Cultural Traditions of Naming in African American Fiction

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Keywords: Naming, Identity, African American Literature, Cultural Traditions.

Abstract. The cultural “aphasia” of African Americans is named with “cultural shock” by the academia. And the United States is a multiculture coexistence society. In such a “new, developing and constantly changing society,” the definition of ego and the search for ego are a long-term and universal proposition. As African cultures wander through embarrassing intersections with American mainstream culture, African-Americans are baffled because of ego identity. And to some extent, the loss of a name that usually contains a cultural mark or the family elder’s name represents the loss of an organizational system and the process of naming and renaming shows a profound recovery of far-reaching organizational system on African-American status. Naming and renaming are critical to individual rebuilding. Finding one’s own name is necessary to discover one’s identity. The name is not only a mark or symbol given by others, but also a recognition of self-existence. African Americans attach great importance to the name and think that the name is part of their personality and soul.

Introduction

The name is not only a mark or symbol given by others, but also a recognition of self-existence. Anonymity means that there is no real, personal, mature feature, and that there is no self. Name is a symbol of a person’s identity and the manifestation of national culture, but also a traditional heritage. The literary master leads the reader into the dialogue between the author and the reader by applying a meaningful name, and succeeds in achieving his or her own goal in his work. For example, Falstaff was a symbol of error in Shakespeare’s famous drama—The Merry Wives of Windsor (1600) and he was a pure hypocrite. In the novel Oliver Twist (1838) written by Charles Dickens, Twist(Oliver’s surname)symbolizes his twists and turns of the life. Name is a useful tool for people to communicate and spread humanities in society. It is also a carrier for people to describe the continuity between the energy of oneself and energy. Name is an important symbol of the identity of people.

Naming and names changing play a role in the awakening of a person’s self-representation and in his or her connection with the past. The mere naming and converting of names is a form of resistance to slavery and its control; and by doing so, African Americans can gain their identity and establish families and communities. In accordance with history, Africans are sold to the American continent as slaves and they are not allowed to use their own surnames. In everyday life, people give things names to lay the foundation for communication. “Naming for African Americans is a crucial and sensitive issue. The accumulation of African cultures, the vicissitudes of slavery and the stigma yet to be discriminated has given African Americans deep comprehension of the cultural nomenclature of self-naming.” [1]

Hard to Find the Road from the Unknown to the Famous

The protagonist who has no name in “The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man” (1912), is also one of the examples of bastard slander of black heroes. Unlike the headlines of slave stories, such as Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave (1825), James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) declined to give his true name. In African Americans’ autobiographies, the openness of an authentic name is a sign of self-awareness and self-affirmation. It shows the author’s pride in what he / she achieved
and what he / she is. The anonymity of the protagonists shows his submission to “noise and confusion” caused by racism. Since his “true self” was caught in a dilemma that could neither be internalized as black nor recognized as purely white, he took the mask and laid down his shield in the fight against racial discrimination. In slave novels, there is always a need to change the original name of the real master.

For example, in the stories written by William Welles Brown and Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), when the characters eventually become free or fully aware of self, their moments are always with them as slaves whose names have been replaced by new names. Booker Washington’s discussion of naming in African-American literature clearly states: “This is one of the first signs of freedom.” [2] This is an implication for the survival and slavery and hence constitutes important rhetoric of the heroic tradition. It is ironic that the colored man decided to alter his name not at the moment when he perceived the true self but when he avoided self-awareness. His witness to lynchings made him decide to change his name and leave his beard, and take the world to the future. Instead, changing the name becomes an outline of cover-up of life experiences as blacks.

In “The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man”, the results demonstrate that renaming is a self-denial deed, not a quest for freedom. According to Linda Hutcheon, the prefix “para” has two meanings in “imitation of a comic book”, one of which is often mentioned as “reverse” or “opposite”. Therefore, the imitation of funny works has become the contrast between the original or counterexample. The miserable mulatto in the autobiography became the contrast to the inspirational hero of the traditional slave story. Johnson’s fear of the inner psychology of black individuals is precisely the absurd rhetoric of racism that leads to mulatto like Ex-Colored Man.

