

Cultural Identity Travels across Borders: A Study of Cross-Cultural Interaction in *Everyday Use* by Alice Walker

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Introduction

All through the colonial period, western and eastern countries underwent myriad changes due to social, political, cultural, and religious interactions that caused the formation of hybrid and ambivalent cultural identities as well as mimic individuals based on the relations between the colonizer and the colonized countries. Those changes did not materialize overnight but spread over a long period due to the gradual expansion of occidental ideology. The colonial period along with all its components goes beyond its initial naïve intention of bringing civilization to the Third World countries with the arrival of the colonizer in those countries with their military forces, missionaries, writers, cultural values, and religious assets. The colonizers brought white settlers to those countries as they were basically inseparable parts of the colonial ideology. As Ania Loomba highlights in *Colonialism and Postcolonialism* (2005) that it is almost impossible to put them in the same category as the colonized people of the Third World countries for they brought their superiority in all senses to these lands (Loomba, 2005). Non-western countries have always been taken into consideration as superstitious, backward, and uncivilized by the so-called civilized western powers. Despite the differences in a racial, cultural, and religious sense in a colonized country they never had the experience of being exploited, being subjected to genocide and cultural corruption that was prevalent in almost all colonies of the world.

The colonial and postcolonial periods respectively witnessed the creation of new cultures and identities in overseas countries as a result of colonialist activities. Military interventions, civil unrest, social and economic instability along with religious and cultural re-formation of indigenous people led to the mobility of not only indigenous people and their culture but this mobility created a sort of hybrid and ambivalent cultures and mimic characters as well. It is this ideological mobilization that resulted in the unprecedented destruction of the Third World countries. Colonialism refers to the establishment of colonial power and existence on colonized lands to exploit all kinds of resources and to rule the subjugated people by using power (Boehmer, 2005). The use of force by European colonizers in colonized countries caused internal

conflicts paving the way to instability, mobility of indigenous people due to the internal social and political turmoil – displacement in a sense - and destruction of nations and consciousness of nationhood. In tandem with this interaction between western and eastern cultures, it seems inextricable that most indigenous citizens have been under the influence of this cultural transformation and corruption. In most Third World countries, the process of western acculturation has been gradual due to local resistance; however, the swift phase of this cultural corruption on behalf of the migrant indigenous citizens in western countries has been remarkable. In this context, Alice Walker first explores and then reveals two different generations of black cultures: Walker initially reveals the traditional black culture in the rural environment where Mama and Maggie lead a conventional life. On the other hand, Dee, the elder daughter, is presented as the representative of the emergent mimic and hybrid character and appears as the opponent of the conventional Third World culture and cultural identity.

Walker's creation of culturally binary characters will be the core discussion of this study. The focal point will be on the mimic, hybrid, and ambivalent attitudes and lifestyles that each character exhibits through the plot structure. In the first part of the article, the location of culture will be clarified to ensure the connection between cultural identity and its components: *mimicry*, *hybridity*, and *ambivalence*. Then the following subchapter will highlight the connection and collaboration between these terms and their representations in the characters' attitudes. To clarify the issue of cultural identity, this study will contribute to postcolonial studies in the sense that it will focus on the mimic, hybrid, and ambivalent representations rather than to focus on mere cultural assets. Thus, cultural identity will be reshaped by the presentation of different cultural representations.

The Location of Cultural Identity

One of the prominent literary figures of the postcolonial period is Edward Said with his masterpiece *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) in which Said was able to account for the motivation behind the colonial activity and imperial dissemination of colonizer countries. "Imperialism's culture was not invisible, nor did it conceal its worldly affiliations and interests. One of imperialism's achievements was to bring the world closer together, and although in the process the separation between Europeans and natives was an insidious and fundamentally unjust one" (Said, 1993, p. xxii). That is, imperialism was a transparent process in terms of its expansion in the intercontinental arena, however; this transparency gains ambiguity when it focuses on the fundamental rights of indigenous people of the colonized countries.

