

# Onomastic Strategies in Contemporary Fiction

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## Abstract

The paper attempts to demonstrate, on the basis of ‘reading names’, that the major world changes occurred from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries have been accompanied by a significant reconsideration of the basic tenets of literature. Since culture cannot be viewed at present as unitary and homogeneous, it is arguable that contemporary fiction has made it into its duty to reflect the heterogeneity and frontierlessness of the contemporary context, while providing possible answers to issues related to identity and the communication between cultures. British and American contemporary fiction can no longer be spoken of as ‘national’ or ‘mainstream’, the role of names being to draw attention to diversity by pushing the ‘other’ to the fore of the literary discourse.

**Keywords:** *contemporary fiction, identity, otherness, intercultural communication*

The passage from the nineteenth to the twentieth century was accompanied by severe upheavals in the Western world’s value system. The relatively stable and solid Victorian stronghold was seriously challenged and gave way to a cultural climate characterised by relativity and fragmentariness. The apparent, even if only illusory, homogeneity of the Victorian world was replaced by the heterogeneity that would become the main characteristic of the twentieth and the twenty-first century society. Paradoxically, although the Empire, built by frontier crossing, represented the main cause of the British society’s subsequent adulteration, Britain’s position of unprecedented power at the turn of the century largely contributed to the Western world’s being perceived as homogeneous. The centre was so indisputably strong and solid that it made the margin culturally irrelevant and perforce part of a unitary and homogeneous whole.

The two world wars forced most of the countries of the Western world to reconsider their position and open up to each other, on the one hand, and to the East, on the other. The twentieth-century society had to acknowledge difference and to begin accepting the other in the other’s own right. With all their negative effects, the two world wars compelled individuals, communities and even nation states to learn to co-exist by following principles formulated in answer to the basic question “do cultures actually exist as separate, pure, defensible entities?” (Rushdie, 2002 a, 297) The twentieth and the twenty-first centuries define themselves under the sign of the modern and “mélange, adulteration, impurity, pick’n’mix [are] at the heart of the idea of the modern, and [has been] that way for most of this all-shook-up century.” (Rushdie, 2002 a, 297)

The contemporary world can hardly be accounted for in terms of its homogeneity. The process of frontier opening started at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth favoured the exchange of ideas and information, but most importantly, it enabled the visibility of the other.

Internationalism was the watchword of the modernist period during which “[t]he boundaries of societies and cultures are being breached by vast, criss-crossing flows of ideas, images and information, their former impermeability lost forever” (Kennedy, 2001, 1). Globalization seems to be the watchword of the postmodernist age. Mainly associated with the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, globalization added to the contemporary world’s openness, but it also enhanced its heterogeneity. Although its most often discussed dimension is the economic one, globalization has far more significant cultural effects. It could be considered the major process of a world in which the more the visible frontiers open, the more the invisible ones tend to keep people apart (cf. Rushdie, 2002 b, 411).

Confronted with the effects of either internationalism or globalization, be they perceived as positive or negative, “[c]ommunities, once invested with deep meanings and encapsulating close-knit relations, are becoming de-localized - torn from familiar and particular places” (Kennedy, 2001, 1). Frontier opening undoubtedly has “its special contribution to the radical uncertainties of the current era.” (Kennedy, 2001, 8)

[...] along with money, goods, people and information, cultural experiences of all kinds — abstract knowledge, aesthetic preferences in everything from cuisine and music to designer goods and TV soaps, marriage customs, religious beliefs and so on - exhibit a growing capacity to break loose from their original moorings in particular societies (Kennedy, 2001, 11).

The contemporary context, whose features can be traced back to the changes occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century, is definitely one in which culture can no longer be understood as unitary and homogeneous. It would be more convenient to account for the contemporary world in terms of cultures rather than culture, since it is impossible to identify that set of universal values strictly delimited by the borders of a particular nation state (Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, 2004, 2). As individuals become nodal points of varied cultural influences, it is essential in this new context to be

increasingly prepared to value diversity and the right of every culture to occupy a space in the world and to share in the common human endeavour on equal terms. Thus, we are seeing an end to the long era of one-sided cultural and political flows where societies engaged with others primarily in order to dominate them (Kennedy, 2001, 12-13).

