

# Nomenclature Theme in the Novel “The Namesake” by Jhumpa Lahiri



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## Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's Booker prize winner novel "The Namesake" is world famous for its depiction of the dilemma of Indians residing abroad, particularly the Bengalis in America. But another equally important and related theme is that of nomenclature. The very title of novel is centered on the problem of name of Gogol Ganguli. The book is full of comparisons between eastern and western nomenclature and the meanings of names. For Gogol his name becomes a problem. He finds it absurd and hates even to mention it at different points of his life in different conditions. Even after his father's disclosure of the circumstances for giving him this name, he does not take this name normally. He changes his name to Nikhil. Nevertheless, he feels no victory or solace. His sick and morbid thinking destroys his personality and ability for balanced growth.

**Keywords:** Nomenclature, Daknam, Bhalonam, Protagonist, Morbid.

## Introduction

Human beings are the most rational and intelligent of all the creatures in the universe and hence they try to sort out all the problems of the universe in order to understand it better and make the life of human beings more livable. That's why they try to give a name to everything that happens to come within the range of their knowledge or understanding. Shakespeare in his well-known drama 'Romeo and Juliet', says "What is in a name? A rose would smell as sweet by any other name"<sup>1</sup>. Many critics like Derrida, Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco<sup>2</sup> also have expressed their views on the idea of meaninglessness in words or names. However, still there is an obsession regarding naming a person, place or work of art or literature. This obsession for name sometimes leads to very critical and very funny situations. Charles Dickens gave his characters names that expressed their physical and mental status e.g. 'Pip, Noah Claypaul, Oliver Twist, and Miss Havisham or Estella'<sup>3</sup>. All these names depict some characteristic or the other. Shakespeare had a very casual approach in the selection of names or titles for his plays. His leading comedies have the titles like 'As You Like It' and 'What You Will'<sup>4</sup> another name for his well-known comedy 'Twelfth Night'. Even the title 'Twelfth Night' has nothing much to do with the content or theme of the play as has been mentioned by famous diarist 'Samuel Pepys'<sup>5</sup>. Jhumpa Lahiri has given her Booker prize winner novel the title 'The Namesake'. The chief protagonist in the novel 'Gogol' has a very morbid and low idea of his name and it haunts him throughout the novel.

Jhumpa Lahiri has dwelt upon the theme of nomenclature extensively, though the novel "The Namesake" is world famous for its theme of cultural difference, sense of rootlessness and the problem of belonging faced by the Diasporas. Ashoke and Ashima a Calcutta based couple is going to have a baby in a hospital in America. They must give the child a name otherwise the birth certificate of the child would be issued with 'baby boy Ganguli' written on it; else later they would have to appear before the magistrate and the doctor suggests "the red tape is endless"<sup>p-27</sup>

Ashoke and Ashima depend upon a letter from Ashima's grandmother for the name of the new born baby. Actually, she has mailed two names from Calcutta one for a male and one for a female baby. She kept these names secret from everybody else. But the letter somehow got lost in the mail and did not reach the couple. And as luck would have it the grandmother has an attack of paralysis and she loses consciousness of even her own name let alone the names she mailed.

Dr. Wilcox suggests that they could name the child after some ancestor and here we get a comparison of western and Bengali nomenclature. In the east they don't name their offspring after their ancestors while in the western countries it has been a custom to name someone after his or her forefathers. This type of tradition also has been hinted at by 'Munshi Pemchand' in his story 'Bade Bhai Sahab'. The elder brother tells the younger brother about the difficulty of remembering the

names of European kings as they all have identical names e.g. they have half a dozen 'Georges', a dozen of 'Henries' and a cowry of 'Charles's'<sup>6</sup>.

"But this is not possible Ashoke and Ashima think to themselves. This tradition doesn't exist for Bengalis, naming a son after father or grandfather, a daughter after mother or grandmother. This sign of respect in America and Europe, this symbol of heritage and lineage would be ridiculed in India. Within Bengali families individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared". P28

So the couple is rendered helpless and then the doctor comes up with another suggestion that they could name the new born baby after someone they greatly admire. Now all of a sudden 'Ashoke Ganguli' is reminded of the terrible train accident and his close skirmish with death; and how a book by his favorite writer 'Nikolai Gogol' had been instrumental in saving his life. Overcome with gratitude for the author he names his newborn son Gogol.

