

Identity in *The House on Mango Street*, *Beloved*, and in *The Woman Warrior*: Names and Naming

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Here then was I (call me Mary Beton Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of importance) sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought. (V. Woolf 5)

It becomes apparent at first reading that in any of the three works to be examined, naming (i.e. the naming of characters by the authors, the characters' addressing themselves and each other individually or in community, the names identifying them when they are spoken to by members of the white majority) has much relevance in the shaping of identity. In ethnic literatures, where personal and communal identity as well as identity in the larger context of society are a matter of life and death, names do matter for both writer and reader, and deserve attention.

In contrast, the quotation above from Virginia Woolf shows that names do not matter if the writer wants to achieve impersonality, to efface herself, or remain in the background. But it should also be added that this particular quotation does not exemplify merely Woolf's preference for the ideal of creative anonymity, but rather the contingency and relative insignificance of names in the formation of identity for the purposes of non-minority writers. At the same time the names Virginia Woolf mentions in the quotation above were used at first by Leonard Woolf in *The Wise Virgins* (20), by way of reference to a popular ballad, and they may have served as a household phrase or a private joke in the usage of the Woolfs.

In this paper I am going to examine briefly the problems of naming in the short fiction of Sandra Cisneros and in novels by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston. Then I will follow up by making a few comparisons between the three women writers, and finally draw conclusions with regard to correspondences and differences between them as mouthpieces for three ethnic groups.

Cisneros follows her protagonist's life from childhood up to her experimentations with adulthood. In the introduction she says,

When I began *The House on Mango Street*, I thought I was writing a memoir. By the time I had finished it, my memoir was no longer memoir, no longer autobiographical. (Cisneros xi-ii)

By this she means that she has managed to arrive at general truths regarding the Chicano people.

In the collection several short stories have the word 'name' in their titles. The stories are told in I-narration or in the third person. The self-conscious attitude the narrator has toward names is significant.

The events of the stories are viewed from a child's point of view whose voice merges either with the authorial voice or with the relentless voices that are in support of racial, class and gender prejudices. Thus the seemingly simple short stories make up an intricate web of voices. These voices are interlocked so tightly that their untangling is a great challenge.

Identity for the child narrator is constructed first of all in terms of physical appearance and outfit (hair, color, feet, clothes, shoes), of mastery of languages (both Spanish and English), sex, gender, and property relations (how the girls and women are treated by the other sex, how the adults treat children, whether they have real friends and a house of their own), but in the final account the fixing of identity is possible for her only through names.

In "My Name" the child narrator informs us that her name in English is hope and in Spanish "it means too many letters" (Cisneros 11). The uttering of the Spanish name is delayed in the first paragraph; first it is identified with the color "muddy." Muddy as a color may be part of the child's vocabulary; it merges, however, with the ironical voice of the author who feels bitterness at having a little girl of her kind named Esperanza. The name generates ambivalent feelings in Esperanza as well as the in the author who is aware of the hopelessness a Chicana faces. Esperanza fits into the ethnic neighborhood, yet her prospects in the wider hostile, or at best indifferent society are bleak.

Esperanza has the same name as her great-grandmother whose lifestory is told. Ancestry is indispensable for determining one's ethnic identity. With a name like Esperanza her great-grandmother may not have been "all the things she wanted to be" (Cisneros 12) or could have been. The great-grandmother's identity was based on mute anger and suffering and that is what Esperanza wants to avoid. In the formation of her identity negative examples such as this one are significant. She is longing for a different name, even though Esperanza sounds exquisite in Spanish. Her name has not got a diminutive form like Magdalena has Nenny which seems more suitable for use in English. She wants a name which would express her personality, a name which she could pronounce without being ashamed of it.

In her dreams her name is Lisandra, sounding very romantic, perhaps elegant; Maritza, a name very endearing and nicer than plain Mary. The other name she would like to have, Zeze, is reminiscent of a famous

singer's name on a poster, or it could be a Catalan name. Her choice of the dramatic name stands for her desire to depart from her community, while the addition of X merely stands for marking that after all she clings to the people on Mango Street. In the first part of the story she calls her own name funny, which reflects the other children's judgment.

In "Our Good Day" it is explained why: "And I wish my name was Cassandra or Alexis or Maritza—anything but Esperanza—but when I tell them my name they don't laugh" (Cisneros 17). In the latter short story Lucy and Rachel, the newcomers from Texas, do not laugh at her name like the girls and boys in her class.

