BG Pulse Journal USA
ISSN:1947-2536 http://www.bgpulseusa.com/index.php/bg

Healing Through Material Practice: Quilting and Psychological Repair in The Persian Pickle Club.

Umida Ozodova
Comparative Literature and Transcultural Studies
Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou,China
umidaozodova1922@gmail.com
doi:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23334582

Abstract: This paper examines quilting as a materially grounded practice of emotional healing in Sandra Dallas's The Persian Pickle Club. Existing scholarship on the novel has largely approached quilting through the lenses of female solidarity, communal bonding, and the shared experiences of pioneer life. While these perspectives illuminate quilting's role in sustaining social relationships and collective identity, they leave underexplored its significance for the psychological and affective lives of the novel's characters. This paper argues that Dallas represents quilting not merely as a communal or historical practice, but as an embodied form of emotional repair through which difficult experiences are contained, expressed, and transformed. Drawing on psychoanalytic and trauma-informed approaches to literary analysis, the study examines how the repetitive, tactile, and creative processes of quilting provide spaces for managing suppressed emotions, negotiating personal loss, and reconstructing fractured senses of self. By shifting attention from quilting as a symbol of sisterhood to quilting as a practice of psychological resilience, this paper repositions The Persian Pickle Club as a text deeply concerned with women's emotional survival and agency. It ultimately demonstrates how domestic creative labor can function as a site of affective repair, enabling experiences that resist direct articulation to be materially processed and reimagined.

Keywords: quilting; women's history; emotional healing; pioneer women; Great Depression; The Persian Pickle Club;

Introduction

Sandra Dallas (b. 1939) is an acclaimed American novelist and journalist whose work frequently explores themes of friendship, loyalty, resilience, and women's domestic lives in the rural Midwest and West. She is a New York Times bestselling author for Prayers for Sale and True Sisters, and in 2007 she received the Independent Book Publishers Association's Benjamin Franklin Award for The Quilt That Walked to Golden. Throughout her career,Dallas has repeatedly returned to quilting as a central motif, as seen in novels such as The Patchwork Bride,A Quilt for Christmas,The Persian Pickle Club (1995).Her literary narratives of quilting use domestic art to illuminate women's experiences often overlooked in historical accounts.Yet in comparison with her literary achievements, the scholarly attention she has received remains notably limited. The Persian Pickle Club is one of her earlier works,set up in a small Kansas town, the novel centers on a group of local women, who gather weekly to quilt and name their group after the pattern the Persian pickle, which is also called paisley in some areas. Dallas continues the literary tradition of quilting

bee narratives[1], but situates the quilting bee within the broader and historical context of the Great Depression. The novel is partly autobiographical, as she notes in her acknowledgement, "In 1933, shortly after my parents were married, my father lost his job, and he and Mom moved to my grandparents' farm in Harveyville, Kansas. A neighbor offered Dad a dollar for a day's labor. Dad worked so hard, he finished by noon and was paid just four bits, the only money my parents saw all season. In our family, that was known as the 'Fifty-cent Summer'"(Acknowledgement). Although she subsequently states that the rest of the novel is fictional, the novel's extensive depiction of women's quilting during the Great Depression should not be read simply as literary imagination. Rather, from a historical perspective, these depictions are grounded in women's lived realities during that difficult period, presenting quilting as a material, emotional, and communal practice that helps them navigate through the economic hardship.

Drawing on psychoanalytic concepts such as the talking cure and theories of creative repetition, as well as trauma-informed approaches to embodied labor, this study demonstrates how quilting in The Persian Pickle Club enables women to articulate suppressed experiences, regulate emotional distress,converse, and support one another. When a newcomer uncovers a long-buried secret that threatens one member of the group, the women collectively act to protect her, reinforcing the strength of their bonds. On the surface, the novel appears to celebrate female solidarity and communal resilience, particularly within the harsh social and environmental conditions of Depression-era rural America.

Accordingly, scholars have largely interpreted quilting in The Persian Pickle Club as a social and cultural practice that fosters sisterhood, preserves pioneer traditions, and sustains community identity (Farrell-Beck; Kiracofe;Cooper and Buferd). While such readings productively situate the novel within feminist and material culture studies, they tend to emphasize quilting's external social function rather than its internal psychological impact on individual women. The affective dimensions of quilting the ways in which repetitive labor, mediated conversation, and collective creativity facilitate emotional survival remain underexplored.

This article argues that Dallas represents quilting not merely as a communal or historical activity, but as a materially grounded practice of emotional healing.

