

## CREATING SELF OF NIKHIL GOGOL GANGULI

**Anwasha Ghosh**

M.A.

West Bengal State University.

### **Abstract**

The purpose of the study is to find out how Jhumpa Lahiri's protagonist 'Gogol' (*daak naam*) of *the 'Namesake'* published in 2003 by Houghton Mifflin has become Nikhil Gogol Ganguli. Nikhil is an American born Indian originated boy having a third name of a Russian author Nicolai Gogol. Travel among the three Indian, American and Russian cultural spaces, creates the identity crisis within Nikhil. This crisis leads him and many other dislocated second generation children to the marginalization in the first world countries. These ABCDs have to struggle with both the inner self and the outer world in order to existence. The protagonist has also played role reversed in gender power politics in his marital life with another ABCD, Moushumi, who has always escaped from her etymological and ontological identity. Demasculization has also seen in his character.

**Key Words:** Migration, Identity Crisis, Diaspora, ABCD, Ethnicity, Heredity, Culture, Demasculization

Saussure already proved that language is arbitrary, meanings are deferred and relational. So 'apple' is 'apple' because we call the red that particular shaped fruit for our benefit as 'apple'. So here in Jhumpa Lahiri's *the Namesake*, the name of the American born Bengali originated boy got the legitimacy to leave the hospital after named on a Russian last name. So he got the named only for the sake of naming. *The Namesake* is the story of the Ganguli family ranging over a period from 1968 to 2000. It revolves around Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli's settlement in the US, their relationship with their US-born children, Gogol and Sonia, and their attempt to lay claim upon a patch of foreign land without losing contact with their Indian heritage. Their family can be best described with the following words from the novel, "Four in the family with two U.S. passports and two Indian ones" (80). The US passports of the children mark them different from the Indian identity of their parents.

Ashoke's move to the US was inspired by the words of a co-passenger named Mr Ghosh during a train journey, who insinuated him thus: "Before it's too late . . . pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it" (16). The fatal journey cost the person and others their lives in sleep, but Ashoke miraculously survived the accident because he was reading Gogol's "The Overcoat". When the rescuers arrived, Ashoke, although unable to speak, could attract their attention by waving a copy of the short story.

"He was born twice in India, and then a third time in America. Three lives by thirty." (21) The memories of that fateful night influenced him to leave India and inspired him to choose an unusual name for his son. In naming his son Gogol, he paid the greatest homage to the Ukrainian-Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. He felt a special kinship with Gogol, the writer not only

because “he believed the book saved his life, but because he spent most of his adult life outside his homeland like him” (77). Thus, the existence and identity of the father and the son are importantly connected with the name Gogol.

Now all confusion creates from here. The novel definitely has an autobiographical streak as Lahiri’s experience of growing up as a child of immigrants, resembles that of her protagonist, Gogol in the novel. In an interview to Mira Nair, she says: “I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers, and the expectations I put on myself to fit into American society. It’s a classic case of divided identity.” Like Gogol, her pet name inadvertently became her good name. She has two other names on her passport and her birth certificate. When she was enrolled in school the teachers decided that Jhumpa was the easiest of her names to pronounce. Talking about the diasporic crisis of dual identity Lahiri, in the same interview, reflects: “The original spark of the book was the fact that a friend of my cousin in India had a pet name Gogol. I wanted to write about a pet name/good name distinction for a long time. It is almost too perfect a metaphor for the experience of growing up as the child of immigrants, having a divided identity, divided loyalties etc.” In a conversation with Mira Nair, Lahiri says, “The names we have, there is so much about them: who are we and they are the one world that exists that represents us. And yet we don’t choose them. They are from our parents.”

As identity becomes the core issue, names become quite significant. The expressive function of a name varies from culture to culture. Stuart Hall discusses two different ways of thinking about ‘cultural identity’ in the context of Caribbean or black diaspora:

“The first position defines ‘cultural identity’ in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. . . .Such a conception of cultural identity played a critical role in all the post-colonial struggles which have so profoundly reshaped our world. (223)”

. The hospital is a space which serves as a site of control and cultural assimilation, where individuals are subjected to disciplinary regimes aim to produce ‘healthy’ and self-sufficient citizens of the nation. Hence, the national political and social milieu unquestionably contributes to identity formation processes, and Gogol’s birth in the American medical institution represents his first solid link with the host country. Like the Americans GOGOL could not make out the ideology of two names *bhalo naam* and *daak naam*, probably because this discourse of du-naming separated him from this geo-political space. But later he randomly shifts between his two identities Gogol and Nikhil in this multicultural society, in order to settle him down and take him out of the tussle of his trio-cultural identity. By the age of fourteen Gogol has come to hate his first name, which he considers both absurd and obscure. He hates signing his name on the drawings he makes in class, or constantly having to explain that it does not “mean anything ‘in Indian’, (...) that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian” (76). Finally, after understanding though the host culture gave him enough

space to blend with it but the society hangs a not allowed board in front of him. In Maxine's birthday party an old white woman constantly tries to remember Gogol that he does not share the same etymological, ontological history with the Americans. The problem is he contains migrated past. In a seminar during his graduation about the Indian author he repeatedly encounters a term 'marginalised'. He chose to be Nikhil, he returns to his Indian culture in America.