That is why Said is critical of the conditions natives were exposed to during the colonial expansion of the Empire. Bhabha contributes to the heterogeneity of the postcolonial period by coining brand new terms that are essentially based on Said's concept of 'the other' and 'orientalism' (Bressler, 2007). Bhabha's masterpiece is a unique contribution to the cultural probe of the worries of the colonized nations. Bhabha has always been of the idea that third-world nations and citizens have a heterogeneous identity- a mixture of their own and the imposed cultural norms of the imperial power- that is the motivation behind his coinage of terms such as mimicry, hybridity, unhomeliness, double consciousness, and ambivalence.

As for culture and cultural identity, both were the dominant social concerns of postcolonial writers and critics. Both terms –culture and cultural identity- have been the essence of postcolonial studies owing to cross-cultural relationships and interactions between the natives and immigrants from third-world countries. Thus, culture and cultural identity have become the core issue of the postcolonial way of writing related to such terms as hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. Identity alone can be associated with different cultural assets but in its essential aspect identity is not “an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Woodward 51). As is pointed out in the quotation that identity is always due to change in the culture it is shaped and reshaped by the norms of a new culture. It has always been the case for the immigrants, indentured workers, and slaves to be subjected to cultural imposition within their new settlements. The probable consequence of the change of cultural identity can be taken into consideration as a positive reaction of new settlers to secure themselves in their new countries. During the colonial and postcolonial periods 'identity' has become a worldwide societal concern both for the Third World nations and citizens and for the Empire. The British Empire endeavored to impose its cultural norms while the Third World nations tried to protect and keep their cultural values. Those periods launch a new atmosphere in terms of cultural identity and thus the periods resulted in cultural transformation and thus can be considered a period of acculturation. Especially the postcolonial period gave rise to a sordid situation on behalf of the Third World citizens that they were somewhere between the culture of 'self' and the culture of 'other'. This situation also paved the way for an understanding of reshaping, reinvestigating, and restructuring their cultural values. Afterward, they commenced questioning the cultural values imposed by dominant white culture and started a quest for their cultural norms. The reestablishment of indigenous culture witnessed a period in which cultural identity was the basic fact that should have been rediscovered.

The period of WWII up until today has been projecting a multifaceted presence in textual analysis that establishes relationships between literary texts, cultural values, and history (Bressler, 2007). Postcolonial writers and critics believe that literature is supposed to deal with social and political developments within the society that occur as a result of social instabilities like slavery, displacement, and cultural degeneration owing to colonial activities. Culture is not a fixed matter of fact and “to see culture as the practices and processes of making shared meanings does not mean that cultural studies believe that cultures are harmonious, organic wholes” (Yaghoubi 23). That is, cultures are subjected to changes and new meanings that are the focus of cultural studies that they are due to change based on the “*relations between the culture and power*” (23). The correlation between power and culture has become much more transparent among the citizens of third-world countries both at home and in all countries they were forced to displace or migrate.

The former definition of cultural identity by Hall clarifies that each identity shelters one true self within itself accompanied by an enforced identity that is much more superficial when compared to the culture experienced by people with a “shared history and ancestry” (Hall, 1996). It is colonial and imperial initiatives that imposed these superficial and imposed selves over indigenous people either in their own countries or in the countries they were forced to live. According to Hall’s second account of cultural identity, there are substantial variations between the original culture and the imposed culture. While the former is a natural process to be able to adapt to, the latter –as it is imposed process- remains unnatural and is taken into consideration as challenging to accept. So, the following part will deal with the issue of cultural identity in harmony with Bhabha’s specific terms related to cultural identity.

Mimicry, Hybridity, and Ambivalence in *Everyday Use*

In *The Location of Culture* (1994) Bhabha examines power relations in terms of culture, authority, race and gender relations, colonial transformation, and postcolonial reformation of cultural identity. Acting as an umbrella term, culture and cultural identity associated with mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity are to be studied in connection with *Everyday Use* by Alice Walker. In her presentation of the events and relationships between characters, Walker embodies *Everyday Use* as a story of an African American family living in the rural part of the American South and tells the story of the family’s struggles for their cultural identity and one of the family members’ quests for her new identity. *Everyday Use* is one of Walker’s prominent short stories that deals with the rights of black minorities in American

society. This microcosmic presentation of the issue of culture and cultural identity is exposed to the readers through characters experiencing *mimic*, *hybrid*, and *ambivalent* representations.

