

# “WHITE PEOPLE NAME NEGROES AS RACE HORSES” – NAMING, AN IMPERTINENT WHITE ATTITUDE, AS SEEN IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF TONI MORRISON

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**Abstract:** Names are not things to be taken lightly or tossed around casually. It legitimizes a person’s existence and recognizes his existence as a human being. Knowing someone’s name can be intimate, knowing other people’s names is nutritive: it helps to build links of trust among groups of people in a community. A name has the power to keep memory victories of the past and promise prosperity for the future. They are passed from generation to generation in hopes of restoring, maintaining or creating a sense of honour. Names not only distinguish individuals, but they place them in particular categories also. Names are really important because they connect one to a past, to one’s history. This study observes the whites’ attitude towards naming the blacks - giving generic names, utilitarian names or naming very carelessly – and its effects on the named.

**Key Words:** Names, Black, White, Generic names, Utilitarian names.

## “White people name Negroes as race horses” – Naming, an impertinent white attitude, as seen in the select novels of Toni Morrison

### I. INTRODUCTION

A person must carry his ‘name’ throughout his life. Sometimes this name goes before the one who carries it, meets the others and tempts them to judge the person. “Each of us is uniquely defined by the names that are used by us and toward us. Names mark those with whom we have (or do not have) equal status and with respect to other individuals. Names can be used as weapons to improve our self-concept. They can create new realities or confirm those that existed before” (Gerrig & Banaji, 191). “Names are not things to be taken lightly or tossed around casually. As a matter of fact, assignation of a name is tantamount to the assignation of an identity, the identification of the unique quintessence within a person. It legitimizes a person’s existence and recognizes his existence as a human being. Names are inextricably linked to identity and to all that entails – one’s own personal past, the past more broadly, and one’s cultural heritage.

Knowing someone's name can be intimate, knowing other people's names is nutritive: it helps to build links of trust among groups of people in a community. In sum, it is an essential part of the experience of community" (Remer, 6-7).

In *The Bluest Eye*, Soaphead Church writes a letter to God in which he asks, "What makes one name more a person than another? Is the name the real thing, then? And the person only what his name says?" (142). Nadine Gordimer expresses the importance of name in the African community through Ruel of *A Sport of Nature*, "we Africans always give names that mean something, not your Marys and Johns" (274). Through her other novel *July's People* she condemns the white attitude towards naming the blacks. July is Mwawate in his native African language: "July," as the chief explains, is "a name for whites to use" and for "fifteen years they had not been told what the chief's subject really was called" (120). A name has the power to keeping memory victories of the past and promise prosperity for the future. They're passed from generation to generation in hopes of restoring, maintaining or creating a sense of honour. African name is "a window into a particular ethnic group or relation to some form of African culture or geographical region" (Beulah Osueke, 1).

## II. DISCUSSION

Names play an important role in Toni Morrison's novels. This paper attempts the impertinence of the white in naming the black/slave. According to Melville Herskovits, in *The Myth of the Negro Past*, names are of great importance in the traditional societies of West Africa. They are identified with the individual's essence and may change with time depending on growth and other occurrences. African names provide a link with the African past and were often used by American slaves. (quoted in Ranström, 23-24).

Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* condemns the black people, who adopt their oppressor's culture. People who adopt the white culture unconsciously accept their inferiority over the supremacy of the whites. In her essay, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" Morrison elaborates: "if we don't keep in touch with the ancestor ... we are, in fact, lost." (140). Through *Son*, she mocks the black people in white attire, touches the complex of black people and throws torch at white's impertinent treatment of the blacks especially in naming them.

“Names not only distinguish individuals, but they place them in particular categories” also. (Gerrig & Banaji, 180). In *Tar Baby*, “there are at least three well-defined levels of status in the book - the wealthy white Americans, the ‘refined’ black American servants, and the ‘rough’ Caribbean Servants” (ibid, 175).

“The wealthy white American”, Valerian Street, who is in the top of the hierarchical order of the island, is conventionally called as Valerian Street (*Tar*, 31), Mr. Street (21) or Valerian (64). His wife Margaret is introduced as "the Principal Beauty of Maine" (11). She is addressed so, as she has acquired the title ‘Miss. Maine’ (54) in the beginning and later called as Principal Beauty (35), Margaret, (28), Mrs. Street (17), or Margaret Street (118).

