

Study on Black Woman Spirituality in Alice Walker's *Everyday Use*

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ABSTRACT

Alice Walker, a famous American black woman poet, novelist and prose writer in the 20th century, introduces "womanism", a different concept from "feminism" to literature and sociology. *Everyday Use* is one of her short stories collected in *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* published in 1973. It narrates the conflicts between the mother and two daughters caused by the "quilts". This thesis exposes the black woman's living condition and the triple oppression inflicted on them, aiming to explore the black woman's spiritual world and to show Walker's identification with the black woman cultures via the analysis of the characterization of the three heroines and the metaphoric meaning of "quilts".

Keywords: *black woman culture, spirituality, Alice Walker*

I. INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker is recognized as one of the leading voices among American black women writers. Born into a large family of sharecroppers in Eatonton, Georgia on 9 February 1944, Alice Walker was the youngest of eight children. When she was eight years old, her brother shot her with his HB gun, leaving her scarred and blind in one eye. The disfigurement made Walker shy and self-conscious. She then isolated herself from all the other kids, as she says in an essay:

"I am no longer felt like the little girl I was. I felt old, and because I felt I was unpleasant to look at, filled with shame. I retreated into solitude."[1]

In spite of poverty, Alice Walker managed to obtain a good education. She also participated in progressive social activities: she worked for the Civil Rights Movement in 1960s, the Second Black Renaissance in 1970s. She also devoted herself to exploring the works of neglected black women writers and she rescued from oblivion the writing of Zora Neale Hurston, an outstanding black literary woman in the Harlem Renaissance.

Most of Walker's works are mainly concerned about black woman's life in the US and their struggle for freedom, equality and liberation in the society full of discrimination. Born in poor sharecroppers in Eatonton, Georgia, Walker sensed the misery of black people, especially black women, many of whom have lived the most miserable life at

the bottom of American society for long. Black people suffered from inhumane slavery, plunder and oppression. Walker witnessed the harshness and humiliation inflicted on her mother. Except that, she also cares about the problem of how to inherit and develop the black traditional culture. Walker takes great interest in the preservation of black culture originated from Africa, especially the everyday work or traditions of generations of black women, such as gardening, quilting, root-working and so on, which are the embodiment of their spirituality and creativity in their lives. Walker admires the struggle of black women throughout history to maintain this creativity that serves as inspiration and friendship to each other.

Readers and critics favor her penetrating observations and the vivid images she created in her novels enthusiastically. *Everyday Use* in Alice Walker's collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, published in 1973, is commonly accepted her best short story by critics. Particularly, it represents Walker's response to the concept of heritage expressed by the Black political movements of the 60s. *Everyday Use* is a story about a poor, African-American family and the conflicting ideas about their identities and ancestry, which is told in first-person by Mrs. Johnson, an uneducated rural black woman. In this short story, there are three women: two sisters and their mother. One of the sisters is Maggie, a docile, weak girl, "walking with chin on chest, eyes on ground, and feet in shuffle" and the other is Dee,

who is a well-educated and experienced woman. The story narrates that Dee returns to her Afro-American family for reunion. There, she claims that a pair of quilts from her passed-away grandmother should be given to her and hung on a wall, not to her sister, Maggie. Dee declares that her sister would ruin them through "everyday use." She charges that her mother does not understand her heritage and therefore should give the quilts to her since she will preserve them. The conflict occurs among Dee, mother, and Maggie over culture and heritage. Maggie and her mother believe that "heritage" deals with their family's traditions. These traditions are the only ones they have ever known and cared about. Dee, on the other hand, believes that "heritage" is about African culture, and she wants nothing to do with her family's heritage. When Mrs. Johnson snatches her ancestors' quilts from Dee and gives them to Maggie, Walker illuminates her life-long celebration of rural Southern black womanhood. Thus, the quilts have become the center to Walker's concerns, because they suggest the strength to be found in connecting with one's roots and past. Without any exception, black woman's living condition is deeply concerned here by Alice Walker as she does in her other works. By the family conflict, Walker has enclosed the internal family relationship, living condition and spiritual value of black women with a purpose of exploring their spirituality. Besides, she has also praised greatly their efforts to quest for spiritual home as well as expressed fully her identification with black culture.