The hero of Invisible Man (1952) is a black man without a name. On the one hand, there is no name to reveal the unknown survival of the entire African-American community. On the other hand, no name implies that the black hero has no identity. In the novel, Ralph Ellison is far more than the original meaning of “protest novel”, and more focused on exploring the black culture, also maintains a black culture indispensable status in American culture. On the basis of this, he built up a black culture identity. During this period, Wheatley “tried to assimilate into the mainstream culture to seek a place for black people. The mid-nineteenth century of Frederick Douglass, highlight the heterogeneity of black identity, a slave narrative first; try to fix the mainstream culture in the confrontation, in order to build a black independent cultural identity.” [3]

There are actually several layers of meaning for “invisible person”, and “other characters are not visible to him as he is invisible to other characters.” [4] One of the problems that plagued Ellison and his protagonist was personal identity. The protagonist begins his story by using what he calls an “invisible person”. His “invisible” is not a state of physical meaning—he is not “invisible” literally—but “invisible” without any status, so people ignore him and do not recognize him as the existence of an independent person. Ironically, though he is the protagonist of the novel, he is only the protagonist of the novel. However, in human society, he does not have any identity as an ordinary person does. Most notably, he never disclosed his name; or the author did not give his name—this is a sign of a person’s identity. His name in the hospital and fraternity, university name, and even the area where his college is located—have not been confirmed. The protagonist kept his voice, but he never appeared as an external, quantifiable existence. This lowliness underscores his position as an “invisible person”.

By and large, the issue of personal identity is the question of who I am, and we often think that a person’s “personal status” is the reason why he is such a person. For ubiquitous personal identity, Ellison once said: At first I thought the white world was completely different from the one I left, but the result was totally wrong. It looks safer, at least these white people look safer. It looks clearer and more civilized, of course, on the material level, it looks richer. But the people I met in that world were suffering the same kind of suffering, and that’s why they did not know who they were. They want to try something new, and I lost myself in a matter of seconds. I do not know whether I am rich or poor, black or white, male or female, smart or stupid, and I do not know whether I am really strong or stubborn. In short, I became American.
In “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” (1969), Maya Angelou (1928-2014) moved toward the ego by actively opposing white hosts to name the black slaves, but also an important step towards establishing self-identity. Angelou began to understand the importance of the name. She claims she has the right to name her by actively protesting whites and gradually awakening self-awareness and ethnic consciousness. Margaret’s job is a maid by Mrs. Cullinan, a white woman. Mrs. Cullinan’s mistaking Angelou’s name for convenience made Angelou a racist prejudice. Mrs. Cullinan casually changed Angelou’s name from “Margaret” to “Mary” (She could not even pronounce “Margaret” correctly) because she found that “Margaret” was too long. She does not want to disturb myself with a long name.Mrs. Cullinan deliberately changed Angelou’s name, denied Angelou’s identity and ethnic independence and considered blacks to be a private property of whites. Without a name, you will not be able to create own ethnic identity, leaving your individual in a state of uncertainty. Angelou was so angry because her self-naming rights were taken away and her identity and independence were erased. Angelou had deep understanding of racial prejudices imposed on his people. At first, Angelou remained silent about her new name, Mary. Angelou knew she could not fully open her heart to Mrs. Cullinan, but she no longer endured being called Mary. Therefore, she did not have to choose to accept it quietly; instead, she turned her anger into the act that broke up Mrs. Cullinan’s favorite tableware in protest. “That horrible woman would never have the chance to call me Mary because if I was starving I’d never work for her.” [5] Finally, Madame Cullinan had to call her Margaret. “Her name is Margaret, god dame it, she’s Margaret!” [6] Angelou’s active resistance brought her back to her name and maintained her name and self-worth as well as the right to racial identity, this incident promoted the establishment of Angelou’s identity. For African-Americans, the name is equivalent to the identity, the real name means the real existence. It is a symbol of individuality and ethnic identity, with profound cultural implications. Self-naming is a tool to guarantee their self-identification and ethnic independence. A name is not just a symbolic representation of a person, it also has a deep meaning, but also a sign of the distinction between self and others. In order to neglect their identity and receive the enslavement of slavery, the slave owners renamed them, and the deprivation of their names caused severe psychological trauma and great mental suffering to the blacks. Mrs. Cullinan could not call Angelou the correct name, a symbol of identity and individuality, and she did not recognize Angelou’s status as an independent person. The name gives them a good start to free life, and it is also a way to classify themselves as free people, whose name is one of the most important factors in their personality traits and whose name will be remembered.

