

The Polity of Names and Naming in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

By the noun 'name', we generally refer it to as a set of words by which a person or a thing is known and addressed. On the other hand, 'naming' is the process of assigning a name to somebody by someone else. In this context, this research study undertakes to exemplify how names and naming of the characters play a crucial role in Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Primarily, it is a story told through memories and flashbacks, a supernatural tale about a slain daughter who comes back to life. Then it is a love story about two people who find one another after nearly twenty years have passed. And it is also a familial tale about three generations of women whose lives are still affected by the institution of slavery. While these are many aspects of *Beloved* that could be argued as important within the context of the novel, the one that has been focussed on here is the act of naming or nicknaming as a way of reclaiming one's self and one's identity.

Key Words: memory, flashbacks, naming, slavery, self, identity

Introduction:

Beloved is a slave narrative where slaves are constantly heard or seen subjugated by the Whites. But as Morrison shows, the different names and naming of the characters play an integral role in the formation of identity, disconnecting slaves from and connecting ex-slaves to their past. Here, one of the famous critics Genevieve Fabre noted in "Genealogical Archaeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*":

Names are an essential part of the legacy (of black people), and names have stories which, incongruous, preposterous as they are, must be cared for . . . Blacks receive dead patronyms from whites. . . names are disguises, jokes or brand names—from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names endure like marks or have secrets they do not easily yield. (108-109)

Thus, names are crucial forming the basis of language and at the same time helping to shape how we perceive the world. In *Beloved*, whereas Whites used formulaic names like Paul D, Paul F and so on as another way to dominate the slaves, but ex-slaves like Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid used the process of naming to claim their newly found freedom. But apart from all this, there are some other major characters whose names are inextricably linked to their identity and their personal past contributing to build up strong black identity.

Aims and Objectives:

The primary objective of this research study is to show how different names and naming processes of characters constitutes one of the significant themes in the novel. The research aims to show how names gives us a lesson about identity, especially that of colored people. Then it aims to juxtapose how Morrison's story articulates the differences in both intent and result when names were issued by slave owners as opposed to names bestowed by Black people themselves.

Literature Review:

This study is an undertaking to explore or to give insight upon a new meaning and understanding of the novel *Beloved* (1987). To serve this end, Harold Bloom's *Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison's Beloved* (2009) is quite influential. Then Genevieve Fabre's essay "Genealogical Archaeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" appeared in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (1988) by Nellie Y. McKay has been significant in setting the similarities and contradictions of *Beloved* as well as *Song of Solomon*. Reference books such as Patricia Waugh's *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989), Lean'tin L. Bracks's *Writings on Black Women of the Diaspora: History, Language and Identity* (1998) provided a thorough critical rendering of the history of lives of men and women during slavery, and their trials, tribulations to escape it.

Research Methodology:

The research paper follows both analytical and descriptive method, and is based on primary and secondary sources. The text book *Beloved* by Toni Morrison served as the primary source and the secondary sources are comprised of other edited books and essays

Analysis:

From the reading of the first few pages of this novel, we get an idea of the unusual nature of names. For instance, Sethe's name has masculine origins while D at the end of Paul D's name denotes his fourth rank in the succession of male slaves all named Paul. In Sethe's case, she was named for a black man, the only one who did not have forced sexual relations with her mother. As her wet nurse Nan tells Sethe, her mother abandoned or 'threw away' her other children while saving Sethe. The difference is that she chose to have sexual relations with Seth's father. In the other situations she was raped; and rape is never a choice. There is an example where Sethe in her re-memory of suffering remembers the words of her Nan: "The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man", who most likely was Sethe's father (Morrison 62). In this context, the way Sethe's mother abandoned her mulatto children draws a direct link to the rape of black slave women as a consequence of the institution of slavery.

Again in case of Sethe's mother, her name has never been mentioned in the novel except for the moniker Ma'am, which is given to her by Nan, the black wet nurse. She is also identified by a brand consisting of a circle with a cross burned into her flesh beneath her breast. So in this context the marks like the one Sethe's mother has served to distinguish their racial identity. The purpose of these marks was not only to identify slaves, but to brand them literally and figuratively as the property of someone else. Then again in case of slaves, such as Paul D's and the other Pauls, did not designate an individual as self but much as a segment of community, an identity larger than self. Apart from all this, Sethe's name is unique because

she was not named by a white slave master or overseer. Sethe's name was given to her by her mother and therefore is a mark of blackness and of acceptance into tribe and culture representing a sense of heritage and a context of relational identity.

In the study of names and nicknames in black communities, many critics have focussed upon the tremendous value and recognition bestowed upon an individual for a feat accomplished, a trait emphasised, or a characteristic noticed. For instance, Beloved, Sethe's daughter, whose birth name we never learnt, took her identity from the single word on her tombstone and from the love her mother holds for her. Moreover, in the story, the only other designation Beloved receives is the nickname, "Already Crawling Girl". So, this nickname "Already Crawling Girl" identifies Beloved for a feat she accomplishes at an early age and thus falls directly into the category of nicknaming which indicates a kind of acceptance and love. Of course this inclusion in the black community occurs before "Already Crawling Girl" is killed by her mother, an act which ostracized Sethe from her community.

