

**NAME AS THEME AND TECHNIQUE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S NOVEL  
*THE NAMESAKE*****Gayathri. M**

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Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* differs from other popular diasporic writings in its focus on names. It becomes unique because Lahiri uses the concept of names as a background, a technique and most importantly as a theme. The protagonist Gogol's unusual name not only creates his identity crisis, but also enables him to resolve it. Hence his name proves to be more than a mere symbol of his dual or complex identity. Thus, the novel seems to be revolving around "names" and Gogol, the protagonist, is evolving through his name(s). With penetrating insight, the novelist reveals the defining power of names and the expectations that they are loaded with. Lahiri also subtly portrays how names turn out to be the means by which we slowly and poignantly come to defining ourselves.

Lahiri creates an apt background to the novel using names through the very title and the epigraph. The title of the novel, 'the Namesake', makes the reader expect some sort of a relationship between people having the same name. The author dedicates this book to Alberto and Octavio whom she calls by "other names". This also anticipates some kind of a play with names in the novel. Hereafter, what we get to see is a plot on names being developed through names.

In the very beginning of the novel, it is said that Ashima Ganguli never utters her husband's name, nor thinks of it even when she thinks of him. Though she has adopted his surname, she refuses to utter his first, as any "traditional" Bengali wife does. Lahiri writes, "instead of saying Ashoke's name, she utters the interrogative that has come to replace it, which translates roughly as "Are you listening to me?"(2)

It is indeed a very common custom in many diverse cultures to venerate names. Ashoke always keeps the cotton handkerchief in which the letter 'A' for Ashoke is embroidered by his mother. It reminds Ashoke of his name and the novelist seems to suggest that one is always under the burden of his/her name which stands for the expectations of one's parents and the society about him/her. The strangeness of names, which is the central thread of the *Namesake*, first appears in

the novel when Ashoke, while waiting in the hospital, recalls his train accident and Nikolai Gogol, his saviour. “Each time, reading the account of Akaky’s christening, and the series of queer names his mother has rejected, Ashoke laughed aloud.” (14). This incident, thus, signals the theme of the novel in beginning part itself.

Another source of this novel, according to Lahiri, is her fascination for the Bengali custom of having (keeping) two names – a pet name (*daknam*) and a good name (*bhalonam*). The former is private and the latter, public. Lahiri has explained this custom with all its details as it is followed in her “homeland”. She writes in the first chapter that the protagonist’s pet name finally becomes “a persistent remnant of (his) childhood” and reminds him that “life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated.”(26). Jhumpa Lahiri contrasts this with “good names” and shows in the last part of the novel how Ashima triumphs in embodying the “dignified and enlightened” (26) nature her “good” name suggests.

The new born baby-boy makes his parents ruminant over for a suitable name for him. Here we come across a long and detailed description of the ways of naming in different cultural communities like the Bengalis, the English and the French. That they were supposed to accept the name that Ashima’s old grandmother suggests shows the reverence given to names in their culture and Lahiri makes it a point to suggest that the ways of showing respect to names differ in different cultural societies. Interestingly, the mysterious missing of the grandmother’s letter containing the names for the baby forecasts the obscure and enigmatic nature of his identity which forms the central theme of the novel. Finally, Ashoke and Ashima decide to name him “Gogol” because of the indebtedness that Ashoke has to Nikolai Gogol, a Russian writer of the same name. It was a volume of Gogol’s work that saved his life when he had met with a train accident years back.

Gogol seems reluctant to go to school because of his newly granted identity under his “good” name ‘Nikhil’. Lahiri writes, “He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn’t know and who doesn’t know him.” (57). This, in fact, is the first instance of his denial of dual identity. His pet name, however, becomes his good name and also faces the crisis of dual identity as it has to act two different roles of the public and the private. The autobiographical element added by the novelist is obvious and explicit in the incident which is self-explanatory: Ashima is conscious of the “need to distinguish [her son] from any other Gogol in the school” (60). She represents all mothers who wish their children to be unique and special in their own ways. Sonia, Gogol’s sister, gets a citizenship of the world as a result of the evolution that her name undergoes. She was first named Sonali, then began to be called by the shorter version, Sonu, which later became Sona and finally Sonia. Jhumpa Lahiri uses names as a symbol to explain the changes that the Gangulis undergo, as part of their immigrant life, in the case of relationships: “As their lives in New England swell with fellow Bengali friends, the members of that other, former life, those

who know Ashima and Ashoke not by their good names but as Monu and Mithu, slowly dwindle.” (63)

