

“You just don’t understand.”-A Postcolonial Reading of *Everyday Use*

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Abstract— This paper presents a postcolonial reading of Alice Walker’s *Everyday Use*, a new perspective on this story. The visitors is metaphorically regarded as new “colonizer”, the Other against Mama and Maggie who have finally defended their stance and truly sustained the African culture.

Keywords— *Everyday Use; the Other; African culture.*

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to Alice Walker

Alice Walker(1944–) is an African-American novelist and poet. She brings her travel experience in Africa and memories of the American civil-rights movement to an examination of the experience of African Americans, mainly in the South, and of Africans. A self-claimed womanist, she has maintained a strong focus on feminist issues within African-American culture. Walker won worldwide recognition with her novel *The Color Purple* (1982, Pulitzer Prize; film, 1985), a dark but sometimes joyous saga of a poor black Southern woman's painful journey toward self-realization. Among her other novels are *Meridian* (1976) on the basis of her experiences. Her short-story collections include, *In love and Trouble: Stories of Black Woman*(1973), and the partially autobiographical *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart* (2000). She has also written poetry, such as *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth* (2003). Many of her essays are collected in *Living by the Word* (1988) and *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* (1997). Walker’s work deals with the strengths and sensibilities of women

of color in a society pervaded by sexism and racial oppression.

1.2 Literature Review

The studies of Walker’s *Everyday Use* are mainly divided into two groups: one group criticizing Dee; the other, on the contrary, supporting Dee. Those who criticize Dee are at the present time takes on the larger portion.

Dee is thought to be prejudicial and superficial. Mama seems more sympathetic than her daughter but her daughter is “looking down on her mother’s simplicity and the simplicity of her heritage”.¹ Bauser also mentions the daughter, Dee, has not experienced self-awareness, and the mother truly understands and promotes the continuation of their “heritage”. Dee actually has turned into a Southerner who wants to do whatever pleases her, condescending over all that is before her. Dee suffers embarrassment along the development of the plot. Critics like Tuten states that Dee’s oppressive voice is mute, for Mama has narrated her out of the story altogether.²

The quilts represent links with Mama and her mother’s generations and to a larger extent the African American culture. These quilts are made of scraps of dresses of the grandmothers’ as well as a piece of the uniform worn by the great-grand-father who served in the Union Army in the War between the States. Cowart says the situation of Dee(Wangero) is analogous to a visitor of a minority

¹Bauser, M. Alice Walker: Another southern writer[J].*Studies in Short Fiction*, 1992(2):143-152.

²Tuten, N. Alice Walker’s *Everyday Use*[J].*Explicator*, 1993(2):125-128.

writer who attempts to become an African only succeeding in becoming a phony. Prior to the quilts conflicts with her mother, Dee's name, clothes, hairstyle, sunglasses, patronizing voice and her companion are all pavements to the quilts conflicts, which adds up to the ignorance of the authentic heritage.³ Sarnowski points out that the quilt reveals the interconnection with heritage which Dee has not shown but her mother has fostered.⁴ Martin also thinks the quilts link sisterhood, empowerment, bonding with nature and history.⁵ Language is important in the story. Dee has changed her name into Wangero after her mother has called her. These important names Dee bases her new-found identity on resemble Kikuyu names, but at least two of them are wrongly spelt. Wangero is not a Kikuyu name, but Wanjiru is. It is one of the other original nine clan names of the Kikuyus.⁶ Dee is not familiar to but still tries to use those names showing her ignorance of the real heritage and her fantasy of being a real African American. Whitsitt also discusses the quilting image. The value of the quilt in the Afro-American experience is prevailed at large by Walker.⁷ Language is so important to the identification of one's own that the refusal to use the original one also means being influenced by the colonist culture.

Seldom mentioned is the animal image. Grusser notes that the value in Maggie and Mama has been possible when looked beneath the surface of things. Maggie's memory is associated with that of an elephant; Dee's voice sounded

as "sweet as a bird", hair "like the wool on a sheep and her pigtails compared to "small lizards disappearing behind her ears,"; Mama is connected to cow, having a liking for milking cows until "hooked in the side." Dee will make such mistakes like her mother hooked in the side.⁸ Those images are helpful for making the characters suitable to a certain image and symbolic of colonist process.

