

## NAMES AND NAMING IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

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### Abstract

*Names are considered as the important part of everyone's identity not only in the ancient or past society but also in the modern society. It is observed that, both in real life and in literature, people are more interested in manipulating and presenting their names. African American communities have given importance to the names of people and places. They have used the names from their myths and Bible. Toni Morrison has also used the names of people and places, which have a kind of connection with the Biblical names. The present paper is an attempt to explore the patterns and importance of the names and naming in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon. Toni Morrison tells that the past of the person has a connection with his name and if his name is changed then his connection to the past is finished. Sometimes it is done deliberately to erase the past memories or compelled by other to stop their connection with the past culture. Milkman, the protagonist of the novel, starts his journey in search of his past culture and finally realizes the importance of his name and its connection with people of his community.*

**Keywords:** Community, Identity, Names and Naming.

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*The fathers may soar*

*And the children may know their names*

-Toni Morrison

Since long time, the anthropologists have paid considerable attention to discursive naming practices employed by dominant groups to secure and maintain power. According to Geertz, “naming is a crucial aspect of converting “anybodies” into “somebodies”” (363). It indicates that though law does not care for the name of a child that fits to it or not. But in many cultures, for name-givers, it’s a matter of great concern as they feel that names express something of the child and reveal their relations to that child. The emerging of sociality is noticed through the naming, which is considered not only as a matter of assignation but also a process of discovery, recognition, or inheritance. Names are frequently assumed to have significant agency. The power of the name plays a critical role in social life. Naming practices may express information about a broad range of social classification and may reveal crucial information about gender, kinship, geographical origin, or religion. Name gives identity to a person and helps to prove himself as an individual and as a member of recognized social groups. Thus, a consideration of personal names and naming become fundamental aspects of social processes. Many times it is observed in the society that the change in social status is reflected by the name change. “The naming of slaves is evidence of a performative act by which discourse produces injurious effects” (Bodenhorn and Bruck 18). The family names are formed in the different historical circumstances and the cultural interferences are involved in the process of name-formation. Many times the family names derive from diverse sources like lexical, toponyms, bynames or nicknames. The understanding of an individual in comparative perspectives is possible with the help of practices of naming, de-naming, and re-naming the living and the dead.

Toni Morrison, the first African American woman novelist, was awarded Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 for her great contribution to the literature. "Morrison's fiction and prose have highlighted the triumphs and tragedies of the African American experience" (Carlacio xiv). Through her novels, Morrison emphasizes the history of blacks and how blacks were systematically victimized by whites. Morrison produces fiction that assumes what A. O. Scott calls the "burden of cultural importance" in so far as it offers "illumination of epochs, communities, of the nation itself" (Web). Morrison tries to depict the problem of identity of African Americans. Their identity comes from how they imagine they are being seen by family, by friends, by lovers, and so on, allowing us to conclude that "the concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts" (Tatum 9).

Toni Morrison, in one of the interviews, explained that "The search for love and identity runs through most everything I write" (Micucci 278). This statement introduces the search for identity as a key theme in *Song of Solomon* and presents that the characters are not only struggling to establish their individual identities but also striving to come to terms with their dual identities as both black and American, and their group identities as members of various communities and organizations. The significance of the names can be considered as the integral part of identity formation and identity politics. Toni Morrison, in another interview, says that "The names that I've chosen for people in the books are very often real names of real people.... The names are just labels to some people, but they're real symbols in another sense. The magic starts with a name. There are reasons for naming people things that have to do with the child himself, as well as the family" (Charles 17-18). In another interview, Morrison says that "I use names that black people are willing to accept for themselves" (Brown 112). This shows that Morrison started writing about the blacks and their lives and the beauty lies in her depiction of the reality in an amazing way. She has also used the real names for her characters and places to create the real pictures of each and everything before her readers.

