

Dee's Identity Crisis in *Everyday Use*

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Based on Fanon's post-colonial theory, this paper takes Dee in Alice Walker's *Everyday Use* as a research object and deeply analyzes her cultural identity crisis as an African American in the white American society. Through close reading of the text, this identity crisis can be found as a "white mask" imposed by white cultural norms, as well as a "black skin" shaped by their own cultural beliefs. In the face of foreign cultural impact, only by strengthening the sense of honor of our own national culture can we effectively avoid identity crisis.

Keywords: post-colonial theory, cultural identity, Frantz Fanon, Alice Walker, *Everyday Use*

Introduction

The African American writer Alice Walker's succinct novel, *Everyday Use*, serves as a compelling exemplar for delving into the cultural identity turmoil experienced by the colonized. Dee is an image of a black woman full of inner contradictions. The irreconcilable contradiction caused by the collision of black culture and white culture gradually separates her from traditional black family, and the blind pursuit of black traditional culture also hints at her awkward situation.

As a theoretical pioneer of anti-colonialism, Fanon's work provides important enlightenment and new perspective for the third world people's anti-colonialism and liberation journey. Culture is an important way for Fanon to seek the liberation of the colony. Dee's confrontation with a cultural identity crisis underscores the substantial impact of white cultural dominance on the development of African-American cultural identity, and the challenges it poses. Oppressed groups in the post-colonial context have serious identity problems. By revealing the double cultural oppression faced by black women and the complexity of cultural identity construction, this paper aims to provide a new perspective for thinking about the cultural conflict and cultural integration in contemporary society.

Fanon's Critique of Cultural and Psychological Colonization in Post-Colonial Theory

Franz Fanon is one of the pioneers of post-colonial theory. In his influential book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, he underscores the persistence of the cultural identity crisis faced by colonized individuals, particularly within the context of a multicultural society akin to the United States. In order to better control and dominate the colonies, the most far-reaching strategy adopted by colonialism is to carry out cultural penetration and ideological colonization of the colonized. This kind of cultural penetration and ideological colonization is the most profound and fundamental way of colonization, which achieves the purpose of controlling the colonized by changing their cultural concepts and values. In this process, the white culture becomes the ruler, and the racial discrimination

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contained in it made the oppressed groups, especially the blacks, have an irresistible anxiety in cultural psychology. They are eager to get rid of this anxiety, so they have a strong desire to become the white race. Therefore, under their black skin, they are wrapped in a “white” heart under the white culture.

Unequal social structures and cultural hegemony lead to deep feelings of self-deprecation and marginalization within these groups. This profound sense of inferiority and repulsion significantly shapes their lives and mental frameworks, leading them to encounter challenges on their quest for equality and liberation. Fanon proposes three stages of the development of colonial culture: “dialectical absorption of Western culture; conscious exploration of one’s own cultural traditions; and fully awakened and engaged in the national liberation movement” (Zhang, 2008, p. 41).

Dee’s White Masks: The Mind Infiltrated by White Culture

In the era of post-colonialism, the establishment of cultural identity has emerged as an intricate yet crucial subject matter. Fanon (2008) believed that white people see themselves as transmitters of culture and bring their own advanced culture and truth to what they see as barbarians (p. 117). Throughout history, colonial isolation was broken by economic and military means, and subsequently, the so-called “truth of civilized society” was imposed on black people.

African-Americans face the influence of white-dominated cultural values, which may lead to the loss of their spiritual foundation, resulting in difficulties of identity and difficulty of realizing self-identity. Just as Fanon believes, colonialism causes colonial people to feel inferior and negate their own culture by forcing the white culture to be instilled. Dee copied white people’s example, wearing “a yellow organdy dress” and “black pumps” on her graduation (Jin, 2013, p. 211). She pursued the beauty standards and values of white society. She often read to her mother and sister, but in this way imposing white values on her family after adopting white culture.