The Great Depression and Rural Women's Emotional Lives

The Great Depression, beginning with the stock market crash of 1929 and extending throughout the 1930s, marked one of the most severe economic crises in United States history. While its effects were widespread, rural communities experienced particularly acute hardship due to declining agricultural prices, environmental disasters, and limited access to institutional support. By the early 1930s, farm incomes had fallen dramatically, and many families faced foreclosure, displacement, and chronic insecurity. The crisis was further intensified in the mid-1930s by the Dust Bowl (c. 1934–1936), which devastated large areas of the Great Plains, including regions such as Kansas where The Persian Pickle Club is set.

[1] This quilting bee is represented in many literary works such as in 19th century quilt ficiton and contemorary quilt fiction Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*(1966), Toni Morrison's *Home*(2012), bell hooks

Within this context, rural women occupied a complex and often underrecognized position. While men's struggles during the Depression were typically framed in terms of unemployment and financial loss, women were responsible for maintaining the stability of the household under increasingly strained conditions. As historian Sara M. Evans explains in her 1997 study, women responded to the economic crisis by intensifying domestic production, taking on additional responsibilities such as sewing, food preservation, and resource management in order to sustain their families (Evans 203). This expansion of domestic labor was not only practical but also emotionally demanding, as women were expected to uphold a sense of normalcy despite pervasive uncertainty.

The emotional lives of rural women during the Depression were shaped by persistent anxiety, isolation, and suppressed distress. Economic instability often led to marital tension, social withdrawal, and a sense of powerlessness, particularly in communities where traditional gender roles limited women's autonomy. However, these emotional experiences were rarely expressed openly. Cultural expectations emphasized resilience, self-sacrifice, and emotional restraint, discouraging overt displays of vulnerability. As a result, women frequently navigated psychological strain in indirect or mediated ways.

In this environment, domestic practices such as quilting assumed heightened significance. Beyond their practical function, these activities provided structure and continuity in daily life, offering a sense of control in the face of external instability. The repetitive, tactile nature of quilting allowed women to focus attention and regulate emotional distress, creating a rhythm that counteracted anxiety and uncertainty. Although not framed in contemporary psychological terms, such practices align with later trauma theory. For instance, Bessel van der Kolk argues that structured physical activities can help regulate affect and restore a sense of bodily control in situations of prolonged stress (van der Kolk 89).

Equally important was the social dimension of these practices. In rural communities where isolation was a defining feature of daily life, gatherings such as quilting bees provided rare opportunities for interpersonal connection. These spaces allowed women to share experiences, exchange emotional support, and alleviate the psychological burden of isolation. As Evans notes, even informal networks of female cooperation played a crucial role in sustaining morale during the Depression (205). The combination of shared labor and conversation created an environment in which emotional experiences could be expressed in subtle and socially acceptable ways.

This interplay between labor and emotional expression is particularly significant. The presence of ongoing physical activity—sewing, stitching, or piecing fabric—enabled women to articulate concerns indirectly, reducing the intensity of personal disclosure. Rather than confronting distress through direct confrontation, women could integrate emotional expression into routine tasks, making it more manageable and less socially risky. In this sense, domestic labor functioned not only as economic necessity but also as a form of emotional mediation.

The historical conditions of the 1930s thus reveal that rural women's survival during the Great Depression depended not only on material resourcefulness but also on psychological resilience. Practices such as quilting offered a means of sustaining both. They provided a structured, repetitive

activity that grounded individuals in the present, as well as a communal setting in which emotional burdens could be shared.

This historical context is essential for understanding the role of quilting in The Persian Pickle Club by Sandra Dallas. Dallas's portrayal of a quilting circle in Depression-era Kansas reflects the lived realities of rural women during this period. However, the novel goes further by foregrounding the psychological dimensions of these practices. Quilting is depicted not merely as a response to economic hardship or a symbol of community, but as an embodied process through which women navigate emotional distress, articulate suppressed experiences, and construct resilience. By situating the narrative within the historical conditions of the 1930s, Dallas highlights how ordinary domestic practices become essential mechanisms of emotional survival.

