

Cultural Politics of Naming: An Analysis of Gloria Naylor's Select Novels

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ABSTRACT

African-Americans were forced to the devious scheme of oppression by the Americans. This subtle or grand scheme had two motives: first, to espouse American culture and traditional values; second, to devalue African cultural practices as unschooled and barbaric. In doing so, Americans demeaned many African cultural values and framed their culture as authoritative. Gloria Naylor in her novels endeavours to break this blockade that stops Africans from living an unencumbered life. In order to educate Africans about their culture and to make them feel proud of their rich cultural heritage, Naylor in her novels contrasts the rich African cultural values with the emptiness of the modern American values. Taking these cues, this article investigates the importance of the cultural value of 'Naming' in the select novels of Gloria Naylor.

Keywords: Africa, culture, tradition, naming, dominance

Culture, the domineering force, which limits the uncivilised behaviour of an individual and a group, is a learned system of behaviour that shapes a particular identity of a community. Culture can also be termed as a medium which connects the individual's soul to the universe; so, to live an unencumbered life under the guidance of the divine force, a proper understanding of culture is necessary for any individual. Americans misapprehended the African cultural practices and strove to dismantle the medium that guided the Africans. Since Gloria

Naylor gives credence to the African culture as the force that guides the African woman to emancipation, she, in her novels, presents the commendable qualities of African culture. She touches upon the sensitive and important aspects of the African cultural practices like naming, ancestral worship, festivals, music, codes, conjuring and healing. In doing so she tries to cast away Africans' ignorance of their culture. This paper presents the importance and the cultural value of naming in her select novels, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Mama Day*.

Names are used to identify a person in association with a person, idea or concept; it is considered being the cultural practice having an important traditional significance. Whites demean the African cultural practice of naming by imposing white identity on the African children. Americans are not ready to accept the non-American cultural values, for instance, a Hopi woman Polingaysi Qoyawayma's name was changed by a white man, when she first went to school. He imposed white identity on her by naming her "Bessie." He printed the name on a cardboard and hung it round her neck. When she came home her mother and grandmother said: "you had your beginning as a true Hopi, Polingaysi's mother told her, fingering the cardboard. You were named in the Hopi way. Your true name is Polingaysi. That will always be your name" (Whitson 204). This story shows the White's attempt to demean the Red Indian identity. Some of the African women writers also show immense interest in names. For instance Ntozake Shange changes her christened name Paulette Williams in the year 1971: "Adopting the Zulu names, *Ntozake*, meaning 'she who comes with her own things,' and *Shange*, meaning 'who walks like a lion,' was a conscious move to renounce European connotation and to celebrate the Afrocentric core of her identity," says Lester (10).

Naylor shows significant interest in naming as she said in an interview: "I would like someday for someone to look at the importance of naming. The whole act of naming, names

themselves within my work because that's real conscious when I play certain games with that. I think the naming of characters and what place names play and how they play out. That would interest me to read about my work" (Felton and Loris 262).

Being conscious about African naming culture and the significant role it plays in personal identity, Naylor's characters often attempt to prove the richness of their naming culture in contrast to the western naming culture. In the novel *The Women of Brewster Place*, Kiswana Browne, one of the seven main characters, who has moved from a decent middle-class family in Linden Hills to Brewster Place, presupposes that her birth name *Melanie* does not express the African cultural values and changes it into "Kiswana". Kiswana's belligerence behaviour for her name change disrupts her mother since the latter is well aware of the African naming culture and named her daughter accordingly.

There is a constant conflict over Kiswana's name change between her and her mother Mrs. Browne. When her mother paves a visit to see Kiswana in her new living space, she knocks at the door by calling her name "Melanie, Melanie, are you there?" (WBP 78) Believing that her mother strives to demean African culture by calling her "Melaine", she opens the door and tells her that she thought the knocking was meant for her neighbour as "no one hardly ever calls me Melanie" (WBP 78). Astonished to see her daughter's acting, Mrs. Browne says, "Well, it's awfully strange you can forget a name you answered to for twenty-three years" (WBP 78). This type of conflict is generally very common among mother and daughter as it is a generational conflict. But the mother and daughter habitually argue over Melanie new name.

