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SHAPING BLACK IDENTITY FOR BLACK NATIONALISM IN ALICE WALKER'S "EVERYDAY USE"

BHUPRAJ JOSHI

bhuprajjoshi330@gmail.com

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Far Western University, Nepal



BHUPRAJ JOSHI

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the black identity by bringing the concept of heritage into dialogue that constitutes Black Nationalism. The writer shapes black identity through the symbolic objects for building Black Nationalism in post-slavery context of America. In such a context, all activities, behaviors and mind sets are unknowingly oriented to maintaining and forming cultural identity. This issue of culture becomes dominant in the time when a particular community or race in minority feels lacking as Alice Walker presents in "Everyday Use". For them, their language, patterns of daily life, and even their belongings of everyday use are the part of their cultural heritage. All the belongings like the quilt, clothes, churn and the things have cultural value to maintain, search and sustain the identity of minority.

Key Words: Identity, Nationalism, Culture, Belonging, Home

The reservoir of heritage consists of the cultural behaviors, activities, language, customs and even the things of daily use, which mark the identity of a community or a person. The identity has to do with the relationships, regular routines and interactions with familiar elements as we see in the African-American writings about their culture and identity. In a way, identity provides sense of security created through the perception of interaction among and between. It rests on relationships and close links with places, particular environment, time and landscape. As soon as one belongs to a things, place or person, one is supposed to have an identity of a sort. So, it is an identity marker, too. The American psychologists, Baumeister and Leary, in their seminal article on the importance of sense of belonging, propose the 'Belonging Hypothesis' suggesting that "human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant

interpersonal relationships"(497).

Lack of cultural identity can result in feeling of social isolation, alienation and loneliness. So it can be regarded as a precursor to social connectedness. They argue that need for belongingness is more than the need for social contact. It is the need for positive and pleasant social contact within the context of desired relationships with the people other than strangers. It means that the need for belongingness is satisfied by "stability, affective concern and continuation into the foreseeable future"(500). To satisfy the need to belong, relational context of interaction with other people is essential. But there are the individual differences in the strength of the need to belong to somebody or somewhere. Some people with lower need to belong may be satisfied by limited contacts, while others with greater need to belong to broader range of contacts. An individual is likely to undergo a risk of loneliness if one is not satisfied with



belongings. Varieties of human behaviors like cognitive, motivational and emotional are contributed by the issue of belonging. The fulfillment of this need to belong leads to the experience of positive emotions such as happiness and joy whereas deficiency can result in negative experiences such as anxiety, jealousy, depression, high level stress and loneliness. In *Toward a Psychology of Being*, Maslow points out that many behavioral, psychological and social outcomes including mental illness, criminal tendencies and social isolations are incited. "Lack of belongingness, being loved and respected resides at the center of emotional breakdowns."

We see the similar sense of cultural identity in Ray Young Bear, a Native American's poem "Grandmother", where he expresses his strong proximity towards his grandmother. His present reality is that he lacks all those of her which make him feel the sense of alienated from those motherly possessions. Beyond the begetter biological mother, he means the culture, identity and nationality of his Masquaki tribe. He sounds very close to that in the phrases: "If I saw/heard/felt/smelt her.... I could recognize her to be my grandmother." Both the senses of belonging and thereby of alienation underlie the words. Diasporic writings are marked with alienation and belonging. The desire for belonging and continuing is so powerful in the African American that it has been taken as a formative force of Black Nationalism in, as the critics say. Korenman writes "several texts written by African American women like Alice Walker in "Everyday Use" point to the Black Nationalism." It means that the domestic affairs of black women in the story, "Everyday Use" "is a part of black consciousness in the black nationality building for their recognition.