Sensitive to the changes of the value system at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, Modernist art started valuing diversity and representing the individual as having multiple identities, rather than being a unitary self. But most importantly, the modernists artistically reflected the changing world by approaching the construction of identity as a result of a mirroring effect between self and ‘other’. In her novel *The Waves*, the modernist Virginia Woolf, through Bernard, voiced some of the ideas that would later on become the major tenets of postmodernism:

Then it becomes clear that I am not one and simple, but complex and many (56);  
We are not simple as our friends would have us to meet their needs (66);  
Louis and Neville [...] feel the presence of other people as a separating wall. [...] I do not believe in separation. We are not single. [...] My book will certainly run to many volumes, embracing every known variety of man and woman (49-50).

At the time Woolf was writing *The Waves* the Western world quasi unanimously agreed that culture represented a unitary whole and that there was “a universal essence, homogeneity and unity in a particular culture” (Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, 2004, 2). In

the context of the Victorian age, whose reverberations were clearly felt at the beginning of the twentieth century, the white was considered the norm against which everything non-white was measured as a deviation from the norm. The presumed homogeneity of the Western culture, perceived superior to the other non-Western cultures, tended to overshadow difference. The Western world conceived of itself as central, pushing everything that was non-white, non-Protestant, and non-English to the periphery. The margin was hardly, if ever, visible or taken into consideration by the superior civilized English society.

Under the circumstances, it is at least surprising to read a novel written by a writer born and bred in the solid Victorian value system as a novel praising difference, pleading for the necessity to become aware of cultural diversity. Virginia Woolf announced ahead of her time that the world was far from being homogeneous and that culture, or rather cultures, should be seen as “a fluid creative social force which binds different groupings and aspects of behaviour in different ways, both constructing and constructed by people in a piecemeal fashion to produce myriad combinations and configurations” (Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, 2004, 3).

Through Bernard, Woolf was trying to define a context which she felt was more and more relative and heterogeneous, thus likely to generate conflict. The difference was not to be looked for across national frontiers. The modernist writer artistically voiced her worry that an individual is not simple and predictable, but rather the crossroads of various cultural influences.

Yet, though she was aware of difference and sensitive to the changing context of the twentieth century, Woolf created a work which, though formally innovative, remains indebted to the mentality of the nineteenth century if one considers the characters of *The Waves*. Bernard, Louis, Neville, Rhoda, Susan, Jinny are all characters assumed, as it is no otherwise stated, white, which is indicative of the fact that whiteness at the time still stood for the normality of mankind and “[a]s long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/ we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people” (Dyer, 1997 in Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, 2004, 105).

Several decades before Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, himself over-sensitive to difference and intently focusing on the cultural encounter between the West and the East, fell victim too to the same mentality shared by the nineteenth-century audiences. There is no reference to the whiteness of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, but it is explicitly stated that the people he encountered during his voyage down the Congo are non-white. “The sense of whites as non-raced is most evident in the absence of reference to whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of white people in the West” (Dyer, 1997 in Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, 2004, 105).

Even if the realist and the modernist literary enterprises differ considerably in the novelists’ artistic faith and consequently in the conventions employed, they are very similar in outlook and ways of dealing with otherness artistically. The realists are more interested in the individual as part of a social mechanism, the modernist novelists shift focus to the individuality of the individual and they thus choose to plunge into the individual’s consciousness. The realists were attracted to the outer aspects of an individual’s life, whereas the modernists gave proper attention to the individual’s inner life. But in either case, when they constructed their characters, they had in mind the white individual as the norm. There is no explicit reference to the whiteness of the white and this is highly visible in the names of the characters either in the Victorian or in the modernist novels. The black people in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* do not even have

names. The names of the characters served different artistic purposes for the realists and the modernists, but what is sure is that they seldom contributed to the definition of an individual's identity.