II. CHARACTERIZATION IN THE STORY

"The creation of the authors originates in their historical condition, social environment and is closely related to their national cultural tradition, family background and living experience"[2].

To Walker, writing is a means of showing realistic life from a spiritual perspective, although she regards her early writing as a means of survival, an alternative to despair. She told David Bradley in an interview in 1984.

"I think writing really helps you cure yourself. I think if you write long enough, you'll be a healthy person. That is, if you write what you need to write, as opposed to what will make money or what will make fame."[3]

Everyday Use reflects Walker's own spiritual value as a black woman writer. This story is closely connected with the social environment, family background and living experiences where Walker is raised up. Walker lived in the time when the two movements — the Civil Rights Movement and Women's Liberation Movement were developing with vigor and enthusiasm. Under the influence of the two movements, many black women writers

broke the silence and spoke out their own experience as black women in their works. Walker's family background and personal experience also play an important role. Because of her childhood experience, Walker witnessed the harshness and humiliation inflicted on black women. All these conditions and experiences Walker encountered throughout her life made her a strong black woman and this aspect of her personality is conveyed through the characters in this story. In addition, from black women, she learned their traditional culture and great enthusiasm, which established her determination to preserve and inherit black tradition culture in her works. As a womanism literature creator, enriched by her culture and roots, she took a keen observation on racial and sexual problems. Particularly, black woman's social interrelationship, living condition, value and spiritual pursuit are the most concern in her works, which are reflected on the three heroines.

A. *The Characterization of Mother*

Mrs. Johnson, mother of Maggie and Dee, as well as the narrator, represents a content, simple, and bravery black woman. She describes herself:

"In real life I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as man."[4]

Through Mama's tone, we can see she is proud of her ability to do these things, and she thinks her ability to do these things makes her better than others. In this novel, Walker never mentioned her husband. It is she who is "always better at man's work" and "never had any education myself", fostered her two daughters independently which highlights her bravery, independence and diligence. Meanwhile, Mrs. Johnson is obedient and humble. She seems to content with her surroundings very much and takes pride of her home. She does not dare to see man in her eyes.

Who can imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye? It seems to me I have talked to them always with one foot raised in flight, with my head turned in whichever way is farthest from them.[5]

She admires her older daughter. She wants to be that kind of person her daughter Dee wants to her to be.

A hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barely pancake. My hair glistens in the hot bright lights. Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue.[6]

In effect, it is the mother's dream to become that kind of woman, but she knows this dream will

never come true. As she stated in the novel," but that is a mistake. I know even before I wake up."

Though Women's Liberation Movement spread vigorously during 1960s to 1970s, in reality, black women, are excluded from feminists' door. In American society, where racial discrimination has a deep root, it is impossible for the white feminists to establish sisterhood relationship between themselves and the black women. As for black women, they are at the bottom of the society, suffer a triple oppression: as blacks they, with their men, are victims of a white patriarchal culture; as women, black men victimize them; and as black women they are also victimized on racial, sexual, and class grounds by the white. They are "the silent class". In their society full of prejudices, women suffered from maltreatment by male domination. The patriarchal ideology confines women to a loss of identity and consciousness and women from misconception about themselves. Women are told to be obedient to men, and deeply dependent on men; women haven't autonomy to their lives and men control their fates. The mother always appears as an obedient and humble image. However, on the other hand, from her narration, we can easily find her calm, self-sufficient and brave side. At very beginning, Mrs. Johnson waits for her older daughter Dee to come back for a family reunion. She describes her yard like this:

It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room. When the hard clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with tiny, irregular grooves anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house. [7]

