

A Study of Dee's Identity Awakening in Alice Walker's Everyday Use

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Abstract

Focusing on the character Dee in *Everyday Use*, this paper carries out an in-depth analysis of the specific manifestations and causes of her identity awakening. In terms of clothing style, Dee shifted from pursuing a modern style to embracing African traditional styles. She also changed her name to an African one and transformed her attitude towards the house and quilts that carry African cultural elements from disdain to cherishment. All these changes indicate her identity awakening. A further analysis reveals that three factors contribute to her identity awakening: education enabled her to understand Black history and culture; social movements inspired her sense of rights and cultural awareness; and self-reflection prompted her to reconstruct her cultural identity. This study not only reveals the close connection between cultural identity and individual consciousness but also provides a new perspective for interpreting the cultural connotations of literary works, thus helping us further explore the cultural values hidden in it.

Keywords

Everyday Use; Dee; Identity Awakening

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement emerged as a defining force in the United States, challenging decades of systemic racism and inequality. Since the nation's founding, African Americans had endured pervasive discrimination in politics, limited access to economic opportunities, scarce educational resources, and strict racial segregation in public spaces. Despite their significant contributions during World War II, Black Americans continued to face discrimination well into the post-war era. The Civil Rights Movement profoundly impacted young Black individuals, reshaping their sense of self and societal aspirations. Externally, the passage of landmark legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 marked a turning point, dismantling institutionalized segregation and granting Black youth equal access to education, diverse employment opportunities, and personal freedoms. Internally,

the Movement evokes a stronger sense of self-identity and confidence among young Black Americans, empowering them to actively participate in politics, advocate for social change, and push society toward fairness and justice. Alice Walker, who came of age during this transformative period, identifies herself as an activist. She articulates her political stance through both literary creation and social activism. Her short story *Everyday Use* serves as a poignant reflection on the cultural nationalist movement, exploring its complexities and implications. (Zhang Zhiao, 2024)

1.2 About *Everyday Use*

Everyday Use follows the story of a Black mother and her two daughters, Maggie and Dee. Maggie, the younger and more reserved daughter, leads a humble, rural life closely tied to her mother. In contrast, Dee, the elder and more assertive daughter, is confident, charismatic, and highly educated, embodying a progressive, worldly outlook. Initially, Dee showed little regard or even disdain for African heritage. However, her college education and exposure to the Black Civil Rights Movement profoundly reshaped her identity. During this transformative period, Dee underwent a significant awakening: she embraced traditional African attire, adopted an African name, brought home a Black Muslim boyfriend, and most crucially, developed a newfound fascination with the cultural artifacts in her mother's home. This shift culminated in a heated conflict when Dee insisted on claiming the family quilts, which her mother had previously promised to Maggie. The dispute highlighted their differing views on heritage—Dee saw the quilts as cultural artifacts to display, while Maggie and her mother valued them for their practical, emotional significance. In the end, the mother asserted her decision, taking the quilts away from Dee and giving them to Maggie, leaving Dee furious and estranged. (Walker Alice, 1973) The story explores multiple themes of cultural inheritance, identity, and generational conflict, highlighting the contrasting attitudes of Dee, her mother, and Maggie toward traditional African culture. While Dee views cultural heritage as something to be preserved and displayed, her mother and Maggie see it as something to be lived and passed down through everyday life.

In this paper, the author aims to explore two questions:

- (1) What are the specific manifestations of Dee's identity awakening?
- (2) What are the main factors leading to Dee's identity awakening?

This study not only reveals the close connection between cultural identity and individual consciousness but also provides a new perspective for interpreting the cultural connotations of literary works, thus helping us further explore the cultural values hidden in it.

