



SPEAKING THE SELF: THE ETHICS OF NAMING AND DECOLONIAL LANGUAGE IN CHILDREN'S NARRATIVES

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Abstract: Names and naming of places and characters in literature are the building blocks of a great literature as they shape the foundation; the stakes get critically high when these linguistic dimensions are coloured with biases and intentions of colonialization in postcolonial children's literature. This paper investigates the act of naming and argues, it functions not merely as a linguistic label but as a site of power, memory, and moral encounter. Drawing upon theory of performativity proposed by J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance*, and Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the Other, investigation is conducted to highlight how naming mediates between domination and recognition through close readings of postcolonial narratives of Yangsook Choi's *The Name Jar* (2001), Beverley Naidoo's *Journey to Jo'burg* (1985), and John Steptoe's Mufaro's *Beautiful Daughters* (1987).

The South African setting in Naidoo's narrative, naming emerges as an index of racial hierarchy and linguistic apartheid, where the colonial lexicon erases indigenous subjectivity. Choi's diasporic narrative reconfigures naming as a negotiation of belonging and selfhood, transforming the child's linguistic anxiety into ethical self-assertion. Steptoe's retelling of an African folktale reclaims indigenous naming as a moral language of recognition, aligning linguistic restoration with virtue and communal harmony. The intersection of linguistic philosophy and postcolonial ethics, the concept of "ethical naming" is a mode of language use that affirms the Other's right to self-definition while resisting epistemic domination. Postcolonial children's literature functions as a humanistic site of decolonial pedagogy, where the word becomes both an instrument of resistance and a medium of moral restoration.

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Language, Power, and the Question of Naming

To name is to know, but also to possess. Across linguistic, philosophical, and colonial histories, the act of naming has never been an innocent gesture of designation; it is a performative act that assigns power to speech, and ethics in recognition. Naming, as J. L. Austin theorised, a speech act does not merely describe reality but brings it into being (Austin 10). In the colonial encounter, this performative capacity of language became a political instrument: empires named territories, peoples, and even moral categories, translating difference into hierarchy. The coloniser's language was not only the medium of rule; it was the metaphysical foundation of authority, a means to define, delimit, and domesticate the Other. Language is "the collective memory bank of a people's experience", to name oneself in one's own tongue is to assert



continuity against the amnesia imposed by empire as argued by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind*. (13) The play with linguistic possession and self-recognition; naming of character and places create the ethical dilemma, especially in children's literature is employed as a moral and decolonial act rather than an instrument of domination.

Children's literature provides the earliest site of linguistic socialisation. The stories children encounter does not merely entertain; they naturalise language, teaching readers what it means to speak, to belong, and to be recognised. As Jacqueline Rose observes, children's fiction is a "cultural site where the adult imagination of the child meets the pedagogical machinery of ideology" (Rose 2). Within postcolonial frameworks, this machinery is inflected with the residues of empire. When children read of names, they are also reading of power; who has the right to name, who must rename, and whose name is erased. One who defines and has the power to name the other and how to name becomes an ethical question. Emmanuel Levinas positions ethics as the first philosophy, the primordial encounter with the face of the Other that calls the self into responsibility (*Totality and Infinity* 43). To utter another's name, or to hear one's own uttered, is to participate in that ethical relation. The colonial act of naming, therefore, is unethical not because it mislabels but because it forecloses recognition; it transforms the Other into an object of discourse rather than a subject of address. The decolonial act of self-naming restores subjectivity through speech reclaiming the right to signify oneself in one's own words.

Situating naming at the intersection of linguistics, philosophy, and postcolonial ethics. Naming is as a dual process: as *performativity*, it creates social reality; as *signification*, it reveals the instability of meaning. Derrida's notion of *différance* deepens the understanding that every sign defers and differs, never fully present in meaning, unsettles the colonial illusion of fixed identity (*Of Grammatology* 25). The coloniser's imposition of names was an attempt to stabilise identities by creation of a rigid hierarchy, but supremacy of language restricts such close by its very structure, resists such closure. Every colonial name carries within it the possibility of re-naming, of linguistic subversion and reappropriation. Postcolonial children's literature becomes a linguistic theatre where the ethics of naming are rehearsed through narrative. The three works examined during the course of this paper i.e, Yangsook Choi's *The Name Jar* (2001), Beverley Naidoo's *Journey to Jo'burg* (1985), and John Steptoe's *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (1987); illustrate distinct configurations of this linguistic and moral struggle. In *Journey to Jo'burg*, Naidoo dramatizes apartheid's semiotics of exclusion, where language and naming delineate who counts as human. Choi's diasporic protagonist in *The Name Jar* confronts the politics of assimilation, negotiating between self-naming and social acceptance. Steptoe's retelling of an African folktale reclaims indigenous naming traditions as ethical pedagogy, aligning linguistic restoration with communal virtue.