All these show the mother's self-sufficiency to current surroundings. As time goes on, she begins to worry about their meet may be an unpleasant reunion. When Dee is at home, she shows contempt towards culture heritage and her family members. Dee despises their house, which she used to live in; she forces "words, lies, other folks' habits" upon her mother and young sister "without pity"; "she wanted nice thing..." When Dee arrived at home, Mother shows extremely content with her daughter; she makes great efforts to accepted her daughter's new name and tries to pronounce it; she tries her best to accept her boyfriend; she gives whatever "everyday use" to her daughter if only she asks for. Nevertheless, when Dee believes she is more inclined to appreciate her African heritage, whereas her mother and sister's simplistic lifestyle embodies "an outdated way of life." To glorify her heritage, Dee believes they should preserve family heirlooms by "hang them on a wall" for display, rather than endorsing her mother and Maggie's belief that such items should be put to everyday use. Mrs. Johnson snatches her ancestors' quilts from her daughter Dee

and gives them to Maggie. In the quarrel between Dee and her mother, it becomes apparent that the two women have clashing viewpoints of their heritage. In response to Dee's desire to hang the quilt on the wall, the mother expresses her disapproval, exclaiming, "God knows I been saving 'em for long enough with nobody using 'em. I hope she [Maggie] will [put them to everyday use]!" Due to her education and experiences, Dee believes she has developed a more sophisticated perception of her culture. This viewpoint is manifested through her desire to honor her heritage by hanging the quilts on the wall. Yet, the mother believes that truly celebrating one's culture involves appreciating relics of the past for their intended value, and not as works of art. These conflicts convey that mother wants her family to live with its culture. She comments after making her decision, "the two of us just sat there enjoying..." They enjoyed their culture; they lived it. She thinks that the African-American culture should be honored through the continuation of their way of life. She pays more attention to the harmony of her family and preservation of tradition culture. The "quilts" record the history of their ancestors as well as symbolize their black tradition culture. The mother takes pride of their tradition and believes that only those who understand their heritage should possess them. Between her two daughters, only Maggie understands the significance of their tradition and knows how to inherit their tradition culture. As she points out in the novel, "Maggie knows how to quilt".

B. The Characterization of Dee

Dee, Mrs. Johnson's older daughter, is described light skinned, with nice hair and a full figure. She is portrayed as an aggressive image, which is reflected on her personality and attitude towards traditional culture and heritage. In Maggie's eyes, she "has held life always in the palm of one hand, and 'no' is the word that the world has never learned to say to her". Maggie envies her for that. Dee disregards the importance of her name, the fact that she was named after her aunt Dee. And when asked about why she changed her name, Dee can only spout a cliché answer. "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me." Another important detail is the words directly preceding her answer about what happened to her name — "She is dead..." is Dee's answer. By these words, Walker shows that Dee has distanced herself far from her family, heritage and culture by changing her name and manner of talking. When she returns her home, she starts snapping pictures of the house and her mother before even greeting them with a kiss or a hug or even a handshake. Later, when they're in the house, Dee begins just taking various items for herself, assuming they belong to her, even without asking permission from her mother. She is described as going straight "to

the trunk at the foot of my bed and started rifling through it". She's wearing a long dress, even though the weather is very hot. Thus, she is more occupied with aesthetic appearances rather than practicality. In fact, Dee's behavior conveys the majority of Afro-American's attitudes to their traditional culture and heritage during 1960s to 1970. At that time, the Black Power Movement spread everywhere in American society. Young black African Americans proclaimed they would no longer be oppressed by their current lifestyle and began to celebrate African culture through exploiting it for exotic names and ethnic appeal. However, by discarding their southern United States roots, they adopt a culture that does not belong to them. In addition, Dee does not understand the origin of her name and the quilts that show her ignorance and indifference to her own culture. She appreciates these everyday uses from art perspective instead of looking on them as an important part of her own culture. She asks for the quilts from her mother just because they are hand-made by her grandma and wants to "hang them on a wall" for display. Her mother, Mrs. Johnson could tolerate everything but her daughter's betrayal to their black African American culture. This is the center of their conflicts.

