

THE ART OF QUILTING IN ALICE WALKER'S FICTION

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Abstract

African-American literature has been inspired by quilt-making, and several African-American writers have embraced this notion of reading the world by employing the quilt tradition in their stories. The implication that quilting reveals a continuum of African-American women's experience and creative expression is a recurrent theme in the works of African-American women writers whose works present the quilt in ways which conceptualize identity and redefine history. Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker point out that "the patchwork quilt ... opens a fascinating interpretive window on vernacular dimensions of lived, creative experience in the United States. Quilts, in their patched and many-colored glory offer not a counter to tradition, but, in fact, an instance of the only legitimate tradition of 'the people' that exists" (Baker & Piece-Baker: 714). Therefore, Baker and Pierce-Baker emphasize the transformative role of the quilt. It's symbolic nature transforms and recreates and it provides an outlet for thwarted energies.

It is, therefore, not only useful but insightful to examine how African-American women writers, namely Alice Walker, incorporate the quilt tradition in their works and reveal the rhetorical nature of Black women's ability to transcend adversity. The artistry of African-American women is illuminated by the cultural artifact of the quilt. The quilt uncovers the choice of symbols Black women used within their community to create a shared, common meaning of self and the world. Thus, the quilt serves as a vehicle for re inventing the symbolic expression of identity and freedom. The weaving of stories into quilts became a way for Black women to defy the system of slavery and patriarchy and assert themselves. This paper focuses on quilting as an art form in Alice Walker's fiction and investigates its role in resurrecting female identities.

Keywords: quilting, African-American literature, identity

Introduction

The patchwork quilt as a trope for understanding black women's creativity, presents an array of interpretive possibilities. It represents, on the one hand, the African tradition of folk art and embroidery and, on the other, a political symbol of resistance by Black women to the oppression in America of being both Black and female. The Negro spiritual "I Ain't No Ways Tired" suggests one of the major characteristics of Black women's history-survival. Despite the dualities of racism and sexism, field and domestic labor, and the double duty of motherhood for

African-American women, they developed methods for surviving. Hurling into slavery and oppression, because of "brutal circumstances [,] they were forced to promote the consciousness and practice of resistance" (Angela Davis 5)¹. Black women weaved resistance into their daily lives.

Speaking about the purpose of art, Bell adds:

myths, legends, folktales, and other forms of verbal art [as well as literary works and artistic works] have four principal functions. They transmit knowledge, value, and attitudes from one generation to another, enforce conformity to social norms, validate social institutions and religious rituals, and provide a psychological release from the restrictions of society. (*The Afro-American* 15)²

The psychological release of art is a distinguished characteristic which is clearly demonstrated in Alice Walker's fiction.

I argue that Black women maintained their centrality to the African-American community by creating a cultural form of resistance that would transcend experience and reshape their world. Upon first impression, the quilt represented skill, aesthetic beauty, and charm (Benberry 23). However, upon deeper viewing, quilts often served in the ante-bellum period as "codes" for escape to freedom. Walker's fiction creates a culture of the quilt which names experience and reclaims the history of the struggles and triumphs of African-American women. The quilt, therefore, became a covert manifestation of resistance.

The art of quilting in Alice Walker's fiction

Quilts, as Priscilla Leder has noted, "embody the ideal of unity in diversity which permeates Walker's writings. The pieces of a quilt like individuals in a pluralistic society, retain their original identities while functioning as parts of something else" (141)³. Thus, like the scraps of cloth sewn into Celie's patchwork quilt, characters' lives in *The Color Purple* are stitched together into a unity whose strength and vibrancy depend on each individual's identification with and distinction from the others around him or her. As Collins claimed, art can construct our potential identities by "locating, shaping, and sharing alternative histories, values, rituals, and myths".

The integrity of art and life elaborated in Afro-American literature lies to a large extent in the perceived Afro-American literary philosophy about the function of literature in their lives. Collins, quoting Donaldson, in her essay "Activists Who Yearn for Art That Transforms: Parallels in the Black Arts and Feminist Art Movements in the United States" states that black artists are in the quest of power in their works, since "Black image makers are creating forms

¹ Davis, Angela. "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." *Black Scholar* 3 (Dec. 1971): 3.