2. Manifestations of Dee's Identity Awakening

2.1 Embracing African Style Attire

National costumes serve as vital carriers of national culture, embodying the histori-

cal narratives and spiritual values of diverse ethnic groups. They also play a pivotal role in fostering cultural exchange and integration among different communities (Du Zongjing, 2024). African women, in particular, are known for their preference for vibrant attire characterized by bold patterns, unrestrained lines, straight round necklines, and fabrics in striking hues such as bright red, emerald green, indigo, and purple. These garments are both elegant and eye-catching, with colors that are predominantly bright, saturated, and intense. (Ma Chunlei, 2019)

In *Everyday Use*, Dee initially harbored a dismissive attitude toward African costumes. At her graduation ceremony, she opted for a green suit paired with a yellow dress, furnished with black pumps—a modern, urban ensemble that set her apart from her rural roots. This choice reflected her desire to distance herself from her countryside black identity and construct a more refined, cosmopolitan persona. However, after receiving a university education and exposure to the Black Civil Rights Movement, Dee's perspective underwent a profound transformation. She began to appreciate the profound heritage embedded in national costumes, a pivotal moment in her re-examination and identification with her African identity. This shift was a clear manifestation of her identity awakening. Dee's later attire exemplified this newfound appreciation. She returned home in a dress with vibrant yellow and orange hues, complemented by gold earrings that cascaded down to her shoulders and bracelets that jingled with every movement. (Walker Alice, 1973) Dee's new dressing style, reminiscent of traditional African clothing in its bold colors, intricate craftsmanship, and distinctive design, underscored her recognition of black culture and her commitment to inheriting and promoting African heritage.

The roots of Dee's transformation in her attitude toward African clothing can be traced to the influence of the Black Civil Rights Movement. Initially, clothing was merely a functional commodity for Dee, devoid of deeper cultural significance. However, as she received higher education in college, she began to be aware of their cultural connotations. Over time, she developed a profound understanding of the cultural meanings embedded in daily objects, leading her to place great value on and actively inherit traditional cultural heritage.

2.2 Adopting African Names

African names are deeply intertwined with national culture, reflecting family lineage, religious beliefs, and cultural values. They record life stages and social roles, while also carrying historical legends and collective memory.

Dee learned during her college years that the earliest African Americans were named by their white slave owners, and these "slave names" were inextricably linked to oppression and the colonial legacy. During the era of slavery, white slave owners assigned names to the Black individuals they enslaved. For enslaved people, being named by their oppressors was not only a profound act of racial discrimination but also a systematic erasure of their cultural identity. (Huang Lili, 2013) Dee's decision to rename herself Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo represents a deliberate

redefinition of her identity—a rebellion against the status quo and an awakening to Black cultural nationalism. Scholar Helga Hoel suggests that Dee’s adopted name, “Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo,” is derived from the Kenyan language Kikuyu. (Davis & Ossie, 1969) By adopting an African name, Dee sought to reject white cultural dominance and reclaim her national identity.

This name change not only highlights Dee’s exploration of cultural identity but also exposes her lack of deep cultural understanding. Her desire to break free from the cultural shackles of her past and embrace a new identity is commendable, yet her lack of in-depth knowledge of African culture reveals a superficial engagement with cultural trends.

2.3 A Renewed Interest in the House

Houses serve as tangible carriers of national cultural heritage, embodying family values, historical traditions, and cultural identity. They act as symbolic links between culture and personal growth, reflecting cultural history while fostering a sense of belonging among their inhabitants. These structures profoundly influence individual development and facilitate the inter-generational transmission of cultural values.

In *Everyday Use*, when little Dee witnessed their former house being consumed by a big fire, she just stood there motionless without any regret. The house, steeped in memories of poverty and hardship, had become a symbol of her past struggles—a barrier to her aspirations for a new identity. This animosity stemmed from her desire to escape her humble origins and distance herself from the life she had known. In a letter to her mother, Dee explicitly stated that she would not bring her friends home, underscoring her disdain for her family and her reluctance to reveal her roots. After completing her college education, Dee’s perspective on the house underwent a dramatic shift. Standing before the new house, a replica of the former house, Dee developed a strong interest in it. She walked back to the car to fetch the Polaroid, taking many pictures of her mother, Maggie, and the house and ensuring that the house was included in each shot. This meticulous attention to the house’s presence in her photographs reveals her newfound appreciation for its cultural significance.