These narratives collectively reveal that the question of naming is inseparable from the question of childhood itself. The colonial project sought to discipline not only lands and bodies but also imaginations, to ensure that children of the empire, whether coloniser or colonised, internalised linguistic hierarchies as moral truth. The decolonial child, by contrast, learns to unlearn: to question inherited vocabularies, to see in the instability of names the possibility of freedom. As Beverley Naidoo has remarked language in children's fiction is never neutral; it is "the terrain where belonging and betrayal are taught side by side" (Naidoo Interview 5). To



engage naming as a philosophical problem, then, is to recognise that language itself is ethical terrain. Austin's performativity finds its ethical extension in Levinas: every word, especially every name, calls us to responsibility. Derrida's *différance* ensures that such responsibility remains infinite, as meaning perpetually slips beyond mastery. Ngũgĩ's insistence on writing in Gikuyu becomes a moral gesture, a reclamation of the right to name the world in one's own language. When these linguistic philosophies are read through the lens of children's narratives, naming transforms into a pedagogical act: it becomes the child's first lesson in power and justice. Postcolonial children's literature redefines naming as a moral language of resistance. In a narrative discourse, naming and name operates as sites of erasure, negotiation, and restoration. Naming, in these texts, is not only a textual motif but an epistemic event, the movement from colonial subjection toward ethical subjectivity. Illuminate how linguistic agency is cultivated in young readers.

Through the interrelated study of the theoretical premise of naming as performative violence and ethical potential the selected primary texts, each illustrates a distinct moral-linguistic configuration: *Journey to Jo'burg* exposes the politics of erasure, *The Name Jar* explores the ethics of self-naming, and *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* reclaims naming as indigenous virtue. The final sections synthesize these readings to articulate a decolonial ethics of language, proposing that to restore the word is to restore the world. Children's literature serves as a humanistic laboratory where the philosophy of language converges with moral pedagogy. Naming becomes both metaphor and method for decolonial ethics: the act through which linguistic wounds are transformed into possibilities of recognition. To name ethically is to affirm the Other's right to speak, and in doing so, to rediscover language itself as the most profound site of moral responsibility.

Naming as Performative Violence: The Colonial Lexicon

Naming embodies both the moral and ontological impulse of language, it is equally true that the colonial enterprise exposed this impulse as profoundly ambivalent. Every act of naming, though outwardly constructive, carries within it the latent potential for destruction; the capacity to efface, to objectify, to silence. Language, which ought to signify recognition, became under colonial rule an instrument of possession. It was through words, more than through weapons, that the empire secured its dominion. The history of colonialism, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Decolonising the Mind* insists "the history of the deliberate dismembering of language, the erasure of collective memory through the imposition of alien speech" (10). To understand naming as performative violence is to trace this moral dismemberment, the process by which language ceased to be a medium of communion and became a mechanism of control. The colonial lexicon functioned as a structure of performative power in Austin's sense, it did not merely describe reality; it *constituted* it. When colonial authority declares a territory to be a "protectorate" or a people to be "tribal" through its authority, such utterances enacted new social realities. As Austin noted in *How to Do Things with Words*, "to say something is to do something" (6). This performativity was far from innocent; it was juridical, epistemological, and ontological at once. It endowed European speech with the power to define what existed and in what form. In the colonial archive, the word was law, and naming became legislation. Michel Foucault's understanding that discourse "produces the objects of which it speaks" (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 49) finds its most insidious expression here: to name the colonised



was to produce the colonised as an object of knowledge, reducible to representation, governable through definition.

Edward Said, writing of this process in *Orientalism*, describes how the West “spoke for” and thereby “spoke over” the Orient (Said 80). Naming thus became a form of silencing, a way of fixing the Other into a static system of signification. The colonial name was less a word than a verdict—a decree that replaced multiplicity with singularity, fluidity with fixity. When colonisers renamed places, peoples, and practices, they were not translating but overwriting; the act was not linguistic mediation but ontological violence. The act of calling India “the Jewel in the Crown” or Africa “the Dark Continent” encapsulated this logic: the empire’s nomenclature transformed the living world into a linguistic possession. Frantz Fanon exposes the psychic dimension of this violence in *Black Skin, White Masks*, when he declares, “To speak a language is to assume a world, a culture” (38). For the colonised, learning the coloniser’s language meant not simply acquiring a tool of communication but internalising an alien worldview. The imposed language became a moral and ontological frame—a way of seeing that positioned the self as derivative and the Other as normative. Naming, under these conditions, performed what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls “epistemic violence” in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*—a violence enacted through the construction of knowledge itself (25). To be named by the coloniser is thus to be situated within a discourse that forecloses speech, to exist as a grammatical possibility but not as a voice.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *symbolic power* clarifies how this performative domination operates beneath consciousness. Bourdieu states Language is a “mechanism of legitimate violence”; a means by which hierarchies are reproduced through everyday speech acts (*Language and Symbolic Power* 37). The colonial lexicon was precisely such a mechanism: its authority was sustained not only by coercion but by belief, by the collective acceptance of the coloniser’s words as truth. The schoolroom, the church and the legal document became theatres where linguistic power performed itself as moral necessity. In these spaces, naming was both pedagogy and discipline. The child who learned to say “Queen”, “Empire” or “civilisation” also internalised the ethics of subordination. As Ngũgĩ reminds us, “the bullet was the means of physical subjugation; language was the means of spiritual subjugation” (*Decolonising the Mind* 9). The violence of naming, however, does not lie merely in linguistic imposition but in the metaphysics it enacts. Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of ethics as the relation to the Other foregrounds this tension. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas contends that the ethical act begins with *address*, with the openness of one face to another (43). The colonial name interrupts this ethical exchange; it replaces the face with a label, the voice with a category. It transforms encounter into classification. To name another within a structure of domination is not to acknowledge their being but to delimit it, to reduce alterity to sameness, to translate the irreducible Other into a manageable sign. Hence, the colonial lexicon is not only a political tool but a philosophical crisis: it collapses the very distinction between language as relation and language as control.