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* deals with the major theme of the erasure of the histories of marginalized people due to the personal and community impacts. The central male protagonist of the novel starts his journey to reclaim his family's lost history. This is also revealed in her epigraph to *Song of Solomon*, "*The fathers may soar/ And the children may know their names*", which introduces the most significant motif of the work, naming (Morrison vii). Morrison tries to indicate that each generation is obliged to remember and pass its knowledge on to the next. Boudreau has

rightly observed that “Because of its myriad characters and extensive timeline, *Song of Solomon* becomes an excellent text to highlight the different kinds of identity people search for, for it is a search for both individual identity and cultural heritage” (48). Milkman Dead appears in the novel as a character without rootedness and unable to move ahead due to his unawareness about the importance of the cultural heritage. But with the assistance of his aunt, Pilate Dead, he discovers his own worth and starts reclaiming his connection to the past. Milkman is able to access balanced identity after rediscovering his family’s legacy.

Morrison has used the biblical names in *Song of Solomon* to show the impact of the Bible on the lives of black people. She has also used some pre-Christian names to give the sense of mixture of cosmologies. According to Toni Morrison, Milkman Dead has to learn the meaning of his own name and the names of things. Morrison presents Milkman as embarrassed and stigmatized by his name and longs for “some ancestor ... who had a name that was real.... A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name” (Morrison 17-18). Toni Morrison always tries to give the message to the people of her community that it is quite difficult to face the problems and survive as an individual in the community or society. So she wants every black member of her society to come together, unite and help each other to live the life and continue the connection with their past heritage or culture. The narrator has presented some unnamed characters in the chaotic opening scene of the novel and identified them in terms of their role within the community: “The dead doctor’s daughter”, “the gold-toothed man”, “the cat-eyed boy”, and so on (Morrison 5-7). People are not known by their real names but by other nicknames given to them considering their weaknesses or characteristics. Due to this, they lose their original identity and get new identity, which compels them to remain away from the society. It states that the loss of one’s name or identity is a disturbing heritage of slavery. The same is pointed out by Toni Morrison, as she says that “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” (LeClair 126).

Jan Furman states that in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* “Names of places and people are routinely appended, denoting some exploit or episode or special skill or talent or notoriety. Names have meaning; names tell stories” (46). Exactly the same is noticed in the story of name given to the street as ‘Not Doctor Street’ (Morrison 4). ‘Not Doctor Street’ was once called as ‘Doctor Street’, the official name of the street was Mains Avenue, but blacks started calling ‘Doctor Street’ to honour the

first black man, Milkman's grandfather, who practiced medicine in that city for them from the beginning to the end of his life. When whites came to know about it they officially changed that street name into 'Not Doctor Street'. The narrator also speaks about the names which were "recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning.... When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do" (Morrison 329). Milkman's name is one old man's idea of humor.

Milkman thinks about black men and women imported to that place. He closes his eyes and thinks about :

all black men in Shalimar, Roanoke, Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in the Blood Bank, on Darling Street, in the pool halls, the barbershops. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness. Macon Dead, Sing Byrd, Crowell Byrd, Pilate, Reba, Hagar, Magdalene, First Corinthians, Milkman, Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State (he just stood around and swayed), Small Boy, Sweet, Circe, Moon, Nero, Humpty-Dumpty, Blue Boy, Scandinavia, Quack-Quack, Jericho, Spoon bread, Ice Man, Dough Belly, Rocky River, Gray Eye, Cock-a-Doodle-Do, Cool Breeze, Muddy Waters, Pinetop, Jelly Roll, Fats, Lead-belly, Bo Diddley, Cat-Iron, Peg-Leg, Son, Short stuff, Smoky Babe, Funny Papa, Bukka, Pink, Bull Moose, B.B., T-Bone, Black Ace, Lemon, Washboard, Gatemouth, Clean head, Tampa Red, Juke Boy, Shine, Stagger lee, Jim the Devil, Fuck-Up, and Dat Nigger. (Morrison 330)