Understanding the final results of Africans struggles in America, Mrs. Browne doesn't want her daughter to sacrifice her life for revolution. When she came to know about the poor living condition of Melanie through her son, she likes to visit her and

guide her in the right path. Kiswana doesn't like her brother Wilson for not valuing his cultural roots. When her mother talks about Wilson's (Kiswana's brother) visit two days before, Kiswana becomes furious because she has borrowed twenty dollars from him. She presumes that "son-of-a-bitch probably ran straight to Mama – and after he swore he wouldn't say anything" (WBP 80). Detesting him for not valuing his cultural identity, she informs her mother about his wife's condition: "Personally, I don't see how she can sleep with Willie. He's such a dishrag" (WBP 80). Kiswana still resents the stance that her brother took in college. When everyone discovered their blackness and protested on the campus, he never took part; he even refused to wear an Afro-shirt. This had outraged Kiswana because unlike her he is dark-skinned and has the type of hair that is thick and kinky enough for a good "Fro." In order to bring African distinctiveness, she cuts her hair but it is so thin and fine-textured, it refuses to thicken even after she washes it. So she has to brush it up and spray it with lacquer to keep it from lying flat. She never forgives him for telling her that she does not look African, she looks like an electrocuted chicken. Felton and Loris opine:

Kiswana chooses an African name (instead of Melanie), blows her hair into an afro, quits college, moves out of her bourgeois neighbourhood to a low-income project, decorates it with African artefacts, and gets a boyfriend in dashiki. The reaction she gets is as sharp as it is forceful. Her mother's lone voice carries with it the moral superiority and confidence of the self-made black middle class, whose hard-earned security has come under fire. (15)

Looking totally perplexed by Kiswana's condition of life in Brewster place, Mrs. Browne blames her for wasting her talents in the name of revolution. When her mother talks ill of the people in Brewster Place, Kiswana becomes angry and says, "They're my people and yours too, Mama – we're all black. But maybe you've forgotten that over in Linden Hills" (WBP 83).

Mrs. Browne is amazingly perceptive about the revolution but her concern is largely on her daughter's future. In a way to continue the revolution in a better path, Mrs. Browne counsels Kiswana to complete her college degree. Kiswana states that the college is counterrevolutionary and that her place is in the street to fight "for equality and a better community" (WBP 83). Her mother argues that the revolutionary people who fought with her are now working in offices with their degree. Kiswana misunderstands her care when she degrades her revolution. She says, "how can you – a black woman – sit there and tell me that what we fought for during the Movement wasn't important just because some people sold out?" (WBP 84)

Her mother accepts that it is important to stand and fight for what they are and to get equal rights. If she fights like this in the streets she cannot bring about the expected change as the government will impose new federal laws and again black people have to face new obstacles "just because they're black" (WBP 84). She insists on her to get a degree and an important job so that she can get some influence and fight within a system. She can "become an assembly woman or a civil liberties lawyer or open a freedom school in this very neighbourhood" (WBP 84). Kiswana rejects her mother's words; she alleges that, by living with these people she can understand their day-to-day problems. Blaming the people who search for their personal comfort and forget about the throbbing life of the black she says "you and Daddy and those other educated blacks sitting over there in Linden Hills with a terminal case of middle-class amnesia" (WBP 84-85).

Kiswana thinks that her name does not carry African cultural values and searches an African dictionary to select a name to make her proud. But the name "Melanie" with which Mrs. Browne christened her after her grandmother has a deep cultural value. Her grandmother gave birth to nine children and

educated them all. She stopped six white men with a shot gun when they tried to take one of her sons to jail.