Angelou reclaims rights of defining her own. Faced with this situation, many blacks choose to accept it silently; nevertheless, Angelou chose to take positive resistance to protest against such racism. From her wishes she defended her name, Angelou showed her maturity, accepting her own self-worth, her ethnic and black identity. She began to treat her as a black man instead of separating her from the rest of the world. Her identity was built not only by her own efforts, but also by the power of the society she experienced in her life.

The Name Carries African Cultural Traditions

As Afro-Americans are at the brink of American society, they fight for their equal rights. In the works of African Americans, the authors often use symbolic names to express special significance and enrich the content of the article. Joe Pittman is Jane’s husband, Jane considered Joe as the only husband in her life, and no one can be replaced. In order to neglect their identity and receive the enslavement of slavery, the slave owners renamed them, and the deprivation of their names caused serious psychological trauma and great mental suffering to the blacks. As a result, Pittman was retained in her surname as part of her name, Jane Pittman. Miss Jane Pittman, which showed that Joe Pittman played a very important role in consolidating Jane’s sense of family and identity important role. “He asked me again and I told him I wanted to think more. He kept on asking me, and that’s when I told him. We were sitting down in the house that day eating when I told him that. I told him if he didn’t want me no more that was right, I would understand. But all he said was. ‘Ain’t we all
been hurt by slavery? If you just say you’ll help me raise my two girls, I’ll be satisfied.’ He was a real man, Joe Pittman was.” [7]

The name manifests itself in each part of the social life, especially in the field of literature. The phenomenon of metaphorical name is common and frequent, which enriches the aesthetics of literature. For African-American black women, they sadly fall into the trap of not only slavery and white racism, but also repression by indigenous men. Being respected by men of this nation gave them spiritual comfort. Under racist oppression, black women not only suffer from the body politics practiced by whites, but also suffer from the invisible imposition of whites. They have no status. In African traditional culture, people hold a special ceremony to name their children. Only by acquiring one’s own name, one can be recognized by the world and has one’s own soul. Wherever they are, they all can find their way home. However, without their own name, they will be ghosts without the help of their predecessors. Therefore, Africans attach great importance to the ceremony of giving a gift of blessing. Slaves tried every means to erase the African characteristics of slaves, such as changing their names and breaking up their families. Because slavery is “the most anti-family system in human history so far”, black families have to experience the human tragedy of their wives and children. Under the influence of this strong culture, some black families have been changed.

