

**Reviewer: Mina Surjit Singh**

**Book Title: *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audrey Lorde***

**Book Author: Alexis De Veaux**

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“Black, lesbian, mother, cancer survivor, urban woman: none of Lorde’s selves has ever silenced the others”, wrote the American National Book Award winning lesbian poet Marilyn Hacker of Audrey Lorde, in 1982. Now, twelve years after Lorde’s painful death with cancer, we have at last a much awaited biography of the poet with a “near-messianic public persona”. The biography, by another warrior poet Alexis De Veaux, is a richly deserved tribute to the first African-American and the first woman to be designated New York State Poet and warrior of the Civil Rights era. With no models to fall back on, De Veaux, who is presently chair of the Women’s Studies Department at the University of Buffalo, admits that she was faced with the daunting task of long and arduous visits to the poet’s family, to her white, gay, ex-husband, to her friends, to her former students and interviewers and to the streets of Harlem where Lorde grew up. Besides exploring “the thirty-odd boxes of papers and memorabilia” officially archived at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, to which she had sole access, De Veaux also examined the over sixty unpublished journals Lorde had left behind, that charted her being. Other significant sources that have chronicled the silent histories of women, like The Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn and The Caribbean Cultural Center in Manhattan, provided supplementary material. What we have then is a well researched and beautifully reconstructed history of the “two lives” of Lorde, which details “her strengths and her frailties, the humanity behind the icon.”

*Warrior Poet* is broadly structured in two main parts. These parts correspond to the “two lives” that De Veaux centers her biography on, that is, Lorde’s life before and after she was diagnosed with breast cancer and later, with incurable metastasized cancer of the liver. Acknowledging that it is never possible to separate identities from how they are represented, De Veaux shares the anxiety of most biographers over bringing together fact and fiction. At the very outset therefore, she expresses concern over how “to walk the bridges” of the life of this intensely public and private poet who was often overtaken by violent fits of rage, without presenting her as monstrous: how “to become - and not become - her.” With this in mind, she chronicles the poet’s life from the time Lorde’s parents migrated from the Caribbean to Harlem in 1924 and ends with the poet’s relocation to St. Croix in the Caribbean, two years after she was diagnosed with liver cancer. Sensitive enough to the privacy of the last few years of Lorde’s painful battle with a terminal illness, De Veaux closes her biography in 1986, that is, six years before the poet’s death.

The first part of the book which deals with the “first life” of the poet is further subdivided into three sections. These sections explore the complex self Lorde had constructed, through seemingly essentialist definitions of herself as black, poet and mother, furthered by the development of lesbian eroticism both within and without her work. The first section entitled “The Transformation of Silence”, details Lorde’s childhood in Harlem of the mid-1930s, defined by President Roosevelt’s promise of a “New Deal”. These details are largely derived from Lorde herself, through her literary memory and mythic constructions and reconstructions of an ugly left-handed duckling with a stutter - clumsy, inarticulate and near-blind, lonely, unloved and nightmarish. Not encouraged to go out alone, Lorde’s mind was imprinted with eclipsed and fleeting images of Harlem, which became “simultaneously real and imagined, solid and fluid” for her. Right from childhood, transgression for which she often got punished and beaten at school, was a strain that marked her as essentially different from her obedient Catholic sisters. Again, not surprising is the young girl’s seduction at age twelve, by the power of words she did not understand, nonetheless, memorized in poems. For the young girl, “Words had an energy and power and I came to respect that power early”. The language of her immigrant parents was filled with the “cadences of the Caribbean” and for Lorde,

this language of survival became her tool for negotiating the world beyond Harlem. De Veaux informs us that by age fourteen Lorde was formally “baptized” into poetry and fascinated by the emotional complexities of the Romantics, Eliot, Elinor Wylie and Edna St. Vincent Millay, during her four year stint at Hunter High School. Although the institution was dominated by girls from middle and upper-middle class white families, it was to become her spiritual school. With a band of recalcitrant female friends who called themselves “The Branded”, she found her freedom, wrote poetry and skipped classes to wander the streets and book stores of privileged upper Harlem. Here, she not only learnt her first lessons in racial humiliation and anger, but also experienced the first pangs of an erotic companionship with the maverick, white skinned, Genevieve, a graceful dancer who Lorde defined as her “alter ego”. The relationship she recalls, “formed a thick and indelible line across the emotional background of my adolescence” and lead on to a series of and dependence on lesbian relationships.

