

Problems Concerning *Misnaming, Renaming, Namelessness* And The Resultant '*Loss Of Identity*' In *Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake'*.

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Abstract

Lahiri in 'The Namesake', explores the extraordinary power of **names in defining identity**. Addressing the themes of **immigration, collision of cultures** and the **importance of names** in the novel, Lahiri demonstrates how much of a struggle **immigration** can be. At the beginning of *The Namesake*, the **issue of names and identity** is presented. The decision of rejecting the proper name on the first day of kindergarten causes **Gogol**, years of distress as it was also his first attempt to reject a **dual identity**. The importance of a **namesake and identity** is brought up throughout the story and becomes a concept that is central to the novel. Throughout his life Gogol suffers from the **uniqueness of his name**. Gogol sounded **ludicrous** to his ears, **lacking dignity or gravity**. What dismayed him was the **irrelevance of it**. He wished he could have been known, at school at least, as **Nikhil**. He could have been Gogol only fifty percent of the time. Like his parents when they went to Calcutta, he could have had an **alternative identity**, a **B-side to the shelf**. He had the **last name of the writer turned first name**, a **pet name turned good name**, and it occurred to him that no one in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shared his name not even the source of his **namesake**.

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Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* comes in a neat package the actual tangible book itself is an object to behold. The contents of the book can be packaged neatly as a "*Novel of Identity*". The novel chronicles the life of the Gangulis, a Bengali family who lives in a suburban Massachusetts. Ashoke and Ashima, after an arranged marriage, immigrate to the United States in the late 1960s. Ashoke is an engineer and becomes a professor after earning his doctorate at MIT. Ashima is a homemaker who spends the majority of her life trying to recreate Bengali culture in her *new homeland*.

The novel focuses on the *dilemmas of the children of immigrants*, instead of those of their *first-generation parents*. The lead character in *The Namesake* is an American child of Indian immigrants (Ashima and Ashoke). The novel attempts to follow the travails of one *oddly named Indian-American boy, Gogol Ganguli*, named for the *Russian writer Nikolai Gogol*, through suburban dyspepsia, followed by that particular prosecution of *second generation Indian-Americans-hyper-achievement* and ivy-education. The novel's protagonist, Gogol, gets stuck with the '*pet-name*' after his '*good-name*' given by his grandmother, gets lost in the postal void somewhere between India and America.

With this promising start, the novel then follows Gogol's conflicting reactions to his name (before heading to college he changes his name to *Nikhil for Nikolai*, that his parents initially attempted to give him, which as a young boy entering grade school he rejected) and to the naming of names in general.

The novel represents the experiences of a very specific community. Sociologically, they are *second-generation South Asian immigrants*, or South Asian Americans. By people within, and recently from, South Asia, they are called, pejoratively *ABCD's (American Born Confused Des(h)is)*. Gogol is an ABCD—an American Born Confused Des(h)i. The word Des(h)I means countryman in several subcontinental languages. At a panel debate on Indian novels in print in English, an expert declares:

“Technologically speaking, ABCD's are unable to answer the question, ‘Where are you from?’...Gogol has never heard the term ABCD. He eventually gathers that it stands for ‘American-Born-Confused-Deshi’,...himself. He learns that C could also stand for ‘conflicted’. He despises that deshi, a generic name for ‘countryman’, means ‘Indian’. He knows that his parents and all their friends refer to India simply as desh. But Gogol never thinks of India as desh. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India (TN,118). His father had told him that he had a special kinship with Nikolai Gogol as ‘He spent most of his life away from his homeland, like me.’(TN, 77). Ashoke had also told Gogol what Dostoevsky had said, ‘We all came out of Gogol’s overcoat.’(TN, 78). The overcoat itself is a symbol for the ancient times. Gogol is the interpreter of maladies of his generation, and in the understanding he gives the solution to the maladies.”

