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Quilting lives: Quilting as a narrative strategy in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Meridian* and *The Temple of My Familiar*

Dr. Asha Krishnan
Assistant Professor in English
HHMSPBNSS College
Neeramankara
Thiruvananthapuram

Abstract

Black women, who were triply disadvantaged, had only limited means to express their creativity. Quilting was one of the means to narrate stories. Alice Walker, a writer who upholds black tradition, uses quilting as a narrative technique in her novels and stories. Alice Walker through her narratives makes an attempt to reconnect herself with the ancient African consciousness. The paper analyses how Walker employs quilting as a technique in her literary works.

Key words: Quilting, Black Consciousness, Black-American quilters, narrative strategy

Quilting, like story-telling is a communal activity in the lives of Afro-Americans. When the African slaves were brought to America from the African continent, the slave women combined the African way of quilting with the American quilt designs, thereby creating a creolized artistic pattern. In design colour selection and figuring, the influence of West African quilts is notable. Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce Baker describe patch work quilts as "A patch-work quilt, laboriously and affectionately crafted from bits of worn overalls, shredded uniforms, tattered petticoats and outgrown dresses, stands as a signal instance of a patterned wholeness in the African diaspora"(309). Quilting was one of the art forms where Black women unleashed their creativity. Since reading and writing were outside the domains of the average Black women, their creativity was expressed in gardening, cooking, story-telling and quilting. Elaine Showalter comments that quilting helped to expand the social relationship between women, as "At the quilting bee women celebrated a birth or an engagement...Quilting bees were also places where women came together to exchange information, learn new skills and discuss political issues" (*Sister's Choice* 148).

Until the 1960's the quilts by Black women were ignored from the American quilt history. Cuesta Benberry in the essay "African American Quilts: Paradigms of Black Diversity" sketches the three events that promoted the acceptance of Afro-American Quilts. They were the inclusion of Harriet Power's famous Bible Quilt in the exhibition of Selections of Nineteenth Century Afro-American Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gladys-Marie Fry's landmark essay, "Harriet Powers: Portrait of a Black Quilter", and the exhibition of

Quilts from Mississippi Heartland, "More Than just Something to Keep You Warm" (Benberry 291) .The formation of Women of Color Quilter's Network, an international association for endorsing African American quilters also contributed to bringing the hitherto unknown quilters to the centre-stage. Quilt researchers identify a peculiar pattern which is recurrent in the African American quilt. The strip quilts, "woven on narrow looms in narrow strips and then sewn edge-to-edge" (Benberry 292) bear testimony to the African American quilter's preservation of the West African influence in quilt making. The use of bold colours in Black American quilt-making suggests the African influence of exercising bright colours. The bright colours were used in African textiles with the aim of detecting people in bright sunlight of the tropical regions. Multiple patterning was also a method introduced by Afro-American quilters. In Africa, multiple patterned dresses were the symbols of wealth, power and reputation. For instance, a king's robe or a priest's robe contained as many as thirty patterns and designs. An asymmetrical design is also one of the features of African quilts. Instead of weaving a particular pattern and repeating it, the quilter was free to choose any shape or pattern which resulted in asymmetrical designs. There is an African superstition behind asymmetrical patterning as well. Africans believed that evil spirits travelled in straight lines and a break in the straight-line pattern helped to ward off evil spirits. Black American quilters use quilts as a medium for narrating their stories, articulating their thoughts and notions and preserving their family lineage. During special occasions like marriage or the birth of a child, quilts are appliquéd so as to record the important family events. Some quilts have religious symbols or inscriptions in native language having protective power. In Africa, quilters believe that wearing quilts with religious symbols or sacred words bring wealth, power, and prosperity to the wearer. The Black American quilters, like their African counterparts, employ charms in their quilts so as to safeguard user from evil spirits.

Even after the lapse of many years, Black Americans preserve the ideas and techniques of Quilt-making which they received as their legacy from Africa. Wahlman opines that the Black American quilters who have succeeded in upholding their tradition prove "the strength of African cultural traditions in contemporary American society, affirming the extraordinary tenacity of African ideas over hundreds of years in the face of major historical obstacles"(*Afro-American Quilting* para 12).

