



RESEARCH PAPER

Triple Oppression of African-American Women: Conceptual Metaphor Analysis of *How to Make an American Quilt* by Whitney Otto

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: April 13, 2020 Accepted: June 15, 2020 Online: June 30, 2020	This qualitative study aims to analyze <i>Triple Oppression</i> faced by African American women using Conceptual Metaphor Theory in the novel <i>How to Make an American Quilt</i> (1992) by Whitney Otto. Triple Oppression as proposed by Jones (2017) involves the categories of race, gender and class all together as features of women oppression. For this purpose certain metaphors relevant to the study have been selected and analyzed using Conceptual Metaphor Analysis by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Women, who cannot find voice in society, find an expression in their needlework. Individual stories, alongside personal and narrative metaphors, of all members of a quilting group depict <i>Triple Oppression</i> faced by them throughout their lives. Nonetheless these women voice their sufferings in the quilting patterns. Their voices echo through the designs and colors of their quilts. They narrate their stories so secretly that even other members of the same quilting group cannot sense it
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Introduction

The social pressures faced by African-American women are three fold as compared to white women (Williams, 1985). African-American women are oppressed due to their gender and this oppression is different from that of black men. Further they are oppressed due to their color, which is different than that of white women. And the third oppression they face is due to their low socio-economic class which is still lower in status than white lower class citizens (Jones, 1995). So, any one form of oppression faced by these black women cannot be dealt-with, separately, since all are inter-linked. Addressing the one and ignoring the other two will never bring any change. All three kinds of oppressions need to be addressed collectively, by giving black women their rights since alongside race and gender economic conditions also become a contributing factor to women oppression.

How to Make an American Quilt depicts how black women face the challenges which come their way in the form of triple oppression and how they use their needles as a counter discourse to that oppression. Otto talks about the history and culture of African-American women through different metaphors in the novel. The challenges these women have come across and the problems they face are implicitly addressed through their quilting art. Their quilting patterns narrate their painful stories which can only be sensed by those who know about the true picture of oppression black women actually face throughout their lives. Selected metaphors from the text are analyzed in the light of the theory of *Triple Oppression* given by Claudia Jones (1995) which links sexism, feminism and Marxism together to study gender, color and class based oppression faced by African-American women. Metaphors in the text are analyzed in the light of Conceptual Metaphor Theory given by Lakoff and Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980).

African-American Quilting Tradition and the Feminine Voice

African-American quilt tradition is quite ancient. Black women not only find pleasure in quilt making but are also proud of their rich tradition and their quilts have preserved their cultural heritage and history (Smith, 2011). They carry hidden narratives which can only be understood by Black people or the people who have really suffered (Butler, 2019; Edgeworth, 1985). They offer an opportunity for the freedom of expression to Black women. King (1995, p.82) holds that the "Text-textile metaphors" have always been important to lessen the authorial practices over the female identity. Similarly Connolly (2013, p. 30) holds that, needlework specially "Quilt" is not just a woven piece of cloth, it is a symbolic documentation of resistance against slavery and also of hope for the weaver's socio-cultural freedom.

The oppression of African-American women is rooted in racial slavery in America which has managed to sustain racial discrimination of black people till today (King, 1975). Darling (1987) states that the hard labor of black women in industry has been ignored from generation to generation. Black women have been used by white masters and mistresses as commodities or private properties which can be bought and sold anytime (Smallwood, 2007). They have been considered to have no brain and no heart and are mere bodies of flesh which can anytime be utilized for personal gains. As laborers, in a society dominated by white working class, black women became more vulnerable to social injustices than white/black men or women and this discrimination affects their physical and mental health tremendously (Perry, Harp, & Oser, 2013). Although as slaves black men were humiliated and discriminated too but black women were oppressed further due to forced sexual roles and rape (Ellison, 1983). Moreover, black people could not expect to have white friends due to their racial unacceptability in the land of white people. They could only befriend black people, people who share their color and share the blood which is Negro in essence and this discrimination becomes the basis of their cultural inferiority as well as the violation of their human rights (D'Souza, 1995). Hence, historically they have lived a coded life in an abstract way, enveloped in the patterns of quilt, which they never narrated or spoke about. Eves (2005) talks about the hidden meanings of quilting patterns which are a

depiction of the untold stories of black women and holds that quilts made by African American women have transferred in them not just history but their cultural values too.

Jones (1995) coined the term '*Triple Oppression*' as oppression that discriminates Black women on the basis of their class, gender and color. Black women face a kind of oppression, which cannot individually be resolved through feminism, Marxism and sexism separately. Black women need an additional support for addressing their problems which are linked with class, gender and color altogether. Jones is of the view that a Black woman goes through an extreme form of racism, sexism and capitalism, freeing her of all three oppressions will ultimately free all other humans facing these oppressions. Thus as Lynn (2016) opines the freedom of black women will be the freedom of all freedom.