In fact, Afro-Americans are not only in the lowest political and economic position in American society, but more importantly, they are forced to lose their traditional culture. The break with the traditional African tribal culture and the estrangement from the mainstream American culture make the Afro-American peoples form a temporary vacuum in the cultural life. The cultural “aphasia” of African Americans is called “cultural shock” by the academic circles. And the United States is a multicultural society. In such an emerging, developing and ever-changing society, defining the ego and finding the ego are a long-term proposition of general significance. As African-American cultures wander through embarrassing intersections with mainstream American culture, African-Americans are confused by their own identity. According to history, Africans were sold to the continental United States as slaves and they are not allowed to use their own surname, in which case a large number of African-Americans began to lose their own national culture. In Roots: The Saga of an American Family (1976), the holy African name of the first generation of Kunta was changed to Toby. Suddenly, a black man began to poke Kunta’s chest with his finger and shouted, “Abruptly the black one began jabbing at Kunta’s chest with his finger, then exclaiming, ‘you —you Toby!’ Kunta didn’t understand, and his face showed it, so the black one kept jabbing him and saying the same thing over and over. Slowly it dawned on Kunta that the black was attempting to make him understand something he was saving in the strange toubob tongue.” [8] The scene took place when Kunta first came to his first white owner’s plantation. Kunta is called Toby, a Greek word that means God is its master. On the surface, this sound likes a good name with perfect meaning, but in fact, it plays a role in two birds and one stone. On the one hand, the change of name from “Kunta Kinte” to “Toby” can cut off his original contact with Africa and force him to adapt to his own slave status as soon as possible. On the other hand, from the perspective of faith, Allah is the patron saint of Africa, and Kunta is a blessed name for Allah, it will make people longevity and give people glory. Replacing Kunta with Toby is not just a change of name, but also a change of faith that conveys the initial strength and aspiration of people in unfamiliar lands.

According to African traditions, children’s names should inherit the names of their ancestors and name the children through a special and sacred ceremony. Kunta’s name comes from his grandfather, a respected man who had saved the entire village from famine. And his father, Omoro, spent seven days thinking of Kunta Kinte, a historic and hopeful name. Morrison once said: “If you come from Africa, your name is a source; your losing is not only your name, but also your race and your tribe, and this is really a terrible thing.” From the above point of view, the name is not only a symbol, but also a carrier of African culture. If blacks know their African names, they can easily infer where they came from, and they are no longer wandering and having nothing to do with them.

For Kunta, he was still keeping his own African name, even if he was forced to change his name. It was somewhat comforting to him, compared to blacks born in the United States who knew
nothing about his ancestors, however, he could not shout loudly that his holy African name remained the trauma in his heart. This trauma about names goes even worse with the birth of future generations, such as the third generation George, a walnut-brown boy, a child of Kizzy and his white owner, a hybrid of Kunta Kinte’s eyes. The name came from the name of a hard-working black slave, arbitrarily taken by his white father. George was a free slave to white masters, and to Kizzy he was a symbol of shame and physical and psychological harm, and in her head her father told her that Africans had a formal and holy ritual to name the boy, and her child’s name has nothing to do with Africa. This subtle phenomenon suggests that with the inter-generational development, the African characteristics of black people gradually fade away, which is the tip of the iceberg in cultural aggression. Gradually, they do not know who they are and where they come from.

**Fight for Naming Rights and Gain Self-Identity**

In Beloved (1987), through three generations of Sethe’s family, The process of being named allows us to discover that families, family members and community members begin to reject whites’ naming rights and gain their own identities in the process of naming them. In return, this really helped rebuild individuals, families and communities. That Sethe’s mother named her Sethe make her have a chance to preserve her heritage and also to make her aware of her own identity. The father’s surname ties Sethe closely to the family and the tribe. With the help of the community, that allows her to survive after she understands her identity. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that Sethe inscribed her daughter’s name on the tombstone through a seven-minute sex trade with the sculptor. The name is one of the two words she spoke to the priest at the funeral. Sethe will not allow the baby to be buried without a name because the name is one of the most valuable assets of all African-American wealth, as it represents the identity. Regaining the power of naming and restoring their names is an important way for African-Americans to figure out their identity. It also helps African Americans to connect with their ancestors and tribes, enabling them to integrate into their communities and survive in a white-dominated society. On the other hand, they are fighting the domination of the ruling bloc and may rebuild their self-perceptions and cultures.

In The Known World (2003), illiterate slaves strip their surnames so that they lose their ties of origin. In addition to free black and black female teachers, black slaves, such as Moses, Alice, Elias, Stamford and Celeste, will not read or write. Moses was from a prominent, black, well-established area, and Henry took control of Moses from Robbins. As Henry’s first slave, Moses was appointed as superintendent. It was reasonable for Moses to have white people as slaves, but contrary to his expectation, blacks who owned the same color as him could have slaves. Like other slaves, Moses can neither read nor write. Jones deliberately appointed Moses as a supervisor. He leaves behind the implication that his Moses can not break the status of the slave, leading his tribe to promising land or rescuing himself. After his master died, Moses planned to gain freedom. Moses succeeded in achieving her trust by living with the hostess.