² Bell, Bernard W. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989: 15.

³ Leder, Priscilla. "Alice Walker's American Quilt: The Color Purple and American Literary Tradition." *Critical Essays on Alice Walker*. Ed. Ikenna Dieke. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999: 141.

that define, glorify, and direct black people-an art for the people's sake". Unlike the ideal philosophy of "art for art's sake" dissociating art from real life, the replaced theory of "art for people's sake" proposed by African writers, underlies call for self recognition and self awareness (Collins). Likewise, Karenga observed "Black Art must be for the people, by the people, and from the people. That is to say, it must be functional, collective and committing" (qtd. in Collins). Walker, if not notably, like other African reaffirms how art can work toward releasing humans, especially women, from the social restrictions keeping them under the supervision of patriarchal authority.

Art in Alice Walker's word is not high elaborated works exhibited in room overflowed with some intellectual persons, time to time, murmuring appreciating words looking at an artistic work. Regarding the practical use of art in daily life - reaffirmed in Walker's fiction, Coleman remarks: "Walker turned the idea of art on its head. Instead of looking high, she suggested, we should look low. On that low ground she found a multitude of artist-mothers--the women" working their own freedom and power and community, employing their underestimated arts. Therefore, as Thadious Davis puts in "Walker's Celebration of Self in Southern Generations" art is a reservoir for generating "...freedom ... beauty, ... power and community". To Alice Walker art is a primary source to which women can resort to for obtaining their own selves in restrictive society in which women's crashed individualities depicted in her works can be regained by employing diverse forms of art. Subsequently, underscoring the role of art in society, she asserts art should "make us better; if [it] doesn't then what on earth is it for?" (qtd. in Davis, 28)⁴.

Art and its aesthetic qualities, inspired by human emotion, provide women with a means of expressing their battered feeling in the form of art and literature leading to their empowerment. Consequently, women's artistic drives are considered as outlets for unrelenting immense oppression they have faced. Henderson elaborates, for Walker, "art is liberational and life-saving; it is an act for reconstruction and reclamation of self, of past, of women, and of community" (67)⁵. Reaffirming the concept, Walker highlights that "people can hear Celie's voice. There are so many people like Celie who make it, who came out of nothing. People who triumphed." (Walker, qtd. in Henderson 67). Joseph Beuys states: "To make people free is the aim of art, therefore art for me is the science of freedom." In the critical essay "Introduction: Alice Walker A Woman Walking into Peril" Dieke confirms that: "for Walker the end of art is salvation and redemption; in other words, salvation is the result of artistic ... agency" (Smith, qtd. in Dieke)⁶. Walker's characters use their own artistic abilities for expressing their creativity to improve their social as well as psychological statuses.

Female bonding through quilt making

One of the recurring motifs in Walker's works is the art of quilting, which plays an effective part in forming and reconstructing female identities. In the essay entitled "Alice walker: The Black Woman Artist as Wayward", Professor Barbara Christian writes: "Walker is drawn to

⁴ Davis, Thadious. "Alice Walker's Celebration of Self in Southern Generations." *Southern Quarterly* 21 (1983): 28.

⁵ Henderson, Mae G. "The Color Purple: Revisions and Redefinitions." In *Modern Critical Views*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York. Chelsea House Publications 1989:67.

⁶ Dieke, Ikenna. "Introduction: Alice Walker, A Woman Walking into Peril". *Critical Essays on Alice Walker*. Ed. Ikenna Dieke. Westpoint, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1999:4.

the integral and economical process of quilt making as a model for her own craft. For through it, one can create out of seemingly disparate everyday materials patterns of clarity, imagination, and beauty.”⁷ Christian argues that Walker employs quilts as signs of functional beauty and spiritual heritage that provide exemplars of challenging convention.