Material and Methods

Conceptual Metaphor Analysis (CMA) by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) widely talks about the implicit meaning and purpose of metaphors. Metaphors are highly ideological and charged as conceptual maps for understanding. "A metaphor may be a guide for future action. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies" (Musolff, 2012, p. 302). CMA deals with the interpretation of intended meaning of the sender conveyed through metaphor and the perception of receiver based on receiver's cultural context. Metaphors are essentially contextual when used to meet communication goals (Charteris-Black, 2004). Conceptually, metaphors direct and link the physical word symbols with target concepts in a way that sets a predictable pattern of understanding the physical object and the related concept in an intrinsic way (Hart, 2008).

In order to examine the challenges a black working class woman encounters regarding her color, gender and class and how she manages to speak about it through her needle and quilting patterns, selected metaphors from the text are analyzed in the light of the theory of Triple Oppression, proposed by Jones (1995). For this purpose, Conceptual Metaphor Analysis, by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) has been adopted to analyze the major metaphors in the text which highlight triple oppression of African American women.

Conceptual Metaphor Analysis of Triple Oppression in *How to Make an American Quilt*

Every quilt made by African-American women is based on some context and serves a specific ideological purpose. Every quilt pattern mirrors the thoughts of its maker (Pauls, 2014). Every patching-up of quilt pieces is a desire to patch-up with something lost long ago. The text is full of metaphors used by the author Whitney Otto who has chosen to do because her characters have also been choosing metaphorical quilting patterns in their lives.

Metaphorical Representation of Racism (Color) and the Quilting Group

Color seems to be a problem for some people ... I am aware of my color - made aware of my color or that I have a color or that I belong to a color. I am always my color first and Anna second Because this is the United States, with its archaic *one drop* rule, a legacy passed down from the Founding Fathers: *One drop of Negro blood makes one Negro*. (Otto, 1992, pp. 185-187).

Anna is the daughter of white father and is going to give birth to a daughter of a white husband. She does not look like Negro at all. She shares the features of her father. During her pregnancy, she lives in a white household and is taken care of, by white masters. But when she is taken to the hospital during labor, she finds herself in a less-privileged *black ward*. Anna gives birth to the third generation of mixed blood. Her daughter Marianna is very close to the color *White*, but still a *Negro's* blood can never be purified of its blackness, according to *racism*. Racial oppression will never end even if generations of Negroes become white.

Racism is an ideology constructed by White people who have usurped the rights of Black people. Imperialists take advantage of their color and use it as a justification of their crimes. They use their color as a symbol of superiority and they link the color of their skin with their right to rule over Black people. Otto's characters also face racial oppression throughout their lives. She writes about racial oppression in her novel at various stages. Anna who appears to be the main character of this novel is thinking that:

Black Americans should not have to demand, plead, or cajole any more than white Americans should be in a position to withhold or bestow. *Why, there is no simple way to show either of our personal histories without including the other's*. (Otto, 1992, pp. 206-211).

Racial oppression engraves into the minds of black women the ideology of being inferior, who can only identify themselves with respect to their masters. They do not have any individual identities. They should be grateful to their white masters for providing them with the privilege of staying near them (as their labors, servants). Black servants have no names, no identities and no space to live the life of their own. It is the greatness of white masters to have shared their own identities with their black servants, and that servants should be proud of being allowed inside the white households. Anna dislikes the idea of being identified in such a manner. She wants her own representation in society and wants to be proud of her own history. She wants to be separated completely from even a single thought that associates her with whiteness of white people and their history.

Metaphors of Color and Cloth

"One can survive without liberation but one cannot live without freedom" (Otto, 1992, p. 167).

The notions of *cloth* and *color* are also of metaphoric significance in the text. There is a great metaphoric significance of this quotation. Otto is trying to explain to the colonizers that they should not segregate poor black people on the basis of their skin color and should not force them to live at a place or with to live with people with whom they cannot find any compatibility. Otto suggests poor black women to “Say something in cloth ... Save your opinions for your quilt. Put your heart and voice into it. Cast your ballot; express your feelings regarding industrialization, emancipation, women’s suffrage, your love of family. Experiment with colors available from nineteenth-century factories” (Otto, 1992, p. 13). Women of quilting group are deprived of their right to vote, their freedom of expression, their feministic rights (rights that the movement of feminism only gave to white women), their rights to have a family and their rights to preserve their history. Metaphorically, Otto is suggesting black women to raise their voices even at their work places and make themselves heard by the oppressors.

