



Reconstruction of Cultural Identity of American Black Women in “Everyday Use”

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Abstract: This paper intends to argue that in the white-dominant society, reconstructing cultural identity of Afro-American women should give priority to courageous response to traumatic history and proper inheritance of black traditional culture. Based on textual analysis, the former part concentrates on the two daughters. It fully examines the exploration and reconstruction of cultural identity of Dee and Maggie by detailing differences in characteristics of the two sisters. After explicating the symbolic significance of “quilts”, it presents and elaborates the comparison of their distinctive attitudes towards “quilts”, which also stands for the different understanding of inheriting African traditional culture. Then, the latter part focuses on another core character — Mama. By analyzing her shifting attitude towards her daughters, this part evaluates and probes into symbolic significance of Mama’s awakening of consciousness in cultural identification and inheritance. It is concluded that combining social background and symbolic meaning of Mama and two daughters, this paper explores the attitude of author Alice Walker towards traumatic history, Black Power Movement and reconstruction of cultural identity of American black women. All in all, by digging out the connotative meaning of “Everyday Use”, this paper proposes that Afro-American women should reconstruct their cultural identity in a proper way in American society dominated by white-supremacist values.

Keywords: Reconstruction, Cultural identity, Traumatic history, American black women

1. INTRODUCTION

“One ever feels his two-ness — an American, a negro ; two souls , two thoughts, two reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder ” (Du Bois, 2007, p. 13). There is no denying that most Afro-American women belonging to post-colonial era are intertwined with “double consciousness” in their identity-seeking journey. Suffering from racial discrimination, gender and class oppression, they are both marginalized at the edge of the American mainstream culture and obscured to look for the way to regain African traditions.

The outburst of Black Power Movement triggered consciousness about inheriting from cultural traditions. Mama and daughters, whom Alice Walker (1973) portrays vividly in “ Everyday Use”, epitomize the social status of African American women at that time. It is worth noting that the flourishing of literary theories also provides scholars and critics with various dimensions to explore “Everyday Use”, like symbolism, trauma, feminism and so forth. However, the previous studies on the cultural identity and cultural inheritance embodied in the short story are far from satisfactory. Christian maintains that “Everyday Use” is in reference to slavery, the Black Power Movement, and sheds light upon the symbolic significance of “quilts” in inheriting African traditional culture (p. 493).

Nevertheless, she only touches upon the surface of the short story without any thorough analysis of the shifting cultural identities of the protagonists, let alone the enlightenment of their awakening and identification to Afro-American women in the contemporary society. In this regard, it provides the critics with much room in the in-depth investigation of shifting cultural identities and regaining of cultural traditions manifested in the main characters.

By elaborating their different attitudes in cultural identification and probing into symbolic significance of Mama’s awakening of consciousness, this paper intends to explicate that in the white-dominant society, reconstructing cultural identity of Afro-American women should give priority to courageous response to traumatic history and proper inheritance of black traditional culture.

2. EXPLORATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY OF DEE AND MAGGIE

“Everyday Use” begins with Mama and her daughter Maggie waiting at home in the deep rural South they had never thought to leave, for the returning home of elder daughter Dee, who cannot wait to keep herself aloof from her hometown. More often than not, black women are labeled passive, obedient and conventional in the literary works. Unlike most of traditional black women, overwhelming attractiveness and brightness is fully manifested in Dee’s portrayal with “lighter than Maggie, with nicer hair and fuller finger” (p. 48). Moreover, Dee has been an enthusiast of following fashion trends since childhood (Farrell, 1998, p. 179). As a self-centered girl to achieve whatever she desires to own with might and main, even in straitened circumstances, she makes over “[...] an old suit somebody gave her mother” to dress herself by changing it from her old suit (p. 49). Totally different from Mama, who cannot imagine “looking a strange white man in the eye” (p. 48), Dee “would always look anyone in the eye” boldly and fearlessly and it comes no surprise to find that “[h]esitation was no part of her nature” (p. 48). In a word, Dee would never lower her eyes under the gaze of the white and dares to show off her glamour anytime anywhere in the white-dominant society. Apart from her distinctive personality, more noteworthy is Dee’s willing but mistaken acceptance of African name, which is indicative of her superficial understanding about African traditional culture and cultural heritage. With Black Power Movement in the 1970s surging forward, African Americans were largely motivated to emphasize political and cultural demands to achieve self-determination for African descendants.

