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The Legacy of Epistemic Injustices in *Everyday Use* by Alice Walker

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Abstract:

Alice Walker's *Everyday Use* provides a rich narrative of cultural identity and heritage, manifesting the tension between differing understandings of African American history and values. Through the experiences of the protagonist, Mama, and her daughters, Dee and Maggie, Walker engages deeply with the theme of epistemic injustice—the silencing and marginalization of certain kinds of knowledge. This paper explores how Walker depicts the contrast between lived, embodied knowledge and the detached, aestheticized understanding of heritage. I argue that *Everyday Use* serves as a critique of Dee's appropriation of culture and heritage and a defense of the lived experiences that inform true understanding and appreciation of one's cultural roots. Drawing from Miranda Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice, this paper examines how the characters in *Everyday Use* either perpetuate or resist epistemic violence, particularly in their relationships with the material culture of their ancestors.

Keywords: Epistemic injustice, culture, heritage, marginalization.

1. Introduction¹

Alice Walker's *Everyday Use* is a strong short story that digs into the complex and multi-layered relationships of African American heritage, memory, and identity through the lives of three

¹ Alice Walker is an American novelist, poet, and activist who has taught African American women's studies at several universities. Her most famous novel, *The Color Purple*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1983.

central characters: Mama, Dee, and Maggie. Set against the backdrop of the African American struggle for cultural recognition and historical validation, the narrative interrogates the complex interplay of tradition and modernity, embodied in the contrasting perspectives of Dee and her mother and sister. The text becomes a vehicle through its richly layered storytelling, critiquing not only interpersonal conflicts but also broader societal dynamics, especially the systemic marginalization and erasure of certain types of knowledge and experience. Central to this critique is the concept of epistemic injustice, a philosophical framework introduced by Miranda Fricker² which examines how individuals are wronged in their capacity as knowers—whether through testimonial disregard or hermeneutical exclusion. Walker's story poignantly illustrates these forms of epistemic injustice, really deepening the implications within African American women's lived realities.

At the very heart of the story stands the tension between Dee's intellectualized and aestheticized approach to heritage and the profoundly lived experience of Mama and Maggie. Dee, who adopts the name Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo as an act of reclaiming her African heritage, is the epitome of a shallow, commodified view of culture—one that values representation over experience and practice. Her desire to own family heirlooms, such as the handmade quilts, as objects of ornamentation stands in stark contrast to Mama and Maggie's more practical and emotional connection to those objects. For Mama and Maggie, the quilts are not symbols of heritages but functional goods imbued with the spirit of their parents and the continuity of their customs. This difference points towards a deeper epistemological conflict: the privilege bestowed on theoretical, abstract knowledge at the cost of embodied, lived wisdom. By foregrounding this conflict, Walker exposes the epistemic violence enacted against those who sustain and transmit cultural knowledge through daily practices rather than intellectual abstraction.

In addition, *Everyday Use* critiques the broader historical and cultural silencing experienced by African American women, whose voices and experiences have often been marginalized or dismissed. It is the condescending attitude toward her family, which exhibits testimonial injustice. For Mama and Maggie's knowledge and lived experiences are devalued to favour the seemingly enlightened but superficial perspective of Dee. Simultaneously, the story

² Miranda Fricker, a British philosopher, defines epistemic injustice as the unfair treatment of people or groups in communicative practices and knowledge-related matters. She coined the term in 1999.

reveals hermeneutical injustice in that the cultural framework required to appreciate the depth of Mama and Maggie's knowledge is obscured by dominant narratives that privilege certain forms of expression over others. Walker forces readers to confront the consequences of this epistemic marginalization, especially in the context of African American women's dual burden of racial and gender-based oppression.

Through its nuanced portrayal of intergenerational conflict and cultural alienation, *Everyday Use* invites readers to grapple with profound questions about authenticity, heritage, and the ethics of representation. It is a challenge not only to the commodification of culture but also to the systemic devaluation of lived knowledge. It offers a scorching critique of epistemic injustice in all its forms. By centring the experiences of Mama and Maggie, Walker reclaims the narrative space for those whose voices have historically been silenced, insisting on the validity and richness of their contributions to the collective cultural memory. This paper shall look into the engagement of the story with epistemic injustice, focusing on its implications for African American women's experience of historical silencing, cultural marginalization, and the struggle for epistemic justice.

