Symbolism of “Quilts” in Alice Walker’s Fictions

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ABSTRACT

This article uses Alice Walker’s *Everyday Use* and *The Color Purple* to demonstrate how African-American women have redefined religion to empower themselves beyond their double minority status in America. With Alice Walker's two representative fictions as examples, the article analyzes the "quilts", this ordinary household, the symbolic significance of which in her works. On one hand, "quilt" acts as the carrier of black family history and tradition; on the other hand, "quilt" contains black women's enormous creativity, their mutual unity, and the fate of the strength and courage. In Walker’s opinion, during the process of reassembling the old cloth to sew a beautiful quilt; black women can vent anger, gain confidence and survival.

KEYWORDS

Quilt, history, tradition, creativity, unity.

INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker's works are known for their portrayals of the African American woman’s life. She depicts vividly the sexism, racism and poverty that make that life often a struggle. But she also portrays as part of that life, the strengths of family, community, self-worth, and spirituality. Many of her novels depict women in other periods of history than our own. Just as with non-fiction women’s history writing, such portrayals give a sense of the differences and similarities of women’s condition today and in that other time. Alice Walker continues not only to write, but to be active in environmental, feminist causes, and issues of economic justice.

TOOLS OF HISTORY & TRADITION

In comparison to Mama, Dee and Maggie have had much more comfortable lives. Dee, however, has made a point of making sure her life was not the country life. After she left the area she told Mama she would always visit, “but would never bring friends”. She never really fit in with her family or the culture in her country town. She is the only one of the three women with college education. She moved away to the city to go to school and had not looked back. Dee had joined the movement of black people to go back to their African roots, which for her, includes adopting a more African name, “Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo.” Dee is a small-town girl, who has grown up and become an urban queen.

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The quilts that Dee covets link her generation to prior generations, and thus they represent the larger African American past. The quilts contain scraps of dresses worn by the grandmother and even the great-grandmother, as well as a piece of the uniform worn by the great-grandfather who served in the Union Army in the Civil War. The visitor rightly recognizes the quilts as part of a fragile heritage, but she fails to see the extent to which she herself has traduced that heritage. Chief among the little gestures that collectively add up to a profound betrayal is the changing of her name. Mrs. Johnson thinks she could trace the name Dee in their family "back beyond the Civil War", but Dee persists in seeing the name as little more than the galling reminder that African Americans have been denied authentic names. "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me". She now styles and dresses herself according to the dictates of a faddish Africanism and thereby demonstrates a cultural Catch-22: an American who attempts to become an African succeeds only in, becoming a phony. In her name, her clothes, her hair, her sunglasses, her patronizing speech, and her Black Muslim companion, Dee proclaims a deplorable degree of alienation from her rural origins and family. The story's irony is not subtle: the visitor who reproaches others for an ignorance of their own heritage (a word that probably does not figure in the lexicon of either her mother or her sister) is herself almost completely, disconnected from a nurturing tradition.

Maggie, on the contrary, has accepted the country life, but has had a more difficult youth than Dee. It seems that she was never very confident, probably as a result of living in Dee’s shadow, but her lack of confidence worsened after a fire burned her badly. Mama describes Maggie as walking with her “chin on chest, eyes on ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire”. Although the fire has had a major impact on Maggie’s body and personality, she still lives a fairly content and practical life, sharing the daily chores with Mama. Some day in the near future she will marry John Thomas, a local man who seems to be a practical choice. She can read, although not as well as her sister. Mama says she “stumbles along good-naturedly, but can’t see well”. It seems that she is not ugly, but not very attractive either. She is a simple girl, who lives a passive life.

But finally, Maggie becomes the successor of the quilts, this is Maggie’s victory, this is also the Black’s victory. So, I conclude as those who don’t respect the culture of the African American have no rights to get their tradition and culture. The blacks should cherish their culture and pass it from generation to generation without stopping.

Mama can do rough work, such as killing and cleaning a hog as mercilessly as a man, with her rough, man-working hands. She is a very spiritual woman; she mentions that she sings church songs, and describes one of her actions in comparison to how she might act in church when the spirit of God touches her. Mama has a deep, rich personality, and although she has not lived an easy life, the rough life she has lived has turned her into a strong woman. As much as their life histories are different, so are the three women’s perspectives on life. Mama is happy with the life she has been given. Although she has not accomplished much materialistically, she is proud of who she is. She is proud that she can do a man’s work as well as any man. On the night in which the story takes place, Mama and Maggie sit on the porch, just enjoying, until it was time to go in the house and go to bed. It is easy to imagine that this is how the two spend many evenings, and Mama says that after Maggie marries she will be free to sit here and just sing church songs to herself. Her life is not very exciting, but she is happy.
Perhaps the biggest difference among the three women is their ideas of history. Mama sees history in the practical things, and as a string of memories. The quilts are a perfect example of this, as Mama hopes that Maggie will put the quilts to everyday use. Mama finds history in her memories of people and places. When Dee admires the benches, Mama reminisces that the benches were made by Dee’s daddy, when they couldn’t afford to buy chairs. To Mama, the fondness of history in this memory is her affection for her husband. When Dee admires the dasher from the churn, Mama notes that it was made “from a tree that grew in the yard where Big Dee and Stash had lived. As she sees the dasher, it is as if she is picturing the house and that tree in the backyard. For Mama, these memories are history.

