

SIGNIFICANCE OF NAMING IN *SONG OF SOLOMON* BY TONI MORRISON

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**Abstract:**

*In Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon naming is actually a device that she uses to propel the spiritual journey and the discovery of what names really mean. Morrison takes names from the Bible and attributes them a narrative function. The title of the novel refers to the Song of Song in the Bible, and in keeping with the title many names allude to the Bible. Song of Solomon amply exhibits Morrison's preoccupation with naming. In case of the names, meaning lies beneath the surface. The very important lesson which Morrison teaches in the novel by emphasizing the device of naming is that one can only progress in one's life when we come to terms and accept all of who we are or when one fully realize who we are.*

**Keywords:** Naming, Spiritual Journey, Bible, Intertextuality.

Hungerford says, "Just as Morrison's craftsmanship simultaneously causes attention to repudiate the presence of an author in *Song of Solomon*, it echoes the Biblical "Song of Songs" in such a way as to deny the authority of the earlier texts" (169). Morrison's engagement with the Bible is unquestioning though the critics like Beth Benedrix may see her rejecting the western hegemony or orthodox Christianity or like Amy Benson or Jan Stryz may see her revisiting, revising, reevaluating and rewriting it. Morrison does retain her interest in the Bible but negotiates by investing it with her own signification. In an interview, she describes the religious quality of her upbringing:

I have a family of people who are highly religious. That was part of their language. Their resources were biblical; they expressed themselves in that fashion. But they combined it with another kind of relationship, to something, I think which was outside the Bible . . . I mean they were quite willing to remember visions, and signs and premonitions and all of that. But there was something larger and coherent, and the resemblance was always a part of what I was taught and certainly a part of what I believe (qtd. in Denard 179).

Morrison takes names from the Bible and attributes them a narrative function. In another interview she explains that she "used Biblical names to show the impact of the Bible on the black people, their awe and respect for it coupled with their ability to distort it for their own purposes" (qtd. in Denard 179). *Song of Solomon* is an apt illustration of it. The title of the novel refers to the Song of Song in the Bible, and in keeping with the title many names also allude to the Bible. For example Hegar, Ruth, Rebecca, Pilate, have obvious biblical associations. *Song of Solomon* amply exhibits Morrison's preoccupation with naming. In fact names in the novel deeply indicate the issues of narratives and the characters that denote their narrative function. In case of the names, meaning lies beneath the surface. Genevieve Fabre in her article "Genealogical Archaeology or the Quest for Legacy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" avers: "There is a connection between naming and flight which reaches back into ancient literature, with flight often a reward for those who know the ancient or true Name" (110).

Naming is actually a device that Morrison uses to propel the spiritual journey and the discovery of what names really mean. It is through names that a person identifies with him/herself and with others around. Morrison calls attention to the importance of naming as a ritual in black people's lives. Blacks received dead patronyms from whites. It was actually a trick of illiteracy played on blacks by whites, which

allowed the literates to mess up their names. Besides a deep truth about human nature may be found in actions like the ability to choose our own names which verifies the power of individualistic creation that underpins our freedom. This general human truth is rendered immeasurably in African American Literature in which ancestors are nameless slaves. The deliberate refusal of the black community in *Song of Solomon* to accept arbitrarily imposed names constitutes an act of defiance toward an oppressive white power structure. This indicates a concomitant act of collective self-love. Throughout Morrison's novel, the "constant censorship of an intrusion on black life from the surrounding society is emphasized not by specific events so much as by a consistent pattern of misnaming" (Davis 323). As a result of this misnaming, "a whole group of people have been denied the right to create a recognizable public self - as individuals or as community" (327).

*Song of Solomon* shows how illiterate black people held the Bible in respect and chose names from it. The children in the Dead family in the novel are named by pointing to a section of the Bible and whatever name the finger landed on was the name of the Dead child. Pilate, Hagar, Reba Dead, First Corinthians and Magdalena are a few of unusual names that result from this technique. She has also chosen a character Circe from Greek Mythology and Guitar Bains from History. Apart from these names there are names that acquire symbolic significance. It also seems interesting that Macon Dead Sr. could not read but had a direct connection with the land he owned: "the man who could plow forty [acres] in no time flat and sang like an angel while he did it" (Morrison 235). Macon Sr.'s power is with the land, animals, and the living world, and it is the symbolic and not the literal written reality that brought about his destruction. When words are written, they also become "symbolic" and turn "towards abstraction" which "eroded face-to-face interaction and eroded people's direct, intimate relationship with the natural world" (Zerzan 7).