Derrida’s theory of *différance* destabilises the illusion of permanence on which the colonial lexicon depended. In every act of naming, meaning is both deferred and differentiated; no word ever possesses a final signified (*Of Grammatology* 25). The empire’s attempt to fix the world through names; to define once and for all who is “civilised” and who is “savage” was



doomed by this structural instability. Yet, as Derrida notes in *Writing and Difference*, this instability is also the condition of possibility for ethical rearticulation: “in every structure of violence, there is the trace of the possibility of justice” (112). The colonial name, therefore, is haunted by its own undoing; it contains within itself the seeds of re-naming, the potential for linguistic rebellion. In this sense, naming as performative violence is never total. Its efficacy depends on repetition, on what Judith Butler later calls the “citationality” of performativity—the reiteration of norms that sustain authority (*Excitable Speech* 51). The moment the colonised refuse to repeat, to internalise, to believe, the chain of domination falters. Postcolonial children’s literature often stages precisely this refusal: the moment a child rejects the imposed name, or insists on speaking in their own idiom, the performative structure of colonial power collapses. The ethical act of naming oneself thus becomes an act of decolonisation. Language carries both the residue of violence and the promise of redemption when the act of naming looked through the lens of decolonisation. Toni Morrison’s concept of “re-memory” clarifies the argument of the recovery of names is an act of historical re-membering. The piecing together of a dismembered self, when a character recalls or reclaims a name once erased, they reconstitute a moral continuity that colonial language sought to sever. The restoration of naming acquires a pedagogical dimension in colonial children literature. The young reader reading and experiencing a character’s struggle to reclaim their name directs him to invoke the dynamic nature of language, not a fixed system but as a living moral field, a space for truth, justice, identity, and voice. This capacity of language to shift from violence to recovery, from being named to naming oneself, strengthen the transition from the colonial lexicon to the decolonial imagination.

Beverley Naidoo’s *Journey to Jo’burg* (1985), Yangsook Choi’s *The Name Jar* (2001), and John Steptoe’s *Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters* (1987), these colonial narratives confront the linguistic legacy in children literature that becomes a playfield for identity, voice and revolution. In Naidoo’s apartheid landscape, names function as juridical instruments of segregation; to be “black” or “white” is to be inscribed within a linguistic order that legitimises injustice. In Choi’s Korean-American narrative, reveals the subtler violence of assimilation and the struggle of naming, being named by other and struggle to identify by your name. Steptoe’s narrative recaptures the African folktale which restore indigenous naming traditions and focuses language into a moral pedagogy of community. Naming, once a form of performative violence, is not merely a historical condition but an ongoing philosophical dilemma. Can language which was an instrument for domination, become the medium of justice? Derrida and Levinas suggest, ethics of linguistic responsibility is to honour the Other’s right to signify themselves. Children’s Literature teaches the young reader not only to speak but to listen, to recognise the ethics of naming lies not in asserting mastery over meaning, but in participating in the fragile reciprocity of recognition. Beverley Naidoo’s *Journey to Jo’burg* as an emblematic text where the colonial lexicon’s violence is most visibly enacted. Through the linguistic hierarchies of apartheid, Naidoo exposes how language produces social order and hierarchy, racial difference, and moral consciousness. The Child protagonists’ gradual awakening to the injustice encoded in words becomes an allegory for linguistic liberation itself a movement from being named by others to naming one’s own world.