Among Black American quilters, Harriet Powers holds an important place. Gladys-Marie Fry has commented on the quilts of Powers that "her quilts are visual masterpieces, jewels of creative imagination and artistic expression" (300). Powers used biblical stories, local legends and astronomical phenomena as raw material for her creative expression. The sway of West African tradition is perceptible in Harriet Powers' quilts. Gladys-Marie Fry explains that in design, structure and pictorial depiction of stories, Power's quilts bear similarity to Dahomean tapestry. The designs in Power's quilts, where figures of animals or humans are appliquéd against the background of gold or black, provide evidence of the influence of Dahomean designs. The use of symbols for representing various characters in biblical stories and other local stories bear testimony to the West African influence. The characters from folk stories and biblical stories figure in Power's quilts. Powers used her imagination in translating oral stories to figures in her quilts. Powers who was illiterate, with the help of Jennie Smith kept a record of the explanation of the pictures in the quilts. In one of her famous quilts which depicts the dark day has the description: "The dark day of May 19, 1780. The seven stars were seen 12.N. in the day. The cattle all went to bed, chickens to

roost and the trumpet was blown. The sun went off to a small spot and then to darkness" (Fry 307). The dark day occurs when the atmosphere becomes polluted with smoke from the forest fires. The day becomes as dark as night as a result of this. Though Powers had not witnessed this phenomenon, she was so impressed to hear about the dark day and she resolved to record this unusual occurrence in her quilt. The quilts of Harriet Powers, though they did not get adequate recognition during her life-time, now are considered to be icons of American art.

Elizabeth Keckley, another talented Afro-American needle worker who later became official dressmaker in the White House was initially a slave. In her book, *Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* she remembers the severe torture of her master during her days of slavery. After becoming the official dressmaker for Abraham Lincoln's wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, Keckley made a silk quilt from scraps of Lady Lincoln's gowns. At the centre of the quilt, was the word, "liberty" embroidered in capital letters. Another gifted needle worker was Hannah Morrow who was a slave at a plantation at Lexington, near Kentucky. Morrow refused to leave the plantation even after Emancipation. With her meagre salary, which she obtained from her former masters, she bought new fabrics with which she made her famous quilt, "Robbing Peter to Pay Paul". This quilt, which is devoid of fragment clothes, "is colour co-ordinated- white dot on red fabric alternating with red dot on white fabric clothes"(Benberry 297).Though there were records of the existence of thousands of Black women in the North as well as South, no quilts by the Black needle workers were found in the ante bellum period.

Just like the folklore, myths and legends; quilting also forms an indispensible part of Afro-American tradition which has laid its influence upon the creativity of Alice Walker. In one of her short stories, "Everyday Use", Walker mentions the importance of quilts in the lives of Black American women. Quilts represented their past and were representative of heritage/tradition. Though Walker stresses the importance of tradition, she criticizes the pretension of some Black American women who deliberately display their cultural artifacts for the sake of fashion. Dee in "Every Day Use" who is city-educated returns to her house with her boyfriend to take away the quilt which her grandmother had made. Dee who has joined the Black Nationalist group changes her name Dee to African name, Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. Dee, who had once rejected her roots and tradition, returns to her home after her college education with a superficial love of culture and tradition. She demands to possess the quilt which their grandmother Dee had started quilting. Dee has rejected the same quilt before, as "old fashioned and out of style" (52). At this point, her mother realizes that Dee's need for her grandmother's quilt is insincere and Maggie, her diffident younger daughter, is the one who is worthy of keeping the quilt as a legacy. Maggie's comment "She can have them, Mama . . . . I can 'member Grandma Dee without quilts" (54) stresses the worth of Maggie over Dee.

As a writer who values culture and tradition, Walker cautions her readers to differentiate between the people who sincerely uphold Black culture and tradition and those who use it as an artifact without sincerity.

Many of Walker's novels are structured in the way quilters make a quilt. In quilt-making, bits and pieces from old clothes are cut in a particular shape and are pieced together to form a larger piece called, patch.

> The patches are joined together into an overall pattern, usually a traditional one with a name that indicates its regional, political or spiritual meaning. Finally the entire fabric is stitched to a heavy padding and heavy backing with a variety of large scale embroidery motifs. (Showalter 149)

The myths, legends and folktales which Walker once heard are consciously pieced together into the fabric of her narrative quilt which enhances the beauty of her novel.