For Fanon, “consequences of colonialism are not only the political and economic changes of the colonized countries, but also the psychological changes” (McLeod, 2000, p. 21). At first, Dee disdained the family’s legacy of everyday use. She thought that a quilt sent by her mother is “old-fashioned, out of style” (Jin, 2013, p. 217). She was afraid of being mocked and resolutely rejects. And Dee was always reluctant to invite friends to her home because she felt inferior to her humble abode. After the reestablishment of ruined house, “no doubt when Dee sees it she will want to tear it down” (Jin, 2013, p. 210). This attitude reflects her denial and alienation of traditional black culture. She prefers to pursue and imitate white culture, believing that it is fashionable and modern. The intense racism of white culture distorts Dee’s mind, causing her to develop hatred of her own race. Dee’s “white mask” is not only a superficial dress, but also a deep psychological oppression.

Dee’s Black Skin: The Soul of Black Culture That Remains

Drawing from the perspective of Fanon’s post-colonial theory, Dee’s cultural identity crisis serves as a manifestation of the lingering issues stemming from the historical backdrop of colonialism. Under long-term colonial rule, black culture was devalued and marginalized, and black people were forced to accept values and lifestyle of white culture. However, Dee’s cultural identity crisis is not irreversible. “Black people began to explore the cultural and historical activities of their own race to counter white prejudice against black people” (Yang, 2018, p. 24).

The Black Power Movement in the late 1960s and 1970s not only promoted that “black is beautiful”, but also emphasized that black people were “superior” to white people rather than trying to integrate into white-

dominated society. With a new emphasis on cultural pride and cultural autonomy, it created a root-seeking frenzy among black Americans.

Although Dee receives the education of white people, but in the spiritual level, she is always unable to get rid of the foundation of black culture, coupled with her inherent black skin, so that her identity is always in a state of ambiguity. In novel, although Dee initially held a negative attitude toward her own black heritage, following the “fashion” of the Black Power Movement, she intangibly and surprisingly found the “value” of the old objects. Fanon believes that the most important aspect of one civilization eroding another civilization is language, because “speaking a language is consciously accepting a world or a culture” (2008, p. 12). Her name, Dee, is a cultural symbol in itself. Dee got the new name Wangero, because she could not bear the old name any longer and do not want to be named after the people who oppress her. Dee thought that she affirmed her African heritage by changing her name. When her mother met Dee, who had not been home for a long time, she held strong style of the Black Power Movement: floor-length dress, gold earrings that fall to shoulders and long braids that wrap around each other (Jin, 2013, p. 212). Dee changed her attitude and requested her mother's permission to acquire everyday uses of cultural heritage in the home that she had despised before.

Nevertheless, this only shows her superficial interest in the traditional culture. The new name “Wangero” seems to belong to an African, but in fact it means nothing to her because it has no connection to her or her family. Two old handmade quilts in the home contain rich cultural history of the family and even of African Americans. Dee thinks that the only use of these household items is to be hung on the wall or placed in the center of dinner table in an artistic way, rather than seeing them as memories and a spirit that should be integrated into their everyday use and life like Maggie. Dee, like many of African American, expects to win mainstream acceptance by demonstrating cultural and social values of her race. However, the African culture they show often only satisfies white people's superficial curiosity about Africa, but fails to truly reveal their own nature. In the social context of the United States, African Americans have a complex psychological state, and the relationship between them white people and them “should not be simply separated or opposed, but the relationship between them should be used as the basis of discussion” (Xi, 2011, p. 13).

Conclusion

The blend of African and American cultures that constitutes the identity of African Americans necessitates a deep understanding of its intricate roots. For them, the identity crisis caused by collision of two cultures is a problem left over from colonial history. This reflects the contradiction between own culture of African American and white culture after Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

Dee's cultural identity crisis in *Everyday Use* by Alice Walker is the epitome of cultural conflict and cultural integration in the post-colonial era. In *Everyday Use*, Dee's past and subsequent behaviors reflect the influence of two different cultures. The dominant white people and their culture imperceptibly make Dee possess a “white mask”: She inadvertently recognizes the advantages of white culture and yearns for it. She wants to erase the stigma of colonial oppression by imitating white people. At the same time, Dee cannot get rid of her “dark skin”. This belief is brought by her own nation. But Dee only wants to show their cultural heritage to the people who oppressed her, rather than truly integrate the spirit they represented into her own blood.

Therefore, in today's multi-cultural society, only by enhancing the sense of honor and mission of our national culture can we get a better cultural identity. We should not regard the differences between different

cultures as a matter of superiority or inferiority. It is these cultural differences that have created the prosperity and development of human society.

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