One of three main themes to be tackled concerning *Everyday Use* is *mimicry*, a term coined by Homi Bhabha out of his effort to touch upon cultural issues during the post-colonial period. Mimicry in its essence is the product of colonial domination and an expected outcome of this domination based on the power and cultural imposition of the colonizer. "In its comic turn from the high ideal of the colonial imagination to its low mimetic literary effects, mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (85). It is very influential in the power relations between the colonizer and the colonized. The term also underlines the heterogeneous origins of cultural diversity that have been peculiar to mixed societies of the postcolonial era "to signify a reading of identities which foregrounds the work of difference in identity resistant to the imposition of fixed, unitary identification which is, in turn, a hierarchical location of the colonial or subaltern subject" (Wolfreys et al 51).

As is the case in *Everyday Use*, Alice Walker attempted to account for the situation of this mixed ancestry through a small black family leading a humble life in the South. In the exposition part of the story, Walker depicts a picture of an ordinary African American family waiting for the elder daughter's homecoming from the city where she is getting an university education. Walker's creation of two binary characters in the story pervades the whole story from beginning to end. Dee is the elder daughter, an educated and sociable woman when compared to the uneducated younger sister Maggie who is timid and is leading a solitary life with her mother in the countryside. While Dee represents the mimic character along with her mimic attitudes, Maggie is bound to her ancestral values derived from her ethnic roots. Dee appears to be a mimic woman who seems to be ashamed of her ancestral roots and thrives to get rid of them by copying the lifestyle of the colonizer's way of life:

"Well", I say. "Dee."

"No, mama," she says. "Not Dee, Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo"

"What happened to Dee?" I wanted to know.

"She is dead," Wangero said. "I couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me" (Arp & Johnson 170).

The way Dee presents herself both through her attitudes and ideas reveals her turn towards the imposed culture as a result of her new environment at the college and forces herself to put a distance between herself and her roots. "*The copying of the*

colonizing culture, behavior, manners, and values by the colonized contains both mockery and a certain 'menace', 'so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace' (Ashcroft 125). Mimicry is to be considered a menace to the original cultural identity as is the case for Dee in the story. Dee's mimic attitudes are derived from the motivation of concealing or masking her original identity and a way of adapting herself to her new cultural environment. Mimicry is not so different for Hakim-a-barber as he turns towards the new culture by rejecting his cultural values. "You must belong to those beef-cattle peoples down the road," said Mrs. Johnson. They said 'Asalamalakim' ... Hakim-a-barber said, "I accept some of their doctrines, but farming and raising cattle is not my style" (Arp & Johnson 170). It is his wish to keep a distance from his cultural values and turn his direction to tenets of colonizing culture. Both Dee and Hakim-a-barber disregard their cultural heritage to some extent in their willingness to be accepted by the dominant others in their new circle.

Walker's intentional depiction of two different poles within the same society enables us to make a thorough observation of diversion in cultural identity by using different masks. So to say, this ambivalence lies in the hesitation of being in-between the two clashing cultures they exist in. "She turns, showing white heels through her sandals, and goes back to the car. Out she peeks next with a Polaroid. She stoops down quickly and lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house with Maggie cowering behind me" (170). Her attitude shows her mimic characteristics and her effort to adapt to the practices of the American way of life. Mama finds it weird as she and Maggie lead a conventional lifestyle in the countryside. In Dee's situation, all memories related to the past and her family are not more than mere memories regardless of any conventional value.

Hybridity is a postcolonial term coined by Bhabha most recently and highlights the intercultural exchange of the values of the colonizing and the colonized cultures, thus emerging a hybrid cultural identity.

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and references an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code (Bhabha 37).

In his *Third Space*, Bhabha rejects the stability of cultural identity, contrarily it fluctuates to form a new hybrid cultural identity and gives rise to the re-formation of multicultural subjects.

Alice Walker herself has been exposed to this Third Space personally whose exotic cultural background mixed with that of western culture and has appropriated the resulting hybrid culture and mirrored this acculturation process in *Everyday Use*. Dee is obsessed with her hybrid lifestyle in-between her original culture and imposed culture since the culture of the colonizer is presented as an elevated lifestyle.