The Western readers may respond differently to the realist or the modernist work. They are likely to become aware of the difference of perception, which requires a particular choice of convention through which the fictional worlds are created. Yet, there is little doubt that the fictional world they are exposed to is not one familiar to them by the names of the characters. Even if the readers get a glimpse of difference and cultural diversification, as the case of Woolf's or Conrad's novels is, what is assumed is that readers and characters belong together, they are part of the same group of superior, civilized, and central, against the group of the inferior, savage, and marginal. The names of the characters are recognizable and easy to associate with a familiar world. No matter how sensitive to difference authors and readers sharing Western values may be, the realist and the modernist novels are constructed so that they should convey a sense of familiarity for readers. Readers are invited to see themselves as the norm against which the other is defined.

"For most of the time white people speak about nothing but white people, it's just that we couch it in terms of "people" in general. [...] At the level of racial representation, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race" (Dyer, 1997 in Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, 2004, 105). And there is no better or more reassuring position than that of being human.

After World War II, the presumed homogeneity of the Western proved extremely fragile and illusory. The contemporary context is acutely heterogeneous. Globalization has favoured cultural exchange and contributed to the opening of the national frontiers in ways never experienced before. Cultural diversification has become the status quo of the contemporary society. "The migrant, the man without frontiers, is the archetypal figure of our age" (Rushdie, 2002 b, 415)

As a consequence, contemporary fiction made it into its duty to reflect diversity, by bringing the 'Other' to the fore. British and American writers started looking abroad, searching "in different contexts for new identities, politically, culturally and socially" (Sauerberg, 2001, viii). "Not least because of the impact of imperial aftermath, British literature has seen a development into internationalization complementary to the well-worn tradition of the nation-tied and mainly social manners type of novel cultivated ever since Jane Austen" (Sauerberg, 2001, 14), which keeps equally valid for contemporary U.S. fiction.

Under the circumstances, the most significant feature of contemporary literature has become "the enhanced presence of the "Other" in a variety of manifestations" (Sauerberg, 2001, 109). "It is [...] its openness to the "other" or "others" which allows it to re-view and develop itself" (Sauerberg, 2001, 137). It is essentially by opening up to the 'other' that contemporary fiction has managed to "re-establish itself as the pre-eminent literary form by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Morrison, 2003, 4).

Postmodernism definitely contributed to the disappearance of those frames of reference in terms of which people could define their identity, be it private or public, individual or social (Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, 2004, 70). Nation state, religion, family, gender can no longer serve as the uncontested frames of reference which make culture and identity be perceived as unitary and homogeneous.

The modernist novel incontestably was more open to the 'other' and more experimental in form than the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century-fiction. Yet, it still was culturally conservative and ethnocentric, reluctant to reconsider its central position and credit the

margin. By contrast, contemporary fiction discovered its new energies precisely by giving up conservatism and ethnocentrism (Morrison, 2003, 6). It ceased being “a culture of disdain for new Asian, African and South American writing” (Morrison, 2003, 6) and it placed itself in the avant-garde to reconsider the very term 'British' or 'American' as “an adequate designation of national identity” (Sauerberg, 2001, 2). Contemporary fiction implies new conceptual frameworks such as ethnicity, gender, or sexuality. “Contemporary fictions are interesting precisely for their ability to locate themselves in the interstices – the spaces between national cultures, genders and histories” (Morrison, 2003, 7).

What contemporary fiction aims to do is to make complexity visible and contribute to a profound knowledge of the other. This new artistic faith finds its reflection in the changes occurred at the level of the protagonists' names in contemporary British or American novels. The names of characters in contemporary novels indicate a change in the context from which this new literary phenomenon emerged. The contemporary world is characterized by cultural condensation and diversification as a result of economic, social and political phenomena such as immigration, regionalization and globalization. In both Britain and the United States, there is an “influx of “immigrant” writers and [a] growing international orientation of “native” writers” (Sauerberg, 2001, 14). Consequently, it has become almost impossible to still approach British or American contemporary fiction “in terms of “national” and “mainstream”” (Sauerberg, 2001, 14). “The modern writer, in or out of Britain, increasingly uses the whole world as his or her frame of reference, and refuses to be restricted by geographical, historical, generic, gender, social and market conventions [...]” (Sauerberg, 2001, 32). The most obvious role the names have in contemporary fiction is to point out and draw attention to the fact that the world has changed and that, if literature is to remain man's efficient means of adapting to a changing environment, it has to reconsider its tenets.