Erasure and Resistance in Beverley Naidoo’s *Journey to Jo’burg*



In the aftermath of, Beverley Naidoo's *Journey to Jo 'burg* (1985) operates precisely within the linguistic domination interstice of erasure and survival where the text appears as a text overwritten a palimpsest where traces of indigenous meaning remain faintly visible as harsh shadow beneath the authority of the colonial lexicon. Written during the waning years of apartheid, it situates childhood as a political condition rather than as an innocent stage, a site where language, morality, and identity are violently shaped and heroically reclaimed. Naidoo depicts Apartheid South Africa that is not only divided by geography and law but also by vocabulary, magnifying the linguistic lens. Language itself becomes an instrument of segregation. The child protagonists, Naledi and Tiro, navigate a world where the words used to describe people marginalises from the beginning, "natives," "Bantu," "coloured"; such vocabulary function less as descriptors and more as decrees to define. These terms, inherited from the colonial lexicon, carry juridical weight deciding where one may walk, study, or live. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reminds us in *Moving the Centre*, "the language of colonisation is the language of separation" (21). In Naidoo's text, this separation is inscribed not only in law books but in everyday speech, where a name becomes a boundary, sculpting, marking, defining a life. The novel's linguistic economy exemplifies what Fanon termed "epidermalisation of inferiority" in *Black Skin, White Masks*. The internalisation of subjugation through language. Naledi and Tiro's journey to Johannesburg in search of their mother is implicitly, a journey through the semiotics of apartheid. Every interaction reveals how naming perpetuates hierarchy, white characters address black adults with diminutive forms or by occupational identifiers such as "maid," "boy," "girl"—while demanding to be called "missus" or "master." Such asymmetry, as Bourdieu would argue, is the enactment of symbolic power through linguistic exchange. The linguistic hierarchy mirrors and sustains the social one; to speak is to perform one's subordination.

Naidoo's attempt of narrating the world of Naledi and Tiro's is not intended to portray the violence but efficiently explores its cracks. Language, though weaponised, remains porous. Within the constraints of apartheid speech, the children's dialogue resists its imposed meanings. Their decision to embark on the journey, against every prohibition, constitutes a refusal to inhabit the colonial grammar of obedience and is an act of redefining. Through the multiplicity of speech, defiance takes the form of linguistic economy; short, direct, unadorned sentences that counter the elaborate paternalism of the white adult's tone. This simplicity, paradoxically, becomes a moral clarity a restoration of language to truth rather than ideology, which elevates and deepens the discourse. The coloniser's words, though intended to stabilise power, always carry the risk of reversal; the colonised can reinscribe them with defiance subverting meaning endlessly which cannot be controlled by the authority. Empowering child protagonists and assigning them as the inscriber is crucial to this linguistic reclamation in colonial children literature. As Jacqueline Rose notes in *The Case of Peter Pan*, children's literature constructs childhood as "a site where the adult's ideological investment in language and control becomes most visible" (3). Naledi's perception of the inequalities around her is articulated not in political abstractions but in moral astonishment. When she realises that her mother's absence is not personal but structural; she must live apart because of apartheid's labour laws. The term "servant," once naturalised, becomes intolerable. Naidoo thus transforms linguistic recognition into moral awakening moment and begins to question the world and its system.



The novel's style reinforces this decolonial pedagogy. As Ngũgĩ observes, "orature carries within it the collective wisdom of resistance" (*Writers in Politics* 56). Naidoo's narrative voice which is rhythmic repetition and community-based dialogue, reclaims this orality as an ethical mode and keeping the diction simple aligns with the oral tradition rather than the bureaucratic language of authority. The absence of linguistic ornamentation serves as a critique of colonial excess, specifically the verbose moralising that justified apartheid as "order." By stripping language of its imperial inflection, Naidoo restores it to its ethical core: communication as solidarity. At the same time, *Journey to Jo'burg* exposes the attempts of colonial language to erase familial and cultural intimacy. The children's separation from their mother mirrors and encodes the dynamics of linguistic separation from native idioms. The novel's English text is lie dead and ignore the presence and absence of African languages; words left untranslated which break rhythms that hint at isiZulu or Setswana beneath the surface stay missing. This absence is not a void but a political trace, a Derridean *trace* that gestures toward what has been effaced but not extinguished. This encodes what Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* terms the "third space", enunciation, where meaning is negotiated between dominance and resistance (56). The narrative thus performs hybridity not as mimicry but as ethical improvisation surviving within a language that is never fully one's own. The tension between erasure and resistance also manifests in the novel's naming practices. Protagonist children's names Naledi, meaning "star," and Tiro, "message", carry semantic weight, quietly asserting indigenous cosmologies against colonial erasure. The names encode a moral philosophy of illumination and communication and are not just arbitrary. In contrast, the white characters often remain unnamed and are designated only by social titles, highlighting the stripping of their individuality by their own structures of privilege. This inversion dramatizes what Spivak calls "the reversal of epistemic coding" in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* where the subaltern subject reclaims the authority of signification (91). The native name becomes a philosophical act, a microcosm of decolonial ethics.

