



LITERARY ANALYSIS OF ALICE WALKER'S "EVERYDAY USE"

Narimanova Jamola Yuldashbayevna

English teacher at Uzbekistan State World Languages University,

Tashkent city, Uzbekistan

jamola.narimanova@mail.ru

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ABSTRACT

This article is about analysis of Walker's story 'Everyday Use' and its basic features and gender issues that expressed in the novels of Alice Walker and it also gives essential plot of the story. Walker focuses on black feminism as a feminist, this term based on black folk culture to make it clear that the notion of femininity comes from the experience of being a black woman. 'Everyday Use' is one of the most popular and widely studied short stories by Alice Walker. It was first published in Harper's Magazine in 1973 before being collected in Walker's short-story collection "In Love and Trouble". Walker uses 'Everyday Use' to explore different attitudes towards Black American culture and heritage.

"Everyday Use" was published in 1973 as a part of Alice Walker's short story collection, *In Love and Trouble*. The story highlights the cultural aspects of African-Americans in the United States. African-Americans are citizens of the United States whose ancestors came from Africa. They were brought to American colonies as slaves. They remained slaves till the end of the 19th century when most were freed after the American Revolution. The story set in late 1960 when many African Americans were struggling to redefine and seize control of their social, cultural, and political identity in American society. At the time, the educated became interested in re-examining the African American past. They were particularly interested in the aspects of African heritage that had survived centuries of slavery and were still present in African American culture. Many black Americans, uninspired by a bleak history of slavery in North America, looked to their African roots in an effort to reconnect with their past.

The main plot of the story

Mama, or Mrs. Johnson waiting in the yard with her younger daughter Maggie to welcome her elder daughter Dee who was sent to the city for her higher education. On the arrival of Dee, Maggie who suffered by inferiority complex after a disastrous accident she faced, attempts to flee. Mama manages to hold her back. Dee's dress and attitude seemingly changed and she pays much attention to take photographs rather than greeting her mother and sister. Mama is informed that Dee has changed her ancestral name into a more African name. She comes with her partner whose name was a harder one for mama to pronounce than



Dee's. Dee is interested in old household objects and she wants them to exhibit them in her home. She snatches some quilts which have a connection to their ancestors. The conflict is raised as they were to be given to Maggie at her wedding as a gift. Maggie is desperate and gives up the quilts but Mama intervenes the matter to restore the quilts to Maggie. Dee is crossed and complains Maggie would probably use the quilts for everyday use which is a waste according to her idea, she hopes to hang them as exhibits in her home. Mama does not change her decision which makes Dee angry and leave the house. Mama and Maggie spend the time together in the yard, their bond seems to be strong after the conflict.

The story is narrated in the first person by Mrs Johnson, a large African-American woman who has two daughters, Dee (the older of the two) and Maggie (the younger). Whereas Maggie, who is somewhat weak and lacking in confidence, shares many of her mother's views, Dee is rather different.

Mrs Johnson tells us how she and the local church put together the funds to send Dee away to school to get an education. When Dee returned, she would read stories to her mother and sister. Mrs Johnson tells us she never had much of an education as her school was shut down, and although Maggie can read, her eyesight is poor and, according to her mother, is not especially clever.

Mrs Johnson also tells us how their previous house recently burned down: a house, she tells us, which Dee had never liked. Dee hasn't yet visited her mother and sister in the new house, but she has said that when she does come she will not bring her friends with her, implying she is ashamed of where her family lives.

However, Mrs Johnson then describes Dee's first visit to the new house. She turns up with her new partner, a short and stocky Muslim man, whom Mrs Johnson refers to as 'Asalamalakim', after the Muslim greeting the man speaks when he arrives (a corruption of 'salaam aleikum' or 'As-salamu alaykum'). He later tells Mrs Johnson to call him Hakim-a-barber.

Dee then tells her mother that she is no longer known as Dee, but prefers to be called Wangero Lee-wanika Kemanjo, because she no longer wishes to bear a name derived from the white people who oppressed her and other African Americans. Her mother points out that Dee was named after her aunt, Dicie, but Dee is convinced that the name originally came from their white oppressors.

Dee/Wangero now starts to examine the objects in the house which belonged to her grandmother (who was also known as Dee), saying which ones she intends to take for herself. When Mrs Johnson tells her she is keeping the quilts for when Maggie marries John Thomas, Dee responds that her sister is so 'backward' she'd probably put the special quilts to 'everyday use', thus wearing them out to 'rags' in a few years.