Dee’s change in attitude toward the house can be attributed to her identity awakening. She came to realize that the house, once a source of pain and embarrassment, now symbolized a vital link between the past and the present. It became an enduring emblem of African cultural heritage within her family. This shift in perspective allowed Dee to recognize the profound cultural imprints embedded in the house, fostering both self-awareness and spiritual growth. Her journey reflects a deeper understanding of her identity and a reconnection with her roots.

2.4 A Resolution to Preserve Quilts

During the era of slavery, black women, deprived of their voices, used quilts as a means of self-expression. Through the careful selection of materials and intricate

structural layouts, they employed needles and threads to weave family histories into their creations. These quilts became not only a testament to familial bonds but also a vital form of cultural heritage, embodying the resilience and creativity of African women in the face of oppression. As such, quilts emerged as powerful symbols of resistance against slavery and a means of preserving family memory and emotion. (Zheng Juan, 2015)

In *Everyday Use*, Dee initially associates quilts with poverty and backwardness, viewing them with disdain. She refused to take quilts when she went away to college, unwilling to allow items emblematic of black culture to appear in her campus life, fearing ridicule from classmates for her humble origins. This attitude reflects her deep influence by worldly values, as she sought to distance herself from her impoverished family background and integrate into what she perceived as a more superior, modern lifestyle. However, as Dee's understanding of her cultural heritage deepened, she came to view quilts not merely as functional objects but as artistic and political legacies. The quilts became symbols of pride and resistance for African Americans. Each quilt carries unique significance, crafted from cherished materials gifted by family and friends, imbued with stories and blessings from elders. These quilts serve as vehicles of family history, preserving the expectations, wisdom, and emotions of previous generations. (Li Rongqing, 2009) The traditional patterns and embroidery of African-American quilts also carry profound cultural connotations rooted in African heritage. Recognizing this, Dee reclaims the quilts as symbols of her national identity, worthy of preservation and celebration.

Dee's evolving attitude toward quilts reflects her journey from a superficial understanding of everyday use to a deeper appreciation of her heritage. Initially, she judged the quilts based on worldly material standards, overlooking their profound cultural and emotional value. However, as she gained insight into the family history and ancestral wisdom embedded within the quilts, her perspective shifted. This transformation marks a maturation of her self-awareness, as she transitions from blindly pursuing external validation to embracing and cherishing her origins.

3. Main Factors Leading to Dee's Identity Awakening

As Hall said: "Black is classified as a political and cultural category, not a genetic or biological category. Black is a controversial concept, and its ultimate attribution remains undecided." (Pan Haiyan, 2023) Different groups have different definitions of "black" and it has no fixed attribution and has been controversial in society. Dee's awakening means that her perception of her black identity was mined in a complex social environment and political wave. Her awakening is also a reflection on this controversial change in identity.

3.1 Educational Opportunity

Education emerged as a transformative catalyst in Dee's life, serving as the cornerstone of her awakening to black cultural identity. College education allowed Dee to

learn the history of black slavery, the resilience of African culture, and the systemic oppression faced by African Americans. This educational awakening not only deepened her understanding of her heritage but also fueled her desire to reclaim and celebrate her roots in a visible, deliberate manner.

Dee's name change to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo symbolizes her reclamation of African identity. The name, imbued with cultural significance, reflects her rejection of the colonial legacy tied to her given name and her embrace of black heritage. Similarly, her insistence on taking the quilts home underscores her recognition of its value as more than a functional item—it is a living embodiment of family history, cultural continuity, and the strength of her ancestors. Her deliberate use of traditional African greetings upon meeting her mother further signifies her attempt to integrate cultural practices into her daily life, reinforcing her connection to her roots. However, Dee's newfound cultural awareness starkly contrasts with the limited perspectives of her family. Her mother, uneducated and untouched by the black history, fails to grasp the profound significance of Dee's actions. Mama's perspective is rooted in pragmatism, unable to see beyond the material value of the quilt to its symbolic and historical importance. Similarly, Maggie, though deeply connected to the quilt through generations of familial use, lacks the educational framework to understand its broader cultural implications. Her inability to engage with Dee's perspective highlights the cognitive gap created by Dee's exposure to higher education.