Kiswana Browne, who shuns her middle-class background and her great-grandmother's name, is the community's radical but one who lacks a genuine understanding of her ancestral past. Her mother's brief history lesson, revealing the strength of Kiswana's great-grandmother, serves as a powerful reminder of the vibrant past which Kiswana willingly suppresses. (Felton and Loris 44)

Mrs. Browne charges Kiswana for not understanding the cultural values they have as a middle-class because no one can continue any revolution if they live hand to mouth. Kiswana is not able to open her mouth against her mother's sentimental talk but "Mrs. Browne's lecture to Kiswana, while it expresses important truths, does not signal a desire to change her daughter; indeed, she is clearly proud of her daughter's idealism and activism" (Fowler 37) as she discloses "the one lesson I wanted you to learn is not to be afraid to face anyone, not even a crafty old lady like me who can outtalk you" (WBP 87). Kiswana's awareness of her cultural values shows her willingness to be identified as African. First her mother appears as counterrevolutionary but through their conversation it is understood that the two women share similar cultural values.

In the novel *Mama Day*, George and Cocoa represent the white and black culture respectively. *Cocoa* is the pet name of Ophelia; she likes her pet name as it represents African cultural identity. Everyone in Willow Springs knows her only by her pet name but George in New York calls her Ophelia because he likes her to be identified in western culture. He "prefers to call Cocoa by her birth name as a way of fixing her in the female identity suggested by Ophelia's role in *Hamlet*.... Cocoa's family's habit of calling her by pet name represents their desire to distance her from Shakespeare's Ophelia, 'whose suicidal madness is born of the indifference of *Hamlet's* plot to represent women as

autonomously desiring subjects'' (Fowler 109). Animosity between George and Cocoa is the result of a normal misunderstanding between lovers but when the deep roots of such conflicts are examined, the westerners' dismissal of African cultural values are visible. The African cultural values cannot be understood by the whites with their rational mind-set. Even they are not ready to listen to such values. Naylor attempts to accomplish the dream of W.E.B. Du Bois, who declares:

But, back of this, still brood silently the deep religious feeling of the real Negro heart, the stirring, unguided might of powerful human souls who have lost the guiding star of the past and are seeking in the great night a new religious ideal. Someday the awakening will come, when the pent-up vigour of ten million souls shall sweep irresistibly toward the Goal, out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, where all that makes life worth living – Liberty, Justice and Right – is marked 'For White People Only.' (Calhoun 520)

Throughout the novel George with his western ideologies attempts to dismantle the myth and the traditional practices of Willow Springs but his efforts become futile. Very cautious about her African cultural roots Cocoa does not like to be identified as *Ophelia*. At her first meeting with George in an interview she tells her pet name *Cocoa*. He, as the interviewer, talks informally and asks her to call him by his first name but as she feels that the person who gives his first name will never give the job, she says that her birth name is not registered in her mind adding, "And I'm used to answering to Cocoa. I guess we might as well start now because if I get the position and anyone here calls me Ophelia I'll be so busy concentrating on my work, it won't register"(MD 29).

The discussion on the name in the interview represents the whites' effort to understand the black cultural values and their failure to do so. She expresses the strong cultural values of African naming practices when she says, "I've had it from a child – in the South it's called a pet name. My grandmother and

great-aunt gave it to me" (MD 29). He cannot understand the importance of her name and tries to degrade it by asking whether the child with butter cream colour gets this name. She becomes sensitive when he ridicules her cultural roots. She wants, "to slap that smirk off your face" (MD 29). George attempts to understand Willow Springs but he finds it hard to believe the importance of the practices with his rational mind-set. W.E.B. DuBois in *Souls of Black Folk* states the double-consciousness of the African who lives in American. George's double-consciousness develops an oscillation in his beliefs:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,-- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanise American, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (3)