The linguistic realism employed by Naidoo allows the reader to perceive how naming operates as a moral litmus test. When white employers rename black servants for convenience "Mary," "John," "Annie", names that had inferior tone and reenact the biblical violence of possession. As Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* writes, "to rename the slave is to annul their world, to confiscate their origin" (174). Naidoo counteracts this confiscation by presenting the children's journey as a process of re-naming reality: to call injustice by its name, to recognise exploitation for what it is. The act of naming becomes an act of truth-telling, a form of linguistic restitution. Naidoo's *Journey to Jo'burg* compels and heightens the ideology of resistance begins not in grand political declarations but in the ethical refusal of inherited words. When Naledi and Tiro reach Johannesburg, their disillusionment with the city's rhetoric of modernity parallels their recognition that words like "help," "maid," and "service" conceal systemic cruelty. Language's betrayal of truth becomes the moral revelation of the novel. As Levinas would suggest, ethics begins precisely at the point where speech confronts the face of the Other and realises its inadequacy. The children's compassion for the sick baby, their confrontation with urban inequality, and their silent endurance all become forms of moral language beyond the colonial lexicon. A linguistic ethics is grounded not in assertion but in attentiveness is the counter discourse that holds strength in Naidoo's narrative. The ethical act in *Journey to Jo'burg* is thus not only to speak truth to power but to recover the capacity for hearing what power silences. Through such gestures, Naidoo's text transforms language itself



from an instrument of control into a medium of communion, a space where recognition becomes possible again. In its refusal to capitulate to the colonial grammar of obedience, *Journey to Jo'burg* becomes an allegory of linguistic decolonisation. Its child protagonists enact what Fanon called “the creation of a new humanism” (315); a reawakening of speech as the ground of moral being. The novel does not end with triumph but with consciousness, an awareness that liberation begins not after the journey but within it, in the smallest acts of resignification. In tracing the movement from imposed speech to moral speech, from linguistic hierarchy to ethical dialogue, Naidoo’s narrative opens the possibility that language, once complicit in violence, can become the very medium of its undoing. It is in this possibility the transformation of the colonial lexicon into a space of care and recognition that the moral philosophy of postcolonial children’s literature begins to articulate its fullest claim: that to name rightly is to restore the world to its human measure.

The Ethics of Self-Naming in Yangsook Choi’s *The Name Jar*

If *Journey to Jo'burg* maps the violence of naming as an external imposition, Yangsook Choi’s *The Name Jar* internalises that conflict, locating it within the intimate space of self-recognition. The novel is about a young Korean girl, Unhei, who immigrates to the United States, unfolds as a meditation on the politics of language and belonging. Where Naidoo’s South Africa manifests the legal segregation of words, Choi’s America dramatizes the subtler tyranny of pronunciation; the linguistic hesitation that renders the foreigner visible as “Other”, under this apparent gentleness lies the same philosophical violence: the colonising impulse to rename. The act of self-naming in Choi’s narrative operates as a moral confrontation with this impulse. Unhei’s name, which means “grace,” carries the weight of an entire cultural heritage and turns into a site of vulnerability when subjected to the American tongue. The schoolchildren’s difficulty in pronouncing it, their well-intentioned suggestions of replacement, and the creation of the “name jar” all reproduce a microcosm of colonial pedagogy—where acceptance is conditional upon translation. As Gayatri Spivak warns, “translation is not a transparent exchange of meaning but an epistemic violence” (*The Politics of Translation* 179). To translate Unhei’s identity into an easier sound is to efface her cultural singularity, to rewrite her within the phonetic comfort of another linguistic regime.

The classroom scene functions as a microcosm of what Frantz Fanon described as “the white world’s demand for transparency” (94) the pressure to render oneself legible within the coloniser’s language. Unhei’s hesitation to introduce her name is not mere shyness; it is a phenomenological crisis. In that pause, the child confronts the alienation that accompanies linguistic displacement. The inability of others to articulate her name mirrors the failure of a culture to acknowledge her humanity in her own idiom. Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of the Other becomes resonant here: “The face of the Other resists possession... it signifies beyond my categories” (197). Unhei’s unpronounceable name, in this sense, becomes a moral resistance—it refuses to be fully possessed by the linguistic economy of assimilation. Choi’s text situates naming as both a linguistic and ethical act. Possess a name is to inhabit a space of meaning; to lose it is to become subject to another’s syntax. The name jar, filled with alternative suggestions—Amanda, Suzy, Laura; embodies the social machinery of erasure masked as benevolence. Each proposed name signifies inclusion at the cost of difference, comfort in exchange for authenticity. Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry, “almost the same, but not quite,”



captures this paradox of *The Location of Culture* (86). To accept a substitute name is to perform resemblance as a condition of belonging. The gesture of renaming, though wrapped in the rhetoric of friendship, re-enacts a colonial script in which the colonised subject must reconfigure her identity within the parameters of recognisability.