Walker acknowledges the influence of her mother as well as her ancestors in nurturing her art. In her essay collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker concedes the unknown artists of the South, like her mother who could make something new and useful out of the worn out materials. The creativity of the Southern Black women that found expression in quilting, gardening, cooking and dress-making went unappreciated. The Southern Black women made quilts from the bits and pieces of the outgrown clothes of their children or rags that could not be used any more. The quilts, when structured in a particular pattern became imaginative masterpieces. Walker follows the same tradition of the Southern Black artists in structuring her narrative quilt with bits and pieces of stories and anecdotes.

Walker herself used the phrase "crazy quilt" to refer to the structure of *Meridian* (Tate, Claudia 176). In quilting, the quilters normally use a pattern or a design into which pieces are combined. But in crazy quilts, no patterns or designs or colour combinations are followed which ultimately give the quilt an asymmetrical look. Quilters can employ any pattern or use material of any kind to make crazy quilts. Betty Pillsbury suggests there are two methods for making crazy quilt. One method is by joining the tiny, irregular shaped pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle. In the other method of making a crazy quilt, scraps of different types of clothes were combined, like velvet, satin, brocade, wool, cotton or linen (para 3).

The novel, *Meridian* comprises of short chapters comprising of anecdotes that focus on a particular incident that are related to the main narrative. At the beginning of the novel we find Meridian leading a group of children to see the mummified body of Marilene O' Shay. Though the story of Marilene O' Shay is not directly related to the structure of the novel, it provides an understanding of the objectification of women in society, against which Meridian protests. The narrative suddenly shifts back to a time ten years back where the revolutionary friends of Meridian interrogate her with the question "Will you kill for the Revolution?"(*Meridian* 27). In the pattern of the crazy quilt, the narrative shifts back and forth in time. The next two chapters titled "The Wild Child"and "Sojourner" give an account of Meridian's life at Saxon College. The narrative again shifts to her childhood days in the following chapters. Meridian's affair with Eddie during her high school days and Meridian's audacious decision to leave her child so as to continue her studies are mentioned after giving an account of her college days. Meridian's tryst with Truman is dealt with in the following chapters. Barbara Christian opines that in Meridian, Walker creates a "quilt of Civil Rights

Movement"(*Introduction* 6) by weaving patches of Meridian's personal life together with patches of the violent history of the 1960's that witnessed the assassination of John. F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.

In *The Color Purple*, which narrates the fairy-tale like transformation of downtrodden Celie to that of a successful entrepreneur running her own firm, Folkspants Unlimited, the transformation is achieved through Celie's creativity and hard work in traditional dressmaking. Walker, who has realized the influence of quilting and dress-making in African American culture, acknowledged it and demonstrated it through her protagonist, Celie in *The Color Purple.* In the early chapters of the novel, we find Celie making quilts and curtains just like any other Black American house wife who makes quilts and curtains as a part of housekeeping. But in the later chapters, we find Celie employing the art of quilting and dressmaking as a strategy to assert her independent existence.

Just like the quilts Celie makes from bits and pieces of old clothes, Walker has made the literary quilt from the fragments of historical and literary sources. Elaine Showalter has rightly remarked that *The Color Purple* is a "narrative quilt from the spectrum of literary and cultural texts which Walker has inherited" (20). In the literary quilt of *The Color Purple*, subjugation of Black women in domestic as well as public sphere, that is expressed through Celie and Sofia forms one of the 'patches'. The lynching of Black men, a widespread atrocity in America is expressed through the murder of Celie's father, forms another piece in the patch. The native African life and manners which are divulged through Nettie's letters forms yet another patch. The colonization of Africa by the Whites and the subsequent erosion of the customs and tradition of the Native Africans are included in the patch. The intimate relationship between Shug and Celie that aids Celie's metamorphosis forms yet another patch. Though the patches appear disparate, the overall design unites them all.