C. The Characterization of Maggie

On the contrary, Maggie is a docile, weak girl — walking with chin on chest, eyes on ground, and feet in shuffle. The descriptive words about Maggie demonstrate her introverted character: "[She] will be nervous until after her sister goes: she will stand hopelessly in corners, homely and ashamed of the burn scars down her arms and legs, eyeing her sister with a mixture of envy and awe. In appearance, life, or education, Maggie has always come second to her flamboyant and excessive sister Dee. She accepts her simple and seemingly insignificant role in society without complaints. Although she was never educated in college, disfigured in a house fire, and continually belittled by her condescending sister, Maggie hates neither life nor Dee. As demonstrated by the conflict of the quilts, she continually plays the part of the more mature individual. When the mother moved "up to touch the quilts, Dee moved back just enough so that [mother] couldn't reach [them]". However, Maggie does not become angry or wish for her mother to grab the quilts out of Dee's undeserving hands; instead, she squeaks from the protection of the door, "She [Dee] can have them [quilts], Mama," like someone who is accustomed to never winning anything. Maggie realizes that she doesn't need those quilts as she affirms "I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts". Maggie's benevolence immediately wins pity from the readers by demonstrating selfishness of her sister. From these facts above mentioned, we can see easily that Maggie perceives the quilt as both a

product and a process upon which her way of life is dependent. Maggie realizes that from her culture's point the quilts should be put into use rather than "hung on a wall". However, she does not stand Dee because she is unable to remember Grandma Dee and Big Dee by making her own quilts. This event reveals that Maggie understands their culture and appreciates her roots.

In black women's society of discriminations, the internal family relationship is holy, which is the most important element to develop love, care, support and harmony. In this novel, Walker explores the love and harmony between the black family members. Besides, while she exposes the changes of family relations, she also encloses their different attitudes towards tradition culture and heritage. No matter how disappointed to Dee or how supportive to Maggie, the mother always makes her efforts to keep her family harmonious; she concerns closely to the next generation's thoughts and spiritual value, especially their attitudes toward maintenance of black tradition and culture.

From the above analysis we can see the main reason for the three women's conflict is their different attitudes to their culture, which is represented by the quilt in the story.

III. ANALYSIS OF THE METAPHORIC MEANING OF "QUILTS"

According to cognitive linguistics, people tend to metaphorically conceptualize certain aspects of their existence. Cognitive scholars maintain that metaphors are not merely a figure of speech, a rhetorical trope, but the property of our brain, a way by which it perceives and makes sense of the world.[8] Walker uses the metaphor of quilts to symbolize the tradition culture and heritage of black women, which reflects black woman's way of living. In this novel, Walker describes the quilts and their conflicts about who possesses the quilts. They are not only the expression of black woman's affection towards their culture and heritage, but also Walker's identification with their own culture.

Knowledge of piecing, the technique of assembling fragments into an intricate design, can provide the contexts in which we can interpret and understand the forms, meanings, and narrative traditions of American women writing[9].

"The quilts", used as a metaphor in Alice Walker's stories just illustrates such a connection. *Everyday Use* as a good example conveys the connotation of the cultural metaphor of "quilts", in plot, structure, theme or other aspects. Moreover, the story is like a nice quilt...may be termed as a "crazy quilt story".