The concept of heritage can be substantiated through Mama and her relations with her two daughters, Dee and Maggie at their home in the south of post-civil war America. Earlier they belonged to the slave community but after the civil war Mama Family is living with economic hardships and with their own beliefs and cultural identifications. Dee is her elder daughter studying in Augusta in spite of poverty. She inherited her name

from their earlier owner Aunt Dicie, who was named after her Grandma Dee. The Sense of black identity can firstly be evident in her changing name from Dee to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, a name belonging to her heritage. She feels to have suffered with the name Dee that resembles with the oppressor: "I couldn't bear it any longer being named after the people who oppressed me" (32). Although her Mama feels it difficult to pronounce in the beginning, she gradually learns to say since it identifies their African heritage. Dee's longing to belong to her identity can be seen even in the time of eating with her Muslim boyfriend Hakim-a-barber, who denies eating collard greens or pork. She delightfully eats. Moreover, her hearty readiness to eat by sitting in the benches made by her late father clarifies her intimacy with her family and home: "oh, mama! I never knew how lovely these benches are. You can feel the rump print"(132). This statement of Dee suggests her familial ties even after going away from home. The sense of identity and belonging can also be seen with Hakim-a-barber. He can't agree with others' system by dispossessing his own doctrine on farming or eating. He says to Dee's family: "I accept some of their doctrines but farming and raising cattle are not my style" (133). It means that although Dee, a non-Muslim Hakim, a Muslim are married, they are not dispossessed with their originality, roots and relationships to their respective culture.

A home is something more than a physical place to live. So, it is naturally a hub of the culture, which is an inseparable and essential possession of the family. It is the center for belongingness for everyone. Sense of belonging may be in the level of a family, community or a nation. The inclination towards one's home or community or nation is incited by keenly rootedness to one's culture. It differs from the term 'House' which simply suggests a physical structure but the term 'Home' is comparatively inclusive to mean to the people, relations, identities and culture. In "Everyday Use", Walker depicts a beautiful home by describing the physical sentimental and familial entities that form a home holistically.

Showing the three roomed burnt down house, Mama's waiting for her daughter, Dee in the

yard and their interrelations represent the physical, sentimental and familial aspects of home respectively. Her utterance, "I have deliberately turned my back on the house. It is three rooms, just like the one that burned, except the roof is tin, they don't make single roof any more. There are no real windows, just some holes cut in the side, like the port hole in the ship" (130). In this extract Mama describes the house but these feature being mentioned appear like the belongings of her poor family. It highlights her happiness even in the hardships of poverty. In spite of being alienated in the beginning, Dee ask for the dasher, (a tool for making butter), which is very old and almost useless. Because she felt a sort attachment to it, she requests her mother to give it to her. She finds it useful for future: "and I will think of something artistic to do with the dasher"(132). Her belonging to this simply relates her connection to kitchen of her Mama. Search for quilt by Dee in the story is the most relevant example to say that see has certain desire to have to it. It is only an old rag but is the apple of discord between Dee and her mother.

The mother says, there are only two quilts with them; they are also made up of old clothes. She tries to persuade her daughter not to take those quilts and says: "why don't you take one or two of the others? These old things were just done by me and big Dee from some tops your Grandma pieced before she died... Some of the pieces like those lavender ones come from old cloths her mother handed down to her "(133). She thinks that Dee belongs to new environment and urban possessions. So, she will not claim for such old things although it matters much for Mama. To her surprise, Dee strongly demands for the old quilt in spite of Mama's clearance: "that I will make them last better ... some of the pieces like those ... I promised to give them to Maggie, for when her marriage John Thomas" (133). A long discourse between mother and daughter in this episode of story about seemingly less important thing means the symbolic value of the quilts. It is a cultural and identical icon to carry on the legacy of Mama's family. To quote Whitsitt, "symbolic value is attributed to the quilt in the story." The quilt is made from small old patches and pieces stitched together. It consists of the old

cloths from the time of her earlier generation. Dee later realizes the importance of the quilt that she originally belongs to:

That's not the point. These are all pieces of dresses Grandma used to wear. She did all this stitching by hand. Imagine... Maggie cannot appreciate these quilts. She would probably be backward enough to put them to everyday use... Maggie would put them on the bed and in five years they would be in rags. Less than that I would hang them. (133)

She suggests that she is fond of those initially old and outdated things for her. In the beginning, when Mama had given the quilts to Dee to go to college, she told they were old-fashioned, out of style. But now, after she feels alienated in Augusta, she valorizes the value of same quilts. Here, Dee is internalizing the sense of possessions and belonging to her home and domestic things which is identity marker of her and the culture. She comes to remember her earlier generations which have their traces in the objects like quilt. She is interested in hanging them on the wall so that she could feel to have a complained by her culture. A debate between Dee and Mama regarding the quilt also tells about the familial bond of them. Mama doesn't want to give them to her because all the remaining and old things are cultural properties for her. She has understood the great value of the things of everyday use.