Sam Whitsitt in “In Spite of It All: A Reading of Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” regarding quilt-making points out that Walker “was one of the first [writers] to write of the value of the quilt in the Afro-American experience, and she has certainly been one of the most influential writers in rearticulating the value of the quilt and in contributing to its success in the collective imagination at large”⁸. Whitsitt acknowledges that since the sixties the quilt has been reevaluated, from the marginalized position as a symbol of gossipy women’s sewing circles, to seventies position, in which it contributes to black female identities. Concerning the importance of a new-found definition of quilt making in “Nothing Can Be Sole or Whole That Has Not Been Rent” Judy Elsley observes:

A woman makes the world her own by taking apart the patriarchal ways of being to create a space for herself. That space allows her to accept her own fragmentation and thus validate herself....In effect she makes a patchwork quilt of her life. (164)⁹

Being arranged and designed in definite male patterns Afro-American women lost their individualities, so as Whitsitt and Elsley note, through quilting their original creative patterns, women can inscribe and create new definitions of themselves. Therefore, confirming the critical significance of quilting Elaine Hedges asks “whether the needle doesn’t at times move too magically to dispel conflict, to solve complex issues of gender and male power?” (Hedges, qtd. In Whitsitt) and contributes to Women’s self realization.

Quilting is an act of tearing and reconstructing. Adrienne Rich discusses women’s use of weaving and sewing as means of transformative power: “the conversion of raw fibers into thread was connected with the power over life and death; the spider who spins thread out of her own body” (cited by Ross in Bloom, 2008:14). After being beaten by Mr__ who believes that: “Wives is like children You have to let ‘em know who got the upper hand” (*The Color* 37), Celie starts to redefine herself through patch working. Celie’s sewing brings her to the primordial power of women. Fallen apart from her own real self as well as family including her sister and her children, Olivia and Adam, like parted scraps, Celie is patched up together at the end of the novel through sisterly affection. Celie should have been torn, to be sewn and patched again in a renewed feminine artistic pattern by the help of her other peers. As Ikenna in “Introduction: Alice Walker, A Woman Walking into Peril” suggests:

Quilt making is therapeutic, because it is interwoven with the whole elemental process of restoration and wholeness. In Walker’s *The Color Purple* quilt is a trope for Walker’s

⁷Christian, Barbara. Black Feminist Criticism. *Critical Essays on Alice Walker*.Ed. Ikenna Dieke. Westpoint, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1999:157.

⁸ Whitsitt, Sam. Whitsitt, Sam. “In Spite of It All: A Reading of Alice Walker’s ‘Everyday Use’.” *African American Review* 34.3 (Autumn, 2000): 443. JSTOR. Web. 21 Aug. 2012.

⁹ Elsley, Judy. “Nothing Can Be Sole or Whole That Has Not Been Rent: Fragmentation in the Quilt and *The Color Purple*”.*Critical Essays on Alice Walker*.Ed. Ikenna Dieke. Westpoint, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1999:164.

deconstructive temper and for understanding the paradox that in order to find the self, one would have to lose the self. (9)¹⁰

So quilt making emphasizes the movement from male-defined fragmented entity to the whole restored female one and from loneliness to community. That is why Celie defined by her husband as: “You ugly...you shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people” (*The Color* 212), is reconstructed to an individual capable of fighting back all male definition prescribed to the benefit of them as well as her husband by articulating “the jail you plan for me [my body and voice] is the one in which you will rot...” and declaring “every lick you hit me you will suffer twice” (*The Color* 213)¹¹. Celie takes her features cast away or repressed by patriarchy and regenerates a new version of herself through art.

As Christian accurately points out, for Walker, quilting is a female written history, referring to the common experience of everybody, “their relationships, with the young to the old, with women to men, which are often embodied in their family structure, rituals, mores, music, and language” (27)¹². Relinquishing patriarchal means of communication and inscription Walker’s women write their own histories in their own language by piecing together shapes and fabrics, taken from different women. For instance, having been accused of illegal sexual affair, Nettie disdained the patriarchal rules by resorting to female written history-“herstory” (McMahon). Having taken out the quilt which Corrine made out of children’s worn clothes, Nettie could convince Corinne, that she is “children’s aunt and their mother is ... [her] older sister” (*The Color* 191). For Walker, the art of quilting like a literature is one means of recording the black women’s history contributing to the freedom from patriarchal history.