SOURCE OF STRENGTH AND COURAGE

Celie is fourteen years old at the onset of her journey to selfhood reflecting a later beginning of disenchantment that is characteristic of African American female protagonists. Celie’s disenchantment is set in motion by a warning from the man whom she believes is her father: “You’d better never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy”. This admonition restricts Celie to silence about the fact that Pa has continually raped her. Her external reality is immediately set in opposition to her inner self or central consciousness.

Sewing is as integral to Celie’s disenchantment as writing. Not only does it serve as a catalyst for Celie’s economic and emotional independence, but it is —as us writing—a vehicle for Celie’s self-expression and for her creation of an alternate socio-cultural context within which to exist. Celie decides that she will sew unisex pants, a decision which directly challenges gender-role stereotypes and furthers Walker’s womanist ideology and Celie’s disenchantment. Also, in that Celie creates pants for the people in her life that reflect their unique personalities and life choices, she re-humanizes the community, demonstrating personal insight and artistic creativity that is self-affirming.

Finally, once the female hero has claimed the “treasure” of a whole and authentic self, she is ready to return “home”, either her ancestral home or the place from which her disenchantment began. With the death of Pa, who Celie now knows is her stepfather, Celie returns to her childhood home and the place of the onset of her disenchantment and discovers that she and Nettie are the rightful heirs of the land and of the house, built by Pa, that now replaces their childhood home. Through these circumstances, Walker provides her hero a site for the creation of a new community, which is the most important aspect and the ultimate measure of the female hero’s successful quest. Having successfully overcome all of the trials in her journey to heroic selfhood, Celie’s reward is a community of equals which includes Shug, Sofia, and Albert that values and supports her heroic qualities: autonomy, persistence, courage, intelligence and achievement.

Shug is the first person that Celie tells about Alphonso’s rapes and therefore enables Celie’s first active refusal of her stepfather’s command. The sexual contact between the two that follows from Celie’s revelation of her past trauma is figured as coextensive with both emotional intimacy and resistance to masculine’s oppression.

Celie’s initial infatuation and eventual love for Shug enables Shug to win her trust and direct her to a broader understanding of God. Williams suggests that the
awakening of Celie’s sexuality begins the process of replacing God with the sister as addressee. Notice how Celie associates her sexual experience to a religious experience: “I wash her body, it feels like I’m praying”. However, as Williams notes, Celie’s sexual experience with Shug serves a greater purpose than prayer does. There is no response to her prayers; however, she gains a friend, lover, protector, and confidant from her sexual partner, Shug. Shug further challenges Celie’s concept of God when she tells Celie that “God ain’t a he or a she, bt a It”. The ability to accept and internalize this understanding of God is crucial to Celie’s metamorphosis.

Because Shug possesses both the open sensuality of Mrs. Jewkes and the nurturing capacity of Mrs. Jervis, she is able to mother Celie as well as to be mothered by her. Shug protects Celie from Albert by threatening to leave if he continues to beat her. Shug reunites Celie with her sister Nettie by discovering the letters Albert has been hiding: and Shug prevents Celie from murdering Albert by taking a weapon from her hand and placing a needle in it instead. When Celie realizes that Albert has hidden her sister’s letters in order to make her believe that Nettie is dead, Celie finds herself standing hind his chair with his razor open. Shug literally and figuratively takes the razor out of Celie’s hand. She helps celie to realize that revenge is the ultimate capitulation to patriarchal codes of behavior, giving in to her violent impulses will only chain Celie to the very social order from which she is struggling to free herself. Through Shug’s guidance, Celie replaces the razor with a sewing needle, diverting her destructive impulses into creative ones.

CONCLUSION

In Everyday Use, Alice Walker argues that an African-American is both African and American, and to deny the American side of one's heritage is disrespectful of one's ancestors and, consequently, harmful to one's self. She uses the principal characters of Mama, Dee, and Maggie to clarify this theme. Mama narrates the story. Mama describes herself as a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. However, her lack of education and refinement does not prevent her from having an inherent understanding of heritage based on her love and respect for those who came before her. This is clear from her ability to associate pieces of fabric in two quilts with the people whose clothes they had been cut from. They are bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell's shirts. The quilts have a special meaning to Mama. When she moves up to touch the quilts, she is reaching out to touch the people whom the quilts represent. Walker uses quilts to symbolize a bond between women. The bond is between women of several generations.

REFERENCES