Along with her mimic attitudes and her distance from her roots, Dee appears to be a hybrid individual having been stuck between her secure premise within this new culture and her authentic cultural identity. She is presented as a mimic character with her fashionable clothes that are fancied up sunglasses and “showing white heels through her sandals” (Arp & Johnson 170). Walker, throughout the novel, depicts Dee as a hybrid character as she is on the brink of rejecting her cultural assets and integrating herself into her new environment. Her desire not to be a part of her authentic life is demonstrated through the story when “she stoops down quickly and lines up picture after picture of me sitting there in front of the house with Maggie cowering behind me. She never takes a shot without making sure the house is included” (170).

Dee displays the very characteristics of the hybrid subject in her hesitation to abandon her authentic cultural values while she does not translate herself into the new culture wholly. “It’s as if before entering that scene Dee wants to make sure that she has a picture of herself not being in the picture. She wants to frame that world, define its borders, and give it a wholeness which then allows her to handle it without being a part of it” (Whitsitt 448). Her distance from her authentic cultural identity is drawn by herself and she manages this socio-cultural process masterfully by excluding herself from her authentic cultural frame. Such attitudes appear and reappear in the story with Dee’s conflicts in her desire to possess authentic materials like the quilt and churn dasher but not of the intention to use them in their everyday function. “Mama,” Wangero said sweetly as a bird. “Can I have these old quilts?” “Well.” I said stumped. “What would you do with them?” asked Mrs. Johnson. “Hang them.” She said. As if that was the only thing you could do with quilts” (Arp & Johnson 173).

It is Dee’s preference to take the old quilts not because of their cultural and authentic values but for her artistic pleasure which appeals only to her desire to prove her distance from her cultural roots. On the contrary, Mrs. Johnson maintains her connection to her cultural representation and favors Maggie’s possession of the authentic materials and she believes that Maggie has a strong interest in her cultural values and identity. What is related to the essence of hybridity in the character of Dee is clarified with Mama’s utterance when their house was set on fire. “I saw her standing off under the sweet gum tree she used to dig gum out of; a look of concentration on her face as she watched the last dingy grey board of the house fall in toward the red brick chimney. Why don’t you do a dance around the ashes? ... She hated the house that much” (168).

Dee’s cultural transformation starts in her teenage years when she feels a sort of alienation from her traditions. As if she wants to erase the traces of her previous life she watches the burning of the house with pleasure. This enables her to turn back on

her cultural history and the traditional story of her ancestral past. Thus, she adapts to the values of the new culture through her development of a hybrid identity.

Ambivalence is a fluctuating term between wanting something and claiming the opposite at the same time (Ashcroft et al. 2000). This ambivalent desire of wanting and rejecting appears within the case of exposure to two different cultures on behalf of the colonized since neither do they reject the imposed culture nor disregard their cultural values and cultural identity. John McLeod explains ambivalence and in-betweenness as this: "Location of Culture addresses those who live 'border lives' on the margins of different nations, in-between contrary homelands...Borders are important thresholds, full of contradiction and ambivalence. They both separate and join different places" (217). The beyond is neither a new horizon nor a leaving behind of the past, it is what gives a considerable explanation of ambivalence –being on a threshold of stepping up into a new identity without denying the history, cultural inheritance, and identity for the sake of materialistic charms of a new cultural identity.

Ambivalence, in this sense, is to stay somewhere secure where one subject stands in hesitation to accept and reject a new and old set of values in terms of cultural and materialistic values, and thus act in a particular way accordingly. In *Everyday Use*, Dee is the most striking character who experiences the ambivalence of cultural identity, while not rejecting her past totally, but integrating into a new culture. She is depicted as a character enjoying the blessings of different cultures:

You just don't understand," Dee said, as Maggie and I came out to the car. "Why don't I understand?" I wanted to know. "Your heritage," she said. And turned to Maggie, kissed her, and said, "You ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It's a new day for us. But from the way, you and Mama still live you'd never know it (174).