Additionally, from Cutter’s perspective discussed in “Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker’s Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*” Celie’s sewing functions as an alternative methodology of language that moves her away from violence and victimization into the self-empowered individual earning her own living. Mainimo points out that: “sewing does more than enable conversation: sewing *is* conversation, a language that articulates relationships and connects and reconnects networks of individuals to create a community”. Tavormina continues in “Dressing the Spirit: Clothworking and Language in *The Color Purple*: “sewing is an act of union, of connecting pieces to make a useful whole. Furthermore, sewing with others is a comradely act, one that allows both speech and comfortable, supportive silence” (224)¹³.

The new ‘language’ introduced a new female communicative releasing means. Opening a new communication through patching discrete scraps, Celie and Sophia accompanied by Shug, make a whole new identity out of disposal by commencing to talk with muted lips and needles working -a mechanism to which male are completely unfamiliar. That is the reason why, Celie, sitting between Mr__ and Shug while they are quilting, describes herself as a complete entity “I see myself sitting there quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr.__ us three together ...For the first time in my life, I feel just right” (*The Color* 60)¹⁴. Taking some different advice from various

¹⁰ Dieke, Ikenna. “Introduction: Alice Walker, A Woman Walking into Peril”. *Critical Essays on Alice Walker*. Ed. Ikenna Dieke. Westpoint, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1999:9.

¹¹ Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982. 213.

¹² Christian, Barbara. “The Color Purple.” New York: Macmillan Digital Publishing 1998. Monarch Notes 01-01-1963: 27.

¹³ Tavormina, M. Teresa. “Dressing the Spirit: Clothworking and Language in *The Color Purple*.” *Journal of Narrative Technique* 16, no. 3 (fall 1986): 224.

¹⁴ Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982. 60.

folks, reshaping her identity, Celie transforms to a living moving artistic quilt, formed by absorbing their features including Shug's independence, Sofia's courage to fight and Nettie's eagerness to learn.

"Sister's choice" (*The Color* 61) the pattern of the quilt Celie and Sofia choose is obviously a symbol of the "female bonding that restores the women to a sense of completeness and independence" and connectedness (Wade, qtd. in Shakhovtseva). Celie's suggestion "Let's make quilt pieces out of these messed up....And, I run git my pattern book" (*The Color* 44)¹⁵ figuratively refers to the artistic pattern she chose to make herself anew out of the dispersed pieces of advice she had collected during her life, based on which she constructs her shattered self, and wins over her passivity and victimhood.

Conclusions

Understanding the quilt as a product of rhetorical invention provides a new perspective on the relationship between narrative and cultural identity. As stories are told and retold, the narrative genre provides a format for a person to understand who he or she is to become and what role the person is to play in society. Walter R. Fisher contends that the stories humans select to tell and to believe demonstrate a "universal logic" of values and common sense (66). This suggests that narration lay at the incipience of understanding all of human communication. In African-American women's communication, the quilt is an expression of the rhetorical nature of art and a representation of Black women's culture.

Story quilts are narrative rather than abstract. They flow directly out of the oral tradition which used story telling as a way to impart the culture and preserve the history of a people. Storytelling and the story quilt impart moral and spiritual lessons as well as personal family genealogy for future generations. To view a story quilt is to learn about the quilters, their families, values and life experiences. One has only to review West African history to understand the role of using narrative in the creation of textile pieces. (Benberry 114)¹⁶

The rhetoric or narrative of the quilt, then, reveals life in America through the experience of Black women and their ability to transcend adversity. By relaying their experiences in narrative form, Black women have defined and re-defined the parameters of American life for themselves and their communities. Similar to the slave narrative as a cultural artifact, quilts are distinctly rhetorical documents because they "reveal a dimension of language that serves as a means toward an end, with hopes of agreeing upon a distinct vision of society. That vision is freedom" (Olga I. Davis 38). Speaking of the slave narrative Charles Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., state, "... in that lettered utterance is assertion of identity and in identity is freedom-freedom from slavery, freedom from ignorance, freedom from non-being, even freedom from time" (157). Walker's works display the symbolic tradition of the quilt and the cultural identity it points to. She incorporates recognizable pieces of American literary tradition into its own pattern, thereby, providing an exploration into the quilt as a symbol of the struggle of African-American women for freedom.

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¹⁵ Ibid. 44.

¹⁶ Benberry, Cuesta. *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts*. Louisville: Kentucky Quilt Project, 1992:114.

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