In daily life, quilts are used as a tool to provide people with warmth. However, in literature, especially in Alice Walker's novel, they are always associated with the black culture tradition. In her masterpiece *The Color Purple*, two activities done by black woman are quilt making and singing. Walker asserts in *The Color Purple*:

"The quilt in the community that I grew up in represented a lot of women working together. It was really an expression of expressed creativity, in that it was something that could use all of their scraps in, their scraps of material; women who otherwise might have been writers or painters who could not because they had to work in the fields, turned to quilting because it was something utilitarian, that was not suppressed; so something that they could do to show their creativity, it's just that the creativity came out in the form of a quilt rather than in the form of a novel."[11]

In Walker's opinion, quilting is a rather more possible way for black women to show their creativity. Quilt making, is a group sewing activity among black women, which originates from Africa. Indeed, by quilt making, the black women establish sisterhood between each other. The quilts transfer love and understanding among black women. In addition, to some extent, the history of these quilts is a history of the family. The narrator says:

In both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell's Paisley shirts, and one teeny faded blue piece, about the piece of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra's uniform that he wore in the Civil War.[12]

These quilts, just as Walker has said, not only stand for its culture, but also are an indispensable part of their culture. The manner in which the quilts are treated shows Walker's view of how tradition should be treated. Dee treats the quilts for their financial and aesthetic value. "But they're priceless!" she exclaims, when she learns that her mother has already promised them to Maggie. Dee argues that Maggie is "backward enough to put them to everyday use." Indeed, this is how Maggie views the quilts. She cherishes them for what they mean to her as living people. This becomes clear when she says, "I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts," suggesting that her connection with the quilts is spiritual and emotional rather than financial and aesthetic. She also knows that the quilts are an active process, kept alive through continuous renewal. As Walker points out, "Maggie knows how to quilt." The two sisters' values concerning the quilts represent the two different ways to their traditional culture appreciation in their society. Heritage can be valued for financial and aesthetic reasons, or it can be valued for personal and emotional reasons. When the mother snatches

the quilts from Dee and gives them to Maggie, Walker is saying that the second value is the correct one. Heritage, in order to be kept alive, must be put to "Everyday Use". Alice Walker is using the quilts, and the fate of those quilts, to point out that heritage can only have meaning when it remains connected to its culture. The story itself is a good example: Walker didn't write it to be enjoyed under a glass vase, judged aesthetically, and sold to the highest bidder; instead, she put it to be questioned, to be explored, to be discussed, in another word, to be put to "Everyday Use." Unexaggeratedly, the preservation of quilts is retaining their family history. Quilt making is not only a way to release their affections but also a means to express their spiritual world. From quilts, we learn the black women's way of living and their marriage, their family and their social relationship.

Alice Walker bonds the black women with the black culture together which aims to show the black women's role in inheriting and creating black culture. On one hand, the black women express their affections, dig their creative potential and explore their spiritual world. In this way, they begin to learn themselves and understand their culture. On the other hand, by learning themselves and their culture, the black women have developed their traditional culture instead of betrayal. Thus, the mother gives the quilts to Maggie who really understands its significance while refuses Dee who betrays their heritage.

IV. CONCLUSION

Over past several centuries, racial segregation and discrimination are always hot issue in American society. Ruled by the white, the black suffered oppression and discrimination both politically and economically. Born in a poverty black family, Walker witnessed the misery of black people, especially black women, who are victimized by triple oppressions. Many of who have lived the most miserable life at the bottom of American society for long. Black woman suffered from inhumane slavery, plunder and oppression. During 1960s to 1970s, Women's Liberation Movement spreads vigorously. Influenced by these social movements, Walker grasps this historical feature and social reality thorough careful observations and considerations. Indeed, Walker's writing is black women centered. Barbara Smith in *Ms*, praises Walker's stories that Walker "sets out consciously to explore with honesty the textures and terror of black women's lives". In *Everyday Use*, the three women characters have their own features and their ways of living; by employing the metaphor "quilts", Walker establishes the connection between them and black culture. Walker is trying to praise them highly for their enthusiasm to cherish and inherit black tradition culture. At the

same time, as a black woman writer, with strong national and social responsibility, she devotes herself to exposing the living condition of black women and shows great interest in black women's spirituality. She makes her great efforts to explore the black women's spiritual world and her identification with black tradition culture.

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