"And Some More" deals with children playing God by giving each other identity, i.e. names. The playfulness, however, ends in enmity through their reeling of names. The originally innocent game turns into a kind of witchcraft, or black magic. The children's distinction between clean and dirty snow is a metaphor for the difference between normalcy and otherness. At first the canting of names seems to take place at random. When Esperanza becomes really angry she addresses Lucy by official name, adding her last name in addressing her. As Lucy gets annoyed too, she tries to hang on to some logical principle to be able to continue her enlisting: she enumerates names with the meaning of flowers, then names beginning with the same sounds and letters—the enlisting being rhythmically interrupted by calling each other offending names. At this point, however, the author's voice interferes, "Who is stupid? Rachel, Lucy, Esperanza and Nenny" (Cisneros 45). That is all four of them because of quarrelling about names and forgetting that they belong together.

Cisneros has a deep knowledge of children's psychology. She is aware of the fact that knowing no compromises children tend to think in terms of black and white, dirty and clean, but they also keep repeating what they hear from their peers and adults. It is dangerous to bring up children in a prejudiced society, as children learn fast. In "My Name," for instance, Esperanza echoes the view about another ethnic group, the convenient stereotype about the weakness of the Chinese women.

What is the identity of a Chicano in the eyes of the authorities? This question is addressed in "Geraldo No Last Name." A Mexican illegal immigrant, a "wetback," has no identity for them, as identity is what your pocket contains, it is documents indicating your last name and address. For the Chicana, Marin, who is named only after the first paragraph, identity is the boy's Spanish first name, his ability to dance and his being nice to talk to. The emphatic voice of Marin outweighs that of the police and the hospital workers, which is another fine example of polyvocality in Cisneros's fiction.

The Chicanos and Chicanas have only started to re-assert themselves, while the black writers have been struggling with their history for a long time now, the opportunity as well as the interest, however, in

telling the truth about the experience of slavery are regarded as relatively recent.

Toni Morrison takes the name of the eponymous character of *Beloved* from the inscription often to be seen on tombstones, a fact that may hint at the intention of the author to mourn for her people, victims of the inhuman institution of slavery. It is also relevant that the character Beloved is a ghost, she is beloved but not in this world. The name of Sethe seems to be unfamiliar, perhaps of African origin. In fact this is the name of a black man that the mother chose to give her daughter, while she threw away her other children from white men unnamed. Given this explanation I was still tempted to associate it with the verb 'seethe,' certainly there were quite a few memories seething at the depth of Sethe's soul. The name of Sethe's "mother-in-law," Baby Suggs, is also unusual, and it is the only thing left after her husband.

Denver, Beloved's sister gets named after the white fugitive girl who helped Sethe give birth to her. The first name of the extravagant proud white girl was Amy—a name of Latin origin. In a dictionary under the section "Feminine names" the meaning of Amy indicated was 'beloved' (Urdang 1555). My point of argument is that the figure of Amy Denver unites characteristics of both Denver and Beloved. Morrison is likely to have used her as a fictional device and split up her personality into traits appearing in Denver and Beloved. In the beginning there is not much evidence to support my point, by the end, however, Amy Denver's secretive and mysterious nature, her caprices and insatiable hunger for love become prevalent in Beloved, while her courageous, independent spirit, and magic healing power become prominent in Denver. Up to the point that Denver seeks the help of the villagers Morrison's characterization of the two daughters is ambivalent. The pattern of the relationship between Sethe and her daughters is modified and shifted throughout the novel.

One of the crimes of slavery was depriving the black people of their identity. One way to do this was to define them by giving them English names, often only first names, de-individualizing them and hastening the process of forgetting their African origin. Even the liberal slavekeeper Mr. Garner named his slaves after himself and according to the alphabet: Paul D. Garner, Paul F. Garner, Paul A. Garner, which is hardly sufficient for identifying grown-up individuals. He believed that by merely letting them use his last name he "had made men out of niggers" (Morrison 11). According to Rody in *Beloved* "Morrison rewrites the life of a historical figure, Margaret Garner, who killed her child to prevent her recapture to slavery. . ." (93). The writer avoids calling her heroine Garner, endowing with this name the slavekeepers instead and giving a clue that her novel should not be read as a traditional historical novel. Baby Suggs is called Jenny by the Garners "Cause that what's on your sales ticket, gal" (Morrison 142). When questioned by Amy Denver, Sethe says her name is Lu, as ". . . there was no point in giving out her real name to the

first person she saw" (Morrison 33). By doing so she deliberately effaces her Sweet Home self.

That name determines one's personal identity is shown in the novel when Sethe "rememories" her mother, who used to coo to her the name "Seth-thuh." This is one of the happiest memories she can recall clearly in connection with her mother.

There are several speaking names used by the writer as a device of mild irony or scathing satire. The nickname of Patsy, Thirty-Mile-Woman, refers to the distance Sixo has to conquer to consummate his long postponed love at last. The characters are aware of the meaning of their names, for instance, on the threshold of death Sixo cries out "Seven-o!" instead of his proper name. In Lorna Sage's interpretation he does so "in the knowledge that he has cheated his owners and killers because his woman is pregnant and has escaped with his child" (178). The name Stamp Paid may allude to the fact that the selling and purchase of slaves was merely a matter of contract with a stamp paid for. Other possible layers of meaning are: Stamp Paid is a kind of messenger in the community; he became his own definer by having disclaimed his former name Joshua when the young master seduced his wife.