However, Moses ignored the fact that the owner or hostess would not give any slave freedom in his heart. In order to ensure his authority, Moses did not care about Celeste who was pregnant and forced her to work in the fields. His stubbornness made Celeste lose his child, which angered the hostess. Losing the trust of Caldonia, Moses had to return his cabin. In order to regain the trust of Caldonia, he sent his wife and son outside. Moses’s dream of freedom was torn to pieces because he oppressed his own people. Unfortunately, Moses failed to save himself and his own people. “Not all black slaves succeeded in building their identity and beginning a new life in The Known World, Moses, the slave-like slave with the same name as the pioneer in the Bible, is expected to be the second black Slave owner Henry, also attempting to assimilate the dream of a white society, was eventually defeated by a crippled body and a total crushing psychology.” [9]

Moses cannot read nor write, which means he cannot afford to break the bondage of his slave identity. In the novel “The Known World”, indifferent black female teachers in their education of black students go through the thoughts: “the white is noble, the black is cheap”. She even said that Henry, of all her students, was not polluted by blacks and actually reduced black success and fortune to being unpolluted by her ancestry. This language comes out, and it can be seen that black
people are enslaved by white enslavement education. Whites reinforce the enslavement education of blacks in the educational system and infiltrate the minds of whites who are born superior to black. Gradually, blacks use this pedantic notion as a truth to educate the next generation. Moses, an inquisitor, tried his best to find relief and freedom as soon as possible, suffering from the hardships and hardships of slave life. However, after his black slave owner, Henry, died, he did not think of fleeing the entire slave but wanted to inherit Henry’s property and become the second black slave owner to continue to squeeze his countrymen. It can be seen that the criminal’s indifferent inferiority is also a profound reason for the tragic situation of blacks. Jones not only inherited the appearance of black slaves, but also corrected the image of black slaves. In the ‘The Known World’, Jones focuses on educated black slaves, free black and black female teachers who are different from other blacks.

Henry decided to find a free black woman to be his wife. Mr. Robbins is very knowledgeable, and his opinion has an important influence on Henry’s judgment, and changed Henry’s fate. With knowledge, Henry wanted to get out of his slave status and decided to be on an equal footing with the white. He imagined he could build his own kingdom, where his slaves would not have to worry about food, clothes, and whips. However, Henry did not break the shackles of being a slave because he rationed the slaves’ food, obeying the Bible to administer his slaves, and punished slaves to prevent them from escaping. Because of lack of culture, slaves succumb to the domination of white slave owners. They became accustomed to the control of whites and never imagined they were free, even after the death of the master. Slaves have no family name, and once they become a property, they are forced to use the host’s family name. However, almost all slaves retain their names, not surnames. On the one hand, slaves do not read nor write, so they dislike the use of the host’s surname; on the other hand, they feel their origin and want to express their opinions. The story shows that Africans lack the ability to learn studying and writing.

Summary

The name manifests itself in every part of the social life, especially in the field of literature. The phenomenon of metaphorical name is common and frequent, which enriches the aesthetics of literature. “Everyone in the novel is unwilling to be inherently nigger, believing that they can change their identity, but that everyone makes a different attempt on the way to identity, and that different attempts have brought them different results. The author told his compatriots in fact: the white society is not the right choice to assimilate; re-naming by themselves, facing the way the past is an effective way to build self-identity.” [10] In fact, Afro-Americans not only in politics and economic status are at the very bottom of American society, and more importantly, they are forced to lose their traditional culture. The break with the traditional African tribal culture and the estrangement from the mainstream American culture made the Afro-Americans form a temporary vacuum in the cultural life. As Afro-Americans are at the brink of American society, they fight for their equal rights. In the works of African Americans, the authors often use symbolic names to express special significance and enrich the content of the article.

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