

## Alice Walker's *Everyday Use*: Decoding Cultural Inheritance and Identity

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### Abstract

The complex notion of cultural heritage can be ascribed different connotations in the context of inheritance and identity. Cultural assets can be construed as valuable gifts handed down through generations which sustain as historic souvenirs of an ever-changing ethnic identity. This paper deliberates upon the intricacies of African-American cultural inheritance and identity in Alice Walker's *Everyday Use*.

Keywords: Alice Walker, *Everyday Use*, Cultural Inheritance, Identity

The complex phenomenon of cultural inheritance and identity concerns itself with the dialectics of conservation of cultural heritage and its evolutionary transmission for future generations. The dynamics of the evolutionary socio-cultural contexts within ethnic groups serve as a fundamental ground for cultural diversity and progression. The need to identify the collective cultural inheritance and identity is a challenge for ethnic communities, the misreading of which is inherently associated with possible negative outcomes.

In this context, Alice Walker's short story *Everyday Use* traces the integration and separation of the Black African roots among the African-Americans who witnessed a redefinition of their cultural heritage and identity during the Black Power movement. Walker

deliberates upon the nuances of cultural conflict and progression of cultural heritage among the Blacks in America through the story of domestic conflict among three black women. The conflict between the two sisters over a hand-made quilt becomes a symbol of the clash of new tenets of cultural inheritance and the age-old ethnic conventions.

The story revolves around two sisters Dee and Maggie who perceive cultural heritage quite differently and Mama, their mother whose attitude and preferences are open to interpretation. Dee who is the only member of her family to receive a formal education, returns home to visit her mother and younger sister Maggie. Her visit symbolically reveals the African-American struggle for identity and voices concerns over issues of cultural inheritance. As Dee progressively embraces the Other, the metaphor of her mother's house transforms towards becoming an artefact of her past, much in need of memorabilia and preservation.

Dee moves through the house and notices material articles from her past like the 'benches' which she wants to carry with her to act as 'unifiers' in her present. The dialects of the historic ethnicity and its absence in the transformed presence leads Dee towards craving for substitutes to gratify a cohesive and fulfilling cultural inheritance. However, it is apparent that she is truly far from valuing and appreciating the traditional culture which she hunts like a scavenger among the fleeting remains.

She desires to carry with her the family's meagre inheritance - a churn top, a dasher, and two quilts. She wants to use the articles as show-pieces to decorate her house: "I can use the churntop as a centrepiece for the alcove table' . . . 'and I'll think of something artistic to do with the dasher.'" (Walker, 26). It is apparent that her cultural inheritance is as obscure as her rationale of treating articles of 'every-day use' as aesthetic ornaments which serve as

reminders of her ethnic identity. The gratification which Dee seeks from these cultural assets becomes dubious and vague.

Dee's perception of cultural assets becomes clear in the context of Amartya Sen's views on cultural identity and inheritance:

Moreover, the idea of cultural identity is closely linked to an idea of social equity, since the value that enables cultural heritage to go beyond mere material significance, and be enjoyed as an inherited asset, is an opportunity for the well-being of a community as a whole (Sen, 1980).

In considering the importance of seeing cultural heritage as more than merely an accumulation of tangible assets it will be of interest here, as a way of taking us beyond utilitarianism. (Sen, 2006).

Dee had been uprooted from her native culture and eventually embraced the foreignness of her new, more modern dwelling place, where she acquired new cultural values. But her increasing adaptability and evolutionary transmigration also meant a distancing and probable loss of her native cultural legacy and thus necessitated a redefinition of her cultural identity. She thus grapples with the problem of identity while crossing the threshold of cultural transformation and tries to come to terms with the loss of her legacy.

She attempts to distance herself from her mother and sister whom she considers backward and inferior yet she wants to carry the utilitarian reminders of her legacy with a sense of accomplishment.

She even changes her name, as she “couldn’t bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress” her (Walker, 27). She thus changes her original name, the most striking cue of her African roots and adopts an American name. Her actual name had been borne by several of her female ancestors, since as long as the times beyond the Civil War. Further, it distances her from her own cultural roots and dissociates her from her family. It is evident that Dee wants to both escape and embrace her cultural inheritance and identity. It is apparent that she wants to escape the stigma of poverty and racial discrimination associated with her African heritage. She wants to click a picture of her mother and sister in front of their house. Thus, we find her thriving within a mesh of escape and attachment as she strives to redefine her cultural identity and explores her legacy.