2. Testimonial Injustice³ and Silencing of Embodied Knowledge:

Testimonial injustice is the case where prejudice makes a hearer give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word. In the story, *Everyday Use*, Maggie and Mama are the victims of this type of injustice at the hands of Dee's dismissive attitude toward their knowledge and way of life. Dee, newly self-fashioned as Wangero, represents the intellectual who has returned from her formal education armed with a new, radical understanding of African heritage. However, her conception of heritage is entirely detached from the daily struggles and rituals of the past. She views the quilts, butter churn, and other family artifacts as mere aesthetic objects, stripped of their historical and emotional significance.

This rejection of the material culture of the family by Dee as mere relics meant to be admired but not made use of is a symptom of her inability to respect the use-knowledge embedded in those very objects. Mama and Maggie, however, understand objects as functional pieces of the everyday life and history of their familial culture. The quilts embody labor, care, creative

³ Miranda Fricker (2007) has introduced and influentially discussed testimonial. Injustice: the injustice done to a speaker S by a hearer H when, due to a. negative identity-prejudicial stereotype she holds about S, H unjustly accords. Too little credibility to S.

expressions, and all the rest expressed in them by generations past that stitched them together. In Fricker's terms, Dee's aestheticization of these objects is a form of testimonial injustice, as it undermines the value of Maggie's and Mama's embodied knowledge—the practical understanding of how to use and care for these objects.

Dee's superiority complex and intellectual arrogance lead her to impose a form of silencing upon her mother and sister. Maggie's silent compliance, her hesitant proposal that Dee take the quilts promised to her, marks the epistemic silencing that takes place in the devaluing of lived knowledge compared with better-positioned forms of intellectual or academic knowledge. Dee's assertion that Maggie would "probably be backward enough to put [the quilts] to everyday use" not only insults Maggie's understanding of the quilts but also reflects a broader societal tendency to devalue practical, lived experience in favour of abstracted, commodified forms of knowledge.

According to Miranda Fricker, testimonial injustice is where prejudice leads a hearer to downgrade the credibility of a speaker's testimony, thereby marginalizing their voice and knowledge. In Alice Walker's short story, *Everyday Use*, this form of epistemic injustice is starkly evident in the interactions between Dee (who renames herself Wangero) and her mother and sister, Mama and Maggie. In this respect, Dee's attitudes toward her family's way of life, which is basically dismissive, serves as an excellent example of how intellectual arrogance grounded in class and educational privilege can serve to devalue embodied knowledge. Her words and actions reflect the larger societal attitude of valuing abstract, intellectualized perceptions of heritage that do not sustain it or transmit the cultural memory but instead devalue the same.

Dee's transformation into Wangero is the perfect embodiment of an intellectual who, equipped with formal education and radical ideology, returns to her roots in an abstracted, aesthetic sense of cultural identity. Here, her reinterpretation of her African American heritage is an accentuation of symbolic gestures and material artifacts, rather than being lived realities. For Dee, quilts, butter churns, and dashers become no longer functional items charged with familial labor and care but relics to be commodified and displayed as proof of her new cultural awareness. In her quest for an idealized heritage, she strips these objects of their historical, emotional, and practical significance. This reduction of deeply meaningful objects to mere aesthetic symbols constitutes a form of testimonial injustice, as it denies the legitimacy and value of the embodied knowledge Mama and Maggie possess.

For Mama and Maggie, however, these objects are integral to their lives and to carrying family history. The quilts are very important to them. These are not mere pieces of cloth, but pieces of connection to their ancestor's labor, creativity, and perseverance. The stitches within these quilts speak of survival and care through the ingenuity of women who have a will to work with as little as possible to create an object useful yet beautiful. For Mama and Maggie, these quilts are not artifacts to be displayed but tools to be used, cherished, and passed down as a living testament to their heritage. Dee's failure to appreciate this perspective reveals her estrangement from the lived realities of her family's culture. Her condescending remark that Maggie is "backward enough to put [the quilts] to everyday use" reflects her inability to get that it is precisely such everyday use that heritage becomes alive and relevant.

