressions.YouTube. <https://youtu.be/-CPAISVaiL8>
- Black Lesbian Archives.(2020, Apr 18). Audre Lorde on being a Black Lesbian in the 50s. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/wqfTfyPFyik>

IIT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Thank you.