Although Maggie resignedly lets her older sister have the quilts, when Dee moves to take them for herself, Mrs Johnson is suddenly inspired to snatch them back from her and hold Maggie close to herself, refusing to give them up to Dee and telling her to take one of the other quilts instead.

Dee leaves with Hakim-a-barber, telling her mother and Maggie that they don't understand their own heritage. She also tells Maggie to try to make something of herself



rather than remaining home with their mother. After they've left, Maggie and her mother sit outside until it's time to go indoors and retire to bed.

As we come to analyze 'Everyday Use', The central crux of Alice Walker's story is the difference between Dee and her mother in their perspectives and attitudes. Where Mrs Johnson, the mother of the family, sees everything in terms of the immediate family and home, Dee (or Wangero, as she renames herself) is more interested in escaping this immediate environment.

She does this first by leaving the family home and becoming romantically involved with a man of African Muslim descent. She also looks deeper into her African roots in order to understand 'where she comes from', as the phrase has it: not just in terms of the family's direct lineage of daughter, mother, grandmother, and so on (Mrs Johnson's way of looking at it, as exemplified by their discussion over the origins of Dee's name), but in a wider, and deeper sense of African-American history and belonging.

This departure from her mother's set of values is most neatly embodied by her change of name, rejecting the family name Dee in favour of the African name Wangero Lee-wanika Kemanjo. Names, in fact, are very important in this story: Maggie is obviously known by a European name, and 'Johnson', the family name borne by 'Mama', and thus by her daughters, doubly reinforces (John and son) the stamp of male European power on their lives and history.

Dee, too, is very much a *family* name: not just because it is the name the family use for the elder daughter, but because it is a name borne by numerous female members of the family going back for generations. But Dee/Wangero suspects it is ultimately, or originally, of European extraction, and wants to distance herself from this. Dee's rejection of the immediate family's small and somewhat parochial attitude is also embodied by the fact that she reportedly hated their old house which had recently burned down.

'Everyday Use' was published in 1973, and Dee's (or Wangero's) search for her ancestral identity through African culture and language is something which was becoming more popular among African Americans in the wake of the US civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Indeed, a productive dialogue could be had between Dee's outlook in 'Everyday Use' and the arguments put forward by prominent Black American writers and activists of the 1970s such as Audre Lorde, who often wrote – in her poem 'A Woman Speaks', for example – about the ancestral African power that Black American women carry, a link to their deeper roots which should be acknowledged and cultivated.

However, Walker does some interesting things in 'Everyday Use' which prevent the story from being wholly celebratory of Dee's (Wangero's) new-found sense of self. First, she had Mrs Johnson or 'Mama' narrate the story, so we only see Dee from her mother's very different perspective: we only view Dee, or Wangero, from the outside, as it were.

Second, Dee/Wangero does not conduct herself in ways which are altogether commendable: she snatches the best quilts, determined to wrest them from her mother and sister and disregarding Maggie's strong filial links to her aunt and grandmother who taught her how to quilt. The quilt thus becomes a symbol for Maggie's link with the previous matriarchs of the family, which Dee is attempting to sever her from.



But she is not doing this out of kindness for Maggie, despite her speech to her younger sister at the end of the story. Instead, she seems to be motivated by more selfish reasons, and asserts her naturally dominant personality and ability to control her sister in order to get her way. The very title of Walker's story, 'Everyday Use', can be analyzed as a sign of Dee's dismissive and patronising attitude towards her sister and mother: to her, they don't even know how to use a good quilt properly and her sister would just put it out for everyday use.

We can also analyze Walker's story in terms of its use of the epiphany: a literary whereby a character in a story has a sudden moment of consciousness, or a realisation. In 'Everyday Use', this occurs when Mrs Johnson, seeing Maggie prepared to give up her special bridal present to her sister, gathers the courage to stand her ground and to say no to Dee. She is clearly in awe of what Dee/Wangero has become, so this moment of self-assertion – though it is also done for Maggie, too is even more significant.

In conclusion, the story "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker is an exploration about the side effects of Black American Revolution. As she views, the African-American's developed and maintained their own culture which reflect their hardships, struggle for survival and their capacity to survive. They are proud about their perseverance. However, the generation after the revolution is reluctant to link their roots in their history as slaves. Therefore, they urge to link their roots to original African culture which has created a conflict between generations.

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