Metaphorical Representation of *Feminism* and the Quilting Group

Anna, just like all other black women could relate to any woman of any color as they share the same similarity of gender, with all other women on earth. Metaphorically, above mentioned quotation highlights that although quilters (black women) can feel and understand other women (specifically white) on the basis of same gender, but white women fail to do the same in case of black women. White women do not consider black women as equals because of their color. In this way, feminists also talk about women rights but fail to address black women’s rights. Therefore, Otto instructs her quilters:

Make yourself heard in a wild profusion of colors, shapes, themes, and dreams with your fingertips. The tedium of quilt construction can some days make you cry; you long to express yourself. To shout out loud in silk and bits of old scarves.(Otto, 1992, p. 168).

The capitalists exploit women doubly, both as workers and women. Women have to face special oppression in every field in capitalist society – as a worker, a wife, homebuilder and citizen (Davies, 2007). Women face double oppression at a workplace, both due to her class and gender. Men do face class oppression but are safe from the oppression which women face due to their gender at any workplace. “To be Woman, according to Claudia Jones, is ‘to face special oppression’ which stems from the construction of Man” (Clarke, 2017, p. 21). But this case is different for women who are Black. Moreover, they are bound to feel inferior among the company of White women despite having same class and gender.

Black women cannot relate to white feminism, “Sophia spends one night a week piecing together bits of fabric with a group of women. As if she could piece together all the things she feels inside, stitch them together and make everything seem whole and right” (Otto, 1992, p. 76). Although black women may work among white female workers, but still black women cannot relate with them as ‘same women’ and

find a feeling of sisterhood in the company of white female workers. Despite all efforts, black women cannot feel equal to all other women of color white.

Otto gives her characters voice through their skill. As “The nineteenth century brought an explosion of ideas to the concept of the quilt, of a woman’s political voice” (Otto, 1992, p. 12). Black women still did not have any share in political voice or human rights. Feminism only spoke for a handful of White women ignoring completely the Black women who were born to serve menial roles in the White households. Otto discusses the theme of Cradle Quilt as a metaphor to explain how upcoming generations of Black people are bound to suffer from Triple Oppression in their lives. Their childhood dreams are fated to be snatched by the claws of slavery. She explains it as follows:

The cradle quilt is the quilt reduced to infant or child proportions. The theme should reflect the child’s immediate world ... influence your child’s dream state (Otto, 1992, p. 50).

According to Otto, a black child like all other children is born free. But the society burdens him/her with oppression s/he is innocent of. She uses the metaphor of *rose* for a child and believes that environment is the most important to flourish them. “Some roses cannot survive the environment into which they are born” (pp.212) Furthermore, if the child is a black girl, the complications created by society are worsened for her nourishment and survival. A black girl’s ideology depends on the fate of her mother or grandmother. She is taught to accept and submit herself to an oppression unknown to her. The oppression she is bound to encounter during her youth. Whitney Otto states that young black girls are time and again reminded to “say nothing more than what you have said with fabric and thread” (Otto, 1992, p. 170). A black girl is silenced and made deaf to the echoes of her own pain. As Anna, the main character of the novel silently thinks that, “I am not invisible ... I learned to speak with needle and thread long before society finally *gave* me a voice – as if society can give anyone a voice; it can only take a voice away” (Otto, 1992, p. 175).

Metaphor of Quilt

At the very base of the text Otto deals with the idea of quilt as a metaphor for ‘Homeland’. Quilt has a metaphoric significance, which stands as a territory, a space, or freedom for the women sewing it. By continuous struggle for liberation from *Triple Oppression*, quilters or freedom fighters can trace back their lost friends, family and their cultural values. As she hopes that, “Quilters will probably piece together a friendship quilt one day”(Otto, 1992, p. 92). Anna is the main character of the novel who is one of the eight women who belong to a quilting circle. Character of Anna is important in a sense that her father was a White man who left when she was a few months old in her mother’s womb. Her mother also dies earlier. Anna’s longing and love for her motherland has been metaphorically expressed by *The Life Before* which is name of the quilt, and this name adds to the significance of metaphoric nature of this particular quilt. This quilt has been dealt by author as a pre-

colonial land of African-American people who was full of dreams, natural resources and beauty. But now that land has been claimed by others, those natural resources are usurped by white people and the life-long dreams of black people are snatched by the colonizers. It is only the sky which is free and does not belong to anyone that is why the Starry sky can be seen everywhere in their quilting patterns. Because it is only the night time when the slaves and servants are set free, it is only the midnight which gives them freedom to dream and live their life to its fullest. "The sky belongs to nobody. The sky is free. So different from the earth" (Otto, 1992, p. 176) Starry sky, metaphorically, allows them the platform to have leisure and privacy, to sit together, talk and share their ideas, to devise their plans for getting freedom from the shackles of slavery and oppression.