There are references to quilting and dressmaking in different chapters of *The Color Purple*. In the early chapters, we find Celie making curtains for her step-son, Harpo. But the curtains are brought back by Sofia when she finds out Celie has advised Harpo to beat Sofia. But Sofia's antagonism disappears when she hears Celie's innocent confession that "I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do it what I can't" (*The Color Purple* 39) After an intimate conversation between the two, Sofia tells Celie "Let's make quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains, she say. And I run git my pattern book" (*The Color Purple* 41). Here quilting acts as a medium for developing the sisterly bond between the two women. The act of quilting becomes all the more exciting one for Celie as Shug contributes her old dress for taking scraps for the quilt. In Celie's own words: "Shug Avery donate her old yellow dress for scrap and I work in a piece every chance I get. It a nice pattern call Sister's Choice. If the quilt turn out to be perfect, maybe I give it to her, if it not perfect, maybe I keep" (*The Color Purple* 56). But Celie decides to give the quilt to Sofia when she makes up her mind to go to her sister's house. As Celie says: "At the last minute I decide to give Sofia the quilt. I don't know what her sister place like be, but we have been having right smart cold weather long in now. For all I know, she and the children have to sleep on the floor" (*The Color Purple* 64). Quilting, not only liberates Celie from all the feelings of selfishness and jealousy, but also infuses in her the womanist quality of loving other women wholeheartedly. M.Teresa Tavormina has rightly stated that:

> Besides providing an outlet for the creative forces within the self and offering a visual and tactile medium for presenting that self to the world, clothworking and clothing can also create the bonds between members of a community, especially a familial one. (223)

The quilt of Corrine made from the old dresses of Olivia also plays an important role in annihilating suspicion from Corrine's mind. Corrine becomes suspicious about Nettie's relationship with Samuel and she doubts Olivia is their child. As the last alternative, Nettie takes a quilt made by Corrine "that alternated one square of appliquéd figures with one nine-patch block"(*The Color Purple* 168) and asks her to remember the lady, Celie whom they had met at the dry goods store while buying dresses for little Olivia. Nettie questions Corrine "Do you remember buying this cloth? I asked pointing to a flowered square. And what about this checkered bird?"(*The Color Purple* 168). Corrine, in a flash of memory, remembers meeting Celie, Olivia's mother and the burden of suspicion is removed from Corrine's mind.

Dress-making becomes a passion for Celie as she starts making dresses at Shug's home at Memphis. Walker must have had her ancestors in mind who have liberated their selves through their creativity while modelling the character of Celie. Ealine Hedges was right in her remark that "Celie is the direct descendant of those earlier generations of women for whom sewing and quilting meant psychic survival" (354). Celie forgets her mule-like existence in Albert's house once she involves herself in dress-making. The thrill of converting her passion into her profession lies in Celie's words:

> I sit in the dining room making pants after pants. I got pants nowin every colour and size under the sun. Since us started making pants down home, I ain't been able to stop. I change the cloth, I change the print, I change the waist, I change the pocket. I change the fullness the hem, I change the fullness of the leg. I make so many pants Shug tease me....Pants all over her chairs, hanging all in front of the china closet. Newspaper patterns and cloth all over the table and the floor. (191)

Albert, the abusive husband of Celie dons an entirely different role in the final chapters of *The Color Purple* when we find Albert helping Celie in sewing. Albert has undergone a sea- change in his character as well as in his attitude towards life. From a rude and offensive husband, he has transformed to an understanding and co-operative husband lending a helping hand to his wife in designing shirts. "Got to have pockets, he say. Got to have loose sleeves. And definitely not spose to wear it with no tie" (257). Teresa Tavormina has precisely noted that through the cloth working imagery in *The Color Purple*, Walker asserts that cloth working "is a human art, not limited to women unless men wish to impose sex-role constraints on their own creativity" (222).

Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* also follows the structure of a quilt with seemingly incoherent characters and situations but is combined together by a pattern by the master quilter. People with different cultural background are brought together along with people sharing their experiences in different spaces and times. Bonnie Braendlin opines that the narrative strategy employed in the novel can be compared to the hybrid creature, the priestess' familiar described in the novel which is part bird, part reptile and part fish. Walker,

in the novel, "mixes tones and style with abandon, at times Walker's language is serious and lyrical, at other times comic and cliched…An unconventional. non-narrative, text, the novel may be read as a pastiche"(50) .

The Temple of My Familiar deals with the story of three couples-Suwelo and Fanny, Arveyda and Carlotta who are not able to cope together as husband and wife. Another couple, Hal and Miss Lissie forms a sharp antithesis to New Age couples. Miss Lissie, a complex character created by Walker is not just a woman, but as Hal suggests, "Lissie is a lot of women" (38). Miss Lissie who remembers her past lives, as J M Coetzee points out, is "less a character, than a narrative device, Lissie enables Alice Walker to range back in time to the beginnings of a (wo)man"(7). Miss Lissie, a friend of Suwelo's uncle Rafe develops a bond with Suwelo which makes her narrate her stories of her past lives to him. Through the character of Miss Lissie, Walker surveys the plurality of experiences of being a woman in different spaces and different times. Each life of Miss Lissie can be considered to be a patch in the quilt.