“Read all the Russians”, Ashoke Ganguli’s grandfather tells him in the novel, *“and then reread them. They will never fail you”*. It was Nikolai Gogol that Ashoke, a twenty-two year old engineering student at that time, was dutifully reading on a train bound for Jamshedpur when the train derailed, killing hundreds of passengers in their sleep. Lying amid the wreckage almost passed over for dead and clutching the surviving pages

of his book, Ashoke manages to wave meekly. Ashoke barely alive and unable to speak or move was miraculously discovered among the wreckage when the rescuers noticed a crumpled up page from *Gogol's The Overcoat* dropping from his fingers. As a result he is rescued and as a result, he lives, he marries, he moves to America and has a son.

Faced with the hospital red tape-the infant cannot be released without a proper birth-certificate-Ashoke is forced to name his child before he has received instructions from his grandmother, who must be consulted on this vital decision.

Somewhere between Calcutta and Boston, a slip of paper containing the future identity of Ashoke and Ashima's newborn son is lost. The mysterious disappearance of this letter, in which the infant's revered great-grandmother was supposed to reveal her chosen "*good-name*" for the child, is never explained-whether it wafted out of the airplane into the Atlantic ocean, or was mistakenly crammed into a mailbox not two doors down in Harvard Square, the Gangulis will never know.

At a loss of words Ashoke mutters '*Gogol*'. Without a '*good-name*', (Bengali customs dictate that a child must have both a good-name or a formal name which he presents to the outside world, and a pet-name reserved for the loved ones), the Ganguli's tiny son exits the hospital armed with only the spur-of-the-moment pet-name, Gogol, after the Russian author, Nikolai Gogol.

Significantly, '*Gogol*' only fills the young American Ganguli with feelings of dissonance and shame. Like *Stephen Dedalus*, who stared at his signature on the flyleaf of his geography book, most of us slip through childhood's first existential porthole and find our own names profoundly alien. But the feeling infiltrates young Gogol's entire life.

Gogol has been uncomfortable with his name. Children teased him, teachers mispronounced the name, and Gogol, himself, saw the *name as a burden*. He often wonders how he can truly fit in with his American friends-or American girls-with a strange name like Gogol. Even worse he feels none of the father's affinity for Nikolai Gogol, the Russian author for whom Gogol is named. When a high school English teacher assigns *The Overcoat* as homework, our Gogol approaches the class with a "*growing dread and a feeling of slight nausea*".

Upon discovering that his namesake was a severe depressive-a "*queer and sickly creature*", as *Turgenev* once described him- "*who slowly starved himself to redeath, was thought to have died virgin.*"

Gogol is mortified, embittered and feels freshly betrayed by his parents. As Lahiri tells us, Gogol's father: "*had a point; 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.*"

Although 'Gogol Ganguli' seems like a sitting duck for schoolyard taunts, Gogol passes through the early years of his life unscathed by ridicule, embarrassed only by his own discomfort with the name, which renders him awkward with the girls and clumsy in social situations as would an ill-fitting suit. Gogol makes point of not reading the works of his namesake, until his teacher assigns 'the overcoat' to the class.

It seems that an *identity crisis* is imminent as Gogol's name becomes the source of greater and greater anxiety: "*At times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, managed nevertheless to distress him physically like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear.*"

The eponym of Lahiri's protagonist is one of the many beloved madmen of Russian literature; *Nikolai Gogol*. Lahiri uses the nominal link between her protagonist and her writer Gogol seriously, but without allowing the Russian philosophical mood to weigh down in her story. There are a number of interesting and provocative parallels to Gogol's *The Overcoat* in *The Namesake*-especially *the odd status of names and naming in Gogol's story*. Gogol's protagonist has a *surreal name himself-Akaky Akakyevich* (the latter means, the son of Akaky), which suggests a kind of *parthenogenetic birth*, without history or family. Gogol refuses to name the office where Akaky works (*"In the department of ...but it is better not to name the department"*).

Gogol who *"cannot imagine saying, 'Hi, it's Gogol' under potentially romantic circumstances,"* experiences his first taste of liberation when he introduces himself to a college girl as Nikhil-a name he officially adopts before heading off to college at Yale. The new name is a salute to his future-a-future without having to justify or explain his confusing name. Gogol, it seems, believes that switching his name can erase the complications of his past. Lahiri always refers to her main character as Gogol and her stubborn insistence on calling Gogol by his original name symbolizes that *a simple name change does not alter the fabric of a person*.