Upon Mrs. Johnson's rejection of Dee's wish to possess the quilts, Dee's reaction reflects the feeling of ambivalence in her appreciation of the materialistic value of quilts and her turning towards the new culture once more at the end of the story by accusing her family not to understand the value of "cultural heritage". Mrs. Johnson, on the other hand, appears to have an ambivalent attitude despite her strict consideration and strong ties with her past and cultural values. In most of the story, Mama is in favor of her familial history by reacting to Dee's attitudes and her negligence of the past; however, she appears to have a dream of appearing on a TV show with her daughter Dee. Mama stands against cultural impositions of colonial ideology but favors a sort of TV culture –a fundamental component of neo-colonial cultural imposition. Her ambivalent attitude is reflected in the story via her utterance that "Sometimes I dream a dream in which Dee and I are suddenly brought together on a TV program of this sort. Out of dark and soft-seated limousine, I am ushered into a bright room filled with many people" (167).

Although Mrs. Johnson leads a solitary and humble lifestyle with her daughter Maggie in the countryside and is portrayed to be a character appreciating her cultural past and heritage, she daydreams of appearing on a famous TV program. Her ambivalence becomes evident in the cultural sense in her contradictory attitude of advocating her cultural heritage and her desire to be a part of TV culture that is an effective means of imposing the western way of life. Mama appears to be the straight character in her manners towards the new culture and her loyalty to her root cultural assets.

Though she is presented with strong feelings and dependence on her root culture, she does not totally reject the cultural and individual transformation Dee goes through at university. "A dress down to the ground, in this hot weather. A dress so loud it hurts my eyes. ... Earrings gold, too, hanging down to her shoulders. The dress is loose and flows, and as she walks closer, I like it" (169). Mama's reaction, when compared to Maggie's, is moderate as she appears to accept her daughter's cultural transformation which indicates her ambivalent attitude between the two cultures. The story appears to be the reconciliation of the idea that culture as a dynamic process travels across the borders, yet it is susceptible to any change and transformation.

Toward the conclusion, Walker in *Everyday Use* literally catches the attention through her unique talent to create a macrocosmic cultural decadence in a microcosmic setting. With a very limited number of characters, *Everyday Use* gives a tremendous feeling of the issue of acculturation in western countries. Still, Walker makes it clear for the sake of her cultural inheritance that culture is susceptible to changes of any sort as long as it travels across the borders. As is the case for Dee, she appears to be confused about her cultural legacy. Though she does not reject her maternal ancestry, she struggles to develop and create a new identity. While Dee considers much about her future, Mama and Maggie protect their ancestral values. It will not be wrong to associate mimicry and hybridity with the character of Dee as she appears to be such a figure in the rural setting. Ambivalence, though, is associated with almost all other characters in the sense of their respect for their cultural legacy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, colonial and postcolonial periods individually are successive eras and the latter is a period of reaction to the imposition of the colonizer's enforcement of cultural identity and this social reality has become an undeniable component of postcolonial literary writing. As a dynamic process, culture and its

component -cultural identity- have gone through an unprecedented active stage, and traveled across borders owing to the social, political, economic, and cultural interests of colonialist and imperialist movements. Throughout colonial rule and imperial expansion, many of the components of culture traveled across borders and resulted in the creation of hybrid, mimic, and ambivalent cultural identities and characters. In her attempt to deal with cultural issues, Alice Walker depicted a micro prototype of this cross-cultural or intercultural interaction in her *Everyday Use*. It is observable especially in the character of Dee that she tries to escape her past and cultural roots as well as her colonial heritage. Thus, contrary to her mum and sister Maggie, Dee adapts herself to a new American way of life either rejecting or ignoring her natural heritage. However, Mama and Maggie manage to survive and keep their cultural heritage and they do not surrender to the practices of the adopted culture. Although Dee is the most volatile character with regard to preserving root cultural values, Mama and Maggie are on the side of maintaining their own traditions and cultural assets.

Alice Walker's attempt to highlight these binary situations in the name of Dee as the assimilated individual and Mama as the protector of authentic cultural norms is clearly observable throughout the story. While mimicry and hybridity are well represented in the name of Dee, ambivalence is the core stance on behalf of Mama and Maggie. When the options for indigenous black minorities are very limited in the countries they migrated to, they often tend to create new options and spaces with the motivation of having more. That is to say, Third World citizens are inclined to turn their back on their cultural heritage to ensure a secure zone by mimicking and exhibiting a hybrid lifestyle. When the root culture is suspended in time and space, the gap between cultural and individual identities is filled by the practices of the target culture through *mimicry*, *hybridity*, and *ambivalence*. Still, culture travels across the borders even if it is open to any kind of change due to various factors available.

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