In the aforementioned discussion the physical aspect of home is stronger. Except the physical things, the yard where Mama is waiting for Dee has also remarkable value in terms of expressing belonging. She fantasizes of reunion with her daughter in the Television scene. She has a stark sense of love for her and wants to show to the public that her attachment to the children is an epitome for others. Her happiness lies in expressing and showing motherly affection to the daughter. In this connection the mother says:

Sometimes I dream a dream in which Dee and I are suddenly brought together on TV program of this sort out of a dark and soft seated limousine I am ushered into a bright room filled with many people. Then I meet a smiling gray, sportsman like Johnny

Carson who shakes my hand and tells me what a fine girl I have. Then we are on the stage and Dee is embracing me with tears in her eyes. (128)

This dream of Mama is an imagination for the ideal family being vicariously overjoyed. She finds her daughter all loving and successful, which naturally is a matter of pride for every parent. Similarly, the spiritual or sentimental aspect of home and familial bondage can also be evident in kissing of Dee on her Mama's hand, who has been waiting for her in the yard with soothing breeze. Not only the mother but daughter, Dee also is inspired by love. She seems to have been eager enough to meet the mother to express her love. Her love with mother is not less than that of mother. But the way Hakim shakes hands of Maggie seems odd and alienated. Because he unwilling or awkwardly goes near to Maggie and pretends to loving her. Since he is an alien to their culture and family, he does so only for formality. From inward, he feels culturally isolated and behaves accordingly. Upon her arrival, Dee tries to force some world ideas and education on family which doesn't belong to the world of her mother. So she doesn't prefer it. Mother is equally worried about Maggie, who was burnt and wounded a decade ago when their house caught fire. She wants to see her wounded and handicapped daughter to marry which will provide her motherly solace. She expects to sing hymns according to their heritage after her daughter Maggie gets married. Sitting in the home and reciting church songs originally belong to Mama's culture. She says, "She will marry John Thomas and then I will be free to sit here and I guess just sing church songs to myself (130). The conceptual belonging and home is supported by Mama's disapproving of a strange person (Hakim -a barber) in her home. Though, he is her son in law, he doesn't belong to her culture and religion. He was a Muslim which was an odd for her. The dress that Dee is wearing upon her arrival was also questioned by Mama since it is not the part and style of wearing in their culture.

As mentioned earlier, identity of a person or community rests on physical and familial relations with the people and possessions. It is also equally related to certain geographical and sometimes temporal framework. "Everyday Use" occupies both

time and Space to make the theme of belonging more powerful and reasonable. In terms of temporal framework, the story was published in early 1970s, in the setting after civil war in the USA. It was the time when blacks were still undergoing some traumatic experiences of color discriminations and sense of alienation. The story shows their realization as outsider within the USA. If we relate horizon of belonging, home and cultural heritage, the story consists of some supportive references: Mama's waiting for Dee in the yard and its description is the evidence of her close connection with it. The story takes its origin from the description of the yard as if it is the motive of the writer Mama speaks by standing in the yard:

I will wait for her in the yard that Maggie and I made so clean and wavy yesterday afternoon. A yard like this is more comfortable than most people know it is not just a yard. It is like an extended leaving room when the hard clay is swept any one can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house. (128)

The well decorated yard of the whites, is not valuable for her. Neither the so called national (white) culture nor home is preferred in the story. The valorization of African home, homely environment and heritage shows what it means to shape a sense of belonging from one's relationship to one's cultural heritage.

In the time of struggle for identity of the minority blacks, the sense of nationalism gets more important to share commonality among the blacks. At this point the face value of the things, practices, patterns and behaviors of the African American people contributes to the formation of their identity. The shared identity underlying these things constitutes collective sense which brings forth Black Nationalism. The things of everyday use discussed by Alice Walker carry the symbolic value to shape the black identity to that insight the nationalistic feeling in the African American minorities of post-slavery context.

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