Household items like butter churn, bench, quilts are regarded as decorations in city by Dee. For her, the value is just a matter of fashion to match her furnishings, a waste of the real use value by nature. Mullins thinks these items are just mementos of Dee's false heritage.⁹

Some critics present different views. Whitsitt points out neither is Dee rejected nor does Magigie plan to use the quilts on her bed. There exists a doubleness in play and putting the quilts in Maggie's lap, which is not to bring them back home to be used, even if they could be used that way.. Dee provokes the question of value, of economy, of representation.[7] Faith Pullin notes with regard to the quilts, "the mother is ... the true African here, since the concept of art for art's sake is foreign to Africa--all objects are for use. Dee has.., taken over a very Western attitude towards art and its material value".[7] Though mocked by Walker, Dee's aspiration to project herself as sensitive artist of the African American experience is not to blame.

Farrell mentions that the story is narrated by Mama and the perceptions are filtered through her mind and her views of her two daughters are not to accepted uncritically. Mama waits for Dee like waiting for the advent of a goddess than her returning daughter. Mama has displaced her own fears onto Maggie and she associates her fear with Johnny Carson's television fantasy.¹⁰

³ Cowart, D. Heritage and Deracination in Walker's Everyday Use[J].Short Story Criticism, 1996(2):171-184.

⁴ Sarnowski, J. Destroying to Save: Idealism and Pragmatism in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use".[J].Papers on Language & Literature, 2012(3):269-286.

⁵ Martin, J. The Quilt Threads together Sisterhood, Empowerment and Nautre in Alice Walker's The Color Purple and "Everyday Use".[J]. Journal of Intercultural Disciplines, 2014(14):27-44.

⁶ Hoel, H. Personal Names and Heritage: Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'[J]. American Studies in Scandinavia, 1999(1):34-42.

⁷ Whitsitt, S. IN Spite of It All: A Reading of Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"[J]. African American Review, 2000(3):443-459.

⁸ Grusser, J. Walker's EVERYDAY USE[J]. Explicator, 2003(2):183-185.

⁹ Mullins, M. Antagonized by the text, or, it takes two to read Alice Walker's "Everyday Use".[J]. The Comparatist, 2013(37):37-53.

¹⁰ Farrell, S. Fight vs. Fight: A Re-Evaluation of Dee in

However, few mentioned the conflicts are results of an ontological colonist society in those studies. The black culture has influenced Dee, who could be seen as the new colonizer toward Mama and Maggie, the colonized, in the society. Dee said to her mama, "You don't understand." Does Dee herself understand what this means? A postcolonial reading is in need of understanding the story.

1.3 Theoretical Framework of Postcolonism

Postcolonialism is frequently used by critics, teachers and writers, covering a large range of issues(p3).¹¹ Postcolonialism is continuation of decolonization, carried on in the Western academy, often termed as Postcolonial Studies¹². Frantz Fanon, whose personal experience as a black intellectual in a whitened world, especially the disorientation he had felt since his first encounter with racism, "decisively marks his psychological theories" about colony. Fanon's chief contribution is his delineation of the colonial subject as both "colonized" and "subject," some "Other" who is unable to assume the necessary role as self. He argues that racism generates harmful psychological constructs that both blind the black to his subjection to a universalized white norm and alienate his consciousness. "A related concept is identity, or "how we define who we are." Literally identity means "same as," but Fanon tells that this identity, created in the past, sustained to the present and remade in the future, is "an ideological construct designed to uphold and to consolidate imperialist definitions of selfhood." Hybridity is deployed in the mestizo culture. Postcolonial studies has also made extensive use of Foucault's ideas. Empire is built upon the imperial discourse. "Discourse" is a "set" of rules which determines the sorts of statements that can

be made, "a system that defines the possibilities for knowledge," or the criteria for truth. The determination is "power," which produces classifications of knowledge and defines our understanding. Though power is not always prohibitive, it is productive as well. Catching a criminal is power, but producing the notion of "the criminal" is power in the first place.¹³

The acknowledgment and reappearance of women's experience is on the rise after being hidden from the histories of colonial societies. Many of the fixed representations of non-western women have been powerfully rejected in a host of contemporary writings, most of which in their different ways refute imaginings deeply rooted in Western narrations and their subsequent over-simplistic depictions. Whatever the irony contained in the fact that very many post-colonial writers choose both to write in English, the language of their former colonizers, and in the literary forms, there is no doubt that the new literatures in English constitute a body of exciting and dynamic texts capable of forcing a reassessment of the traditional canon and of providing a vigorous alternative to what are often regarded as rather defensive and introspective English texts.¹⁴

II. THE METAPHORIC INVASION OF DEE'S VISIT

2.1 Language and Cultural identification as Tools of Invasion

The story has intricately compared Dee's visit to an invasion. The visit of Dee and her companion is metaphorically symbolic of those who are representative of the colonizer. At the beginning of the story, Walker has presented before readers a picture of waiting--Mama is waiting for her daughter home. She and Maggie have

Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use.'[J].Studies in Short Fiction, 1998(2):179-186.

