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22	Representation of Hisotry and Resistance to Marginality in Rohinton Mistry's <i>Such a Long Journey</i> and <i>A Fine Balance</i> Marisamy, S & Ganesan, M.P	73
23	Women in Salman Rushdie's <i>Shame</i> Moorthy, N & Ganesan, M.P	78
24	Delusions in Limited English Proficiency (LEP) of Tertiary Learners Nivetha, S	81
25	The Sync of Materials, Teacher and Syllabus in a CLT Classroom Parvathavarthini, S	84
26	Texts within a Text: Analysis of Epistolary Elements in <i>The Ministry of Utmost Happiness</i> Primrose, K	88
27	Immersion for Fluent Language Rathi Devi, R.D.V	91
28	Writing Skills and Dyslexics: An Experimental Study Rathi Devi, R.D.V	95
29	Popular Fictions and Postmodern Readers in the Postmodern Era Rathika, B	98
30	Reminiscences of Nature in Thomas King's <i>Medicine River</i> Ravi, K & Dominic Savio, G	101
31	Feminism: Subaltern concepts on Mahaswetha Devi's <i>Dhowli</i> Rexmart, R	105
32	The Conflict between Patriarchy and Individuality: A Study of Anita Nair's <i>Ladies Coupe</i> Robert Jesu Daniel, R	107
33	What's in A Name? Reincarnation of Toni Cade Bambara's Characters through Rechristening Roselin Mary, A	110
34	Is the Reader Wedded to the Author or to the Text? Sathian Daniel Periyasam, S	114
35	Valued-Oriented English Language Teaching: A Paradigm Shift Sharon Milton	118
36	Search for Beauty and the Racial Suppression: A Study of Toni Morrison's <i>The Bluest Eye</i> Yuva Bala Sobikha, A	121
37	Women in Manju Kapur's <i>Difficult Daughters</i> and <i>Home</i> Sophia Mary, J	123
38	Liberation as a Colossal Question for the Refugees in the Hegemonic Socieity Suresh, E & John Sekar, J	126
39	Determined Youths Demystifying the Conventions: A Parallel study of Chetan Bhagat's <i>2 States</i> and Vairamuthu's <i>Oru Porkalamum Irandu Pookalum</i> Ukkirapandian, K	128
40	Ecofeminism through Anticolonial Framework in Linda Hogan's <i>Solar Storms</i> Vijaya Vasuki, S	132

WHAT'S IN A NAME? REINCARNATION OF TONI CADE BAMBARA'S CHARACTERS THROUGH RECHRISTENING

A.Roselin Mary

Introduction

Names are enthralling because of their origins, meanings and cultural milieu. African American naming traditions were radically influenced by slavery. When African slaves were brought to the new world, African names were never even recorded in the ledgers of the slave traders. The traders as well as slaves simply didn't bother about the names. The tongue was strange and there was no point in learning it they felt.

"I suppose they all had names in their own dialect," mused Edward Manning, a sailor of the 1860s, "but the effort required to pronounce them was too much for us, so we picked out our favorites and dubbed them 'Main-stay,' 'Cat-head,' 'Bull's-Eye,' 'Rope-yarn,' and various other sea phrases." (295) Manning was speaking of African slaves who would be drafted to help on the slave ships. The bulk of them, however, went unnamed. There was simply no reason to name them.

Once established as slaves in the American colonies, the enslavers had the right to give them any name they wished. A slave name is the personal name given by others to an enslaved person, or a name inherited from enslaved ancestors. Mostly, slaves were given Anglicized names. From Plantation records one can discover that diminutive first names; biblical, historical, classical, place names and family or place names as first names have been used. But an African name was rarely found in the list. Slaves secretly called one another by their African names in slave quarters. With emancipation, liberated slaves abandoned diminutive names like Betty or Tom for the full given name (e.g. Elizabeth, Thomas). For surnames they had a wide range of choices — the surname of their former owners, that of prominent leaders, their occupation, a city or town, etc. Changing from a slave name to a name embodying an African identity became common after emancipation by those in the African Diaspora seeking a reconnection to their cultural roots. A surviving African name suggests that the slave was able to communicate with his owners and gain enough respect to maintain his ethnic name.

To establish their rights and identity African Americans had been changing their names perpetually. Abandoning their slave names was an attempt to cut the psychic chain that binds them to slavery in name and deed. The Civil Rights movement of the 60s and 70s strengthened the sense of Black pride and identity. African Americans began to discover more about their origins. In 1976, Alex Haley published the Pulitzer Prize winning book *Roots, The Saga of an American Family*. It spurred an interest in the Black community to give children African names (e.g. Ama) or African sounding names.

One can find a very long list of renowned African Americans who changed their names revealing their originality, new identity with religion or political movements which gave them a sense of pride or a new identity. Muhammad Ali said that Cassius Clay was a slave name. He chose Muhammad Ali, a free name which means beloved of God and insisted that people use it when they speak to him. Malcolm X, born Malcolm Little, changed his last name to X to signify his rejection of his "slave" name and which is also symbolic of a stolen identity. He later wrote that Little was the name that the white slave master had imposed upon [his] paternal forebears.

This paper studies how naming nullified all negative impact of whites' perspectives and images of African Americans in Bambara's fiction. In their journey of achieving power, the dominant means to exercise their authority is the sovereignty to name themselves.

The identity of African Americans which was erased by their color was re-established by their reclaiming their right to name themselves and in naming themselves they have been profusely indigenous and innovative. Bambara excelled in incorporating the African culture and folk tradition in names. Names and naming have always been powerful aspects in establishing the identity of the Blacks. The whites' opinion of blacks and their power over them are revealed in both the names they call them and in naming them. Black people have claimed their power as a people by claiming the power to name themselves. They were called savage, heathen, slave, spear-chucker, jig-a-boo, spade, boy, sambo, darky, contraband, property,