One method is to seek their root in African traditional culture, which evoked a number of activists to resume their lost black cultural traditions fanatically, even blindly. Apparently, fashion-pursuing Dee is also a representative from the root-seeking deluge. On her arrival home, she announces with pride that she has changed her name to a native African name “Wangero” (p. 50). Then she explains that changing her original name is conducive to the fulfillment of inheriting from their African traditions. More importantly, it is also the way to indicate disassociation from “the people who oppress [her]”— those white people (p. 50). But in fact, according to Helga Hoel, “Wangero and Kemanjo are misspellings of the Kikuyu names ‘Wanjiro’ and ‘Kamenjo’”, which serves as a proof for Dee’s blind impulse to change her name without thorough and scrupulous consideration (qtd. in White, 2002). More ironically, she even has no idea about that she was named after her aunt Dicie, grandmother Dee and even earlier ancestors. Suffice it to say that Dee seems turn a blind eye to her own family’s tradition passed down from generation to generation. The naming tradition is of great significance in African-American culture, not merely serving as a symbol of remembrance and deep emotions to family members, and also a carrier of cultural inheritance of the whole nation. That is what black people, especially African Americans who are away from their hometown in Africa, have never forgotten to grasp, preserve and inherit in essence. Nevertheless, when Mama seriously traces their

family naming tradition as far back as she could, Dee “[...] sent eye signals [...]” with her boyfriend and regards it as not worthy of serious consideration (p. 50). That is to say, she mistakes the superficial adoption of an African name for the most appropriate way to show cherishment and respect for their African traditional culture.

In addition, Dee merely attaches great importance to the accepting of African culture in speech, hair style and dressing style. Instead of saying “hello”, she greets her family with African language “Wa-su-zo-Tean-o”, which indeed sounds inappropriate and weird. To their surprise, she wears quite in an “African” way with “[a] dress down to the ground, in this hot weather [...] yellows and oranges enough to throw back the light of the sun [...] gold and hanging down to her shoulders” (p. 50). Moreover, Mama and Maggie also cannot understand her hair which “stands straight up like the wool on a sheep [...] like small lizards[.]” (p. 50). Maggie even could not help making a strange noise about Dee’s hairstyle. As Mama states, “I hear Maggie go ‘Uhhnnh’ again. It is her sister’s hair” (p. 50). It can be seen that Dee’s African speech, dressing and hair style are not appreciated by her family at all. Admittedly, Dee has actively participated in the pursuit of her root in traditional black culture and regained loads of lost African traditions in many aspects. However, her superficial understanding of cultural tradition has prevented her from reaching the core part of inheritance of African traditional culture. In a nutshell, her pursuit of the traditional black culture is more like an impulsive behavior triggered by conformity, which is far from fulfilling the tasks to rectify the distorted images of African traditional culture in the white-supremacist American society (Altobai, p. 9). And in her eyes, African traditional culture is treated as an outward fashion other than indispensable necessity which should be cherished from the bottom of heart.

Much less controversial than her attractive and bold sister Dee, Maggie is a typical of traditional Afro-American women. Mama recognizes that her little daughter knows clearly her own limitations and “she knows she is not bright. Like good looks and money, quickness passed her by” (p. 49). Walking “like a lame animal, perhaps a dog run over by some careless person rich enough [...]” (p. 48), Maggie is a thin and awkward girl, “chin on chest, eyes on the ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground” (p.48). That fire not only left irrecoverable scars to Maggie physically, but also existed as a ghostly nightmare to traumatize her mentally. Accustomed to be passive and oppressed, Maggie is content with simple life in her own closed world and even she feels nervous and uncomfortable about her sister’s visit, which could possibly mess up her former uneventful life.

Even though Maggie is obviously overshadowed by his sister nearly in any aspect, she still outweighs Dee with a grasp of an admirably thorough understanding about black culture traditions and inheritance. The attitudes of Maggie and Dee towards their traditional culture, seemingly similar, but are evidently different, especially in the inheritance of quilts. As Elaine Showalter points out, the quilt itself has drifted away from being specifically tied to woman’s culture: “[...] as the central metaphor of American cultural identity. [...] as a universal sign of American identity” (qtd. in Whitsitt, 2000). As a symbol of unity and wisdom of African-American women, quilts are undeniably appreciated and valued by the two sisters, which dramatically causes them to contend for one of the quilts. Maggie, habituated to the disadvantaged status throughout her life, expresses unwillingness to conflict with her sister for the quilts. For Maggie, it is her grasp of true meaningfulness of cultural inheritance that matters, not the quilt itself. She values and cherishes the family quilts for their sentiment, connoted emotions and practical usefulness. Moreover, Maggie has also learned how to quilt from her grandmother and aunt and then she regards the quilts as a reminder of her grandmother and aunt so that she says, “I can ‘member’ them without the quilts” (p. 55).

It is highlighted that Dee “claims” to value the family quilts (Coward, 1996, p. 175). Nevertheless, the value of quilts lies in appreciation as priceless artworks in her eyes. Before going to college, the quilts were worthless and old-fashioned to her. As an educated and cultivated college student, now she abruptly has seized an apperception of significance of quilts and changes her mind, urges to have the quilts for decoration in her room. Dee believes that she can appreciate the more materialistic value of the quilts than Maggie, who will “be backward enough to put them to everyday use” (p. 54). Ironically, the truth is that by meaningful cultural inheritance, one should stick to using as frequently as possible for fulfillment of its value other than treating it as an artwork just on display.

3. EXPLORATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY OF “MAMA”

Likewise, even though Mama is depicted as the unswerving protector of African traditional culture, she has still gone through a series of mental movements transiting from confusion to awakening in exploring the appropriate method of inheritance. Mama describes herself as “large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands” who “can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as a man” (p. 47). However, her lack of education and confined life does not much hinder her from having an inherent understanding of cultural heritage, which is revealed in her shifting attitude towards two daughters. At first, Mama dreams that she and her favored daughter Dee could step in some kind of Johnny Carson talk show and share with the audiences proudly that “what a fine girl ” she has (p. 48). And Dee would appear as who “is embracing me with tears” in her dreams (p. 48). Her impractical illusions imply that what she desires is to be respected by Dee and to get rid of otherness and to integrate into the White world. Apparently, Mama shows her partiality to Dee, who is recognized as her whole hope and honor. Mama, along with Maggie, attentively prepare for Dee’s visit to show as warmest welcome as they could. When Dee arrives, the mother even praises her that “[h]er feet were always neat-looking” (p.50). Much more knowledgeable and having rich experience in the colorful outside world, Dee is hold up as a flawless goddess and appreciated as a head-to-toe perfection in Mama’s mind.

In contrast, Maggie is treated indifferently as one of no great importance. Stated in tension spiritually to welcome her sister, she asks her mother timidly “[h]ow do I look ? ” (p. 48). On seeing her burn scars down arms and legs, Mama avoids answering her question directly and says, “ [c]ome out into the yard ” (p. 48). Facing her scarred daughter, Mama responds without due care and comfort. It is likely that she also flutters with fear in her heart with that fire and has no courage to look back on that painful and traumatic history.

Nevertheless, her attitude towards Dee and Maggie changes dramatically when it comes to the inheritance of quilt. Mama dissatisfies with Dee’s exaggerated dressing style and ignorance of family naming tradition. As Dee has quarreled with Maggie about the quilt and Maggie is resigned to give it in, Mama finally awakens to make it clear that Maggie is the one who fully grasps the significance of inheriting from cultural traditions based on her love and reverence for those who came before her, while Dee is just chasing after the fashion of regaining African traditions out of vanity. Delight in thorough awakening, Mama feels just like “the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout” (p. 55). To fully express her support to Maggie, she appears at the first time as the protector of her little daughter and “did something I never done before: hugged Maggie, [...] snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero’s hands and dumped them into Maggie’s lap” (p. 55).

4. CONCLUSION

Set in the 1970s, Mama and daughters in “Everyday Use” were portrayed as archetypal characters to present Walker’s views about Black Power Movement at that time. Responding with those activists who superficially understand cultural inheritance, Mama’s awakening of consciousness is a wake-up

call to appeal for truly incisive grasp of inheriting from cultural traditions. It is recommended that inheritance of traditions in cultural identification should be understanding and respect for traditional culture by heart, safeguarding and fulfillment of their practical usefulness to “everyday use” across generations. In the globalized age, there is no denying that Maggie’s confinement in a closed living environment has some demerits and is of no use in integrating the inheritance of cultural tradition with outside world. In this regard, Dee’s courage and enthusiasm could benefit those American black women in cultural inheritance and transmission of traditional culture to a wider range.

In addition, reconstruction of cultural identities of African-Americans cannot be separated from courageous response to the traumatic history. That fire which scarred Maggie left permanent traumatic pains. As Freud argues, “[...] the symptoms were, [...] like residues of emotional experiences, [...] psychic traumas. Their individual characters were linked to the traumatic scenes that had provoked them” (qtd. in Fanon, 1991). For more Afro-Americans, slavery and racism can be acknowledged as fire-like traumatic scenes to torment and scar them with collective traumatic memory left behind. Even though there is much more progress made to elevate social and political position of African-Americans, the pervading dark clouds hanging over equality and freedom do not vanish. There are still many American black women avoiding to face up to traumatic history just like what Mama did to scarred Maggie before. It is lesson learned from painful trauma that is worth remembering, not scars. Even though the dark past is filled with griefs and miseries, embracing it with bravery is undoubtedly the first and foremost step to settle into the new life.

It is inconclusive that what African-Americans should do to reconstruct their cultural identities in the contemporary era. The elimination of racial discrimination and self-realization of their cultural identification still waits more time and efforts to achieve. No matter how many difficulties and obstacles they will confront with, they should keep in mind to put cultural inheritance into “everyday use”, bravely respond with traumatic history, “go out” from closed environment and play an active role in transmission of traditional culture across the world. If adhering to it and making reasonable adaptations to meet requirements of the new age, one day they will certainly realize their goal in the identity-seeking journey.

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