

Cultural Dislocation and Humanity Lost: A Post-Colonial Analysis of Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

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Alice Walker is a famous African-American female author whose short story "Everyday Use" takes the conflict between a mother and her two daughters over the final ownership of "a quilt" as the main line and creates three black women characters with bright personality. This paper will focus on the living conditions and spiritual world of black women, and reflects the anxiety of black women on ethnic cultural heritage within the white world and reveals the suppression of the strong culture to the weak culture, and the self-preservation of the weak culture from the perspective of post-colonialism.

Keywords: "Everyday use", post-colonialism, black women, cultural dislocation

Introduction

Alice Walker is a representative writer at that time. She is a leading African-American female novelist, poetry and short novelist. Since the 1960s, she has published six novels, three collections of short stories, and six collections of poetry. She also wins more than a dozen awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, America's top literary prize, for her novel *The Color Purple* in 1983. Walker's novels are concerned for the miserable living situation of those black women who struggle for freedom, religion, dignity, and survival in a gender-baised and racist society.

In the novel, Alice Walker uses clues such as "Johnny Carson" and "quilt" to imply that the time of the story is exactly in the 1960s, when the American Black Civil Rights Movement, also known as the African-American Civil Rights Movement, rise.

In the early post-war period, with the outbreak of the Cold War, the U.S. government adopts a repressive policy at home, and various social movements in the United States are at a low tide. However, with the decline of McCarthyism, various social movements begin to become active again, forming the climax of the reform movement in the 1960s. The black civil rights movement is an important part of it. Black Americans have long fought against racial discrimination and for equal rights. But the really big organized civil rights movement emerges in the mid-1950s and reached its climax in the 1960s. Before the 1960s, the widespread racial discrimination in the American society makes the African Americans at the edge of the society both economically and politically, and their culture is naturally completely marginalized by the mainstream American society. However, in the 1960s, with the awakening of the black national consciousness cause by the

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independence of African countries from the colonial yoke, this situation of ignoring and denying the black history and culture is resisted and challenged by the black writers, artists and intellectuals who led the black art movement. The increasingly nationalistic black intellectuals, like Alice Walker, are more anxious than ever about the absence of black history and culture from mainstream American culture.

Literature Review

Her representative short novel "Everyday Use" has gained great popularity and good fame among popular readership as well as critics since it has published in 1973 for its field culture vision, profound thought contain and unique artistic style. *Everyday Use* (1973), a short story by African American writer Alice Walker. The plot revolves around a quilt, from the perspective of a black mother in the first person, tells the family dispute caused by her two daughters, a pair of black sisters, in order to snatch the quilt. In terms of material/materialism turn, a popular trend in cultural studies, everyday goods carry the memories, sufferings, joys and hopes of African American women. The inconspicuous "things" in daily life have been given another form of life, and the material, decoration, color and pattern of the quilt contain the identity of gender, race and class, which makes people think deeply. Since the publication of the novel, scholars have made a detailed analysis of the theme, narrative strategy and character image of the novel from different theoretical perspectives. There are many research papers, mainly from the perspectives of psychoanalysis, post-colonial theory, text comparison, literary ethics, narratology, feminism, Fanon's racial trauma theory and so on. Thadious Davis's (1983) essays deal the least with "Everyday Use" itself, but she does give the story a context in Walker's other fiction. Davis explores the image of community in Walker's fiction and the tensions of being an artist in that community. Individuals, she concludes, are "inextricably linked in social and familial generations," and while one must struggle with "external constrictions to find meaning in one's own life" (Thadious, 1983, p. 39). Walker's view of community is ultimately a "consoling vision of interconnections". The essays by Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker (1985) deal the most with "Everyday Use" itself. Baker and Pierce-Baker analyze the central in age of heritage in the story, "the quilt." Exploring the process of quilting as well as the finish a product, they argue that "Everyday Use" privileges a woman's craft as a way of exploring communal bonding that confounds traditional definitions of art and suggests the "potential effects of black women's creativity in America." In 1994, "Everyday Use", edited by Barbara T. Christian (1994) is honored by a critical edition published in the Rutgers University Press series "Women Writers: Texts and Contexts." The volume follows the basic order of each book in the series: the story itself—"Everyday Use" by Alice Walker; backgrounds to the story—an essay and poem by Alice Walker and an interview she did at about the time "Everyday Use" was written; and a collection of critical essays which informs one's reading of the story. Although the essays focus on "Everyday Use," their purpose is not just to explicate the story. Sam Whitsitt (2000) believes that "what never seems to be noted is that what makes possible the sisterhood they value is their exclusion of a sister" (Sam, 2000, p. 447). The story out of which Dee gets narrated is not Walker's, but the critics' story of identity, which shuts down any room for a ludic play of differences. The aim of his article is to propose a reading which respects a play of difference, which keeps "things" like Dee, in play.