Readers are forced to challenge their perception of themselves and of the other. Contemporary fiction confronts readers with the unknown, makes readers transgress frontiers. Names are no longer familiar to the typical white Western reader. Therefore, readers are invited to consider the other, but also to redefine themselves. We are no longer the norm according to which the other is defined, we become ourselves the other, the place of convergence of various cultural influences. Interculturalism becomes thus a characteristic of the contemporary novel in subject matter and themes, but also regarding the reading audience (cf. Sauerberg, 2001, 111).

In the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> - century English and American novel, the characters' names were either used to denote that the fictional individual's belonging to a category of some identifiable class or group of people or, on the contrary, to emphasize the highly individualized quality of such literary constructs. In either case, however, it was assumed that characters and readers shared, if not the cultural context, at least the same perspective on the cultural context.

By analysing the names of the protagonists in three contemporary novels, we attempt to show that in contemporary fiction, the name means more than a word by which a person is known. The role of names is to draw attention to diversity by pushing the ‘other’ to the fore of the literary discourse. For typically Western audiences, names are no longer familiar and easily recognizable. Names become cultural indices, markers of cultural and personal identity. Names are essentially stories.

The protagonist of Percival Everett's *Erasure* is Thelonius Ellison, called Monk, whose name, with a clear symbolic significance, is intended to function as an identity

card. The name simultaneously alludes to the jazz pianist Thelonius Monk and the American writer Ralph Ellison. Both names imply a search for identity, beyond race distinctions. By his name, Thelonius Ellison tries to recover a sense of belonging. He is at the same time part of the African American community and of the academic and artistic one. The condition he aspires to is that of an insider, which can help him “overcome the stigma of [...] marginality” (Hoffman, 1989, 123).

Thelonius Ellison, Monk introduces himself as being and not being black enough, as belonging and not. As he refuses to conform to the stereotypes the society works by, Thelonius inevitably remains suspended between here and there.

I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose, some of my ancestors were slaves [...] and so the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race. Though I am fairly athletic, I am no good at basketball. [...] I graduated *summa cum laude* from Harvard, hating every minute of it. I am good at math. I cannot dance (1-2).

Thelonius’ attempt to see beyond stereotypes and prejudice makes him hardly adaptable to any group. He tries to turn himself into an insider of the American society, by remaining indifferent to race distinctions. Yet, his most noticeable and, bitterly, saleable feature seems to be his blackness.

While in college I was a member of the Black Panther Party, defunct as it was, mainly because I felt I had to prove I was *black* enough. Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not *black* enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing (2).

Karim Amir is the protagonist of Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*, whose initiation has an obvious cultural dimension. Karim’s journey from the suburbs to the centre parallels the journey of the margin to the centre in the imperial aftermath. The voices of Karim, Haroon, his father and the people of their kind, Anwar or Jamila, become audible as they elbow their way to the centre of the society they live in.

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. [...] Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored (3).

Names seem to be of primary concern for Hanif Kureishi and by making explicit, though ironic, reference to names and their origin, he attempts to define the condition of in-between-ness of the contemporary individual, “severed from his roots, often transplanted into a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of a new community, [...] forced to face the great questions of change and adaptation”. (Rushdie, 2002 b, 415)

Ted and Jean never called Dad by his Indian name, Haroon Amir. He was always ‘Harry’ to them, and they spoke of him as Harry to other people. It was bad enough his being an Indian in the first place, without having an awkward name too (33).

Karim finally comes to terms with his peripheral condition and overcomes the stigma of marginality. After oscillating between here and there, Karim Amir understands that the immigrant’s predicament is that “[w]e became part of England and yet proudly stood outside it” (227). Karim’s cultural maturity is reached by his realizing

that “to be truly free we had to free ourselves of all the bitterness and resentment, too” (227).