Epistemic violence in testimonial injustice is well illustrated in Dee's attitude toward her mother and sister. Her intellectual superiority complex leads her to impose a form of silencing upon Mama and Maggie, dismissing their voices and reducing their experiences to a static, antiquated form of cultural knowledge. Maggie's quiet demeanor and reluctant willingness to relinquish the quilts to Dee highlight the power dynamics at play. Maggie, molded by years of trauma and self-effacement, is the silenced subaltern figure whose knowledge and worth are eclipsed by Dee's showy self-confidence. In this context, Maggie's submission is not just a gesture of surrender but also a reflection of the greater societal marginalization of those whose knowledge is rooted in lived, practical experience.

Furthermore, Dee's desire to possess the quilts and other artifacts while simultaneously denigrating the context in which they were created underscores a profound misunderstanding of heritage. By commodifying these objects and detaching them from their functional and historical contexts, Dee enacts a form of epistemic silencing that denies the value of Mama and Maggie's embodied knowledge. In this manner, Dee's behaviour reflects the broader cultural mechanisms of epistemic injustice, in which the voices of marginalized communities, specifically African American women from rural and working-class backgrounds, are constantly devalued and ignored.

Walker employs Dee's relationships with her family to challenge the way society favors abstract, intellectual knowledge over the lived, embodied experiences of those who actually maintain cultural traditions. Mama and Maggie's relationship to their heritage is not a performative act or display but rather deeply ingrained within their lives and identities. In highlighting this

contrast, Walker foregrounds how testimonial injustice serves to extend and consolidate the hierarchies of knowledge that discount marginalized contributions. Through the lens of *Everyday Use*, readers are challenged to face the harmful effects of epistemic injustice and to realize that all forms of knowledge should be honoured and valued, especially those grounded in experience.

3. Hermeneutical Injustice⁴ and the Erasure of Cultural Context:

Hermeneutical injustice is a concept developed by Miranda Fricker, in which structural gaps in collective interpretive frameworks hinder the ability of individuals to articulate or understand their experiences. Such injustice is poignantly depicted in Dee's (who renames herself Wangero) interactions with her family and their cultural heritage in Alice Walker's *Everyday Use*. Her intellectual and performative engagement with her roots exemplifies the erasure of personal and cultural context, reducing rich traditions to symbols divorced from their lived and embodied significances. Through Dee's actions and attitudes, Walker critiques a superficial reclamation of heritage that prioritizes abstraction and aesthetics over the continuity of everyday practices and communal identity.

On the surface, Dee's decision to rename herself Wangero is a reclamation of identity—a rejection of the name “Dee,” which she associates with colonial and racial oppression. However, in doing so, she enacts a form of hermeneutical injustice, ignoring the intimate, familial narrative embedded in the name. As Mama pointed out, the name “Dee” has a lineage that stretches back through generations, linking Dee to her grandmother and great-grandmother. Such continuity carries with it not just individual historical narratives, but also survival and hope and love in the continuum within that lineage as a direct impact of systemic oppression. Wherein lies Dee's diminished and narrow insight into how personal culture and family identities come about. She de-contextualizes “Dee” to turn it into a colonial artifact. This strips it of the deep, lived meanings that lie there, reducing it to an icon and, in so doing, erasing the distinct cultural narrative it carries for her family. This is the very essence of hermeneutical injustice—the imposition of an alien, external interpretive framework upon an intimate cultural reality.

⁴ According to Miranda Fricker, hermeneutical injustice is when a person is at a disadvantage in understanding their social experiences due to a gap in shared interpretive resources.

Moreover, Dee's intellectualization of African heritage reflects a broader societal tendency to essentialize and commodify cultural identities. By donning African-inspired clothing, adopting a new name, and seeking out family artifacts like the butter churn and quilts as decorative objects, Dee conflates heritage with material symbols. She treats these items as symbolic of a pristine, remote African past rather than as a lived, African American present—indeed a present characterized by struggle, survival, and adaptation. Her cursory involvement bespeaks a larger cultural trajectory in which African American history and culture are recontextualized in ways that transform them into items of trade and commerce with their original context and its lived reality erased. This perspective alienates Dee from the true essence of her heritage, which resides not in static symbols but in the everyday lives and practices of people like Mama and Maggie.

