

WHAT IS IN A NAME? REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING SOME NAMES IN THE NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON

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Abstract

The present article endeavors to build upon the conviction that an all-purpose teaching methodology is not available and how we teach, and what we focus upon in teaching a text depends upon some parameters like the genre and nature of the text, the socio-cultural backdrop in which it is produced and even the specific stylistic peculiarities of the writer in question, among other things. This article tries to exemplify the last point: How some aspects which may be insignificant in some works may have some enormous significance in some other literary works.

Keywords: socio-cultural backdrop, Toni Morrison, English literature, Shakespeare, Elizabethan period, American literature

The case in point is the issue of names of some characters in the novels of Toni Morrison. In contrast to the suggestion of the memorable Shakespearean character, Juliet, who evinces a position that a name is only a matter of nominal importance, the present article contends that some names in the select novels of Toni Morrison communicate a lot about the characters in the novels, and as a result the significance of these names should be brought out in the class room, while teaching those texts. An attempt is made to bring out the significance of select names by foregrounding and explicating their suggestive richness.

Since the beginning of the language, names play very important role in humans' lives. As in lives, so in literature, names have a significant role from the beginning of the literature. This is strikingly evident in the case of allegorical writings, such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, where names represent abstract characters and qualities instead of real people. Not only in the works of literature but even in the history of English literature, are some periods called after the representative writers' names. For instance, W. H. Hudson christens the periods of English literature like Chaucer period, before Chaucer, after Chaucer, Shakespeare period, Victorian period, Elizabethan period etc . . . when a literature student learns literature basing on these periods, the student can easily access the tone and tenor of the period taking the name as a literary benchmark. Each period is called after a particular name implying that a particular name has close association with that period.

Especially in the modern novels, the names of the characters depend on the plot and genre of the novel. If the plot is comic, the names of the characters are humorous; if the plot is ironic the names of the characters are also ironic and so on. Often, the talent of the writers depends on choosing the name with suggestive potential for the characters in their novels. This way, the novelist can foreground the plot of the work with their characters' names. Writers seek the attention of the readers with the names of the characters.

The most important writer of this kind is, perhaps, Toni Morrison in the contemporary American literature. She is an Afro-American writer. She won the Nobel Prize for her subversive writings that exposed the inhumanness of racism in America. The colored people's quest for identity constitutes a main theme in almost all her novels. As her theme is related to quest for identity, she names her characters in a way that is somehow suggestive of their identity.

Readers can understand the irony of the author, only when the reader appreciates the irony behind the usage of names in Morrison's novels. Through names themselves, Morrison evocatively conveys the pathetic conditions of Afro-Americans to readers. The names raise expectations about the sequence of events in the novel, and sometimes they embody the irony of the writer.

Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye*, predominantly focuses on American standards of beauty and its impact on the lives of Afro-Americans. The hegemonic standards of American

beauty unsettle the lives of Afro-Americans. Afro-Americans are black which is why they are considered an aberration from the American aesthetic normativity by the dominant whites. They do not get love from their own community as well as from the members of white community. Thus the Blacks lack acceptance and love in a society that defines itself through the white standards as the normative expectation.

The search for love is a main theme of Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. The protagonist of the novel is Pecola. She belongs to Breedlove family. Morrison uses the name 'Breedlove' sarcastically. The name 'Breedlove' suggests the signification of providing love but the irony is that there is no love in Breedlove's family. As there is no love between the parents of Pecola, Cholly and Pauline, they get separated. Also, they do not know how to provide love to their children; and that is the reason why their children are put outdoors. The female protagonist of the novel, Pecola fails to get love from her parents as well as from the society. She craves for love throughout the novel. She searches for different ways to be loved. But she fails in all her endeavors. Finally she becomes insane. Thus, though the main character's name is Pecola Breedlove, she fails to get love and becomes mad as a result. This is not only the life of Pecola, but a representative case of many black girls that craves for love in a divided society. Morrison uses the name Breedlove to present the missing love in blacks' families, and the sense of irony in the naming strategy is unmistakable.