The dog is called Here Boy, a short instruction briefly snapped at male slaves by their masters. It is also relevant that the physical distortion of Here Boy is repeatedly mentioned, for slavery distorts physically as well as mentally. Ironically, the name of a lame rooster in the novel is Mister, for he lives like a king as compared to the black male slaves.

Names of "whitepeople" have possible connotations of disgust or irony: Whitlow ("pussy inflammation"), Mr Buddy ("chum," "comrade"). In *Beloved* identity can be preserved only by means of clinging to one's name given out of love, and uncorrupted by the masters.

Maxine Hong Kingston is concerned with the Chinese-American new woman. *The Woman Warrior* has often been misread as an autobiography. Narration is in the first person. "In fact the book's protagonist never actually gets named, questioning the immediate identification of the protagonist with the author. . ." (Nishime 73). In the novel Kingston is not particularly innovative in the use of names; she refers to Chinese gods and mythical figures (Fa Mu Lan) from time to time, but names like Brave Orchid or Moon Orchid may mean something quite different to the Chinese than to the American or European reader, for whom a possible connotation may be rare treasure or mere exotics.

That names are of utmost importance for Kingston can be illuminated by numerous quotations from the novel. The title of the first chapter is "No Name Woman." Nishime reminds us of the message of this chapter, that ". . . one does not exist without recognition from the community" (80). In the same vein, in *Beloved* the black community denies the schoolteacher his proper name not only out of respect for his "book-learning" but also out of hatred, refusing his personal acknowledgement in this way.

In the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior* the narrator explains that "The Chinese I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence" (Kingston 6). She refers to the emigrants who preserve their identity by keeping often their only possession, their real names to themselves.

In *China Men* Kingston uses naming in an eccentric way. As Wang points out,

Normally one's first name stands for one's individual identity, while the last name carries the family or ethnic identity. Kingston preserves both, but she subverts the order. In fact, this is one way how the author creates the new Chinese-American identity. (108)

The significance of ideographs, especially in relation to proper names and personal pronouns, is something that gives a Chinese flavour to Kingston's novels. From *China Men* we learn that "I" in Chinese is made up of two signs, the second one standing for "war." Also when the landscape is described, the Chinese ideograph is recalled: the flying crane is reminiscent of the ideograph "human," the Gold Mountain looks like the Chinese sign for the word "mountain." Chinese writers must have a completely different understanding of the world than we have, which is likely to modify their concept of metafiction as well.

The heroines in both *The Woman Warrior* and *Beloved* have a drawing on their backs. Sethe has a chokecherry tree on her back as a result of former whippings, and this is something that she cannot and would not see. Kingston's woman warrior bears the names and address of her parents on her back so that she could always find her way home, and a long list of her people's grievances to remind her of her vow and revenge. The relevance of the traditions of illiteracy versus literacy is expressed poetically yet powerfully by the two symbols.

A comparison of the three ethnic writers shows that while Cisneros's interest lies in depicting identity in the present and in the process of formation, for Morrison and Kingston naming is not a way of fixing the present, but rather of reaching out to the past in Morrison's fiction, and also to the future in Kingston's. When some crisis or disaster occurs their protagonists react by disclaiming their names to protect their selves and identity. It is not accidental that *Beloved* is a ghost story, or rather a mixture of the genres of the historical novel and the ghost story. "Morrison somehow holds these two disparate forms together" (Malgrem 96). By this amalgamation Morrison shows both the impossibility and the dehumanizing effect of slavery. In *The Woman Warrior* autobiography, history, and myth are blended; in it the re-emergence of ghosts is connected to a past that the writer cannot accept. With no name one is a ghost, but the non-Chinese Americans are also called ghosts in *China Men*.

In brief, Cisneros's emphasis lies on contemporary society and reality from a Chicana's point of view, Morrison's fiction is closer to the

traditions of Gothic fiction, while the novels of Kingston approximate parody as a hilarious kind of magic realism.

The aim of naming by the three authors differs according to their peculiar generic subversion: Cisneros tries to define her ethnic group in the process of having them acknowledged; Morrison wants to fill in the gaps in ancestral history (she never questions the matriarchal traditions of the blacks) trying to find out how to communicate an authentic truth of identity; Kingston, on the other hand, is uncertain about what makes this authentic truth, especially for the female gender.

In summary, ethnic writers want their heroes and heroines to find their place in the wider context of American society and preserve their ethnic identity at the same time. Out of the three ethnic female writers Cisneros and Kingston also attempt to educate the reader in the languages of their ethnic community.

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