As far as the Biblical names are concerned, the allusions stand in three different relations. There are names which stand as parallels though within different time and space. Some of the characters have Biblical associations but are subversions. Still there are some which contest any intertextuality. Ruth, falling in the first category has light yellow skin tone, and is the daughter of a rich educated doctor, presented as a counterpart of Biblical Ruth, who was a Moabite but was married to an Israelite. Just as Biblical Ruth seeks acceptance from the Hebrews, after she is estranged by her native people, Ruth seeks acceptance from both her father, husband and her community in the novel but is estranged from her people for her cultured life style. There is yet another parallel between these Ruths. Their names are associated with loyalty. Just as the Biblical Ruth followed her mother-in-law, Ruth of the *Song of Solomon* remains loyal to her husband. Ruth in the Bible had remarried when persuaded by her mother-in-law and had Jesus eventually as her progeny. Ruth in the novel had come to a point when her marriage had almost ended with her husband but helped by Pilate, she conceived Milkman, who becomes a spiritual heir in the novel.

The character named Reba, who is Pilate's daughter, is named after the wife of the patriarch Isaac, the daughter-in-law of Abraham and Sarah, the mother of the Jacob and Esau. Her story is told in Genesis, the first book of Torah. She has been shown as a manipulator and for this she suffered a lot. In the novel Reba is Pilate's daughter and Hagar's mother, also known as Rebecca. Reba has strong sexual drive and is attracted to abusive men. Nevertheless, because Pilate is her mother, the few men who dare mistreat her are punished. Reba's uncanny ability to win contests such as the Sears half-millionth customer diamond ring giveaway demonstrates that wealth is transient and unimportant.

Hagar is yet another character to whom Morrison gives a Biblical name in order to align her with a well-known figure. Biblical Hagar is an Egyptian slave in the Bible, according to Torah, with whom Abraham fathered Ishmael. Abraham and Sarah, his wife had grown old waiting for an heir. In their old age Sarah took matters in her own hands, convincing her husband to sleep with her slave, Hagar, who bore him a son. For theologians, Hagar is a mélange of good and bad, who is a representative of the sins of the flesh while at the same time is a blessed character. In the novel, Hagar is Reba's daughter and Milkman's lover. She devotes herself to Milkman, even though he loses interest and frequently rejects her. So, Hagar bears

the same experiences as Biblical Hagar which emphasizes that women are seen as disposable and can be easily manipulated by men. Hagar, in fact, in the Bible suffered from physical slavery whereas in the novel she is an embodiment of mental slavery. Morrison here talks about two kinds of slavery- physical slavery and mental slavery. Physical slavery is unredeemable to an extent, which is the case of Hagar in the Bible, but mental slavery falling within subjective effort of the character is a redeemable situation. Thus Morrison relates the past with the present.

But all characters with Biblical names do not serve as contemporary parallels. Pilate, who is Milkman's aunt, and sister of Macon Dead Jr., is named after the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, the judge who ordered the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. According to the New Testament accounts, Pilate seems to have favored negotiation, rather than confrontation as in the case of Jesus, Pilate offered the crowd a choice: Barabbas or Jesus. The crowd chose Barabbas and in a result Jesus went off to his 'death'. But in the novel, Pilate is a woman to whom Morrison has totally subverted, by depicting her as a positive, full, aggressively alive character who also recalls the name's near homophone, Pilot. Pilot, who guides flight, directs and takes charge. Milkman's father tells him "how Macon Sr. wrote one word in his life - Pilate's name; copied it out of the Bible. That's what she got folded up in her earring" (Morrison 53). One can see how names are important when Pilate takes the magical vestige of the past that is written by her father and seals it in a snuff box. She attaches it to a gold wire and hangs it from her ear. This besides showing reverence for the Bible also proves why both naming and self-love have been embraced by Pilot. Pilate's name is just as important as her identity; and it is part of her power. She is a mother earth, goddess figure in Milkman's journey, the guide to his identity, and the earth mother that black women like Pilate "natural healer" who makes use of magic throughout the story (150). Ruth tells Milkman that Pilate has maintained "the maternal world through myths" (Holloway 26). Pilate gave her "some greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff to put in his [Macon Jr.] food" (125). She charmed her husband to sleep with her so that she could get pregnant with Milkman. Even when Milkman is conceived, it is through Pilate's intervention that Milkman is saved from abortion and abuse. This shows that Pilate in the Bible is associated with the crucifixion of Jesus, whereas Pilot of Morrison manages birth and life and goes beyond the life/ death cycle. She can communicate with the dead ones.

Morrison's purpose is not just mere inversion. She plays on the word Pilate with the homophone Pilot to steer Milkman on a spiritual journey. The word is also associated with flight connotatively transcendence and spiritual upliftment. Had Morrison purpose been only inversion, she would not have attributed Jesus' message of undiminished love for humanity to Pilate in *Song of Solomon*. Hence Morrison foregrounds the sense of humanity enshrined in the Bible in her novel *Song of Solomon*. Pilate, although having none of the material comforts, gives peace to Milkman whenever he is around her and her home. She is the one who sparks his curiosity and guides him to a weighing up that opens his eyes about his race, his family, and his own autonomy. Morrison further extends the meaning of the word 'Pilot' by empowering 'Pilate' with the potential to go back into the past to communicate with the ancestors, fly high while being rooted on the earth signification, and by incarnating the value of love for the future of the humankind.