The novel powerfully makes the point that the Blacks need love from the society; and if they get love their lives may be different from their present alienated experiences. The main reason for losing their identity is missing love in their lives. After all, human sense of identity requires recognition from others. Alterity is not an indifferent exteriority to one's identity but that is what informs one's identity.

Morrison's second novel is *Sula*. In this novel, Morrison takes two family backgrounds to narrate the story. One is 'Wright' family and the other one is 'Peace' family. In the name of Wright family, the first letter of the name 'w' is silent. The pronunciation is 'right'. The family members are silent and right. 'Right' here suggests that the family members follow the rules and regulations of the society. They never give importance to their individuality. They suppress their individuality under societal norms. Even then the family is considered 'right' by the society. Though this is not right according to the author, she ironically uses the name '(W) right' for this family. The other family is 'Peace' family. This family lives for its own sake. It never thinks of the societal norms and rules. The family has its own set of rules and regulations that is why they are able to live peacefully. They have 'peace' in their lives. But this 'peace' is not accepted by the society. When the main protagonist of the novel Sula Peace sets her own rules, she is abandoned by the society. She is considered evil and no one in the society dare to speak with her. Even at her death bed also, though she dies peacefully, society is not at 'peace' with her.

Here, there is another connotation for 'Peace'. The unmistakable homophone of peace is piece. Morrison uses peace to suggest this piece also. Sula's individuality is not accepted by the society. That is why the family becomes a peace(piece) in the society, suggesting a sense of fragmentation. This peace (piece) of family finally loses its identity in the society and becomes alone and ostracized in the community.

Symbolically, Morrison uses the name 'Peace' here to tell the readers that though the black's individuality may not be accepted in the society, they have to stand on their own self and should not bother about any one. Then only they can lead their lives peacefully like Sula Peace. Blacks can achieve 'peace' when they are able to live their own lives according to their own individuality. Through this novel, Morrison presents the ways to gain peace which are missing in blacks' lives through ages.

Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon* exemplifies the importance of familial roots for one's identity. Due to industrialization, many black people move to the North by leaving their kith and kin in the South. In this process, some families even left their familial roots. Without knowing their roots they have started a new life in the North. They want to equalize their position with the white Americans, in the economic sphere. They feel that earning money is the only way to get identity in the society. So they become very busy in earning money. A black family who earns money and does not care about anything else is the plot line of the novel, *Song of Solomon*.

Morrison very sarcastically gives the name of the family as 'Dead'. The family lives physically but spiritually all the members of the family are dead. Macon Dead and Ruth Foster Dead lead their lives without any verve. Their son's name is Milkman Dead. The good economic status of the family provides a lot of comforts to them, but, at the same time, fails to provide a respectable and reckonable position in their own black community. According to the other members of the black society the family is 'Dead'. They do not have any specific identity with reference to their own black community. They are abandoned by other black members in the society.

There is another special signification to the name, Milkman Dead. Milkman does not have any ambition even when he gets thirty five years. Though he is aged, he is not a matured man. To suggest this immaturity, Morrison uses the name Milkman figuratively; this means the aged man who does not know anything about his identity depends on his family for everything, like a breast sucking kid.

To change Milkman into a matured man, a miracle should happen. The miracle is in the form of Milkman's aunt, Pilate. Pilate is a biblical name. Pilate in the bible is best known today for the trial and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Morrison uses Pilate in this novel to crucify the material objects of 'Dead' family thereby taking them to their familial roots and bringing their identity back to them.

Thus, Pilate shows the way to Milkman to find his identity. She gives the directions to Milkman to find his roots. At the end of the novel, with the help of Pilate, Milkman is able to find his roots and reclaim his identity, as well as his family's identity. The significance of names, both in depicting his condition of immaturity and in reclaiming the family's identity, is demonstrably manifest in this novel.