“The ‘refined’ black American servants”, who are in the second position of the hierarchical order, are called as Sydney (17) and Ondine (18) and never as Mr. Childs and Mrs. Childs by the Streets. Margaret calls Sydney, "Sydney the Precious" (31). Yardman is the only person in the whole island who calls Ondine as Mrs. Childs: “... At first she [Ondine] thought it was Yardman. He alone on the island called her that. Even the Filipinos over at the nearest house called her Ondine” (159). Later, it is Son, who calls them as Mr. Child (162) and Mrs. Child (159).

“The ‘rough’ Caribbean Servants”, who are in the last position of the hierarchical order, are called as Yardman and Mary (39) both by the Streets: “too bad Gideon couldn’t come” ... "Who?" asked Valerian. "Gideon. Yardman" (201), and by the Childs: "Must be Yardman." said Sydney, "or one of them Marys" (39).

Jadine Childs, the niece of the Childs, who studied under the patronage of Valerian also refers them as Yardman and Mary.

[Son] “Who?”

[Jadine]. . . “ Yardman. The gardener.”

“That his name?”

“No.” She smiled . . . “But he answers to it. Which is something, at least. Some people don't have a name of any kind.”

...

[Jadine] ... “Mary. It must have been Mary” (115)

Before leaving to Paris Jadine meets the young girl, who has occasionally accompanied Gideon and Thérèse, and wishes her good luck: “Bye. Mary, I have to go. Good luck.” The young girl whispers, “Alma,” whispered the girl. “Alma Estèe.” (290) as Jadine didn’t wait for her reply. It is very clear that Jadine knows none of their names.

The names Yardman and Mary are generic in the observation of Gerrig & Banaji “... Yardman is a generic name” (181), “... Mary is used as the name of a category rather than as a specific name” (ibid, 182). When Ondine complains Margaret’s request for breakfast she generalizes the yardman along with the beggars: “Yardmen.” said Ondine. “And beggars.” (*Tar*, 33). Later when she complains about the theft of chocolates, Sydney uses a similar kind of expression “Must be Yardman.” ... “or one of them Marys” (39). The young girl “Once in a while Yardman brought . . . Fourteen, perhaps, or twenty, depending on what she chose to do with her eyes” (40) is not Mary [Thérèse]. She is Alma Estèe. Thérèse is the only “Mary” ever employed with the Streets.

Son, the black intruder, is the only person who bothers about the names of the black people of the island. When, once Son is drifted off with Yardman and Mary in the *Prix-de France* by Valerian, he learns that Yardman and Mary have names, Gideon and Thérèse. He greets Mary of politeness, “Miss Thérèse, love of my life, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”(153). After returning to the mansion, Ondine asks Milkman, “You went off with Yardman yesterday?” It bothered him that everybody called Gideon Yardman, as though he had not been mothered. “Yes ma’am,” he said (161).

Son, the black man, who is brought up with his cultural values, could not tolerate the impertinence of the white man. He uses his knowledge of the real names of the people and spoils the Christmas dinner of the white man.

[Son] “Too bad Gideon couldn’t come.” ...

“Who?” asked Valerian.

“Gideon. Yardman.”

“His name is Gideon?” asked Jadine.

“What a beautiful name. Gideon.” Valerian smiled.

“Well, at least we knew Mary's name. Mary.” said Jadine.

“Nope.” said Son.

“No?”

“Thèrèse.”

“Thèrèse? Wonderful.” said Valerian. (*Tar*, 201)

Unlike her choice of names, for the characters, in other novels Morrison’s choice in the *Song of Solomon* is extremely sensible. The names chosen are meaningful and unique in their nature. The names of her characters lead her readers to understand them before hand. The name which is mistakenly registered by a white is discussed here. Milkman, influenced by his father Macon Dead II’s capitalistic ideals, travels to south in search of gold, which is believed to be hidden in a cave by his paternal aunt, Pilate. But soon his search for gold turns out into a search for his ancestry. Reverent Cooper, who knows about his grandfather, guides him to Circe, who is “older than death” (*Song*, 239). Circe discloses the secrets about his grandfather (Macon Dead), grandmother (Sing), father (Macon Dead II) and his aunt (Pilate Dead). When Circe tells about his grandmother, Milkman raises a question and her answer reflects the impertinent attitude of the whites:

[Milkman] “Sing? Sing Dead. Where’d she get a name like that?”

[Circe] “Where’d you get a name like yours? White people name Negroes as race horses” (243)

Macon Dead II shares his memory of his father, fertile peach farm of Lincoln’s Heaven and the cruel death of his father with his son. He also narrates how their names came about:

“When freedom came. All the colored people in the state had to register with the Freedom’s Bureau”

“Your father was a slave?”