Jhumpa Lahiri has dealt with the theme of nomenclature in detail; she further enlightens us about the culture of pet names among Bengalis. All the Bengalis have pet names beside their original names. The word for pet name in Bengali language is 'daknam'. The pet names remind that one is not the same thing to everybody. They remind of one's childhood and that life is not always so serious. Ashoke's petname is Mithu while Ashima is Monu. In their closest circle Bengalis are loved, missed, adored and scolded by their pet names. P-25, 26

"Every pet name is paired with a good name, a bhalanam for identification in the outside world. Consequently good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories. And in all public offices...unlike good names pet names are frequently meaningless, deliberately silly, ironic, and even onomatopoeic. Often in one's infancy one answers unwittingly to dozens of pet names, until one eventually sticks." Ibid

Nevertheless the name Gogol is accepted by Ashima also because she is aware that the name stands not only for the name of her son but also that of her husband, though she has not read any of Gogol herself. Thus Gogol Ganguli is registered in the hospital's files. They still take it as his pet name expecting to replace with a good name soon. Much against Ashima's will the child's name is typed Gogol even on his immunization card. Before their first visit to India after Gogol's birth they spend long evenings to find a suitable good name for Gogol but all in vain. And even on his passport the name Gogol is written. Even Gogol starts to respond to this name.

Then appears the first chance when his name could have been changed i. e. his entry in the school life. But Gogol refuses to go to the kindergarten with a new name 'Nikhil'. There is also an allusion to the Americans' habit of shortening the names as his parents fear that they could curtail it to 'Nick'. The name also bears a satisfying resemblance to 'Nikolai' the first name of the Russian Gogol. P56 However at school Ashoke is unable to satisfy the principal Mrs. Lapidus about the tradition of good name and pet name rampant among Bengalis. Gogol himself doesn't respond to the new name despite all

the efforts put in by his father in the school. But Mrs. Lapidus sweet talks him into telling his desired name. Finally she tears up the old form and fills up a new form and he is enrolled as Gogol in the school.p59

The impact of American view of life on the Bengali nomenclature has also been depicted. Many of the Bengalis have done away with their pet names. When the Ganguli couple has another child, they are ready with a name. Instead of giving it any pet name they call the child with her good name 'Sonali'. They have learnt from their first experience and from the experiences of many other Bengali friends that having pet names adds a lot of problems to life in America. P67

As a young boy Gogol doesn't mind his name. He takes it very normally. As for his surname 'Ganguli' he is proud of it when he visits 'Calcutta' and finds it written on many places. The novelist also has referred to the full form of 'Ganguli' i.e. 'Gangopdhyay' as Bannerji is Bandopadhyay; Mukherji is 'Mukhopadyaya' and Chatterji 'Chattopadhyay'.

The first shock about the oddity of his name strikes him on a field visit when all of his classmates along with him are asked to trace weird names from the tombstones of a graveyard.

"He likes these names, likes their oddness, their flamboyance. "Now those are the some names you don't see very often these days," one of the chaperons passing by and looking down at his rubbings, remarks. "Sort of like yours". P70

But gradually Gogol develops a disliking for his name. He even starts hating his name by the time he has entered the fifteenth year of his life as he has to explain that his name means nothing in 'Indian' and feels ashamed even signing his name at the bottom of his drawings. He is worried about pronouncing his name to the girls he might have romantic affairs with. It becomes a source of eternal agony to him. He rues his first day at school, which he doesn't even remember, when his name could have been changed.

The importance of the idea of double name can be understood from the fact that long evenings are spent by the Gangulis and their friends in America to find a suitable name for Gogol. Though he has grown up now, still a question is frequently asked why Gogol doesn't have a good name. His parents would explain:

"We live in a country where a president is called Jimmy". p77

By the time he is fifteen many of his friends have started courting girls but he still has the same nagging sense in his mind about his name. Kim is the first girl he becomes intimate with and to her he does not introduce himself as Gogol but as Nikhil.