Scholarship on quilting and its literary representation has developed across multiple disciplines, including women's history, material culture studies, and feminist literary criticism, yet critical engagement with The Persian Pickle Club by Sandra Dallas remains relatively limited and tends to emphasize communal rather than psychological interpretations. Foundational historical studies by Jane Farrell-Beck position quilting bees as "central mechanisms of communal cohesion," highlighting their role in fostering cooperation, shared labor, and social bonding among women in rural and frontier environments (Farrell-Beck 46). Similarly, Roderick Kiracofe conceptualizes quilts as material artifacts that preserve "layers of cultural memory," arguing that they encode experiences of migration, hardship, and adaptation within their physical structure (Kiracofe 118). Feminist scholars such as Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Buferd extend this perspective by interpreting quilting as a form of culturally sanctioned artistic expression, through which women negotiate identity and creativity within the constraints of domestic labor (Cooper and Buferd 52). Within literary studies, critics including Janet Floyd have examined quilts as narrative devices, suggesting that they function as alternative textual forms that record women's histories and challenge dominant historical narratives (Floyd 365). In parallel, sociological research by Marybeth Stalp frames quiltmaking as a mode of cultural production that sustains identity and continuity, reinforcing the idea that quilting operates as both social practice and symbolic expression (Stalp 264).

Despite this substantial body of scholarship, studies of The Persian Pickle Club itself have largely remained within similar interpretive frameworks, focusing on themes of friendship, community, and regional identity. Contemporary reviews and critical commentary consistently describe the novel as an exploration of "the ties that unite women through good times and bad" and as a depiction of "loyalty and friendship in a women's quilting circle" . Critics have also emphasized Dallas's ability to evoke the social fabric of Depression-era rural life, portraying quilting circles as central to everyday experience and communal survival. Within this critical tradition, quilting is primarily interpreted as a symbol of solidarity, moral support, and shared identity, reinforcing broader feminist readings of women's collective resilience. However, such interpretations tend to privilege quilting's external social function while overlooking its internal, affective dimensions. Even when the novel's darker elements—such as secrecy, moral conflict, and

psychological tension—are acknowledged, they are typically discussed in terms of narrative intrigue rather than emotional processing or trauma.

More recent interdisciplinary research has begun to suggest that textile practices, including quilting, may contribute to emotional well-being by providing structure, repetition, and a sense of purpose (Burt and Atkinson 285). Nevertheless, this line of inquiry remains underdeveloped within literary criticism, particularly in relation to Dallas's work. Existing scholarship rarely considers how the act of quilting itself—its repetitive motions, tactile engagement, and integration with conversation—might function as a mechanism of emotional regulation. As a result, the psychological experiences of individual characters in The Persian Pickle Club remain insufficiently examined, despite the novel's sustained attention to anxiety, grief, and interpersonal tension.

This gap is significant because it limits understanding of quilting to its symbolic and communal dimensions, neglecting its potential as an embodied and affective practice. By contrast, this study builds on existing research while shifting the analytical focus toward quilting as a process of emotional healing.

Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, particularly Sigmund Freud's concept of the talking cure, and trauma theory as articulated by Bessel van der Kolk, it argues that quilting in The Persian Pickle Club operates not only as a communal or cultural activity but also as a materially grounded practice through which women articulate suppressed experiences, regulate emotional distress, and construct psychological resilience. In doing so, this article contributes to feminist literary studies by reinterpreting domestic labor as a site of both cultural meaning and emotional survival, thereby extending current scholarship on quilting beyond its traditional focus on community and representation.

In The Persian Pickle Club, Sandra Dallas constructs quilting as a materially grounded practice of emotional healing, operating through the interconnected processes of conversation, repetition, and collective unity. First, quilting facilitates emotional articulation through conversation, functioning in ways that parallel Sigmund Freud's concept of the "talking cure," in which psychological relief emerges through the gradual expression of repressed experience (Freud 17). Within the quilting circle, women disclose personal anxieties indirectly, embedding emotional truths within ordinary dialogue rather than explicit confession. For example, Queenie Bean's understated remark that her husband is "not a bad man, just not much of a kind one" (Dallas) reveals marital dissatisfaction while maintaining emotional restraint. Similarly, brief statements such as "some days feel longer than others" (Dallas) signal exhaustion and distress without overt dramatization. These moments demonstrate how the quilting bee provides a protected environment in which emotional experiences can be voiced incrementally, allowing speakers to maintain control while still being heard. Dallas further reinforces this dynamic by linking speech with physical activity, noting that "the steady motion of needle through cloth went on as the talk drifted" (Dallas), suggesting that the act of stitching grounds and stabilizes emotional expression.

Second, quilting functions as emotional regulation through repetition, as its rhythmic and tactile nature provides structure and continuity in the unstable context of the Great Depression. The women's repeated actions—threading needles, pulling stitches, assembling patterns—create a

predictable routine that contrasts with the uncertainty of their external environment. Even in moments of tension, "no one stopped sewing, though the room grew quieter" (Dallas), indicating that the act of quilting absorbs emotional strain and allows the women to remain grounded. This process aligns with trauma theory, particularly the work of Bessel van der Kolk, who argues that repetitive physical activity can regulate affect and restore a sense of control (van der Kolk 89). Moreover, the transformation of scattered fabric scraps into cohesive quilt patterns symbolically mirrors the women's efforts to organize fragmented emotional experiences into meaningful forms. As Jeremy Tambling suggests, repetition enables individuals to revisit and reshape distress, converting it into structured understanding (Tambling 90).