The protagonist of Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo*, Celaya Reyes is herself in search of identity. Lala’s journey takes place across the Mexican-American border, the novel being set in the trans-national spaces between Mexico, San Antonio and Chicago. The characters’ names and the novel’s alternating English and Mexican Spanish show how culture and subculture interact, reflecting and influencing each other.

We come in all sizes, from little to big, like a xylophone. Rafa, Ito, Tikis, Toto, Lolo, Memo, and Lala. Rafael, Refugio, Gustavo, Alberto, Lorenzo, Guillermo, and Celaya. [...] The younger ones couldn’t say the older ones’ names, and that’s how Refugito became Ito, or Gustavito became Tikis, Alberto – Toto, Lorenzo – Lolo, Guillermo – Memo, and me, Celaya – Lala (27).

Although Sandra Cisneros draws inspiration from the cultural specificity of the Chicano communities, she uses her writing to identify an artistically audible voice of her own, converting thus “the unyielding forces of gender and ethnicity which had historically bound and muted [her] into sources of personal and stylistic strengths” (Ganz, 1994, 19). Celaya tries to create herself a meaning beyond the cultural stereotypes at work in the contemporary world. She is not seen as Mexican enough as she does not conform to the stereotypical representation of her group. What Cisneros tries to prove through her use of names and language is that “[...] I don’t look Mexican. I *am* Mexican. Even though I was born on the U.S. side of the border” (Cisneros, 2002, 353).

Like all characters caught in between here and there, Celaya is looking for a “way to lose [her] alienation without losing [her] self” (Hoffman, 1989, 209), confident that “[h]uman beings don’t only search for meanings, they are themselves units of meaning” (Hoffman, 1989, 279).

What contemporary fiction attempts to do is to show that societies and people are multi-faceted and complex and to deconstruct stereotypical images generally circulated by the media (Holliday, Hyde, Kullman, 2004, 7). By revealing and crediting complexity, literature helps readers account for and come to terms with the diversity of the contemporary context, but most importantly, offers them the knowledge of the other they need to be able to give up prejudice and the tendency to stereotype and otherize, “ogres” inherent in human nature.

In all quests the voyager is confronted by terrifying guardians of territory, an ogre here, a dragon there. [...] But the voyager must refuse the other’s definition of the boundary, must transgress against the limits of what fear prescribes. [...] The defeat of the ogre is an opening in the self, an increase in what it is possible for the voyager to be. [...] The journey creates us. We become the frontiers we cross (Rushdie, 2002 b, 409-410).

‘The airport departure lounge’ could be the metaphor to describe contemporary culture as well as contemporary fiction. We can interpret it in its negative aspects, seeing it as “the leveller of all national characteristics in favour of a carefully cultivated international atmosphere”, but we can also look more optimistically on the bright side of things and decode the metaphor in relation to the function of contemporary fiction as “the meeting place of people from all over the world” as “travelling and literature have always belonged together” (Sauerberg, 2001, 28).

The contemporary writers’ creed could be expressed in Rushdie’s words:

The problem of limits is made awkward for artists and writers [...] by our own adherence to, and insistence upon, a no-limits position in our own work. The frontierlessness of art has been and remains our heady ideology. The concept of transgressive art is so widely accepted [...] as to constitute, in the eyes of conservative critics, a new orthodoxy (Rushdie, 2002 b, 440).

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## Strategii onomastice în literatura contemporană

### Rezumat

Prin interpretarea numelor personajelor dintr-o serie de romane contemporane britanice și americane, articolul încearcă să demonstreze că schimbările majore la nivel mondial, începând cu secolul al XIX-lea, au fost însoțite de reconsiderarea principalelor premise ale literaturii. Nu se mai poate vorbi în prezent de o cultură unitară și omogenă, drept pentru care literatura contemporană își propune să reflecte eterogenitatea generată de deschiderea frontierelor lumii contemporane și să ofere răspunsuri unor probleme de identitate și de comunicare între culturi. Literatura contemporană britanică și americană nu mai poate fi interpretată strict ca „națională”, rolul numelor fiind acela de a atrage atenția asupra diversității și de a aduce alteritatea în prim planul discursului literar.