Morrison's fourth novel, *Tar Baby* pictures how blacks are suffering under whites' material world. To convey this symbolically, she gives the name of white family as 'Street'. As is well-known, Wall Street has an important role in American economy. Morrison uses the name 'Street' to refer to the white family in the same sense. This 'Street' family provides financial support to Jadine, a black girl who is an orphan.

Her education and everything else is taken care of by them. Jadine feels that she is also a part and parcel of this white culture. So she pretends to be a white girl and forgets her culture completely. The hero of the novel, 'Son' comes to change Jadine's attitude and tries to take her back to her original culture. The use of the name 'Son' symbolically suggests that the hero is the 'son' of African culture. As a 'Son' of African culture, his responsibility is to take care of his culture as well as to protect black people from the infatuation with the white culture.

The most famous novel in Morrison's fictional career is *Beloved*. This novel concerns itself with slavery. The haunting memories of slavery are still with black people and are destroying their lives. Most of the people are unable to come out of those haunting memories. Morrison advises these people that if they want to overcome the terrific memories of slavery, they have to unite and to be loved by the people of their community. That is the reason why Morrison gives the name, 'Beloved' to one of the characters in the novel. The main protagonist of the novel, Sethe does not want to send her children to live under slavery. When Sethe suffers from the memories of slavery, no one in the society supports her.

To save her daughter from an impending slavish life, Sethe kills her unnamed daughter. Later Sethe gives her murdered daughter's name as 'Beloved' on the tombstone. Beloved haunts her mother as a ghost. The ghost is nothing but the memories of slavery. The members of the society have never thought of Sethe, before Beloved starts haunting her. As the members find the importance of their support to Sethe, they all come together and send away Beloved. The power behind sending away Beloved is nothing but developing the bond of love among them. Morrison says that the love between black community members is very important to forget their past. The only way that Morrison suggests to all black slaves especially to black women to overcome the terrific memories of slavery is to be-loved by each other. Thus the name, Beloved has a double significance in the novel. The sixth novel of Toni Morrison is *Jazz* which clearly presents the racial terror in the lives of the black people. Many black women are suffering to trace their identity. Morrison uses 'Trace' symbolically to tell the way to the black women, to find their 'Trace' in their own gender.

The main character of the novel is Violet Trace. Initially Violet is very smooth like a violet flower; but when she is unable to find her 'Trace' she becomes Violent. She is called Violent by the society. With her violent behavior she did many mischievous things.

She destroys the dead face of his husband's girlfriend, Dorcas. Later she wants to 'Trace' the past of Dorcas. When she finds the history of Dorcas, she feels a sense of satisfaction that Dorcas has the similar qualities what she assumes her daughter to have. She feels that Dorcas would be her daughter. Violet also develops friendship with Alice who is an aunt of Dorcas. Violet is able to 'Trace' her identity with the friendship of Alice. After she finds the 'Trace' of her identity, 'Violent Trace' becomes 'Violet Trace' in the society. Morrison wants to intimate black women that they cannot 'Trace' their identity unless they find capable friends like Alice. To 'Trace' their identity black women should develop a friendly bond among them. Tracing the correct friend can give black women a lot of strength to find their missed identity as a black woman.

Morrison uses different names in almost all her novels to convey different ideas and feelings symbolically, ironically and frequently sarcastically. As the foregoing discussion makes it clear, Morrison's talent lies in using different names to suit different situations, to grab the attention of the readers to the peculiarities of her characters in the novels, and to underscore their variegated fates

Against this backdrop, in teaching these novels, I believe, foregrounding the significance and the suggestive signification of the names of the characters in the novels will greatly help in appreciating Morrison's novels properly. Once we are familiar with the characters we feel that their names acquire the evocative power that projects all the peculiarities of the character. But this charging of the names (which becomes a signifier now) with the qualities of the signified is what Shakespeare's eponymous heroin also suggests when she asks the question that formed the beginning of the title of this paper.

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