In one of her early lives Miss Lissie describes her pathetic story of how she and her neighbours were taken off in a slave ship from the African shores, "packed as if we were sardines for this two-month long journey"(68) enduring all kinds of horrors including rape by the White men. She was later sold to one of the planters and while trying to escape she fell into a trap and lost one leg which eventually led to her death.

In another life, Miss Lissie was a pygmy where they led a happy and contented life with their "cousins" trees and apes. The happy co-existence of human beings with animate and inanimate objects of nature is highlighted in this life of Miss Lissie. She and her husband violated the custom of their society by staying together even after her pregnancy. According to the norm of the society, men and women should stay apart and only in times of mating they should live together. As a punishment for the breach of law, Miss Lissie and her mate were isolated by the tribe. So they went to stay with their "cousins" in the deep forest with their baby. The message that life is filled with contentment where there is an assimilation of man and nature is highlighted in this life of Miss Lissie.

Miss Lissie remembers her yet another life where she became a prostitute as she was born without a hymen and on her wedding night there was no blood stained sheet to show off to the villagers which made her husband condemn her for being adulterous. She describes a different life of hers in a letter to Suwelo where she was a mooress, one of the pagan heretics who was burned alive for allegedly practicing witchcraft. Walker here describes how the custom of Mother worship in Africa was systematically dethroned by the Whites. The White men felt insecure at the sight of women dominating every aspect of life. "We helped life and they did not like this at all. Whenever they saw our power it made them feel they had none. They felt themselves the moon to our sun" (196). The White's strategy of ignoring the female voices and forcefully silencing were one of the ways of ensuring his domination over the women. As Miss Lissie recounts: "He (The Whites) has let himself be taught that his own mother is evil and has joined religions in which her only role, after nurturing and rearing him with her blood is to shut up"(196).

In one of the dream memories of Miss Lissie, that are her lives in the distant past, that are "so frayed around the edges that is like an old moth eaten shawl" (366), she was a lion. Miss Lissie memorizes the details of her existence as a lion- and the richness of her friendship with the women and children at a time when men and women lived apart. Women and children shared a happy, independent and undisturbed life with their familiars. They grew up together and had their own favourite spots in the forests where they played together. In the nights they were kept warm by the night fire. As time changed, men and women started living together, which resulted in the loss of freedom for both. Man started wielding power and authority over women which resulted in the loss of harmony between the two. The most heartbreaking thing was that men ordered the women to chase their familiars away from them. The men instructed their dogs to chase them. Man's jealousy and wrath were aimed at the lions "to hunt us down, to kill and eat us, to wear our hides, our teeth and bones" (367). Lions moved away from man to the depths of forests and they were "experiencing one of the great changes in the structure of earth's life" (367).

The narrative quilt of *The Temple of My Familiar* is enriched with the experiences of different people of different customs and ethnicity. Zede narrates her experiences in South America, and through Fanny the African life and manners are recounted. Each patch or block of the quilt is enriched with plurality of experiences and a multitude of characters which lend the quilt a distinctive colour and a unique pattern.

Walker is a writer who values her heritage, which manifests itself in myths, legends and folktales. For Walker, the myths, legends and folktales of the African as well as African American community are raw materials which can be transformed accordingly as to fit into the framework of her fiction. Like an African griot, Walker through her novels, attempts to record the past of her community from declining into oblivion. African griot is the counterpart of the Medieval European minstrel who passes the stories of the ancestors from one generation to the next. They are known to be custodians of history, as written history is something new to Africans. Griots sing songs about their ancestors and also of their past. Walker expounds her bonding with her ancestors in these words:

> I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life my ancestors lived, and in the writing...I felt joy and strength and my own continuity. I had that wonderful feeling that writers get sometimes...of being with a great many people, ancient spirits, all very happy to see me consulting and acknowledging them, and eager to let me know through the joy of their presence, that indeed, I am not alone. (*In Search* 157)

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