The moral axis of the story turns when Unhei, after deliberation, reclaims her Korean name. This moment, though understated, is charged with philosophical consequence: it marks a reclamation of the signifier as self-ownership. In choosing to be called “Unhei,” the child reverses the vector of naming, the external act of definition to the internal act of assertion. This shift parallels what *Decolonising the Mind* describes as “the decolonisation of the mind” (28)—a return to linguistic autonomy as a form of moral liberation. Naming, in this view, becomes performative not as domination but as restoration, a speech act that reconstitutes the subject in her own language. What distinguishes *The Name Jar* from more didactic narratives of multicultural inclusion is its awareness of the ethical ambivalence within this reclamation. Unhei’s classmates’ intentions are not malicious; their ignorance is structural, not personal. The text, therefore, beyond a binary of oppressor and oppressed to reveal the subtler contours of linguistic ethics. Judith Butler’s theorisation of performativity offers a useful lens: identity, she argues, is “a reiteration of norms that can also become their disruption” (*Bodies That Matter* 145). Unhei’s reiteration of her name within an American classroom is precisely such a disruption—it repeats the act of naming while undoing its normative violence. The moral lesson emerges not through correction but through recognition: that to speak another’s name rightly is to enter a relation of care.

Choi’s choice to build such a narrative in children’s literature is significant to this ethical pedagogy. As Perry Nodelman observes in *The Hidden Adult*, “children’s literature teaches by example what it means to be human in language” (36). In *The Name Jar*, language becomes both the site of alienation and the tool of reconciliation. The narrative enacts a linguistic ethics that begins in empathy: classmates learning to pronounce Unhei’s name correctly embody an act of moral listening, what Levinas would call “attentiveness to the other’s voice.” The moment of correct articulation is not merely phonetic but relational it restores reciprocity where hierarchy once prevailed. Equally crucial is the novel’s visual dimension, where illustration reinforces the textual politics of naming. The image of Unhei tracing her name in Korean script, contrasted against the English letters on classroom walls, visualises the coexistence of linguistic worlds. This juxtaposition is not one of conflict but of potential dialogue. The Korean characters signify continuity, not nostalgia; they assert that linguistic difference can coexist with belonging. The aesthetic design of the book thereby embodies what Bhabha terms “the third space of cultural hybridity” (*The Location of Culture* 56)—a space where the integrity of origin and the reality of displacement meet in creative negotiation.

Choi’s narrative further complicates the notion of linguistic purity by suggesting that ethical identity emerges not from isolation but from relational authenticity. Unhei’s final act of teaching her name signifies the transformation of the colonial grammar of pedagogy into a reciprocal one. The classroom, once a space of linguistic correction, becomes a space of mutual learning. The act shifts the roles, with the child, traditionally the recipient of instruction, now assuming the role of teacher. The act of teaching her name transforms into an ethical



pedagogical practice, restoring equality through the shared exchange of speech. This exchange subtly resonates with Paulo Freire's concept of dialogical education, which posits that liberation is achieved through communication rather than instruction (72). The moral force of *The Name Jar* thus lies not in its resolution but in its recognition of vulnerability as ethical ground. Unhei's momentary dilemma to adopt a new name embodies what Hannah Arendt described as the "space of appearance," where action and speech reveal the human condition of plurality (176). In this space, self-naming becomes both an assertion of autonomy and a gesture of openness; it invites others to meet the self on its own terms. The ethics of self-naming, therefore, is not narcissistic but relational, it restores language to its original function as the site of encounter. Owning and accepting her Korean name, Unhei, doesn't mean retreating from the world; instead, it means embracing it more fully. Her act of self-naming transforms isolation into dialogue of fight and solidarity, turning the burden of difference into the grace of presence. The linguistic grace encoded in her name thus materialises: grace as self-acceptance, grace as patience toward misunderstanding, grace as the courage to remain untranslatable. In this sense, *The Name Jar* extends the moral trajectory begun in Naidoo's *Journey to Jo'burg*: where Naidoo's children resist erasure through the journey outward, Choi's protagonist resists assimilation through a journey inward. Both affirm that to name is to exist ethically, and that language though shaped by power retains within it the possibility of renewal.

Reclaiming Myth and Cultural Memory in John Steptoe's *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*

If *The Name Jar* locates linguistic identity within the moral interiority of the self, John Steptoe's *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (1987) restores it to the ancestral terrain of collective memory. The act of naming in Steptoe's work is no longer merely personal or psychological but civilisational. Naming becomes the ritual through which cultural continuity is asserted & reasserted against the dismemberment of colonial history. The tale, inspired by a traditional Zimbabwean folktale, reimagines the African oral narrative within the visual and textual architecture of the modern picture book. In doing so, it performs a dual reclamation: it reclaims the mythic as a living epistemology and restores to the colonised imagination the right to narrate its own moral world.