Metaphorical Representation of *Marxism* and the Quilting Group

The abilities of black women to experiment and produce new goods are suppressed under the pressure built upon them through capitalism. They are not allowed to use their minds but to only use their physical strength to over-work and meet the demands of their masters. White masters exploited the resources of labor class. And this exploitation is doubled when the labor class is black in color. And it takes the form of *Triple Oppression* when that black labor is a 'Woman'. The text shows many instances when the rights of Black women in quilting circle are being exploited by 'White mistresses'. Industrialization has also strengthened the roots of capitalism in America. As Otto tells the characters of her novel that, "Your needles must be finely honed ... the ones from England are preferable ... you will need the embroidery thread to hold the work together for future generations ... for generations of people you will never meet" (Otto, 1992, p. 8). In this quotation 'Needles from England' has a great significance as a metaphor. Explicitly they stand as a tool and explain that it is England which sends tools and aids to the working class black people to provide them with employment, as these tools become a source of their earning. The white generations are not used to having unguaranteed and unreliable products for their daily use while the real makers of these products have no right to use them or claim them or even own them.

Black Women will only be provided with good resources and quality raw material when the purpose is to serve the generations of people who will never acknowledge the efforts Black people put to produce these goods. Similarly, the goods Black women make for themselves to cater their own needs are only made from remnants, as they have no access to quality resources or raw materials for themselves. As Otto reveals, "It utilizes that which would normally be thrown out, *waste*, and eliminates the extra, the scraps" (Otto, 1992, p. 9). The quilts women of quilting circle make for them are made with the leftover of quilts they make for their white mistresses.

Another quilting instruction Otto gives to her characters is that black women workers should resist working long hours without being appreciated for their work or

without being paid as much as they deserve. The efforts these working black women are putting in their work are worth the wage any other white worker is getting. Similarly, if they will sell their own ideas the way white masters are re-selling the ideas of these black workers, they will be able to earn as much as any white master is earning. "Without your ideas incorporated into the work, it is just an exercise, something to fill the long evening spent without companionship ... only you can tell your story" (Otto, 1992, p. 169). This instruction can metaphorically be decoded in the words of Clarke as he says that "The worker becomes a commodity that is all the cheaper the more commodities he creates. The depreciation of the human world progresses in direct proportion to the increase in value of the world of things" (Clarke, 2017, p. 30).

Metaphor of *Crazy Quilt*

Crazy Quilt is the new project assigned to quilting group. This quilt is planned to be gifted to a white girl on her marriage. That white girl is the granddaughter of an English household and these Black women of a quilting group have an association to this household as maids or helpers. *Crazy quilt* metaphorically stands for the capitalist land of America due to its disorganized and irregular patching. It is the quilters' representation of American ideology. Kress (1993, p.15) defines ideology as "a systematically organized presentation of reality". *Crazy quilt* stands as a metaphor for American capitalist ideology. Otto defines *Crazy quilt* as "Comprised of remnants of material in numerous textures, colors This is the pattern with the least amount of discipline and the greatest measure of emotions" (Otto, 1992, p. 8). America as a *Crazy quilt*, is most undesired place for Black female workers but their voices are always suppressed because there is no one to talk in favor of their freedom. The female characters of the novel do not like the haphazardness of *Crazy quilt*. They are used to making organized patterns and are habitual of living a disciplined life. They are against the disturbance of natural order. They know that this uncontrolled life in America is their fate for the rest of their lives. There seems to be no way back to their peaceful lives in Africa.

Conclusion

To conclude, Otto's *How to Make an American Quilt* is the true depiction of the challenges Black women face in their routine life. Three kinds of oppression which Jones talks about can collectively be seen in the lives of eight women from a quilting group, described in the novel. Otto has used a metaphor of 'quilt' to describe the triple oppression which Black Women face and how they can overcome it. She also keeps on giving several 'Quilting Instructions' to her characters which were analyzed metaphorically by the researcher to decode the implicit meanings conveyed by the author. Otto has bluntly talked about the evils of imperialism and crimes which White masters have been committing in the form of various kinds of oppression. As Jones was a real hero and savior of Black women who within America, courageously revealed the evils of capitalism and was sent into exile. She struggled to implement

communism for African-American people residing in a capitalist society of America and also fought for the feminist rights of Black women specifically.

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