

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Predicament of Name in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract:

Man is known by his name. He gets identity in the society by his name. Name helps in getting the social status too. When one migrates to unknown territory the question of identity arises and remains unanswerable. The question of identity is always difficult especially for people who are culturally displaced. Culturally displaced people live in two worlds. As Nikolai Gogol in 'The Overcoat' describes that 'The reader should realize himself that it could not have happened otherwise, and that to give him any other name was quite out of question.' *The Namesake* is a story about the struggles and hardships of a Bengali couple who immigrate to the United States to make a life outside of everything they know. The author Jhumpa Lahiri believes that immigrants have the feeling of exile and the constant sense of alienation when they start life on a foreign land. It causes loneliness and the knowledge of and longing for a lost world (mother land) are more explicit and distressing than for their children. *The Namesake* narrates story about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali Family, the Gangulis, from Calcutta, into America, over thirty years (from 1968-2000). The cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their American born children are different. They suffer spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations in their effort to settle "home" in the new land where as their children- Gogol and Sonia are born on the American land-new land struggle to assimilate with the Indian culture and traditions.

Keywords: Exile, dislocation, identity, alienation, second generation, bilingual, bicultural

1. Introduction

'*The Name sake*' narrates the life of the Ganguli family from their tradition bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into America along with their children Gogol and Sonia. Narrating events from 1968 to 2000, the novel spans more than 30 years in the life of the Ganguli family, although much of the book focuses on Gogol's life and his seemingly lifelong disconnectedness to his family, his culture and all the riffs on life he tries to play as he seeks his true self. Major events are centered on their America born boy namely Gogol and his predicament to get a name of his choice. On the heels of their arranged wedding, Ashoka and Ashima Ganguli settle together in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ashoka, An engineering student at MIT, adapts American life than his wife. Perhaps getting involved into study at a prestigious college like MIT is more important to him than being indulged in the issues of settling to the new life. Moving to America for Ashima is experience of exile. She is cut off suddenly from a large family in India and comes eight thousand miles away in Cambridge to begin a new life with a man she got married. Left alone in the rented, very small apartment in America in comparison to her big house in Calcutta, she resists all things American and craves for her family. When their son is born, the task of naming him becomes a sensitive issue. It is from here the struggle for identity and realization of being alienated starts. Being Bengali the parents wish to follow the custom of naming a new born. As the Bengali tradition allows an elder person from the family to name the new born both of them are eagerly waiting for the letter from grandmother of Ashima to arrive with a name in it. However in order to get release from the hospital they require to give an official name to the boy to be on the pass port and to be on the birth certificate. So Gogol name is selected in the memory of a Russian writer by his Indian parents in order to retain memory of a catastrophe years before. Gogol Ganguli when grows up brows only that he suffers the bender of his heritage as well as his old, antic name. The novel shows how the immigrants face cultural dilemmas in the foreign system. Lahiri shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Their own children groom to be "bilingual" and "bicultural" face cultural dilemmas and displacement more than their parents.

2. The Quest for Identity

It happens that if you carry two names- a pet name and an official one, you are often mistaken of your identity when you are suddenly asked and you utter your pet name. If this happens against in front of the immigration officer at the time of immigration then you are gone." A suspicious look shoots from the officer's eyes. "It doesn't match your record." Then you suddenly remember that your legal name is different. You are baffled as you visualize the difference between two names. Your legal name may not completely represent you. You ask about who you are, but you never find an answer. Likewise, Gogol, an America-born Indian man in *The Namesake*, experiences confusion due to the change of his name. However, he succeeds in identifying himself in the end because he realizes the importance of his original culture. Eva Hoffman, the author of *Lost in Translation: a Life in a New Language*, also questions her identity in a new country in face of assimilation. . Barbara Ehrenreich, the author of *Cultural Baggage*, fails to identify herself but decides to create a new heritage on her own. Name change and language diffusion worsen

the life of immigrants since it is hard to draw a clear line in the process of assimilation. All face trouble in giving appropriate identities in acculturation process. It takes time to solve the dilemma on the new land.