¹¹McLeod, J. Beginning Postcolonialism[M].Manchester:Manchester University Press,2000.

¹²朱刚.二十世纪本文文艺批评理论[Z].上海:上海外语教育出版社,2001.

¹³朱刚.二十世纪本文文艺批评理论[Z].上海:上海外语教育出版社,2001.

¹⁴Drabble,M. The Oxford Companion to English Literature[M].Beijing:Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press,2005.

cleaned the yard, which is so clean like a floor with fine sand around the edges. The description of the clean yard is to show Mama and Maggie's enormous attention to Dee, to the extent that nothing should be uncomfortable. "I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon." (*Everyday Use*, p.133) They have prepared for the arrival of Dee for a long time with great effort, which is quite formal like preparing for the advent of a distinguished guest instead of a family member. The preparation for the formal reception started one day earlier in the afternoon, which proves something eccentric at first. Usually the reunion of family members tends to be joyous and happy, but the scene presents a sense of solemnity, as if they were waiting for someone who could decide their lives.

When Dee finally arrives, Mama could not see them clearly. This means the overwhelming bearing from Dee, carrying with her a sense of invasion that has taken away all the defenses from Mama. Dee is well-educated and the education she gets has shaped her identification, no longer the one that is closer to Mama and Maggrie. In the southern plantation, she feels that the colonist economy, politics and culture are more attractive. She wants to shake off all her traits so as to be the same as a white person. Her mind is whitewashed that she speaks the colonizer's language, thinks in the colonizer's way and sees familiar things as if they were new to her. She struggles to rank in the white circle and she behaves like she has managed to do so. In the eyes of Mama, she is not someone familiar with but an alienated *Other*, invading their peaceful life.

The way she speaks is changed by education and what she has been through. The social movement, Black Power Movement, is in its heyday when large amounts of African Americans are seeking roots in Africa. The movement according to Hoel is misleading in that slaves were brought from West Africa but those in favor of the movement were not learning west African language.

When greeting Mama, Dee says "Wa-su-zo-Tean-o!" This is a Luganda phrase showing how the Buganda people of Uganda say "Good morning", originally used in east Africa according to Hoel¹⁵. Dee's mixture of east African phrases has nothing to do with seeking roots in Africa but just with fashion. The more she shows to her mama, the less she could get from her. When asked why she has changed her name, she expressed a desire to name herself as she pleases. This name, however, has nothing related to her roots, proved by Hoel that "Wangero is not a Kikuyu name".¹⁶ When names are no longer the way they should be, the spirit of a Black is lost. Because "names are extremely important in African and African American culture as a means of indicating a person's spirit."¹⁷ After changing the name, there is almost nothing familiar left for Dee. When she looks at everything around the house, she feels so delighted, the dasher, the bench, the churn and finally the quilts, which has ultimately shown her ignorance and the white-minded view of how daily item should be used--decoration as fashion, just as a European's "Scramble for Africa." (p.158)¹⁸

Dee thus has shown to Mama her visit as discovery of inspirations, as superiority using language they are not familiar with, as owners of all the daily-use items, as representative of neo-colonizers bringing with her newly-found "advanced culture."

2.2 Dee's Metaphoric Leaving--the Defeat of Colonizer

Dee's invasion goes on smoothly, the arrival, the demand to take photos, the introduction to her new name, the meal. Then she turns on the small items to such extent that she could not stop appreciating them with an aesthetic

¹⁵Hoel, H. Personal Names and Heritage: Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use' [J]. *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 1999(1):34-42.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G. And Tiffin, H. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures* [M]. London: Routledge, 1989.

standard. Those items are now priceless for her though she used to look down upon them.

When Dee loses interest in the kitchen articles, she finds out two quilts and decides to take them away and hang them as decorations in city. The conflicts start breaking here, as Mama is reserving those two quilts for Maggie who finally shows her feelings towards the quilts deprived of her. Tensions are startled for the bottom line Dee has touched upon. Dee is like an invader taking whatever she likes without permission from Mama and Maggie, but she does not like those quilts before her arrival.