Gogol is an intelligent American boy. The first time he bestows his name as Nikhil, he handles to kiss a girl even though he is only an awkward adolescent, as Nikhil also he gets friends. He feels it is the command of the name. He hates life as Gogol and becomes Nikhil, doing it officially in the court. He enjoys himself, doing a curriculum in Architecture. He feels liberated from the yoke of the old name. He turns into Nick to friends, actually American.

"It is as Nikhil, that first semester, that he grows a goatee, starts smoking Camel Lights and parties and ...discovers Brain Eno and Elvis Costello and Charlie Parker...it is as Nikhil that he loses his virginity..." (TN, 105)

Gogol Ganguli, like most of the ABCD's is more akin to an American than an Indian. The trials and tribulations of Gogol define the person that he is, but stop short of making him the person that he secretly aspires to be. The answer to the question what Gogol believes in is very vague. Indeed, he is not even certain of the name he wants to be called by. *Christened Gogól*, refusing to be named Nikhil on his first day at school, he finally renames himself Nikhil when he attains adulthood. Yet there is an urge to be called Nikhil, to be even Nick, to be more American than he is and to have a life independent of his intruding parents. For Lahiri christening is something very central in shaping someone's life as *Teresa Wilsz* writes: *"Naming is everything, a way to claim identity, to pass on notions of love, tradition and hope. And so it is perhaps, that Lahiri dedicates her book to the two men in her life, her husband and son, 'For Alberto and Octavio, who I call by other names...For Octavio she knows, life as a second-generation American-born Gautemalan Greek Deshi will be very different, a different kind of navigating between cultures, but navigating nonetheless."*

Gogol does get an independent life, but it keeps turning into a translucent function of a city, an affair, a job, a woman or even a vacation. *Three decades of exploring identities*-an Indian identity that he would match rather not has and an American one that deludes him is the sum and substance of *Namesake's* protagonist's adventures in living a *dual life*.

The great conceit of Lahiri's novel is that Gogol, *the ambassador of a community without a name, is himself*

misnamed. His parents give him a proper name, Nikhil, but it does not really stick. As he goes to college, Gogol wants to redefine himself on terms that his feels are his own rather than those that come from his parents' Bengali immigrant culture. In an amazing act of self-definition, which loses nothing by the fact that it is in fact a common event, he abandons the name Gogol, and tries to become someone else. This duality, between Gogol's ethnic roots and his American birthright, perpetually torments him. Befuddlement, confusion and anger over *unresolved identity* occur with dispiriting regularity across the span of Gogol's young life.

Even at a traditional Bengali party celebrating his six-month-old-status, the infant Gogol, "*forced to confront his destiny*," cannot and "*with lower lip trembling*," begins to cry. As a junior high school, Gogol loathes his name, despondent that it is "*never on keychains*". Conscious of his differences, he is hurt by the snickers his parents' accent evoke from store clerks. By actions conscious and unintended, Gogol immerses himself in the American melting pot. It is not an accident that by the time he is an adult, he will live in New York city, a refracted image of "*How the Other Half Lives*", affluent but disenchanting, externally successful but internally impoverished.

It's somehow fitting that the Gangulis gave their son a name neither Bengali nor American-but of all things, Russian. Gogol, unmoored without a solid sense of being either Indian or American, anchors himself to a series of strong-willed women, allowing them each in turn to define him. There is Ruth, his college sweetheart, whose hippie upbringing and free-spirited ways appeal to his newfound liberation as Nikhil- "*He cannot imagine being with her in the house where he is still Gogol.*" Then there is Maxine, whose casual ease with both her wealth and her parents captivates Nikhil for an intoxicating year of fine

cheeses and summer cabins in New Hampshire. And finally, she is Moushami, a childhood family acquaintance and fellow ABCD whom Nikhil marries, mistaking familiarity for love, and who betrays him to his roots-and to his childhood name, Gogol. It raises a number of interesting issues regarding names: *misnaming, renaming, and the epistemological problem of namelessness*. Like its hero, *The Namesake* is a little overawed by the *power of names*. As he enters adolescence, Gogol, along with his friends-Colin and Jason and Marc- like to listen to records together, to Dylan and Clapton and the Who, and read *Nietzsche* in their spare time.