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culture to the weak culture, and the self-preservation of the weak culture from the perspective of post-colonialism.

Dee

Dee is the representative of the American Black Civil Rights Movement but Dee shows the urgency and sense of crisis that black Americans are eager to rebuild their own racial history and culture. She hopes to get out of the historical and realistic dilemma, but her behavior is too radical due to her own character defects. She wants to change her behavior in a startling number of ways from the ways she walks, talks and dresses to the men she flirts with so much that her knowledge of many things only stays in very shallow level, not seeing their essence, which results in her not being fully respected and recognized by her mother. The mother focuses on her best points and is proud of that: *"I am a large, big-bone woman with rough, man-working hands... I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man... I can work outside all day"* (Walker, 1944, p. 1). While Dee does not share her ideas. These best points precisely represent the body and mind that black Americans have been disciplined for a long time. Although they are strong, they are ignorant, barbaric and subject to being slaughtered. Dee opposes racial discrimination and is eager to fight for freedom, equality and liberation. She hopes that they could look down at white people instead of being humble. So Dee wants her mother to look like *"a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights. Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue"* (Walker, 1944, p. 1). When Dee sees her old house engulfed in fire, there is *"a look of concentration"* on her face, and when Dee returns to the slum again, she hopes her mother to call her the new name "Wangero" rather than "Dee", which symbolizes the enslavement in the past. All of these show her desperate desire to escape the ghetto, to break free from a history of slavery and oppression. There is nothing wrong with what Dee has done. She is eager to change, and she has a combative mentality, enjoy challenge, and like to change her surrounding environment. Of course, she has successfully escaped the slum, but she has not prepared how to start over, which is the reason for her radicalization. The final conflict between Dee and her mother lies in the competition between the two quilts. These two quilts are made by her grandmother, aunt and mother using different color blocks, shapes of rags collage into different patterns of quilt, and the raw materials are a combination of native American fabric and African traditional fabric. The whole process is entirely hand made of pure, non-machining section, which has extraordinary artistic aesthetic value and material value. In her mother's eyes, Dee's attempt to take away the quilt is like "steal", because these two quilts have nothing to do with her, she does not participate in the making process of the quilt, and she even does not know the whole process. More importantly, her mother has given her a similar quilt before she goes to college, and she despises it. Therefore, she must not obtain the approval of her mother. The motive behind Dee's attempt to "steal" the two bedclothes is very utilitarian. Just as the first thing she does when she just go back home is to take out her camera and shoot the surroundings, rather than greet her mother and sister, she just wants to record everything around her as an outsider. In fact, Dee can't wait to get away from this "home," and for her, whether churn top (*"Uncle Buddy whittle it out of a tree you all used to have"*) or dasher (*"Aunt Dee's first husband whittled"*), all of these are just handmade handicrafts in the era of mechanical replicas. They only have some artistic value and commercial value, other than that, nothing else. In fact, Dee does not understand the traditional culture of her own people, just as she does not understand the

significance of the quilt for black women in history. For black women, the quilts are not only the reflection on lives, but also the nostalgic feeling for their own history, which comes from the memories of life scenes and deceased relatives, and means the tracing of all of the good in the past, the remembrance of the past that has not gone away, and the pursuit of spiritual home. Therefore, these affair has been settled by Dee too hashly, and even though Dee manages to escape the ghetto, she still has little respect for motherhood and the author.