At first, Gogol does not care about his name. But as he grows up, he begins to realise that his self is broken and scattered. Jhumpa Lahiri has beautifully put it this way: he begins to identify “pieces of himself in road sign: GO LEFT, GO RIGHT, GO SLOW.” (66). He comes to know that he was named after a famous Russian writer and that his name, therefore, will live on forever. Afterwards, he becomes obsessed with thoughts about names, particularly about the strangeness and peculiarity of his name. He wonders at seeing the pages of the Calcutta telephone and directory, six of which are filled with the numbers of people who have the same surname Ganguli. Though his friends gradually stop laughing at his strange name, it continues to haunt him even more strongly.

Gogol once notices that the name ‘GANGULI’ on their mailbox has been tampered with the letters U, L and I missing. This irritates him for it seemed to be an insult for his whole family and he buys and replaces the missing letters on the same day. It symbolizes his final revival of the name, which was once “purposely hidden” and “legally diminished” (290). Names are the only thing that grabs his attention. Gogol is surprised at the wide variety of names found on tombstones in a cemetery which he visited as a part of a project work. “he likes these names, likes their oddness, their flamboyance” (70), so writes Jhumpa Lahiri. He is so allured by those names, which he has collected from there, that he preserves them in spite of his mother’s disgust. This incident has a profound significance in the novel because it is through this field trip that Gogol realizes that he has no ancestors in America. This realization, too, is brought out with the help of names which obviously shows Gogol’s interest in names but also his enhanced anxiety over his bizarre name. Gogol understands the unusual newness of his name when he sees the name ‘Abijah’ since he has not met a person named so. He thinks about the pronunciation of that name and he also wonders whether the bearer of that name is a man or a woman. However, Ashima does not like this play with “dead” names and never encourages her son for this.

In the fourth chapter of the novel it is said that Sonia, Gogol’s sister, insists on calling him “Goggles”, which seems to be an American version of “Gogol”. This reinforces Lahiri’s comment on pet names that they are a reminder “that one is not all things to all people.” (26). Also, when he was presented with a book titled *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* by his father on his birthday, “Gogol Ganguli [was] relieved to see no resemblance” (75) between himself and his namesake. His hatred towards his name increases day by day mainly because it is neither Indian nor American. He hates his nametag which bears his name. He does not even want to sign his absurd and obscure name on his drawings. Jhumpa Lahiri describes Gogol’s dilemma in the following lines:

For by now, he's come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates having to tell people that it does not mean anything "in Indian."... He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian.... At times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, manages nevertheless to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear. At times he wishes he could disguise it, shorten it somehow, the way the other Indian boy in his school, Jayadev, had gotten people to call him Jay. (75-76)

Gogol also feels that he cannot introduce himself by this name "under potentially romantic circumstances" (76). He is also dismayed that his parents selected the weirdest namesake and according to him, it could have been better if he were named Leo or Anton or Alexander. All these show how the name given to a person becomes a burden for himself.

Gogol is amazed at the myriad Bengali terms for which he would use just two – 'uncle' and 'aunt'. It exemplifies how names have helped Gogol's understanding of cultural differences. When Gogol visits India with his parents, he is allured by the marvelous construction of the Taj Mahal and he learns the succession of emperors' names of Mughal Empire. Thus, Gogol traverses through the history and tradition of his "homeland" and the bridge on which he treads is one built of names.

At school he learns more things about Nikolai Gogol, his namesake, and the knowledge of the writer's queer and sickly life created warmth in Gogol: "Each time the name [of the "eccentric genius"] is uttered, he quietly winces." (91). Seeing no asterisk mark against Gogol's name on the page of contents in a book, unlike the other authors in the anthology, Gogol Ganguli doubts if his identity would also similarly end without unmarked and unnoticed by others. His classmates say that they merely skim the difficult Russian names while reading and this intensifies his fear of the possibilities of being unnoticed. His name irritates him in such a way that he feels that his classmates' complaints about Gogol's story are directed towards himself and that he is responsible for all those attacks. Gogol does not like to read his namesake's story because it, he feels, would mean "paying tribute" to the other Gogol and also "accepting it somehow." (92).