Steptoe's story of two sisters, Nyasha and Manyara, who embody the moral polarities of humility and pride, operates on the surface as a didactic fable about virtue and justice but is powered with profound decolonial aesthetic. The act of naming the sisters—"Nyasha," meaning grace or kindness, and "Manyara," connoting shame or arrogance in Shona; anchors the narrative in African linguistic consciousness. In contrast to colonial children's books that appropriated African imagery within European moral codes, Steptoe grounds his narrative ethics within African lexicons themselves. Language here is not ornamental but ontological. it constructs a world rather than describing one. The *Decolonising the Mind* contends, "language carries culture, and culture carries the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (16). By situating meaning in native linguistic roots, Steptoe resists the imperial act of abstraction that has long stripped African stories of their vernacular soul. The restoration of myth in *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* is also a restoration of moral geography. The story's sketches a lush, self-contained African landscape with earthy illustrations that celebrate natural abundance. This reimagined geography dismantles the



colonial visual code that rendered Africa as barren, chaotic, or primitive. Instead, Steptoe's Africa is radiant with life and sacred order. In Fanon's sense, the narrative reclaims the "zone of being" denied to the colonised subject by Western representation (*The Wretched of the Earth* 9). The landscape doesn't just serve as a backdrop for adventure but becomes a participant in moral life. Trees whisper, creatures test character, and the river becomes a medium of transformation. In this enchanted ecology, language and nature converge, recovering what Aimé Césaire calls out in *Discourse on Colonialism* the "cosmic harmony of precolonial consciousness" (72).

Steptoe marvelously harmonised world where naming assumes the function of moral recognition. Each encounter of Nyasha, with the hungry boy, the old woman, the snake, becomes a linguistic test: her words, gestures, and responses define her essence. When the serpent ultimately reveals himself as the king, the revelation is not a surprise but a fulfilment of the moral order encoded in her name. The ethical act in Steptoe's world is not one of assertion but of attunement; the virtuous subject is one who listens, speaks with humility, and recognises the divine within the ordinary. In this sense, *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* reanimates the precolonial epistemology of relationality—what Emmanuel Levinas would call "the primacy of the face-to-face encounter" (*Totality and Infinity* 67). Steptoe's reconfiguration of myth is not an act to return to a precolonial purity but to articulate a moral modernity rooted in indigenous sensibility. The narrative structure mirrors what Homi Bhabha discusses in *The Location of Culture*; "the re-inscription of tradition as hybrid" (126). Steptoe writes and illustrates in English, yet the rhythm, imagery, and ethics of his tale are unmistakably African. This hybridity is not compromise but transformation: a reconstitution of linguistic colonisation into an instrument of reclamation. As Chinua Achebe argued, the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience, but it will have to be a new English, altered to suit its new surroundings. Steptoe's prose exemplifies this new English which is inflected with the tonalities of oral storytelling, where repetition, rhythm, and cadence produce a texture closer to ritual chant than to Western narrative linearity.

The picture book form itself becomes an ethical intervention in postcolonial pedagogy. Visuality in Steptoe's work is not illustrative but epistemic, teaching children to see the world from a new model. The detailed depictions of Zimbabwean flora, traditional attire, and architectural motifs function as mnemonic devices that reconnect diasporic readers to ancestral memory. As Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" suggests, cultural trauma is often transmitted through aesthetic repetition, allowing subsequent generations to access lost histories through imaginative engagement (22). Steptoe's illustrations, then, perform this postmemorial function: they translate mythic consciousness into visual pedagogy, bridging the gap between historical loss and cultural recovery. The dialect of erasure and remembrance that runs through the book can be read as an allegory of decolonial healing. In contrast to the Western fairy tale, where moral order is restored through hierarchical resolution. Steptoe's Nyasha's ascension to Queenhood is not triumph but restoration; it rebalances the moral cosmos disrupted by arrogance and envy. Her humility does not signify submission but self-knowledge; the ethical awareness that power must serve care. This moral structure resonates with African philosophies of *ubuntu*, the idea that "a person is a person through other people" (Tutu 35). Steptoe's narrative embodies *ubuntu* as both ethical principle and linguistic ethos: the characters' interactions articulate a world in which identity exists only through relation.



The act of retelling a Shona folktale in a global medium performs a subtle resistance in voice of epistemic violence, the silencing of subaltern knowledges through representation. Steptoe's text speaks precisely the margin where it is not mimicking Western narrative codes but re-enchancing the moral imagination of the West itself. Reintroducing African myth into a predominantly Western children's literature canon, he challenges the implicit hierarchy that privileges Greco-Christian moral narratives as universal. Decolonisation begins in the imagination, Steptoe's fable decolonises precisely by imagining Africa as the origin, not the derivative, of moral wisdom.