“...Course he was. Who hadn’t in 1869? They all had to register Free or not free. Free and used-to-be- slaves... the man behind the desk was drunk. He asked Papa where he was born. Papa said Macon. Then he asked him who his father was. Papa said, ‘He’s dead.’ Asked him who owned him, Papa said, ‘I’m free’. Well, the Yankee wrote it all down, but in the wrong spaces. Had him born in Dunfrie, wherever the hell that is, and in the space for his name the

fool wrote, ‘Dead’ comma ‘Macon’. But Papa couldn’t read so he never found out what he was registered as till Mama told him . . . Showed off his paper to her. When she looked at his paper she read him out what it said” (53)

When Milkman asks his father, whether his grandfather had any chance to correct his name, “He didn’t have to keep the name, did he? He could have used his real name, couldn’t he?” (53), he replies that his “Mama liked it. Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out (54). His mother, a girl of Indian origin, “mixed. Indian mostly” (243), really wants the past to be erased, because of the sufferings the black undergone during that time.

Because of the impertinent attitude of the drunken Yankee, not only Milkman’s grandfather’s name but heritage of his ancestry also is lost. Macon Dead II is the son of “Jake”, (248), who is “one of those flying African children” (321), of “Solomon a flying African” (322). Before leaving to the north, Milkman thinks about the different names of the men in Shalimar “Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness.” (330) and understands that names really have meanings and history in them. At the end of his search he understands that, “Names ... 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” (329).

Omali Yeshitela, Chairman of the African People’s Socialist Party (APSP), outlines the importance of taking on an African name “... hundreds of millions of African people who have been taken into captivity and renamed and to have been a part of a situation where royal companies would actually take Africans and then upon capture would brand us and then would give us brands, take our names and then using searing hot irons—this is typical, this is not an unusual situation—would then brand us with the names of the company now branded and seared into our skin and things like that and we got names like “number 1” and “number 2” and “number 3” (1). Slave owners use “formulaic names” (Remer, 1) and numbers to their slaves to “erase our [their] memory” (Omali, 1) and give them “a sort of a historical amnesia” (ibid, 1). In *Beloved*, Sixo is given a number for a name and Paul A, Paul D, and Paul F, are given serialized ‘formulaic’ names.

The “depressingly utilitarian name” couldn’t make any “desired effect” on Baby Suggs, since she does not “internalize the idea behind them” (Remer, 3). Once Halle has bought his mother’s freedom, when

she is “sixty-odd-year-old” (Beloved, 166) from the plantation, baby Suggs asks the plantation owner Mr. Garner, “Why you all call me Jenny?” He replies her that “‘cause that what’s on your sales ticket, Jenny Whitlow is what his [Whitlow, the previous owner of Baby Suggs] bill said. When Mr. Garner asks her, “What you call yourself” Sugg replies “Nothing” ... I don’t call myself nothing.” She rejects the suggestion of Mr. Garner to retain her name “If I was you I’d stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs. Baby Suggs ain’t no name for a freed Negro”, and names herself, Baby Suggs, after her husband’s name, “Suggs is my name sir. From my husband. He called her “Baby” not “Jenny” (167-168).

But Paul D has “internalize[d] the idea behind them”. The retention of his name, after freedom, shows the fear he suffers in his inner psyche. He feels comfortable inhabiting his name as “mentally, a part of him is still back on Sweet Home” (Remer, 10). Along with the mean names, the slaves are given the names of their owners to show their ownership over them, “surnames ... from their owners ... displaying slave ownership” (Gutman, 250). When Denver addresses him as “Mr. D” he corrects her “Garner, baby. Paul D Garner,” (*Beloved*, 13)

### III. CONCLUSION

Names not only distinguish individuals, but they place them in particular categories also. In giving generic names to the people, as in *Tar Baby*, not only the white masters but the refined blacks also are impertinent. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman suffers because of this white attitude, since it results in the loss of names and ancestry as well. Baby Suggs of *Beloved* succeeds because the ‘depressingly utilitarian name’ couldn’t make any ‘desired effect’ on her, as she doesn’t allow it ‘to internalize the idea behind it’ and Paul D fails as he allows.

“Names are really important because names connect you to a past and to your history. Names are not just things floating out there in the world, but if you want to even look back and see where you came from and dig into your roots” (Omali, 1). Ellison stresses the possession of one’s own name, “...it is through our names that we first place ourselves in the world. Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own.”(147). Baby Suggs, even at ‘sixty-odd-year-old’ rejects the name, Jenny, which is given by her owners and takes the name of her husband for the rest of her life. She is the message.

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