Mama and Maggie serve as embodiments of an alternative relationship to heritage, one that resists intellectualized or performative displays. Their connection to their cultural history is grounded in continuity and practice. Partly, Maggie is the figure embodying such quiet strength and resilience among those who carry cultural knowledge alive from lived experience. When Mama declares that Maggie will be the one to inherit quilts because “she knows how to quilt⁵,” she is valorizing embodied knowledge and labours of generations of women who transformed necessity into artistic ones. Maggie's quilting is an unbroken chain of creativity and survival, heritage not abstracted but lived and practiced by her ancestors.

The desire of Dee to hang the quilts as art objects instead of using them as her grandmother intended shows the hermeneutical chasm between her and her family. For Dee, the quilts are artifacts of a static past, valuable mainly as aesthetic representations of heritage. For Mama and Maggie, the quilts stand for something far more vital: for love, strength, and ingenuity intergenerationally stitched into patches of old clothes with memories. When Dee decides that she will hang the quilts on the wall, the meaning is to transform those objects from objects that speak of intimacy intergenerational labor into something un-human. This detachment underlines the hermeneutical injustice faced by Mama and Maggie, whose deep, lived connection to their heritage is overshadowed by Dee's intellectualized and decontextualized interpretation.

⁵ Everyday use, 02.

In *Everyday Use*, Alice Walker presents a nuanced exploration of hermeneutical injustice as it intersects with cultural heritage and familial dynamics. Through the juxtaposition of Dee's performative reclamation of identity and Mama and Maggie's lived connection to their past, Walker critiques the reduction of heritage to abstract symbols without context. The quiet, unassuming knowledge Maggie holds, as well as her ability to embody continuity, starkly contrasts with the appropriation of her cultural roots in Dee. Walker's narrative points to the importance of preserving the lived and communal aspects of heritage, which dominate the frameworks that erase them and perpetuate hermeneutical injustice.

4. Heritage and cultural appropriation⁶ :

In Alice Walker's short story *Everyday Use*, the theme of heritage and cultural appropriation comes out prominently through Dee's perception and treatment of her family's material culture. Dee's approach reflects a broader trend of cultural commodification, where the symbols of heritage are detached from their original context and repurposed as aesthetic or intellectual artifacts. By viewing the quilts and butter churn as decorative items for display rather than functional objects imbued with personal and historical significance, Dee epitomizes a capitalist mind-set that reduces culture to a commodity. Her perspective transforms the artifacts of her family's everyday life into symbols of curated identity, disregarding their intrinsic connection to the lived experiences, struggles, and traditions of the family's lineage. Essentially, Dee's eye is not an eye of reverence but an eye of appropriation, heritage stripped of its essence and reconstituted for individualistic and superficial gain.

Dee's claim that Maggie cannot "appreciate" the quilts because she would use them in daily life speaks to her commodified understanding of culture. This view speaks to a fundamental disconnect between Dee and the ethos of her family's heritage. For Dee, the quilts are meaningful as they represent a past she can curate and show off, a past reshaped in the light of her education and external influence. Maggie, on the other hand, represents a connection with the quilts much more personal, one born of lived experience and the oral traditions of story and craftsmanship passed down over generations. This dismissive attitude of Dee towards Maggie's "everyday use"

⁶ Cultural appropriation is the act of adopting elements of a culture without understanding or respecting the original culture and context.

of the quilts reveals her inability to see heritage as a dynamic and practical process, one that thrives in its application rather than in its mere preservation.

Mama's decision to give the quilts to Maggie, rather than Dee, can be seen as an act of profound epistemic and cultural resistance. This choice asserts the importance of lived heritage over commodified representations. By giving the quilts to Maggie, who has both the skill and the understanding to continue the quilting tradition, Mama affirms the value of embodied knowledge and rejects Dee's attempt to appropriate the family's heritage for performative or aesthetic purposes. This act is not merely a maternal decision but a powerful statement about the nature of cultural legacy. It challenges the pervasive societal trend of detaching cultural symbols from their origins and reclaiming them as static, museum-like objects. Instead, Mama reasserts that heritage is an evolving, lived experience—a dynamic process interwoven with the everyday acts of survival, creativity, and memory.