Milkman learns to accept his name at the end of the novel and discovers his heritage that includes the origin of his name and understands the words from Solomon's Song. After realizing the importance of his name and his community, he was very proud of his given name that links him to his people. Jake keeps the name given him by an illiterate white man and passes that name on to his son, who passes it on to his son. According to Guitar, Pilate keeps "Her own name and everybody else's" in a brass box attached to her ear (Morrison 89). Pilate might have understood what the narrator speaks that "When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do" (Morrison 329). Macon Dead, who bears his father's name, walks by his sister's house: "Surely, he thought, he and his sister had some ancestor,

some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness" (Morrison 17).

Gurleen Grewal points out that "Buried beneath the "Dead" name is a wealth of knowledge that could free the Dead to live, but Macon Dead is obsessed only with the gold buried beneath a dead man in a cave on his father's lost property" (64). This buried past beneath his own name later gives him a vision to connect himself with the people of the community. Milkman's family name is very significant as it tells that how their origin is falsified and new identity is imposed upon them by a federal agent. It also presents the attitude of the black middle class toward the past of the slaves. Milkman's grandfather accepts a name that would "wipe out the past" (Morrison 54). This reflects how the black middleclass people accepted it and cleaned their past and started a new clean life. Milkman Dead's first name connects him to his mother who was neglected by his father. The name 'Dead' appears here as a riddle that draws attention to the question of the father's survival. Milkman tells his friend Guitar about the naming of his parents: "Say, you know how my old man's daddy got his name? / Uh uh. How? / Cracker gave it to him/.... What for? He was already Dead" (Morrison 89). But "under Pilate's influence, Milkman's first name signifies the maternal capacity to nurture, and the gold becomes the buried wealth of patronymic lore. Drawing him into the matrix of African American culture, Pilate functions as the life-ensuring mother figure for Milkman" (Grewal 68). Coming in contact with Pilate, Milkman understood the importance of each member of the society and unlike his father and grandfather; Milkman started showing respect for all women connected to his life. So Pilate appears as the real pilot to Milkman in his journey to find out his connections to the past and his original identity.

Many names of the major and minor characters of the novel come from the Bible. Except Hagar, the other characters diverge from their biblical counterparts. Pilate never denies the responsibility like Pontius Pilate. Pilate has some fantastic elements that she is born after her mother's death and has no naval, so she lives isolated life away from the society but maintains contact with the spiritual world. She appears in the novel as the voice of black love and pilot for Milkman to his true heritage. Ruth Foster Dead, like her biblical counterpart, is a loyal follower. Biblically, "First Corinthians" is not a person's name at all, but it is a section title in the New Testament. It is noticed that all their parents use to read Bible and they used these names for their children. Susan Byrd provides vital information to Milkman when he was searching for his family history. She clears to him that Sing Bird is Milkman's ancestor and Susan's part of the family has

Indian heritage that revises the spelling of 'Bird' to 'Byrd'. Circe lived at the old Butler mansion and served whites for long time, shares her name with a witch in Homer's *Odyssey*, magically links the generations of characters. Milkman comes to know about the real names of his grandparents from Circe, Jake and Sing. (Kubitschek 74-79).

The title of the family saga of three generations is a variant name of the biblical text called the Song of Songs, which actually belongs to an oral folk tradition. The allusion to the Bible signifies the historical appropriation of it in slave songs' liberation theology. The changing of name also has a kind of connection to Toni Morrison's personal life, as she has also changed her name from 'Chloe' to 'Toni'. The title of the novel may also pay tribute to her admired grandfather, John Solomon Willis. Thus it shows Toni Morrison's return to the past and how she uses the names and naming pattern in *Song of Solomon* to create a kind of connection between past and present generations. This claiming of the past is done by the people of the present to make the unconscious conscious and disclose the secret. Milkman did the same, he discovered his past culture and the origin of his name, and finally by realizing the importance of his name and his community, he connects himself to the people of his community.

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