This disparity underscores the transformative power of education in shaping identity and cultural awareness. While education empowered Dee to reclaim her heritage and assert her black identity, it simultaneously created a huge cognitive gap between her and her family. Dee's journey illustrates how education can serve as both a bridge to cultural enlightenment and a barrier to shared understanding, depending on the perspectives of those involved. In this way, educational opportunity not only illuminates Dee's path to self-discovery but also reveals the complexities of reconciling personal growth with familial and cultural dynamics.

3.2 Social Movement

The trend of modernized ideology has completely reshaped Dee's worldview and self-awareness. Baptized by the waves of the Black Civil Rights Movement and feminism, she is no longer timid due to racial and gender differences. Instead, she can face the gaze of white people with an equal stance, and this confidence springs from her awakened rights consciousness. Cultural pluralism has further propelled her to reconstruct her identity. When her mother habitually calls her by her old name, she firmly rejects this symbol of oppression that was once imposed by white colonizers and chooses a new name that carries the genetic code of African culture, thereby declaring her recognition and adherence to her cultural roots.

When she returns to her hometown, Dee is determined to take away the butter churn and the African patchwork quilt. These items, which were once used by her

mother in daily labor and carried the family's memories, have transcended their practical functions in Dee's eyes and become works of art engraved with the cultural codes of the black people. By collecting and displaying these traditional handicrafts, she attempts to bring the marginalized black culture into the spotlight and confront cultural hegemony with her individual actions. This act of elevating everyday items to cultural symbols not only demonstrates the awakening of her modern cultural consciousness but also reflects her modern individualistic values of reshaping the cultural discourse power through individual choices.

3.3 Self-Awareness

Modern education has prompted Dee to reflect deeply on her personal experiences and explore the connection between Black culture and her identity. Her acts of changing her name and attire style, as well as the disputes over the ownership of the ancestral quilt, essentially represent the deconstruction of white cultural symbols and the reconstruction of Black cultural memories. The conflicts with her mother over these issues have enabled her to re-examine the relationship between her family and culture, break free from the constraints of traditional values, and establish a modern cultural identity.

Dee's rebellious nature has been evident throughout. From her rejection of her black identity before college to her transformation, influenced by social trends and college education, she has been constantly introspecting. Through continuous self-examination, she has shifted from self-negation to becoming a staunch defender of black culture. It is precisely through such persistent reflection that Dee's black ethnic consciousness has awakened, allowing her to find her cultural belonging and identity.

4. Conclusion

Dee's awakening of black identity is evident in her transformation from rejecting to embracing black culture, both internally and externally. Internally, she shifts from cultural inferiority to a staunch defender of black heritage, as seen in her newfound appreciation for the house and quilts. Externally, her clothing transitions from modern styles to traditional African attire, and her name evolves from Western-oriented to African-inspired. The leading factors driving this awakening include her educational experience, which made her acquainted with black history, fostering a deeper understanding of her identity. The Black Civil Rights Movements further reinforced her recognition of national identity's importance, motivating her to actively pursue black culture. Self-awareness also played a role; early struggles with poverty and racial discrimination led to cultural inferiority, but higher education and the civil rights movement helped her reclaim her identity. This transformation is vividly illustrated in her passionate debate with her mother over the ownership of quilts, indicating her firm commitment to preserving black cultural heritage.

The study of Dee's identity awakening reveals the complex interaction between cul-

tural identity and individual consciousness, demonstrating how social trends drive individuals to break free from traditional constraints and reconstruct their identities. This not only provides an example for understanding the evolution of ethnic minorities' identities but also holds great significance for exploring cultural inheritance, inter-generational conflicts, and the influence of modernity. Moreover, it helps to excavate the multicultural values of the work, offering a new perspective for interpreting the cultural connotations of literary works.

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