In *the Namesake*, the question of identity plays a vital role. Jhumpa Lahiri was born as Nalanjana Sudeshana. However, her pet name Jhumpa was found easier to pronounce, the teacher at her pre-school started addressing her Jhumpa. In the course of time it became her official name. Jhumpa Lahiri tries to focus on the issue of identity she had faced in her childhood. Names are always seen as symbols that help people to communicate with each other, but they play an important role for people to identify themselves. The problem of Gogol's name symbolizes the problem of his identity. He was comfortable with his name and does not want a new name when he enters into preschool. He could not communicate when he was addressed as Nikhil and asked questions by his teacher. A contrast is made between the Indian and American cultures when Ashoke informs the teacher that he wants him to be called "Nikhil," his good name. She doesn't quite understand the point of this second name. The parents received a note from school authority that he should be addressed by his pet name Gogol as he likes to be identified with that name only. Ashoke's efforts for his official name have gone into vain. They do not care about the preference of parents. They do not press the issue but give in. Gogol is so fond of his name that he waits for the art classes where he can carve his name with paper clips into the bottom of clay cups and bowls. As a young boy too Gogol does not mind his name. It seems perfectly normal if he does not find his name on a key chain or metal pins. He was told that he was named after a Russian author and as the author is known throughout the world it will live on forever. It is when he is eleven years old the peculiarity of his name become apparent. He wants to be connected to the strange names in the graveyard when the students were taken to the graveyard for the project. He wants to relate himself with American locale but his name hinders his way to be recognized as an American. . In order to achieve a comfortable life in the American environment, he strives to blank out his heritage and assimilate to American culture. Nikhil replaces Gogol when he enters Yale as a freshman. Here nobody knows his earlier name. He feels relief and confident. No one knows him as Gogol but Nikhil. His life with new name also gets changed. His transformation starts here. He starts doing many activities which he could not dare to do as Gogol. He dates American girls. He shares live in relationship. His way of life, food everything changes. But a new dilemma clutches him. He changes his name but "he does not feel like Nikhil" (105). Gogol is not completely cut off from his roots and identity. He tries to reject his past but it makes him stranger to himself. He fears to be discovered. While also experiencing identity confusion from a change of names, Gogol is nevertheless able to define his identity. Since Gogol is born after his father survives a horrific train accident in which few others survive, his father sees the name Gogol as a pet name to signal his rebirth. With the rejection of Gogol's name, Lahiri rejects the immigrant identity maintained by his parents. But this outward change fails to give him inner satisfaction. "After eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feels scant, inconsequential." (105) He hates everything that reminds him of his past and heritage. The loss of the old name was not so easy to forget and when alternate weekends, he visits his home "Nikhil evaporates and Gogol claims him again." (106). When he goes back to India, he locks Nikhil into his unconsciousness and switch to being Gogol. Yet, chaos emerges as he frequently switches back and forth between two names. When he goes to his parents he is Gogol. He is Gogol when his parents call him on phone. He tries to put a wall between his past and his present, but it is not easy. The inner mental contradiction confuses him about his real identity. Certainly he is not an American, but it seems that he is not a real Indian either.

Gogol, in particular, is torn between two cultures – the Indian traditions of his parents and the mainstream American culture in which he grows up. His struggle is the same one that his sister Sonia goes through, and his wife Moushumi, too. It is also related to the struggle his parents undergo as immigrants. Each character faces a choice whether they should assimilate into American culture and if yes then to what extent. Also they feel they betray their roots in the process of being assimilated to the new culture. Characters confront with these questions through their relationships with their names, their relationships with their families, and their choices about the future. In Gogol's perspective, a new name represents a new identity, which is a detachment from his original heritage. No matter how aggressively he resists the new surroundings, he has to compromise on assimilation.

About the controversy of name of Gogol, Lahiri says in an interview, "But I think that for the child of immigrant, the existence of two names kind of speaks so strongly for the very predicament of many children of immigrants". However, Gogol does not understand how meaningful his name is when he is young. Later on, Gogol develops resentment toward this name during adolescence and decides to use his legal name, Nikhil, as an overcoat to escape from Indian culture. Gogol who hates his name, for the first time in his life, takes an independent decision and decides to get it changed to Nikhil. Gogol who hates his name, for the first time in his life, takes an independent choice and decides to get it changed to Nikhil. It is as Nikhil; Gogol faces the predicament of establishing his real identity. He finds it complicated to acknowledge that Gogol and Nikhil are both a part of his own individual self and torn between this struggles. It is as Nikhil; Gogol faces the crisis of establishing his real identity. He finds it difficult to acknowledged that Gogol and Nikhil are both a part of his own self and torn between this struggle he feels as 'If he's cast himself in a play acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye, yet fundamentally different.' He is having twin sets of personality now – Gogol is the son of Indian parents who wants him to live, behave and act according to Indian culture and values; Nikhil is the free liberated person, who has left his past behind and has nothing to do with Gogol. It is as Nikhil that Gogol forgets all the cultural restrictions imposed on him by his parents, who even after spending twenty years' in America cannot bring themselves to "refer to Pemberton Road as home'" On the other hand, the problem for the children of immigrants - those with strong ties to their country of origin - is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. This has been my experience, in any case. Jhumpa talking on identity issue says, for example, I never know how to answer the question: "Where are you from?" If I say I'm from Rhode Island, people are seldom satisfied. They want to know more, based on things such as my name, my appearance, etc. Alternatively, if I say I'm from India, a place where I was not born and have never lived, this is also inaccurate. It bothers me less now. But it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged" (Book Browse, 2007). But as a teen he wishes to change his school. After changing the name, there is only one complication: "He doesn't feel like Nikhil. Not yet.... But after 18 years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feels scant, inconsequential" (Lahiri, 2004).