The black male characters in the novel, including Paul D and Stamp Paid, are also affected by the lack of identity that slavery perpetrated upon them. As mentioned earlier, Paul D is one of a series of Pauls, named in alphabetical succession by the previous slave master who owned them before they were sold to Mr Garner. But by being given the same first name, with only an alphabetical character to distinguish between them, the Pauls are effectively dispossessed of their individuality and their own distinctive claim to an identity. Their names do not celebrate accomplishments, personality traits, or family conventions. The designations are solely for the benefit of the slave masters and not for the self-identification of the male slaves.

Another character in the novel is Stamp Paid, who was given the birth name of Joshua, renounces his slave name and renames himself. He is the only former slave in the novel to accomplish this, but once he has his freedom, he still questions his self-made identity. As Morrison states in *Beloved*:

Perhaps . . . he (Stamp Paid) had misnamed himself and there was yet another debt he owed. Born Joshua, he renamed himself when he handed over his wife to his master's son . . . With that gift, he decided he didn't owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off. (184–185)

This passage not only questions the symbolic freedom from the debt of slavery, but demonstrates that, even with his supposed freedom, Stamp Paid continually suffers under the institution of slavery because the single act of handing 'over his wife to his master's son' that deprived him of his dignity and manhood. Because of this self doubt, Stamp Paid continually pays, and will continue to pay with his self-inflicted misery for his freedom and his name.

Morrison also used biblical names to show the impact of the Bible on the lives of black people, their respect for it coupled with their ability to distort it for their own purposes. Morrison used some pre-Christian names to give the sense of a mixture of cosmologies. But more than just discussing her use of names, Morrison also goes on to detail the psychological and historical factors behind her choices. In an interview with Thomas Le Clair of *New Republic Magazine*, Morrison stated:

I never knew the real names of my father's friends. Still don't. They used other names. A part of that had to do with cultural orphanage, part of it with the rejection of the name given to them under circumstances not of

their choosing: If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That's a huge psychological scar. (9)

Of all the characters in the novel, Baby Suggs becomes perhaps the most self-identified, self-aware, and self-possessed. In fact, Baby Suggs's definitive 'self' is a direct result of her rejecting the name given to her by white patriarchy and accepting black patriarchy. Moreover, Baby Suggs is the only character in the novel named by and for a black male. In the exchange between Baby Suggs and Mr. Garner, which takes place as he is delivering her into her freedom, bought and paid for by Sethe's husband, Halle, who was Baby Suggs' last-born child and the only one ripped from her arms and sold as a mere toddler:

'Mr. Garner', (Baby Suggs) said. 'why you all call me Jenny?'
 'Cause that what's on your sales ticket, gal. Ain't that your name?
 What you call yourself?'
 'Nothing,' she said. 'I don't call myself nothing.' (141)

During the exchange between Baby Suggs and Mr. Garner, when Baby Suggs answers "with her lack of name"—"Nothing . . . I don't call myself nothing"—it is a testament to the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home. Thus this scene reveals Baby Suggs to be the most self-claimed and self-identified character in the novel. As she claimed:

'Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn't call me Jenny.'
 'What he call you?'
 'Baby.'
 'Well,' said Mr. Garner, going pink again, 'if I was you I'd stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs. Baby Suggs ain't no name for a freed Negro.'
 Maybe not, she thought, but Baby Suggs was all she had left of the 'husband'. (141)

The previous passage demonstrates that Baby Suggs never suffered from a loss of identity because of slavery; she simply did not answer to white patriarchy's identification of her Jenny Whitlow, but instead identified herself by the name given to her by husband Suggs. He called her 'Baby' and she in turn completes this identity by naming herself Baby Suggs in his honor. Morrison supports the idea of Baby Suggs being self-possessed, when in one of Sethe's flashbacks, Morrison writes as the omnipotent author about how Baby Suggs suddenly comes alive unto herself and claims her body and soul after being freed from enslavement at the hands of Mr. Garner. Again Baby Suggs's role in helping others become more self-actualized, as when Sethe reclaims her self through living at 124 Bluestone Road, as well as when Suggs delivers her sermons in the clearing, further demonstrates the actualization of Baby Suggs. Morrison writes, "Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, [Sethe] had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95).

Conclusion:

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* works on many levels to achieve a balance as a slave chronicle and a story of three generations of black women, whose lives were devastated by the institution of slavery. *Beloved* centers on the theme of reclaiming identity and achieving self-actualization. The motivating factor at the heart of this tale of self-actualization is the

theme of naming and nicknaming, through which many of the characters of the novel lose and reclaim their identities.

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