Gogol finds a solution to this embarrassing shortcoming of his life when he stumbles upon the column of 'Second Baptism' in the magazine 'Reader's Digest'. He learns that many celebrities of the world had changed their original names and were known by the new names that they had adopted for themselves e.g. Bob Dylan was Robert Zimmerman; Leon Trotsky was born Lev Davidovich Bronstien and many more. He learns from the article that it is a right enjoyed by every American that he can change his name and that every year around ten thousand Americans changed their names.

He brings up the matter with his parents at the dinner table and when they object to the very idea of name change and question the necessity of it, Gogol goes to the point of saying that nobody takes him seriously because of his name. However, the fact remains that it is his own morbid thinking that makes him feel so negative about his name.

"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. And yet he'd continued saying that they should be glad that his official name would be Bengali, not Russian". P100

He obtains a 'Commonwealth form of Massachusetts' change-of-name form and appears before the judge. There too he is unable to cite any strong reason for his change of name. And simply says "I hate the name Gogol, I have always hated it". P1 02

And after the name change he has a tremendous sense of relief; the same feeling as would be enjoyed by an obese person on becoming thin or a by a prisoner on being set free. He is tempted to tell everybody around him that his name is Nikhil'.

It is with his new name that he goes to 'New Haven' for his further studies away from everybody who knows him by the name 'Gogol'. There he buys a new telephone number. His over sensitiveness about his name can be understood from the idea that on all his course books he writes his new name "Me llamo Nikhil". P106

He himself insists that his parents should address him by his new name 'Nikhil' in front of his roommates and new friends at this new place but when they do so he himself feels that he is not related to them. His father divulges to him the reason for giving him the name 'Gogol', in the chapter 5 page124. Gogol is stunned to learn how his father had experienced that horrendous train accident. He feels as if the pet name Gogol had assumed totally new meanings. Aghast at the revelation Gogol asks his father if his name reminded him of that deadly experience. But Ashoke tells him that his name reminds him of everything that ensued i.e. his new beginning in life. However there is no cure for his own impressionable and sensitive, paranoid nature because whenever travelling by a train to Boston from New York he is reminded of the train accident that nearly killed his father. Of the disaster that gave him his name. p185

After two or three unsuccessful love affairs Gogol finally marries 'Maushami' the only girl in his life who had known him as Gogol. But there too the name problem continues as much against his wish and liking 'Maushami' tells a group of friends, on a dining table, that Nikhil had changed his name and that his real name was 'Gogol'. Again his baseless reservations regarding the name come to the forefront as he feels very hurt by the mere mention of it. When asked the reason for his parents giving him a Russian name he simply lies or tells the half truth that his father was a fan of the author Gogol.

His father having died, his marriage collapsed, towards the end of the novel, his mother

Ashima plans to leave USA forever. Now the givers of the name Gogol would be far from him. He hopes to begin a new job with some new firm which might, with the passage of time, incorporate his name.

"And in that case Nikhil would live on, publically celebrated, unlike Gogol purposely hidden, legally diminished, now all but lost" p290

But all this doesn't matter much to him now as He realizes with a sense of loss:

"no matter how long he 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 again". P289

Gogol Ganguli has a very morbid way of thinking generated perhaps from a sense of insecurity born out of living a life torn between American and Bengali cultures. This, however, mars his whole personality and breeds a sense of shame in him. He too could have lived a happier and fuller life had he been a little socially concerned. He would have learnt that human sufferings are More or less same everywhere whether in America or India. He could have felt that people lead far more unhappy lives full of real problems than his insignificant and self made trivial problem of name and making a mountain of a mole hill. Jhumpa Lahiri has, however, dwelt upon the theme of nomenclature both in the eastern and the western world with acumen. She has even explained the names of Bengali names e.g. Ashoke means one who transcends grief; Ashima is someone boundless or unlimited; Sonali is a word for golden girl; the meaning of Maushami is a south west breeze and Nikhil is one who is entire encompassing all.

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