Finally, quilting produces emotional healing through unity and collective creation, most clearly represented in the making of the "celebrity quilt." This project transforms quilting from an individual coping mechanism into a shared act of moral and emotional solidarity. As one character observes, "It wasn't just a quilt anymore—it was something we were doing together" (Dallas), emphasizing the shift from routine labor to collective purpose. The women's decision-making process further highlights this unity, as they "didn't argue much after they decided; they just stitched" (Dallas), suggesting that collaborative action resolves emotional and ethical tension more effectively than verbal debate. From the perspective of D. W. Winnicott, such shared creative activity constitutes a form of reparative experience that fosters connection and reinforces a sense of relational stability (67). The completed quilt thus embodies not only aesthetic achievement but also the redistribution of emotional burden across the group, transforming individual suffering into shared resilience.

Taken together, these three dimensions—conversation, repetition, and unity—demonstrate that quilting in The Persian Pickle Club operates as an embodied practice of emotional healing.

Rather than serving merely as a symbol of community or tradition, quilting becomes a dynamic process through which women articulate distress, regulate emotional experience, and construct collective strength, ultimately positioning domestic labor as a crucial site of psychological survival.

Quilting as emotional healing through conversation: Freud's talking cure,Hysteria,and female emotional expression

One of the most significant ways quilting functions as emotional healing in The Persian Pickle Club is through conversation. Within the quilting circle,speech becomes more than casual social interaction; it operates as a therapeutic mechanism through which women gradually articulate emotional pain, anxiety, and dissatisfaction that cannot otherwise be openly expressed within the social constraints of Depression-era rural life. Dallas repeatedly depicts the quilting bee as a protected domestic space where women speak indirectly, cautiously, and collectively about their emotional experiences while engaged in shared labor. This dynamic strongly parallels Sigmund Freud's theory of the "talking cure," first developed in Studies on Hysteria (1895), which proposes that psychological suffering can be alleviated when repressed emotions are verbalized within a safe and receptive environment. Freud argues that traumatic experiences or socially unacceptable

emotions are often pushed into the unconscious mind because individuals cannot openly confront or express them. These repressed feelings subsequently manifest as psychological distress, anxiety, or emotional instability (Freud 17). According to Freud, healing occurs when the individual gradually transforms unconscious emotional material into language, thereby bringing hidden suffering into conscious recognition.

Freud's theory emerged specifically from his work with women diagnosed with "hysteria," a condition widely associated in the late nineteenth century with emotional repression, nervous distress, and psychological conflict. In Studies on Hysteria, Freud repeatedly demonstrates that many female patients experienced symptoms not because of physical illness, but because their emotional experiences had been silenced or denied within restrictive patriarchal structures (Freud 31). He contends that speech itself possesses therapeutic power because it enables individuals to organize fragmented emotional experiences into coherent narrative forms. Importantly, Freud emphasizes that traumatic emotions are rarely expressed directly at first; instead, they emerge gradually through fragmented statements, indirect associations, pauses, or seemingly ordinary remarks (22). This understanding of emotional articulation is particularly relevant to Dallas's portrayal of women's conversation within the quilting bee.

Historical studies of women's emotional lives further support this framework. In Brilliant Exiles: American Women in Paris, 1900–1939, Diana B. Carlin explains that women in the early twentieth century were often expected to embody emotional restraint, domestic stability, and moral composure even under conditions of personal dissatisfaction and psychological strain. As a result, female distress frequently manifested indirectly through socially coded forms of communication rather than open confrontation (Carlin 74). Women negotiated emotional expression carefully because direct articulation of unhappiness could threaten social expectations surrounding femininity, marriage, and domestic duty. This cultural context illuminates why the women in The Persian Pickle Club rarely confess suffering explicitly, instead communicating emotional pain through understatement and mediated conversation.

For example, Queenie Bean's remark that her husband is "not a bad man, just not much of a kind one" (Dallas) reveals profound marital dissatisfaction while simultaneously minimizing it. The emotional force of the statement lies precisely in its restraint. Queenie avoids direct accusation, softening criticism through qualification and understatement. Freud argues that repression often causes painful emotions to surface indirectly because the speaker fears the consequences of fully confronting them (Freud 26).