His name affects his relationships. He does not want to tell Kim his name since it is not romantic. "He wishes there were another name he could use, just this once, to get through the evening." (95). Gogol introduces himself as Nikhil to Kim, remembering the other name that had once been chosen for him, the one that should have been his. After kissing Kim, he tells his friends that it was not him, but he "doesn't tell them that it hadn't been Gogol." (96).

Gogol Ganguli, when he was eighteen years old, changes his name to Nikhil by law, but still remains uncomfortable being unable to accept the new one. Though he begins to practice his new signature, “his hand [remains] unaccustomed to the angles of the N [and] the dotting of the two i’s.” (98). Gogol wonders how many times a person writes his name during his whole lifetime. This is one of the ways in which Jhumpa Lahiri emphasizes man’s dependence on names. Gogol justifies his change of name to his parents saying that because of the strange name no one takes him seriously, which he knows, is a lie. But his father, as a mouthpiece of the novelist, reminds us,

the only person who didn’t take Gogol seriously, the only person who tormented him, the only person chronically aware of and afflicted by the embarrassment of his name, the only person who constantly questioned it and wished it were otherwise, was Gogol. (100)

But, this new name could not put an end to Gogol’s misery. Though he feels weightlessness and freedom and he likes to tell everybody that he is Nokhil, “he doesn’t feel like Nikhil. Not yet. Part of the problem is that the people who now know him as Nikhil have no idea that he used to be Gogol.” (105). However, he is relieved to ignore his parents more easily because he is not Gogol any longer. And he is proud to announce “*Me llamo Nikhil*” in his Spanish class. The new name provides a number of fresh experiences for him and it was as Nikhil that he lost his virginity (along with his old name). But the relationship was not that deep and it did not last for long. It was so inconsequential that he found it unable even to recall his name later. He even felt it unnecessary to have changed over suddenly from Gogol to Nikhil.

At times he feels as if he’s cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different. At times he still feels as if he’s cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different. At times he still feels his old name, painfully and without warning, the way his front tooth had unbearably throbbled in recent weeks after a filling, threatening for an instant to sever from his gums... Occasionally he has to hear Nikhil three times before he answers. (105-106).

When his parents refer to him as Nikhil, he troubles him with a feeling that “he is not related to them, not their child.” (106). After several years, Gogol recalls Sonia’s comment on his attempt to “become” Nikhil. She says, “You can’t do that... Because you can’t. because you’re Gogol.” Through these instances, Jhumpa Lahiri takes Gogol to an extent where his name endangers him or turns out to be a threat to his existence. Gogol’s fascination for all the genres of names has been vividly portrayed by the novelist when he is charmed by the beauty of technical names in architecture which collectively “form another language he longs to know.”(108). His concerns

and worries surrounding names trouble him go to such an extent that they even spoil his lovemaking moments. Ruth, one of his early girlfriends, whispers his (new) name and tells him that it is wonderful, during their lovemaking. Even then, he feels depressed thinking how many more times he will have to remind people of his new name. When Ashoke narrates the story behind Gogol's name, he listens stunned and feels that his father is a stranger. But suddenly the sound 'Gogol' acquires a meaning completely new - the meaning of rebirth; and this is what Gogol realizes and experiences at the end of the novel.

Jhumpa Lahiri's play with names continues throughout *The Namesake*. When Gogol talks to Ashima about Maxine, his new friend, referring to her as 'Max', she says that it is a boy's name. Then Gogol corrects her informing that it is Maxine. Ashima's surprise shows how a shortened, pet name draws an entirely different, and sometimes even wrong, picture of a person in other's minds. In the sixth chapter, Lahiri provides the readers with a rather interesting paradox in just three lines. In one of those moments with Maxine,

He thinks of himself at fourteen, his life nothing like it is now, still called Gogol and nothing else. He remembers Maxine's reaction to his telling her about his other name... "That's the cutest thing I've ever heard," she'd said. (156).

Their contradictory views on a name gradually spread to other aspects of life which finally made them separate.

Gogol is very much scared of the rail tracks which resembles endless ladders stretched ahead rather than upward, rooted to the ground. He knows that other passengers do not have such fears. This unnatural concern and fear take us back to Gogol's anxiety over his name which, again, was uncommon.