The second section is significantly entitled “Poetry Is Not Luxury”. It deals with a phase that defines the poet’s life by a poetic excitement in which, motherhood, marriage, the political and artistic climate of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, and Martin Luther’s historic seven-minute speech to millions of protesters, were dominant concerns. While marriage and motherhood brought pleasure, the growing demands of the family brought stress and relegation of her needs and desires, which were primary in a social world where Lorde was “Prima Donna”. De Veaux also tells us that Lorde’s “identities as lesbian and mother were not synonymous, creating a dialectic in which those identities were both unified and in conflict”. A scholarship from the National Endowment for the Arts brought Lorde to Tougaloo College, a historically black college in Jackson, Mississippi. The poet’s experience at Tougaloo intensified her racial and sexual dynamics through workshops she conducted for her students and these “sprouted” the seeds of what was to become Lorde’s theory of difference into language. As Lorde wrote later: “its not enough being / different / you have to cherish it too.”

“Uses of the Erotic” forms the third section of the first life and focuses on Lorde’s attempts to reinvent and ground herself in a lesbian identity as black, mother, feminist and poet. Lorde defines the power of that identity as “the erotic...a resource within...that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of... unexpressed

or unrecognized feelings”. “Uses of the Erotic” traces Lorde’s evolution as a poet of repute, her pioneering activism with its attendant sense of power and arrogance and her conflicting states of love and hate for white women within the feminist struggle. It also records the poet’s overwhelming fear of cancer, which was to “split” her “life in two”. The two main sections are interspersed with some fascinating pictures of the poet with her female companions, writers, and fellow activists.

The second part of the book has two sub-sections entitled “The Black Unicorn” and “The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance”, both titles of her volumes. While the former is her eleventh volume, the latter was published posthumously and dedicated to her “blood sisters” Mavis and Marjorie, who she discovered in St. Croix. “The Black Unicorn” establishes Lorde’s spiritual relationship to Africa, her reconciliation with a self that was Caribbean, and her scathing treatment of American foreign policy and democracy. “The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance”, however, dwells more on the prognosis of cancer, its effect on the poet’s life, the resounding success of *Sister Outsider*, and her essay, “Grenada Revisited” written on her return from Grenada. The essay was Lorde’s most explicit and studied critique of America, not only through the eyes of a citizen of the Third World, but also as a “transnational who claimed both: a ‘there’ and ‘here’ as home”. The section also underscores Lorde’s focus on difference as a path to social reconstruction and her return to St. Croix, the spiritual home she had “spent a life-time” searching for. De Veaux closes this excellent biography on a note of quiet dignity that upholds the very delicately balanced and real portrait she has painted of a life “that spoke truth to power”. Without resorting to any maudlin sentimentality, a brief four-page “Epilogue” informs us of Audrey Lorde’s passing away quietly among her own people.

In the writing of this biography, the writer is in some way writing in the self too, yet, De Veaux has self-consciously avoided the pitfalls of subjective authorial intrusions. With the veracity and substance of historical fact, she has given us a picture of a life she believes to be true, to whatever extent the ‘intangible personality’ or the ‘inner reality’ of a person can be known from the external facts of that life. Written in a narrative style that is devoid of voyeurism and as engrossing as the life it speaks of, *Warrior Poet* is a testimony to Alexis De Veaux’s superior insights and scholarship. The biographer has

truly succeeded in capturing the challenging complexities of Lorde's various identities with the subtlety and élan of a truly perceptive critic. The book is as valuable to Lorde's scholarship as it is likely to be influential in the genre of biographical writings.

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