Queenie's fragmented disclosure reflects this process of cautious emotional testing, allowing her to acknowledge suffering without violating social expectations of female loyalty and self-restraint.

Similarly, Dallas repeatedly portrays emotional exhaustion through seemingly simple remarks that conceal deeper psychological distress. Statements such as "some days feel longer than others" (Dallas) appear ordinary but implicitly communicate loneliness, anxiety, and fatigue. The quilting circle absorbs these comments without demanding explanation or resolution. Rather than forcing dramatic confession, the women respond through quiet acknowledgment and continued presence.

This dynamic reflects Freud's belief that emotional healing does not necessarily depend upon direct interpretation or immediate catharsis; rather, the act of verbalization itself initiates psychological relief by allowing repressed emotions to enter shared consciousness (Freud 32).

Dallas also emphasizes that speech within the quilting bee is inseparable from physical labor. She notes that "the steady motion of needle through cloth went on as the talk drifted from one thing to another" (Dallas), linking emotional expression to rhythmic bodily activity. This detail is psychologically significant because the repetitive act of quilting stabilizes the emotional intensity of conversation. The women do not sit face-to-face in confrontation; instead, their attention remains partially focused on stitching, enabling difficult feelings to emerge gradually and safely. Contemporary trauma theorist Bessel van der Kolk similarly argues that bodily engagement and sensory rhythm can regulate emotional distress, helping individuals process traumatic experiences without becoming overwhelmed (van der Kolk 89). Dallas's depiction of quilting intuitively reflects this principle by presenting sewing as a grounding mechanism that supports emotional articulation.

In addition, feminist psychoanalytic theorists further illuminate the significance of collective female conversation within domestic spaces. Nancy Chodorow argues that women often develop relational forms of identity rooted in emotional connection and mutual recognition rather than isolated individualism (Chodorow 43). Within the quilting circle, emotional healing occurs collectively because women recognize their experiences in one another's speech. Their conversations create what Chodorow describes as a relational emotional structure in which shared understanding reduces feelings of isolation and psychological fragmentation.

The quilting bee also functions as what Donald Winnicott terms a "holding environment," a psychologically safe space in which vulnerable emotional experiences can emerge without fear of rejection or punishment (Winnicott 10). When one woman observes that "You could say things here you wouldn't say anywhere else" (Dallas), the novel explicitly defines the quilting circle as a protected emotional environment. The women are not required to justify or defend their feelings; instead, the group's collective listening creates emotional containment and security. In this sense, quilting becomes not merely a social activity but an alternative therapeutic structure rooted in women's communal labor.

Through these scenes, Dallas ultimately transforms quilting into a profoundly affective practice of emotional survival. The quilting bee enables women to articulate experiences that patriarchal culture encourages them to suppress, while the repetitive act of stitching provides bodily stability during emotional disclosure. By integrating Freud's theory of the talking cure, historical understandings of female hysteria, feminist relational theory, and trauma studies, The Persian Pickle Club reveals how ordinary domestic spaces become crucial sites of psychological repair. Conversation within the quilting circle does not eliminate suffering, but it allows women to endure it collectively, transforming isolated emotional pain into shared understanding and resilience.

Quilting as Emotional Healing Through Repetition: Rhythm, Stability, and Emotional Regulation

In The Persian Pickle Club, quilting functions as emotional healing not only through conversation but also through repetition. Dallas repeatedly emphasizes the rhythmic, repetitive nature of sewing—the continual motion of threading needles, pulling stitches, and assembling fragmented pieces of fabric—which provides the women with psychological stability amid the uncertainty of the Great Depression. The repetitive structure of quilting creates predictability within an unstable social and economic environment, allowing emotional distress to become manageable through bodily rhythm and habitual action. Rather than depicting quilting merely as productive domestic labor, Dallas presents repetition itself as a mechanism through which women regulate anxiety, contain emotional chaos, and restore a sense of continuity to their lives.

The psychological significance of repetition can be understood through Sigmund Freud's theory of "repetition compulsion," developed in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920). Freud argues that individuals confronted with trauma or unresolved emotional conflict often unconsciously repeat actions, memories, or patterns in an attempt to gain mastery over experiences that originally produced helplessness or distress (Freud 18). Although repetition may initially appear irrational, Freud suggests that it reflects the psyche's effort to transform passive suffering into active engagement. By repeatedly revisiting difficult emotional material within a controlled framework, individuals gradually reduce its disruptive psychological power. In The Persian Pickle Club, quilting operates according to a similar principle. The women cannot control economic collapse, marital dissatisfaction, illness, or social limitation, yet they can control the rhythm of stitching, the arrangement of fabric, and the gradual construction of the quilt. Through repetitive labor, emotional disorder is converted into patterned activity.