In this multicultural capitalist territory he remains acultured. Throughout the novel Nikhil carries his Indian identity very tactfully. He always told that he is not thinking of marriage while he was engaged with an American origin. His deep enchantment towards Indian culture has been shown after his father's death. He rejects Maxine as his family member and maintains all the Indian rituals. His marriage is an example of typical postcolonial migrated culture. Both the bride and groom already have lots of sexual intimacy, with other race due to their hybrid position but politically mingled with the same race, though it was unsuccessful. The topographical space did not allow him to create his own identity till the end of the novel. Being an Indian origin boy, he tried to escape from his Indian identity. He realizes from the very beginning it would not work to follow the Indianans'. Therefore he adopts the American way of living but due to Ashima he never could do this successfully. But his attempt was good. In kindergarten he chose his name which claims his first rejection towards Indian culture. He hates to come at Kolkata. He avoids to be seen with ABCD( American born confused deshi) students in university campus. His hybridity take him to smoke secretly among his friends, he attends late night parties, he spontaneously do sex with his girlfriends. A strong negligence was there in Nikhil's attitude to

accept all the Indian culture at one hand, on the other he always was deeply rooted with it. In this respect Carl Jung should be mentioned here. According to him the *persona* denotes 'how we present ourselves to the world'. The *persona* represents all of the different social masks that we wear among different group and situation. Nikhil's *persona* drives him to act according to situations. Within his home and Bengali society he behaves like a core Bengali by heart-participates all the rituals, understand the emotions attach with it. Though he does not like to go Kolkata, but he never strongly refuses to do that. He also promises to his *mashi*, do whatever wants to do with foreigner but will marry to a *deshi* girl and he does so. Whereas, outside his home and *deshi* group, he is totally an Americanized boy except his name. Therefore he has been accepted gladly by his American girlfriends- Ruth and Maxine. He was not only accepted by his hybrid Mediterranean look but also for his multicultural attitude. Out of the confrontation of his split personality he wishes to spend his birthday with his lover's family not with his own parents. He wishes to live in his lover's home rather than his own. These events obviously put him in a corner out of his Indian identity and an intruder of foreign culture. Another exemplary example of his *persona*, as I have shown so far, Gogol has had to negotiate two very different cultures throughout his life, as well as a third brought about by his name. When he turns fourteen, for example, he has a party with his friends from school, with pizzas that his father picked up on his way home from work, a baseball game watched together on television, and some ping-pong played in the den. The next day they have another celebration, a Bengali one this time, to which forty people from three different states are invited. As usual, Ashima cooks for days beforehand, cramming the refrigerator with lamb curry and potatoes, *luchis*, *channa dal* with raisins, pineapple chutney, and *sandeshes* molded out of saffron-tinted ricotta cheese. However, she is

much more comfortable with cooking all these dishes than she is with “feeding a handful of American children, half of whom always claim they are allergic to milk, all of whom refuse to eat the crusts of their bread”(72). It may say that the father is responsible with the ‘American’ party (involving less food, not prepared in the house, and some sports), which helps Nikhil to acquire Americana, or to enter into the periphery of western culture, whereas the mother takes care of the ‘Indian’ celebration (involving plenty of food, all cooked in the house, numerous Bengali families with children who play hide-and-seek and watch *The Love Boat* and *Fantasy Island*) which takes back to his mother’s culture.

Gogol was choice to him at the beginning as because takes him out of his Indian root till he encountered with the writer Nikolai V. Gogol, and his way of living, his uprootedness from his own land but it was also a fear to Nikhil of lack of both his ethnic identity and his present multicultural hybrid identity. This led him to consent to his etymological root. But the twist of his name comes in his twenty seventh birthday. He became aware of his father’s rebirth due to Nikolai Gogol’s story ‘the Overcoat’, as per his father’s believe. After few days Ashoke passes away. The name ‘Gogol’ became more significant to him. Gogol finally understands he cannot and should not sever his roots Therefore when Moushumi his wife could not understand his emotions regarding this name and declare about his changing of name publicly he found him desolate. This event can be interpreted as a result of his identity crisis, it shows the homage he pays toward his father and the name he has already changed.

In case of Moushumi, another ABCD, a woman he knew from childhood and who stands for the ethnic identity he has now decided to adopt. Nikhil becomes the appropriate example of demasculinised masculinity. From early childhood she had been determined not to let them have a hand in her marriage. So she rebuffed all the Indian men, and as a teenager she was forbidden to date. Moushumi seeks refuge in French culture, and after graduating from college she moves to Paris in an attempt to escape as far as possible from her family and the two cultures she had been caught in between her whole life. They met in a planned way, continues out of their same historical root. And they chose to be married. After marriage they got disillusioned about each other. Moushumi, is a hybrid, just like Gogol, his mirror image. Her dislocation is more violent though: he changes his name but stays in the United States, close to where his parents live, whereas she remorselessly turns her back to the two countries that could 'claim' her and escapes to a third, totally unrelated, where she eventually asserts her individuality by denying any roots. Born in England to Indian parents, having lived in the United States before fleeing to France, she has relationships with men of several nationalities in order to devoured questions regarding her own national belonging. At the time of their marriage, both of them knew that they are doing a thing which was prescribed for them for a long time. It was more for their ethnic parents and the sake of their etymological root they quickly transform into unknown strangers under the same roof. She felt more succumbed in this marriage with a known *deshi* boy. Moushumi's aroma transform into smoky smell of cigarette. The issue of gender power reversals where women become brokers of new domestic cultures and of new kinds of sexual politics and where the man comes to bear the burden of representing cultural tradition and family loyalty. Nikhil proves to be marginalized by his hybridity is an affect of globalization in order to create his own 'being'.



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