At a later stage in his life, Gogol is surprised at Moushumi's fluency in pronouncing the names of French dishes. Through Moushumi, who has mastered the French language, Lahiri portrays another character for whom her hybrid and complex identity, with no boundaries of territory, language and culture, is a celebration. In another context in the novel, Moushumi is described like this:

Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge – she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever. (214)

And this is the reason for Gogol's fascination for her. Jhumpa Lahiri has beautifully brought out his attitude towards Moushumi in the following passage:

She both fits in perfectly yet remains slightly novel. Here Moushumi had reinvented herself, without misgiving, without guilt. He admires her, even resents her a little, for having moved to another country and made a separate life. He realizes that this is what their parents had done in America. What he, in all likelihood, will never do. (233)

In fact, Moushumi can be seen as a foil in this novel – a person whose character and traits can be contrasted to those of the protagonist. She has achieved what Gogol has been yearning for throughout all these three decades. It should be noted that even her character and identity are revealed through names. For instance, Moushumi loves Gogol for two reasons: first, he is neither a doctor nor an engineer, that is, she likes his “neither...nor...” qualities; second is the fact that he has changed his name from Gogol to Nikhil. It made him, for her, “someone new, not the person her mother had mentioned” (248). Her denial of patriarchal traditional norms is exemplified in her refusal to adopt the surname Ganguli. She does so because “her own last name, Mazoomdar, is already a mouthful” (227) and a hyphenated surname would make her unfit into the window of a business envelope. The biggest effort that she takes to learn her students’ French names is another example of this. Moushumni’s affair with Dimitri Desjardins is also chronicled by Jhumpa Lahiri using name symbolism. She writes, “The name alone, when she’d first learned it, had been enough to seduce her.” (256). The strange ways of names by which they address each other and the manner in which Moushumi records his phone number are, needless to say, instances of Lahiri’s play with names. The only technique that she chooses to create any ambience she wants is names either as theme or as symbols.

Gogol and Moushumi, during their short-lived married life, attend a dinner party at which all the gatherers choose names as the topic for discussion. They talk about names of their interest, meanings of names and express somewhat bizarre, but revolutionary comments on names. Here is one such statement made by Gogol: “there’s no such thing as perfect name. I think that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen,”... “Until then, pronouns.” (245). At the party, Gogol feels bad at Moushumi’s revealing of his “old name” and also for her making it a joke. He even wishes for a life of no names, a life in which people are either ‘He’ or ‘She’ as it is in a French novel in which the names of the characters were never revealed.

Jhumpa Lahiri uses the symbol of names to describe what has been lying between Dimitri and Gogol. As far as Gogol is concerned, Dimitri is the only “other” man whose name upset him more than his own. At the end of the novel, Gogol realizes that even after changing his name, “it had not been possible to reinvent himself fully, to break from that mismatched name.” (287). This brings to our minds Nikolai Gogol’s words which are included as epigraph to the novel. Gogol Ganguli doubts if he would have a child to name in future. However, his name will live

longer than him because there is a possibility for Gogol to become an associate of an architectural firm incorporating his name. Thus, Nikhil will be “publicly celebrated” unlike Gogol, which was a “purposely hidden, legally diminished” (290) one.

However, Gogol finally reaches an exalted, perhaps saturated too, state where name is totally immaterial for him. But he is interested to read his namesake’s work for the first time in life. He attains an identity or a self that is independent of name as well as other parameters like nation, culture, or even language. Like his mother Ashima, Gogol comes to a realization that he belongs to nowhere, but to everywhere at the same time. Thus, as Ashima has done, Gogol alias Nikhil Gogol Ganguli also proves the “meaning” of his name.

Lahiri narrates how the name of a person plays a crucial role in his life and becomes a problem for him as he sees it being saddled for his pet name in the place of real name. Throughout the novel, Gogol is haunted by his name and identity. The divinity attached to his name makes it even more unbearable for him. When he changes his identity to ‘Nikhil’, he finds it difficult and struggles to come out of his old name. It was Marshall Mc Luhan who observed that the name of a person is a numbing blow from which he never recovers. Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* thus portrays the poignant struggle of Gogol Ganguli towards such a recovery.

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