Dallas consistently associates quilting with calmness, routine, and bodily steadiness. Even during moments of emotional tension, "the needles kept moving" (Dallas), suggesting that stitching continues regardless of conflict or anxiety. This detail is significant because it positions repetition as an emotional anchor. The continuity of physical movement prevents distress from becoming psychologically overwhelming. Rather than confronting emotional suffering directly through dramatic expression, the women absorb and regulate distress through repetitive action. Freud emphasizes that repetition provides a sense of psychic organization because it imposes structure upon otherwise chaotic emotional experiences (Freud 23). Similarly, the repetitive motions of quilting impose order upon both fabric and feeling.

The novel further reinforces this idea through its emphasis on process rather than speed or completion. Quilting unfolds slowly, stitch by stitch, requiring patience, concentration, and sustained attention. Dallas describes how the women "worked the seams carefully, each stitch following the last" (Dallas), highlighting the deliberate rhythm of the activity. This repetitive sequencing reflects what trauma theorist Bessel van der Kolk identifies as the regulatory function of patterned bodily movement. In The Body Keeps the Score, van der Kolk argues that trauma destabilizes an individual's sense of safety and bodily control, while repetitive physical practices can help restore emotional regulation by grounding the individual in sensory rhythm and predictable action (van der Kolk 89). Activities involving repeated motion—such as sewing, knitting, or stitching—can reduce anxiety because they direct attention toward tactile engagement

and bodily coordination. Dallas's depiction of quilting intuitively reflects this psychological process. The women repeatedly return to stitching because its rhythm creates temporary emotional stability within lives shaped by hardship and uncertainty.The repetitive structure of quilting is also symbolically significant because it transforms fragmentation into coherence. Quilts are assembled from separate scraps of fabric that, individually, appear disconnected or insignificant. Through repetition and patterning, however, these fragments become unified into a larger design. Literary critic Jeremy Tambling argues that repetition allows individuals to revisit difficult experiences in forms that gradually become "organized, structured, and therefore psychologically manageable" (Tambling 90). This concept illuminates the symbolic relationship between quilting and emotional healing in Dallas's novel. The women's lives are fragmented by financial strain, loneliness, marital disappointment, and social restriction, yet the repetitive process of stitching allows these fragmented experiences to be reshaped into meaningful forms. The quilt thus becomes both literal object and metaphor for emotional reconstruction.

Importantly, Dallas portrays repetition not as mechanical emptiness but as emotionally sustaining ritual. Ritualistic repetition creates continuity across time, reinforcing stability in periods of crisis. Anthropologist Catherine Bell argues that ritualized action generates emotional security because repeated practices produce familiarity and reinforce social order (Bell 81). Within the quilting bee, repetition becomes communal ritual: the women gather regularly, repeat familiar gestures, and reproduce established patterns. This continuity counters the instability of Depression-era life, where economic collapse and uncertainty threaten the predictability of daily existence. The quilting process therefore becomes psychologically restorative precisely because it remains constant when external circumstances do not.

Moreover, repetition allows emotional expression to occur indirectly rather than through explicit confrontation. Dallas avoids dramatic scenes of emotional breakdown; instead, distress is processed gradually through continued sewing. At moments when conversation becomes tense or silence falls across the room, "no one stopped stitching" (Dallas). The persistence of repetitive movement suggests that quilting absorbs emotional tension, preventing psychological paralysis. Feminist theorist Rozsika Parker similarly argues that textile practices historically enabled women to channel emotional experiences into repetitive creative labor, transforming anxiety into controlled physical action (Parker 12). Through quilting, emotion becomes materially manageable.

By emphasizing repetition throughout the novel, Dallas ultimately presents quilting as a form of embodied emotional regulation. The women survive psychological strain not through sudden catharsis or dramatic transformation, but through the steady repetition of ordinary domestic practice. Stitch after stitch, quilting provides rhythm, predictability, and sensory grounding that counter emotional instability. Through Freud's theory of repetition compulsion, van der Kolk's trauma studies, ritual theory, and feminist analyses of textile labor, quilting emerges in The Persian Pickle Club as a deeply affective practice that enables women to organize emotional fragmentation into continuity and resilience.