Maggie

In that uncertain era, Maggie is like most people, they had no choice but to endure in silence, accept the suffering brought by fate, and lead a miserable life. "*She knows she is not bright. Like good looks and money, quickness passed her by. She will marry John Thomas (Who has mossy teeth in an earnest face)*" (Walker, 1944, p. 2). Maggie is crippled by a fire. She isn't pretty and smart, and she is about to be married by her mother's arrangement. She never fought for anything, and when her sister wanted to take away the two quilts that should have been left for her, she just chose to silently tolerate it: "*'She can have them, Mama,' she said, like somebody used to never winning anything, or having anything reserved for her*" (Walker, 1944, p. 6). Maggie will only accept the grievances that others give her. Maggie is like a puppet who has lost her soul and is only left a broken shell at the mercy of others, "*This was Maggie's portion.*" But if you believe that for Maggie she is just poor, obscure, plain and so little that she is soulless and heartless. That's wrong. She has deep feelings and rich inner world as a black woman. However, She does not resist does not mean that she has no resistance ability. She knows who she is and she has responsibility to protect their own community in her own manner. It wasn't until Maggie said to her mother, "*I can 'menmber Grandma Dee without the quilt.*" Maggie is like a pure angel coming down at this moment, warming the heart with love and understanding. For Dee, the painful culture of black Americans is like a poison, and she avoids it like a flood. But there is more than humiliation in the hurt culture of American blacks. It is the kindness, tenacity and optimism nurtured by these hurt cultures that are more and more precious. For Maggie, these two quilts are not only the sustenance of the elders' love, but also a remembrance of the elders by the younger generation, which is the continuation of the black blood and a symbol of family affection. For women, weaving is another form of language. In the criss-crossing warp and weft, women weave, stitch and thread, emotions that are difficult to express in words or words, into carefully designed fabrics. Just like Maggie's grandmother, aunt, mother, etc., these black women have silently written their own culture and spirit, being united and cooperative, painstaking and striving ahead, grateful and happy in the work, and never giving up with needle and thread in countless dark days in the past, and such culture and spirit will be passed down from generation to generation, and all of them are proud of it.

Mother

The novel is written from the perspective of the mother's first-person narrative. The change in attitudes of the mother towards Dee and Maggie shows the central idea of this novel. In the eyes of the mother, the little girl Maggie is ugly, stupid, shiftless and unsuccessful. Although Maggie has always been around to accompany her and being obedient, the mother still looks down on the Maggie. "*Have you ever seen a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough to own a car, sidle up to someone who is ignorant enough to be kind to him? That is the way my Maggie walks*" (Walker, 1944, p. 1). However, in the eyes of the

mother, the eldest daughter Dee is smart, beautiful and successful. She also dreamed of being complimented by everyone on her daughter's success "*Sometimes I dream a dream in which Dee and I are suddenly brought together on a TV program of this sort*" (Walker, 1944, p. 1). Many of the eldest daughter's behaviors puzzled the mother, for example, Dee always forces the mother and Maggie to listen to her read; Dee "*was determined to share down any disaster in her efforts*" (Walker, 1944, p. 2); Dee had a style of her own and knew what style was at her sixteen, etc., All of these made the mother feel confused, uneasy and emotionally insecure, but the mother still put herself in her daughter's position and chooses to tolerate her daughter. She does not understand the significance of Dee's black civil rights movement, so the pain of inclusion made her feel lost. Until Dee wants to take away the quilt that should belong to Maggie, Maggie says, "*I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilt*" (Walker, 1944, p. 6). She suddenly has such a feeling, "*something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet*" (Walker, 1944, p. 6). She couldn't recognize with Dee's attitude toward the quilt. For the mother, every piece of cloth made into a quilt is a piece of family history, and the process of sewing the quilt is a process of kinship integration and cultural transmission. The quilt is the consanguineal and emotional connection of family members, and it can not be just displayed as a traditional handicraft, so she takes the quilt back from Dee and give it to Maggie, in a deep sense. She has preserved and continued the cultural heritage of her people. Her mother found that Dee does not understand her own cultural tradition, and even abandoned this part of the cultural tradition, and her understanding of the value of culture only lay in the surface aesthetic value and material value. She could not approve of it. And Maggie's words made her wake up. Maggie still maintain a good heart and tenacious survival power in tribulation. For the first time, she recognizes with Maggie, embraced Maggie, and give her the strength to walk away from the situation.

Conclusion

In short, by comparing Dee, her mother and Maggie, Alice Walker reveals the phenomenon of black culture loss caused by the white strong culture impact, and vividly and accurately reflects the different attitudes of black people under the strong culture impact. As David Cowart writes, "Alice Walker's searing satire of the cultural misconceptions of black consciousness in the 1960s negates their piety, particularly their roots in African culture, and affirms neglected cultural values" (David, 1983, p. 39). At the same time, Walker made a point: Culture and heritage are not superficial east and west, do not need to be held as fashion, but handed down from generation to generation, only to understand and respect them first, in order to achieve inheritance and development, only in this way can maintain the vitality of culture and heritage, can reflect its value as culture and heritage.

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