In order to test Cocoa's cultural awareness, Mama Day, while doing gardening, calls her by her birth name *Ophelia*. Cocoa is not able to gasp that immediately because she does not like to be called in a western name, that too by Mama Day, who values the African cultural practices. She misses Mama Day's intention and becomes angry for trying to identify her with western values. She asks Mama Day why she called her by her actual name, which she has never done before. Cocoa's over-protectiveness of her name equals the idea of Ntozake Shange: "A name means a lot more than just a signature on your Master Charge. It's who you are. I didn't want to be defined by a heritage that infuriates me. I didn't want any kind of Anglo-Saxon name because European culture has nothing to do with me" (Lester 10).

Ambush in a later chapter points out the unique cultural practice of Willow Springs in avoiding the western names, "Well, I've been answering to Ambush all my life and I know my name is Charles. And I bet you can't even remember Cocoa's real name" (MD199).

She looks at the *Sunday Times* and understands that there are more pages in the Help Wanted section than in the telephone book of Willow Springs. When the American companies do not appoint her for her race, she says "But it took me a while to figure out that New York racism moved underground like most of the people did" (MD 18). The emptiness of American life which Cocoa finds out reveals the emptiness of their culture. They live a hypocritical life but still they degrade the values of the African life. Through constant search for a job in various companies Cocoa understands the prevalence of racism in America. So when she sees a job advertisement in Andrews and Stein Engineering Company she hopes to get one because it is run by Africans. Ted Koppel announces the need "to produce at least one program per month on racism in the United States, indicating that the respected host felt that racism had not ended and in fact that it was a serious issue to which he should devote attention" (Asante 18).

Animosity arises between George and Cocoa because of her deep cultural roots. Naylor portrays George as an orphan and his mother as a whore so as to bring out the fact that the Americans do not have any culture and that the present culture they possess is due to the contact with various people. Earlier they experienced painful communication difference because of their attempts to develop their relationship according to the white culture. His first approach for a date irritates her. She considers his company boring.

She strives to understand the white culture in the first part of the novel through "George according to a white script. Her way of understanding the disconcerting interview she has with

him is to see it in the formulaic terms of cinematic melodrama" (Felton and Loris 116). In his attempt to educate her of western culture, he takes her to various places to make her understand real New York. Even Cocoa makes a great effort to understand the hypocritical living of the Americans. But when she brings George to Willow Springs he does not understand it with his rational mind-set. Whatever he knows about her in New York is only a part of her and the whole of her is in Willow Springs. She knows that it is difficult for him to take the transformation in her "beginning with something as basic as my name" (MD 176). She knows that no one in Willow Springs knows who Ophelia is as everyone calls her Cocoa: "And even if you were a more flexible type of man, it was too late for you to start calling me Cocoa" (MD 176) as she addresses him, and adds: "No, my temper was nothing new to you but, try as I might, I became a child again in this house. You respected Ophelia's anger just as she respected yours. How would you react seeing that Cocoa's anger, whether coddled or dismissed, was never taken seriously here?" (MD 177)

The independent culture of Willow Springs astounds George because having been brought up in America it is a new way of life for him. Commenting on the American culture Luther S. Luedtke says:

For the most part, the time is past when Americans found it necessary to insist, urgently, that they had a distinctive literary and artistic culture of their own. American culture continues to expand and change, however, like the composition of the American people themselves, and cultural and national identity are no less intimately related at the end of the 20th century than two hundred years ago when the new United States was struggling to affirm its cultural as well as its political and economic independence from Europe. (33)

The triumph of the African cultural identity through naming comes with the death of George: "Though Cocoa's birth name might be Ophelia, George's death frees her from that

identity and allows her to receive the mantle of Sapphira, a name Naylor deliberately invokes in order to redefine" (Fowler 117).

Naylor shows the importance of the African cultural identity of naming in contrast with western cultural identity. Her characters Kiswana and Cocoa like to be identified with African values as they believe that the western culture has nothing to do with them.

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