In Mama's narration, Dee used to hate her house, the way Mama and Dee lives, things that related to their traditions, and the poor condition of her family. When the house was burned down, Dee just stood there and watched the house falling down. She probably felt more than excited as the old and shattered house would never be a shame on her, symbolic of all ugliness and poverty. With the falling of the house, she became free from a sign of her awkwardness even when her friends if any came to the house. There is no sense of being nostalgic of her house to say nothing of her past. After her being admitted by a college, she turned down her mother's offering her a quilt she wants and holds tightly now. She just felt they were old-fashioned and out of style. If Mama brings up the refusal, she would probably mention something about fashion trend or something that is out of Mama's imagination and recognition.

All those familiar items now become apple of her eyes, enough to prove her greed and irrational characters. Dee the invader takes all those everyday uses that she used to detest. Dee understands well what the white people like and tries to follow suit. Once she gets what she likes she will likely show off to the city dwellers what fine things she has to win fame or fortune. Dee's vanity is the same as the colonizer who wants to discover themselves by finding the African culture. Hanging the quilts is the only

thing Dee could do with the quilts that Mama could not understand. Now that Maggie has given up on the quilts, Mama feels something hit her on top of her head that she decides to restore what is not ruined by Dee. She snatches the quilts out of Dee's hands and dumps them on Maggie's lap.

"Take one or two of the others," I said to Dee,

But she turned without a word and went out to Hakim-a-Barber.

You just don't understand," she said, as Maggie and I came out to the car(p.144).¹⁹

The tension is now reaching its peak and Dee's leaving is inevitable, metaphorically meaning the defeat of the colonizer, whose intention and ideology are crashed by Mama and the innocent Maggie.

III. MAMA'S REJECTION TO COLONIZATION AS REDEMPTION

Mama is not only waiting for her daughter, but waiting for redemption that her well-educated daughter lifts Maggie and her out of the present or future status. Mama has fantasy that is unknown to neither Maggie nor Dee. She has deemed her daughter as someone who is capable enough to do her good. She carefully prepares for her arrival, cleaning the yard, waiting anxiously for her daughter.

Fantasy means lack. Mama has always been in need of Dee's closeness even dreaming of their reunion on TV programs. On this program, Dee acts like a dutiful and obedient girl, praised by the host, and then Dee might pin an orchid on her dress. The fantasy only proves one thing that Dee has never been such a daughter. No matter how brilliant she is and she will be, Dee is always self-centered and overbearing that her mama could never get the closeness or kinship that she deserves.

Fantasy has drawn Mama into an imaginative status, but

¹⁹张汉熙. 高级英语第1册(第三版)[Z].北京: 外语教学与研究出版社,2011.

reality rules out the fantasy. She is by no means able to fulfill her dream in that her appearance and weight are what makes her daughter feel shameful. Her daughter could not bear her mama's roughness and never shows a slightest mercy towards her mama, careless of her mama's health, mama's lives and mama's thought. All that she wants is to take and go away with her high-flying style.

Mama knows what she fantasizes is a mistake. *"But that is a mistake. I know even before I wake up(p.135)."*²⁰

Even she has realized the impossibility of winning her daughter's kindness, she still sticks to the fascinating dream in case of being fulfilled.

Dee used to be a high-brow and forcing girl, reading to her Mama and Maggie without asking them to understand, a girl of no mercy and compromise in sight. *"She used to read to us without pity, forcing words, lies, ...She washed us in a river of make-believe, burned us with a lot of knowledge we didn't necessarily need to know.(P.136)"*²¹

Mama knows clearly her life will be dull and have nothing to do after Maggie's marriage. Perhaps she sits at the yard, sings the church songs and nothing else. Mama has a strong sense of being lost in future. Her only consolation at present is Maggie, but what else? Nothing. Her spiritual life is so poor and unworthy of being touched upon. Probably the arrival of Dee may bring her some hope of living a different life. *"She will marry John Thomas(who has mossy teeth in an earnest face) and then I'll be free to sit here and I guess just sing church songs to myself(p.136)."*²² Readers may neglect this part, but the phrases are real reflection of Mama. She is afraid of living like this and fears being useless after Maggie's marrying John. How she hopes to find her own redemption! Mama's singing is not getting rid of boredom but a tribute to the loss of the traditional custom in the slanting sun that has lasted ever since.