Quilting as Emotional Healing Through Community: Collective Support, Shared Identity, and Emotional Survival

In The Persian Pickle Club, quilting functions as emotional healing not only through conversation and repetition, but also through community. Dallas presents the quilting circle as a collective emotional structure in which women survive hardship through shared labor, mutual recognition, and interpersonal support. During the Great Depression, rural women faced not only economic instability but also profound emotional isolation. Geographic distance, restrictive gender roles, and the burdens of domestic labor often limited opportunities for emotional expression or social connection. Within this context, the quilting bee becomes more than a social gathering; it operates as a communal space of psychological survival where emotional burdens are distributed collectively rather than endured individually. Dallas repeatedly demonstrates that healing in the novel emerges through relational connection, suggesting that resilience is constructed not in isolation but through participation in supportive female community.

The emotional significance of community can be understood through Donald Winnicott's theory of the "holding environment," developed in Playing and Reality (1971). Winnicott argues that individuals require emotionally secure environments in which vulnerable feelings can emerge safely without fear of rejection, punishment, or abandonment (Winnicott 10). Originally formulated in relation to early childhood development, the concept has broader implications for understanding collective emotional support. A holding environment stabilizes emotional experience because it provides continuity, recognition, and containment during periods of psychological stress. In The Persian Pickle Club, the quilting circle functions precisely in this way. The women are able to reveal frustration, grief, and anxiety because the communal environment absorbs emotional tension rather than intensifying it. Their suffering becomes bearable through collective presence

Dallas repeatedly emphasizes the emotional safety of the quilting bee. One woman remarks, "You could say things here you wouldn't say anywhere else" (Dallas), explicitly identifying the quilting circle as a protected emotional space. This statement reveals that the women experience the quilting bee differently from the broader patriarchal structures governing their lives. Outside the quilting circle, emotional vulnerability risks judgment, gossip, or social consequence; within it, emotional expression becomes socially acceptable because it is embedded within communal domestic labor. Winnicott argues that psychological security emerges when individuals feel emotionally "held" by reliable relationships and environments (12). Dallas's quilting circle provides precisely this kind of emotional containment. The women are not required to solve one another's problems directly; instead, healing emerges through consistent presence, listening, and shared participation.

The communal structure of quilting also reflects feminist theories of relational identity. In The Reproduction of Mothering (1978), Nancy Chodorow argues that women often construct identity relationally, through emotional connection and mutual recognition rather than through isolated individualism (Chodorow 43). This framework is highly relevant to Dallas's portrayal of the quilting circle because the women understand themselves through collective interaction. Emotional experiences become meaningful when recognized by others who share similar struggles. For example, when one woman quietly expresses frustration or exhaustion, the others respond not with

dramatic intervention but with subtle acknowledgment, humor, or continued conversation. These interactions reduce emotional isolation by transforming private suffering into shared experience.

This collective recognition is especially important during the Depression, when many women lacked institutional or psychological support systems. Historian Sara M.Evans notes that during the 1930s rural women often depended upon informal female networks to maintain emotional stability amid economic uncertainty and domestic pressure (Evans 205). Quilting circles provided spaces where women could exchange practical help, emotional reassurance, and social companionship in environments otherwise marked by isolation. Dallas draws directly upon this historical reality. The quilting bee in The Persian Pickle Club is not portrayed as leisurely entertainment but as emotional necessity. The women repeatedly gather because communal presence itself becomes sustaining.

The symbolic centerpiece of this communal healing process is the creation of the "celebrity quilt." Unlike ordinary quilts made for practical use, the celebrity quilt transforms quilting into a collective emotional project that unites the women through shared purpose. Dallas emphasizes that "it wasn't just a quilt anymore—it was something they were all part of" (Dallas). This statement reveals how collaborative creation strengthens emotional connection by linking individual effort to communal meaning. The quilt becomes a material representation of collective resilience, containing the labor, emotions, and identities of multiple women within a single object.

The collaborative nature of the celebrity quilt also reflects sociologist Émile Durkheim's theory of collective solidarity. Durkheim argues that communal rituals generate emotional cohesion because shared activity produces a sense of belonging that transcends individual isolation (Durkheim 217). The quilting bee functions as such a ritualized communal practice. Through repeated gatherings, shared stitching, and collaborative decision-making, the women construct emotional solidarity that counters the fragmentation of Depression-era life. Their collective labor produces not only a quilt but also a sense of psychological continuity and mutual dependence.

Dallas further demonstrates that communal quilting redistributes emotional burden. Rather than carrying distress alone, the women process emotional difficulties collectively through ongoing interaction. During tense moments in the novel, silence is often interrupted not by confrontation but by continued stitching and subtle support. Dallas notes that "nobody hurried anyone to speak" (Dallas), emphasizing the patience and emotional tolerance within the group. This absence of pressure is psychologically significant because it allows emotional disclosure to occur voluntarily and gradually. Feminist theorist Carol Gilligan similarly argues that women's emotional ethics frequently prioritize care, listening, and relational responsiveness rather than dominance or resolution (Gilligan 30). The quilting bee embodies this ethic of care by creating an environment where emotional survival depends upon collective attentiveness rather than individual independence.