Later as a New York architect, Gogol will fall in with a circle of friends headed by a couple named Donald and Astride. These people haven't been named, we think, so much as branded-he's supposed to sound like the son of a do-right corporate preppy, she the daughter of a wannabe Beatle girlfriend. Guggenheim-leeching artistes, they form-together with their baby, Esme-a-little-bobo-ensemble we are pained to detest, down to their Florentine sheets and their stainless steel stockpots. Absent proper kinship ties, Lahiri seems to be saying, this is how Americans feel most at home: among their things. Refined as it may be, *consumerism* has touched these characters to the core; they merit nothing better than such status descriptors. The critic *Gayatri Spivak* has revived the Greek term "*Catechresis*", in a number of recent essays (*The Critique of Postcolonial Reason*). It is actually a rather simple and straightforward concept:

"When you misname something because there is no name for it, that is Catachresis. 'American Indian' is an example of Catechresis-there was no singular ethnicity to describe all the different civilizations of the western hemisphere before European discovery and conquest."

Lahiri's *The Namesake* is the *novel of Catechresis*, at once an American immigrant story and an intriguing contribution to growing *postcolonial cannon*. As the example of "*American Indian*" shows, *misnaming is global*, and it doesn't start with American school teachers who find it difficult to pronounce difficult Indian names like "*Siddharada*" (*who inevitably gets renamed "Sid"*) or "*Jaswinder*" (*who inevitably becomes "Jesse"*).

Though it was quite a different thing, misnaming and renaming is a process that began much earlier—at the moment of the colonial encounter. It is Anglicization of "al-hind", the Persian name for the area around the Indus River.

Lahiri's own experience as a writer echoes Gogol's. In her recent *Charlie Rose interview*, *Lahiri* revealed, that *Jhumpa is her pet name rather her good name*.

Growing up in America, however, she has chosen it as her official; public name. The gesture annoys some members of Lahiri's family, who must find the public use of a private, family name to be inappropriate. But it is a gesture that allows Lahiri to claim the version of herself she knows best, and she wants others to know. Asserting the name *Jhumpa* is at once *a misnaming and a refusal to be misnamed*—it is a powerful hybridizing speech act addressed to both her *familial-ethnic community* and to her *American (actually global) readership*.

The true representative of the *second generation Indian in America*, *Jhumpa Lahiri*, has said of India: "...as different as Calcutta [the place of her origin] is from Rhode Island [the place of her upbringing], I belonged there in some fundamental way. In the ways I didn't seem to belong in the US."

At the same time she has confessed that *she does not feel at home in India* when she came to Calcutta for her wedding: “*I never considered Calcutta my home, just my parents’ hometown.*”

These two statements about her association with India which are self-contradictory speak of the paradoxical nature of the relationship of the *diaspora community* with this country. But when comes to the second-generation in the west, they contentedly acclimatize themselves to the new environment. Their predicament is like the predicament of *Trisanku*.

Lahiri, in *The Namesake* struggles with characters that are trapped wandering between two worlds, two personalities. In her work, the central characters who are *first generation immigrants* find it hard to let go of their culture and traditions and they fight back to carry on with the environment, which they cannot comprehend. Further, greater part of her protagonists who are *second-generation immigrants* have in some way or other adjusted and assimilated themselves into the folds of the new culture even if they feel a pull towards their native land. Tightfisted with words, yet awfully persuasive, she intertwines illustrated images for the reader in a rational approach. Further, an ear for discourse, a sense of novel metaphors and a judicious expressive talent permeate Lahiri’s text with elegance.

Jhumpa Lahiri thrives in fusing the *theme of migration and dislocation* to that of individual relations. She illustrates her characters sprouting in the center of a new crossbreed culture, Indo-American awareness. The point of dialogue here, “*Is a return to the roots or a re-alignment in the wake of a blending of two different world orders?*” In case of *Jhumpa Lahiri*, it is a curious *amalgamation of both*.

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