Though Mama embraces the fact, she still lingers in the

wish of getting a new start when Dee arrives. The fantasy is interrupted by the arrival of Dee. Seeing Dee's approach, Mama feels her redemption at hand. The arrival is metaphorically compared to the strong sun, signaling hope and unknown future. *"It is hard to see them clearly through the strong sun(p.137)."*²³ The approaching is sounded like unreality. The position Dee approaches should be in line with the sunlight or set from a relatively higher place, so that Mama has to look up to the sun. Mama has felt the strong atmosphere Dee brings with her but ironically the arrival has turned out to colonize them. The hope of gaining redemption is crashed when Dee drives away.

IV. MAGGIE'S REFUSAL TO THE AGGRESSIVE BEARING

Maggie's reaction to Dee's arrival has always been negative. Deep in her heart, she is afraid of her sister. Mama knows that, and Dee is aware of it for she is the one who causes all the fear. Dee's education background, determination and appearance outweigh that of Maggie, even after the meal Maggie cleans the kitchen. She is paled by Dee in all ways, unable to look at Dee to such a degree. Dee stands for advanced civilization with all the advantages Maggie is in need of. The aesthetic taste has been developed since she was young. However, the taste is not a taste of their own. The taste is influenced by the white society, even her seeking for African roots is out of her plan, just acting on a whim.

Maggie has said a few words in the story, but for the most part she remains behind her mama and keeps silent. She refuses to face her sister directly in that she could remain undisturbed. Her first words are uttered before Dee arrives. She has put on perhaps the most beautiful dress she has and musters up her courage to ask Mama whether she looks good. It is sure that she thinks she looks good in that skirt, but she is afraid of being mocked by Dee.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

Mama is sure to assure her being nice and proper in the dress so to protect her. As a matter of fact, Maggie is learning from Dee about how to make herself nice. It is unreasonable to judge that Maggie does not want to be nice, otherwise she would have not asked Mama to look at her skirt. In this sense, Maggie wants to get in touch with a more civilized community represented by her sister. The problem is that Dee has expressed the idea of a more civilized circle in a wrong way so that Maggie has not been able to comprehend and accept. All that Maggie sees from her sister is to take and turn down the term “no”. Her sister’s aggressive attitude has frightened her since always, not to mention the invasive arrival.

Her male companion is another representative of a more advanced society in which the hairstyle, the greeting way and the words are scaring Maggie. It is likely that she has never encountered someone like Asalamalakim. When Asalamalakim is going to hug Maggie, he has frightened Maggie so that she retreats back and escapes from the hug. This greeting is followed by a second try when Asalamalakim shakes hands with Maggie in a fancy way. This second greeting has turned on Maggie’s defense system once more. She feels being insulted and tries to pull her hand back. How could she understand the way Dee’s companion wants to greet and show kindness to her. The civilized way seems to have no effect on Maggie who wants to get into their circle but fails to agree with their cultural identification.

Zhang points out that a nation's memory is crucial to its members. The breaking of the memory chain means the loss of the whole nation's self-consciousness. The past "self" connected to the present "self" makes a whole self.²⁴ The quilt conflict has made Maggie a whole self in that she could carry on the national heritage by quilting, but Dee has fallen into the supremacy of the white-centered thinking mode. The memory of her people

is totally nonsense to her, a sign of breakage of her own national heritage but as the national ineffectual, her point of view has no connection with the members. She could not but serve as the tool of the oppressive force and becomes new proxy for the white society. Thus, Maggie’s refusal to the advanced civilization is clear and resolute in the story.

V. CONCLUSION

The paper has employed the postcolonial perspective to read the characters in *Everyday Use*. Thus, the relationship between Mama, Dee, and Maggie is not simply family relation, but new forms of oppression upon the African family. However, the invasive visit comes to an end with the defeat of Dee, the metaphoric invader. Mama waits for Dee as she dreams of redemption Dee could bring up after Maggie’s marriage. Maggie does not refuse the advanced civilization but the way Dee and Asalamalakim have acted has made her retreat, thinking the way she is used to being better. In this sense, Maggie has stubbornly insisted that her way of life is the correct one for sustaining the national culture. Walker seems to implicitly criticize Maggie for not following the trend of the times. African Americans should have made effort to follow the trend of times and maintain their cultural heritage. The future of Maggie is likely to be repeating that of her predecessors. Though Dee and Asalamalakim as proxy for the neo-colonizer, they have right to comment on Mama and Maggie, “You don’t understand.” Dee does not understand neither. Hybridity, a mixture of the colonist and the colonized culture should be the future for both Mama and Maggie as well as Dee and Asalamalakim.

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²⁴张德明.多元文化杂交时代的民族文化记忆问题[J].外国文学评论,2001(3):11-16.

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