Ideological Conflicts (and Related Ironies) In Alice Walker's Everyday Use

Everyday Use is a masterpiece novel written by African American writer Alice Walker, being published in 1973. The highlighted perspective of the social conflicts in marginalized members of the society, like females and colored people, has earned the novel great popularity for both readers and critics. Due to its value in sociology, various scholars have performed related academic researches on the novel. (Zhang and Liu 75; Masiha and Behrang 62-83).

The story centres around an African American mother and her two children, Dee and Maggie, who possess traits and personalities in sharp contrast. Dee, who later changed her name to Wangero (due to her refusal to be named after the people who oppressed her people), is a stylish girl who has received college education. Maggie is a shy girl who has low education and self-esteem, and she does not seem to understand the way Dee acts, just like her mother.

The Name of Dee: her pursuit for Civil Rights and her cultural heritage The Civil Rights movement of African Americans initiated as a series of protests against legally enforced segregation based on the ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority, starting from the 1900s. The Black community then embarked on a journey on pursuit for equality in the United States for almost 90 years (Cashman 128-142).

In the novel, one of the notable acts of Dee is her change of her name to Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, which she believes is an African name that reflects her cultural heritage. Names exist as a crucial part of a Civil Rights campaign, as the imposing and acceptance of a name can reflect an individual's own cultural identity, on whether if an individual accepts oneself as a "Negro slave", a "Black person" or an African America (Martin 83-107). The name Dee was given to her ancestors by the white American slave masters who shipped and enslaved the ancestors of Wangero, so she no longer accepted herself being called Dee after learning about the history, possibly through her college education. A conflict in this case would be the pragmatism and ease in addressing Wangero by her simple European-rooted name Dee and idealism of cultural preservation by using the long, African-rooted name Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, just like any other conflicts between pragmatism and idealism in the essay (Sarnowski 269). However, despite Mama's initial discomfort of the name changing, she ultimately decided to respect her child's will, thus made attempts in addressing her child and her partners by their African-rooted names. An irony of the name changing act is that Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo is not a typical African name in itself. The closest connection of the name with Africa is that it may be a name from East African origin, which may not be the accurate origin of Dee. Therefore, it is speculated that Dee only has superficial knowledge of African culture, despite her vain attempt in retrieving her cultural heritage (Hoel 34-42). A blunt criticism of her actions is that Wangero, as an individual raised as an American, has made a series of actions to "become" African, which cannot achieve any success other than making her a "phony" (Cowart 171-184). There shows the partially agreement with such criticism: the fact can be respected that Wangero has enough cultural awareness, which drives her to make efforts in cultural preservation. However, her superficial knowledge of her cultural roots may not make her a competent individual in cultural preservation. Therefore, she may need to experience the culture of Africa, by actually live in Africa for a period of time. In this way, she can have the chance to

experience the culture from the African perspective, but not from the perspective of “White America” (Cowart 171-184).

“Quilts”: as another cause of ideological conflict The novel entered another area of main theme, as Wangero requested to her mother for the ownership of 2 quilts after dinner. However, Mama refused to give her the quilts, as Mama believed that Wangero would not use the quilts properly for pragmatic usages. Wangero wanted the quilts for the idealism purpose of cultural preservation, and she believes that it would be wasteful and “backward” to apply the quilts to “everyday” pragmatic use. Therefore, another conflict happens in the household of Mama, between the pragmatic “everyday use” of quilts as an item to keep an individual warm and the idealism of the item as a form of cultural perseverance (Sarnowski 269). This can be considered the central part and climax of the novel, which is coherent to the novel title, where the ideological debate centering “everyday use” begins. It is understandable why Wangero finds value in the quilts. She has lived in the urban areas, where everything is mass produced, thus she finds handmade items unique, rich in culture and artistic (Zhang and Liu 75). However, she neglects the fact that culture actually originates from everyday lives (Fiske 154-173), and that her family is already preserving the culture by keep producing and using the quilts. She may have overly idealistic concept of culture, where culture must be high class and formally worshipped, and have neglected the fact that culture is already being preserved healthily if it is pragmatically applied to the “everyday use” of the people. On the other hand, it is ironic how Wangero used to despise the quilts as items of “out of style”, before she received college education. There is possibility that Wangero has learnt about the cultural heritage of her African roots in college, thus she started to reevaluate the cultural value of quilts. This leaves room for thought: has the education she received enhanced her cultural awareness or distorted her views on what culture is?

The author has offered the world, especially to the people of color, food for thought through this short story, yet sophisticated piece. It has triggered the people of color to rethink and reevaluate the value of their cultural heritage. Should one just follow the mainstream culture of the society blindly for pragmatic purposes, or should one strive to preserve one’s own cultural roots, despite how difficult it may seem? This leaves substantial room for debate and discussion in the academic world, since its publication in 1973. It can be anticipated there will be more discussion to come in the future, along with the emerging and monotonous phenomenon of “globalization” (George 354-372).