The transformative force of *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* lies in its ability to reposition myth as philosophy rather than superstition. In colonial epistemology, myth was relegated to the realm of the primitive, opposed to reason and history. Steptoe subverts this dichotomy by demonstrating that myth is itself a mode of rationality, a language of ethics encoded in narrative. In retelling the folktale, he performs what Derrida calls "reinscription of the trace" in *Writing and Difference*, an act that neither erases nor repeats the past but writes it anew within the horizon of presence. The story becomes a palimpsest of African temporality, where ancestral time and narrative time coalesce. This temporal synthesis teaches the child reader that history is not linear progression but cyclical renewal. The moral polarity of the two sisters resists the Western dichotomy of good and evil that is common in famous works like *Harry Potter* series by J.K Rowling. Nyasha and Manyara are not moral absolutes but dialectical complements, their names and fates revealing the relational ethics of balance. As in Yoruba cosmology or Shona myth, harmony emerges not through annihilation of the negative but through its integration into moral order. The snake-king's test, therefore, is not punitive but pedagogical teaching virtue is not the absence of desire but orientation toward empathy. The narrative's closure, with its serene equilibrium, enacts what Paul Ricoeur describes as the "hermeneutics of restoration" (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 101), where storytelling reconciles fracture through understanding rather than domination.

Read through this philosophical lens Steptoe's writing becomes a profound meditation on how language and myth heal the colonial wound. The reclaiming of African narrative forms within a Western-dominated publishing world constitutes a reversal of linguistic hierarchy. The English language, once the instrument of cultural expropriation, becomes a vessel for cultural recovery. This inversion enacts the very principle attributes to writing: that "every origin is already a translation" that *Of Grammatology* discusses profoundly (93). The African story translated into English thus does not lose authenticity; it multiplies it, expanding the moral imagination of both colonised and coloniser. *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* teaches that the ethical act of calling the world by its ancestral names is an act of remembering. Each proper name in Steptoe's tale is a seed of memory, binding the child to the moral ecology of people. Pronouncing these names, readers participate in an unspoken ritual of restoration. As Toni Morrison write in *Beloved*, "to name is to claim possession, but to name with love is to recreate the world" (37). Steptoe's luminous retelling thus becomes not only an aesthetic achievement but a moral intervention, a gesture of linguistic grace that reawakens the colonised word into song.

Reclaiming the Word: Language, Ethics, and the Child's Moral Vision



Language in children's literature carries the weight of historical injury and the promise of ethical renewal. The colonial encounter speech is an instrument of domination, naming used a tool for erasure but postcolonial narratives reclaim through restoration. When words are reinhabited by those once dispossessed of them, they cease to be mere signs; they become sites of moral reconstitution. In the stories of Naidoo, Choi, and Steptoe, language is not simply recovered but redeemed, regains its capacity to connect, to heal, and to humanise. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o notes, "to speak is to reclaim one's presence in the world" (87). This reclamation, when voiced through a child, performs a radical inversion of history: the subaltern tongue becomes the moral centre from which a decolonised future can be imagined. The moral imagination of the child operates as a corrective to linguistic violence. In *Journey to Jo'burg*, words that once delineated racial boundaries are reconfigured as expressions of love and resilience. In *The Name Jar*, Unhei's self-naming resists assimilation not through defiance but through understanding and powering decision to keep her name is both a refusal of erasure and an embrace of mutual recognition. In *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*, oral traditions and proverbial wisdom reinstate the dignity of African speech, transforming myth into an ethical pedagogy. Across these works, language undergoes a movement of forgiveness and revolution of no more being a weapon but becoming a medium of grace. The child's moral imagination, untethered from inherited hierarchies, enacts this redemption by envisioning speech as relational rather than instrumental. These colonial narratives linguistic reclamation is inherently ethical. To rename oneself, one must first unlearn the coloniser's grammar of hierarchy, speak anew, restore meaning to the silenced word. Children's literature is the first ethical classroom of humanity teaching the child to see the Other not as a category but as a voice. The act of naming channels assertion into listening, control into care. It gestures toward what Hannah Arendt calls the miracle of beginning, a renewal of the human condition through the child's capacity to speak differently.

Redemption of the linguistic and moral essence in the narratives directs to a deeper philosophical insight that decolonisation is not merely political but are inherently profoundly semiotic. Manipulation of language signifies the reawakening of ethical consciousness. When a child utters a name, tells a story, or revives an ancestral myth, they perform an act of justice more enduring than resistance. This act reimagines the very foundations of communication, making the redemption of language synonymous with the redemption of relation itself. In this redemptive grammar of children's literature, every utterance becomes a small act of repair. It heals not only the speaker but also the fractured moral world left by empire. The ethics of naming, therefore, is not confined to individual identity but extends to collective renewal. In the end, these stories do not merely restore names; they restore the possibility of dialogue, of forgiveness, of beginning anew. The child's voice, gentle yet resolute, reclaims language from its historical complicity and reorients it toward compassion. Through her, we are reminded that the word, once redeemed, can once again become what it was always meant to be—a home for justice, memory, and the infinite promise of relation.



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