In this light, the quilts symbolize more than familial bonds; they represent the labor, resilience, and stories of generations of African American women. It is in the functionality that these things carry rather than in any beauty, and this for a family's history and continuity. Thus, the action taken by Dee toward heritage was not only a lack of understanding but a symbol of how culture is traded upon—the more meaningful reality of experience replaced with superficiality in an effort to attain ownership and the mere pleasure of display. By such resistance, Mama is re-owning the quilts—and with them, by association, her family heritage—back from this commercialized text and firmly establishing them within the reality of the real world, tradition. The meaning that *Everyday Use* imparts as critique toward cultural appropriation compels one to think through the moral dimension of heritage and why that should be lived with a view toward its utility and practice.

In *Everyday Use*, Alice Walker delves deeply into the nuanced tensions that arise between intellectualized understandings of culture and heritage and the embodied knowledge that is transmitted through generations in lived, often unnoticed ways. The story serves as a critique of the epistemic divides that privilege abstract, detached perspectives over the organic, experiential wisdom of marginalized communities. Through the character of Dee, Walker illuminates how cultural heritage, when viewed through an intellectualized or performative lens, can be reduced to a superficial or even commodified notion of identity. The desire on Dee's part to claim her family's

heirlooms—the hand-stitched quilts, in particular—not as functional objects but as cultural artifacts to be displayed underlines her disconnection from the lived reality of her heritage. Although it appears to be empowering, her reclamation of her African roots ultimately rings hollow because it dismisses the authentic, often painful experiences and knowledge embodied by her mother, Mama, and sister, Maggie.

Mama's decision to entrust the quilts to Maggie rather than Dee is an act of resistance against this commodification of culture. It is a deep validation of lived experience and generational wisdom, preferring those who have nurtured and preserved heritage through daily acts of resilience rather than those who seek to capitalize on it for personal or aesthetic gains. Maggie, in her humility, simplicity, and quiet understanding of her family's struggles, embodies the continuity of cultural identity in its most authentic form. In her hands, the quilts are not abstract symbols of heritage but rather tangible reminders of a shared history that brings the past to the present. Mama's decision isn't just a moment in familial justice but is also the broader assertion of cultural authenticity: an acknowledgment that heritage is preserved not in display but in use and the continuation of an intimate connection with it.

Methodology:

In order to understand the existing topic that deals with epistemic injustices in the primary text⁷, the major part of the study has been done on primary text. The study is also based on the literary survey of the secondary sources. Textual, discourse analysis and interpretation methodology have been used to interpret and justify the objectives.

5. Conclusion:

Through this narrative of poignancy, Walker critiques the epistemic injustice that occurs in cases where dominant frameworks of understanding—often academic, elitist, or performative—undermine or erase the validity of lived experiences, especially those of marginalized communities. The importance of embodied knowledge is a counterpoint to the exploitative tendencies of appropriation and intellectual detachment. Heritage, Walker suggests, cannot be merely recuperated in the guise of symbolic expression or material things; rather, it has to be experienced, performed, and even revered within the very milieu that confer value upon it. In

⁷ *Everyday Use*

vindicating Maggie's unassuming yet deeply authentic connection with her past, Walker positions authenticity and cultural tradition above fashionable re-invention.

Ultimately, *Everyday Use* is less a critique of cultural commodification than a tribute to the strength of minority groups in protecting their traditions. In placing the voices and experiences of such characters as Mama and Maggie at center stage, Walker draws attention to the power of lived history to resist erasure and appropriation. The story is a powerful reminder that true cultural heritage is not preserved in museum-like curation but in the everyday practices, struggles, and triumphs of those who live it. In this sense, Walker not only critiques epistemic injustices but also offers a vision of heritage as an active, ongoing process—a testament to the enduring strength and continuity of marginalized cultures in the face of historical and systemic challenges.

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