Walker juxtaposes Dee’s perception of identity and cultural inheritance against that of her younger sister Maggie who has not received formal education unlike Dee, and can read in a limited capacity. Maggie’s upbringing in a rural backdrop and her remaining virtually away from the urbane culture of the Other contrastingly makes her understanding of her cultural heritage and identity more wholistic and chaste. Maggie become a symbol of uncorrupted purity and selflessness in the story who requires decoding and empathetic understanding.

When the story opens Mama appears to be proud of her elder daughter Dee who is smarter, brighter, bolder and more successful. However, as the narrative proceeds Mama reawakens towards a more complete understanding of her younger daughter Maggie who serves as a metaphor for uncorrupted cultural inheritance.

The plot reaches a climax when Dee demands to take with her two hand-made quilts made by her grandmother which act as a symbol of cultural inheritance in the story. For the women, the quilt holds special meaning as a reminder of who they are and from where they have come.

Dee asks Mama for the quilts and ironically asserts that she will be able to preserve them better than Maggie. Mama had promised to give the quilts to Maggie and hears her drop something in the kitchen as she slams the door and leaves quietly. Mama asks Dee to take the other quilts, but Dee insists on taking the ones hand-stitched by her grandmother and argues that she can appreciate them better than Maggie and would be able to preserve them in a better way too.

Walker thus showcases the issues of African American populace through the conflict between the two sisters. Dee who assumes herself to be in a better position to preserve her cultural inheritance, is ironically the one who is more distant from her cultural identity. Maggie who is meek, subservient and shy is in reality closer to her ethnic identity as she does not undergo the process of cultural transformation.

Mama is faced with a dilemma of choosing either of her daughters as the inheritor of their cultural legacy. Dee argues that the priceless quilts will be destroyed from over use if Mama hands them over to Maggie while she could actually preserve them by hanging them aesthetically as a show-pieces in her house. However, Mama who initially seems to be confused grows clearer in her understanding of the situation and replies that Maggie knows how to quilt and can make more. Maggie generously tries to make peace with her sister, offers to renounce the quilts and hands them over to Dee. But Mama impulsively hugs her, snatches the quilts out of Dee's hands and hands them over to Maggie. She tells Dee to take one or two of the other quilts. Hakim-a barber who accompanies Dee, accuses Mama and says that Mama does not understand her own heritage. Dee makes up with Maggie and advises her to try and improve herself before leaving.

Walker's story symbolically address the concerns of the African American struggle for redefinition of cultural inheritance and identity during the late 1960s or early 1970s. The period witnessed a flux of redefinition as the African Americans integrated into the fabric of

American life while they became increasingly interested in examining their African ancestral past.

The history of African cultural legacy had survived centuries of slavery and the cultural inheritors were revisiting their identity in an effort to reconnect with their past. The era witnessed an emergence of ethnic groups which fostered distinct ideologies such as the Black Muslims which is represented in the story through Hakim, the barber who accompanies Dee to her mother's house.

Walker's story juxtaposes the cultural perception of Dee and Maggie as inheritors of their cultural legacy through an exposition of their dialectical reality. History is a witness to cultural transformations that take place at points where two different lines of thought intersect. Though they are sisters, Dee and Maggie represent the opposite nodes of culture and encounter conflict when they meet each other. But their association and conflict is a part of the continuum of the cultural inheritance which is witnessed almost unvaryingly by most cultures at different moments in the great chain of Being. The association, interaction and clash between Dee and Maggie is the promise of the continuous evolution of culture and its manifestation in the form of ever changing plural identities.

The collective cultural heritage is fundamentally associated with memory of the past and identity in the present. The perception of inherited cultural assets and ways of their so called use, whether material or sentimental, thus exhibits its value by the inheritors who construe it as a piece of legacy worth preservation versus those who practise it as a part of their daily life. The inheritance of cultural legacy in the sense of what it meant in history, and its different interpretations in present and in future are fundamentally linked with the cultural identity, both at individual and collective levels. Walker explores the nuances of cultural inheritance and its interlinkages with cultural identity both individually and collectively through her short story *Everyday Use*.

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Note: The Manuscript has been checked.

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