Although the name Nikhil brings him more confidence, Gogol is always present inside him. Soon he feels a sense of futility and dissatisfaction about avoiding his roots: "Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all" (Lahiri 289). All his efforts pay him back with confusion about who he truly is. He sees himself as Nikhil, striving to be truly American, yet he fails to eradicate Gogol. By the end, he chooses to stick with "Gogol," is Indian identity, since he realizes that everything that he has gone through, from the botched naming attempt at his birth (Gogol) to his realization of the hope behind Gogol, is the meaningful fragment to define who he is.

Gogol is constantly making comparisons between Indian and American life. For Indian immigrants such as Ashima and Ashoke, many aspects of American culture are foreign to them, and they also feel like strangers in American society. Gogol finds it easier to live life in American style. But his parents struggle to maintain certain Indian traditions, while adapting to American customs, such as Christmas, for the sake of their children. Indian-American characters such as Gogol and Moushumi often feel foreign in both India and America, as though they are lost in between the world of their parents and the world in which they were born. They often feel like tourists, only, unlike most tourists, they have no chance of a homecoming. Gogol's romances with Anglo-American girlfriends do not last because they can't possibly understand how different he feels, even though he is attracted to them precisely because they seem foreign to his experience. Traveling to India actually makes Gogol feel less connected to the Indian part of his heritage. Gogol and his sister view their multicultural life differently. After annual enforced trips to Calcutta, they yearn to get back to their Western ways. "With relief," Gogol "puts on his headset to watch *The Big Chill* and listen to top-forty songs."

Identity issue is also seen in the custom of marriage too. Everything from one-night stands to steadfast marriages, and Gogol alone runs the gamut. He cannot recall his first girl friend with whom he has lost his virginity. Gogol can only get up the confidence to hit on girls with his new name, Nikhil. He might think that the name Gogol is just plain unattractive, or because a new identity makes him bolder. Love goes right and love goes terribly wrong. When it does go wrong, it usually has to do with the cultural identity issues of the romantic partners. Either one night stand or live in for some time with Kim, Ruth, Maxine is a try to get Nikhil in American way of life. The first girls Gogol dates are not Indian, and it is their American-ness that attracts him. This particular girl is from Maine and has divorced parents, which would be unthinkable in Bengali society. For Gogol it is exciting and exotic. He hides these affairs from his parents. They do not last for long as their ethnic identities do not seem to matter so much as attitudes towards those identities. How each character feels about his or her identity as an Indian, American, or Indian-American affects their romantic decision-making. Gogol's love choices in particular often reflect his own love-hate relationship with his Indian heritage, while other characters who are more at ease in their Indian-American identities (such as his sister, Sonia) seem to have better luck in love. Gogol and Moushumi's marriage was doomed from the start, because their backgrounds are too similar. They are both attracted to free life of America where there are no bondages. Maushami had uncountable one night stands while she is away from her parents in Paris. On their very second meeting, in maushami's apartment they make love. It seems Indian parent want their children to be in the comfort zone. Affairs of Gogol, Sonia or Maushami are coming out of that comfort zone. This is something against Indian custom. Pre marriage relations are not accepted till today in India. When the first generation immigrants like Ashoke and Ashima try to retain such traditions their second generation children become kind of rebel when they are given liberty .it describes their confused state of mind. They follow American ways but do not wish to reveal to their parents. Gogol through such affairs shows his unhappiness from not fitting in, about the cultural differences that set them apart from everybody else. These characters feel isolated, and alienated from both Indian and mainstream American cultures. These feelings of alienation seep into their relationships with their family and their lovers and cause all kinds of dissatisfaction.

3. Conclusion

Gogol successfully retrieves his Indian identity by accepting the name Gogol in the end; nevertheless, assimilation is a stumbling block that puzzles Gogol about finding a balance between his identities. *The Namesake* very well describes the characters as Indian immigrants struggling with the universal issue of identity, Gogol's discomfort with his name represents the bewildering world of American immigrants who are born in one country but spend their life either gracefully immersed or hopelessly drowning in the culture of another people. It is hard to balance two different cultures, particularly when there is one already rooted in. However, by the end of the novel, the house on Pemberton Road has become a real home for the Gangulis, reflecting the years they lived together and apart as a family. The anxiety that Gogol has about his name represents an even larger feeling of anxiety Gogol has about his identity as an individual. Gogol's struggle with his name is symbolic for his struggle with his identity, which is largely influenced by his parents' struggle with making Indian and American culture coexist peacefully in their lives.

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