Thus attributing a four dimensional character to her character Pilate, Morrison brings out the word from the hegemonic rigid boundaries. Meaning as naming is thus always at one and the same time 'inside' and 'outside' the text.

The meaning of the sign is thrown open - the sign becomes 'polysemic' rather than 'univocal' - and though it is true to say that the dominant power group at any given time will dominate the intertextual production of meaning, this is not to suggest that the opposition has been reduced to total silence. The power struggle intersects in the sign. (Moi 158)

Language as a reflection of power relationships proves how such signification makes even the little narratives written in opposition to grand narratives, subversive. Besides, Morrison instills deep spiritual

qualities in Pilate by conflating it with Pilot to place her sharp contrast to the Biblical Pilate. Pilate in the novel is able to have her spiritual heir; Milkman underlining how merely getting a Biblical name does not get one spiritual depths. Discovering the past lineage, knowing the names of the ancestors imparts a spiritual potential.

The protagonist of the novel, Milkman is also known as Macon Dead III. As his nickname suggests, Milkman literally feeds on what others produce. Born into a sheltered, privileged home, Milkman grows up to be an egotistical young man. He lacks compassion, wallows in self-pity, and alienates himself from the African-American community. But his eventual discovery of his family history gives his life of purpose. Although he remains flawed, this newfound purpose makes him compassionate and caring. The novel is a journey for his identity and selfhood as a Macon Dead III to the affirmative, his nick name Milkman.

In the novel, it is Pilate who nourishes Milkman's birth in spite of Macon's efforts to have the pregnancy aborted. Milkman, born on the moment of suicidal flight, discovers that he belongs to a family of flying Americans who sought freedom from slavery or by escaping North or 'flying' back to Africa. When he finally hears his name in the *Song of Solomon*, he frees himself from the emotional death of Macon dead, and from the obsessive terrorism of Guitar, as well as the clinging guilt of Hagar's love. Milkman and Pilate bury his grandfather's bones. Finally Milkman finds the strength to lift himself.

Milkman's conversion from immature person to matured person is also realized through his physical imperfection symbolizing his moral imperfection, which is suggested by his shortened left leg resulting in a barely noticeable limp. After the communal hunt, in which he is initiated by the men of Shalimar into comradeship and respect for life and nature, he ceases to limp. The cold, self-centered Milkman matures into a sympathetic, caring man through the discovery of his own past, his ancestors' suffering, and their struggles against poverty, racism, greed, and pride. The name, which Macon III got for having been suckled by his emotionally starved mother past his weaning stage, and which he comes to abhor having discovered the truth behind his naming by the twist of irony acquired positive and deeply spiritual connotations. With Circe, Morrison further strengthens her spiritual discourse in the novel. Modeled on Circe of Greek mythology, Morrison's Circe carries a resemblance to the goddess of the same name found in Homer's *Odyssey*. *Odyssey's* Circe provides Odysseus with crucial information on how to end his voyage. The naming is very important because Circe in Greek mythology was a minor goddess of magic that lived in a great mansion that was protected by wolves and lions. The character has a similar personality and place. Milkman even mistakes her for the witch from his dreams: "Witches in black dresses and red underskirts; witches with pick eyes and green lips, tiny witches, long rangy witches, frowning witches, smiling witches...so when he saw the woman at the top of the stairs there was no way for him to resist climbing up toward her outstretched hands" (Morrison 239). He thought Circe, like the oracle, to be dead and thought, "she had to be dead. Not because of the wrinkles . . . but because out of the toothless mouth came the strong, mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old girl" (240). Circe had a supernatural aura just like her namesake, who Odysseus meets off the coast of Greece. She is an integral part of Milkman's journey because she leads him in the direction of his family history, so that he may end his search for his family heritage.

Thus we see Morrison performing the ritual of naming her characters with a clear spiritual agenda. Morrison has given them names alluding to the Bible, but she is not making it an allegory and therefore many of these names do not carry any parallel or deviation in them. The intertextualities between the *Song of Solomon* and the Bible can be seen as clearly contested with the reference such names as the First Corinthians and Magdalena called Lena. The two sisters of Milkman await an opportune time to realize the spiritual roots in them. As an Afro-American, Morrison exercises her intellectual powers positioned between pulls of two different systems - The African folk beliefs and institutionalized Christianity. Nicole Wilkinson is quoted as arguing that "the Bible is always for Morrison fully subsumed under the white man



discourse that Morrison rejects, and therefore the “Bible in her novel remained unread” and sometimes even completely “irrelevant” even when evoked” (Hungerford 166). The critique is only partially true because of the complex treatment that Morrison gives to the names she takes from the Bible. The very important lesson which Morrison teaches in the novel *Song of Solomon* by emphasizing the device of naming is that we can only progress in our life when we come to terms and accept all of who we are or when we fully realize who we are. Pilate signifies flying with rootedness and hence reading *Song of Solomon* calls for intertextuality but much is extratextual as is Pilate's supernaturalism and the demand of the author for a spiritual response from the reader.

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