Moreover, the communal act of quilting challenges the emotional isolation imposed by patriarchal domesticity. Although the women remain constrained by social expectations surrounding marriage, femininity, and domestic labor, the quilting circle enables them to construct an alternative emotional community within those limitations. Rozsika Parker argues that traditionally feminine textile practices often functioned as hidden forms of emotional and social

resistance because they enabled women to create networks of communication and solidarity within domestic space (Parker 15). Dallas's novel reflects this dynamic by portraying quilting as a subtle but powerful form of collective resilience. The quilting bee does not openly reject patriarchal structures, yet it creates a parallel emotional world in which women's experiences are recognized, validated, and sustained.

Through the quilting circle, Dallas ultimately redefines community as a therapeutic force. Emotional healing in The Persian Pickle Club occurs not through individual self-discovery alone, but through collective participation in shared labor, ritual, and emotional recognition.

Conclusion

In The Persian Pickle Club, Sandra Dallas reimagines quilting as far more than a marker of communal tradition or pioneer heritage, presenting it instead as an embodied practice through which women achieve emotional survival during the Great Depression. By foregrounding the intertwined processes of conversation, repetition, and collective creation, the novel demonstrates how domestic labor can function as a powerful mechanism of psychological repair. Quilting enables women to articulate otherwise suppressed experiences through mediated dialogue, regulate emotional distress through rhythmic and repetitive action, and transform individual suffering into shared resilience through communal unity.

This study has argued that quilting operates not simply as a symbolic representation of female solidarity but as a materially grounded practice that sustains emotional well-being. By bringing psychoanalytic perspectives, particularly those of Sigmund Freud and D. W. Winnicott, into conversation with trauma theory as developed by Bessel van der Kolk, this analysis demonstrates that the act of quilting itself—its physicality, repetition, and social context—facilitates processes of articulation, regulation, and repair. In doing so, it expands existing scholarship, which has largely emphasized quilting's communal and cultural significance, by highlighting its affective and psychological dimensions.

More broadly, this interpretation invites a reconsideration of domestic practices within literary and cultural studies. Activities historically dismissed as routine or decorative emerge instead as vital forms of emotional labor and resilience, particularly for women whose experiences have often been marginalized in dominant narratives. As The Persian Pickle Club illustrates, psychological survival in times of crisis is not achieved solely through overt resistance or dramatic transformation, but through sustained, collective engagement in ordinary acts of making. Quilting, in this sense, becomes both method and metaphor—a quiet yet powerful process through which women stitch together not only fabric, but meaning, agency, and emotional continuity in the face of uncertainty.

References

1. Cooper, Patricia, and Norma Bradley Buferd. The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art. Anchor Press, 1978.
2. Dallas, Sandra. The Persian Pickle Club. St. Martin's Press, 1995.
3. Evans, Sara M. Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America. Free Press, 1997.
4. Farrell-Beck, Jane. American Quilts: The Democratic Art. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976.

5. Floyd, Janet. “Stories of the Quilt: Re-reading Women’s Work in American Culture.” Textual Practice, vol. 21, no. 2, 2007, pp. 363–385.
6. Freud, Sigmund. Studies on Hysteria. Translated by James Strachey, Basic Books, 2000.
7. Kiracofe, Roderick. The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort. Clarkson Potter, 1993.
8. Stalp, Marybeth C. “Quilting: The Fabric of Everyday Life.” Sociological Spectrum, vol. 27, no. 3, 2007, pp. 259–280.
9. Tambling, Jeremy. Repetition and the Aesthetics of Modernity. Manchester University Press, 2006.
10. van der Kolk, Bessel. The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma. Viking, 2014.
11. Winnicott, D. W. Playing and Reality. Routledge, 1971.
12. Publishers Weekly. “Review of The Persian Pickle Club.” 1995.
13. Kirkus Reviews. “The Persian Pickle Club Review.” 1995.
14. Mainardi, Patricia. “Quilts: The Great American Art.” Feminist Art Journal, vol. 2, no. 1, 1973, pp. 1–8.
15. Parker, Rozsika. The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine. Routledge, 1984
16. Torsney, Cheryl B., and Judy Elsley, editors. Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern. University of Missouri Press, 1994.
17. Turney, Joanne. The Culture of Knitting. Berg, 2009.