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**The Power of a Name: Exploring Self and Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake***

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**Abstract:**

*The Namesake* by the most prominent British-American author, Jhumpa Lahiri, elaborately examines the interconnection between names, self-reflection, and identity within the dispersed experience. This article directly explores how a name affects a person's identity, focusing on Gogol Ganguli's struggle between his Bengali heritage and American upbringing. Other than just a tag, a name bears cultural, familial, and emotional significance, molding self-consciousness and socialization. Gogol's discontent with his name mirrors his challenges with assimilation, leading him to adopt 'Nikhil' in an attempt to redefine himself. While this is a change, it points to greater conflicts associated with his immigrant parents' visions. Lahiri employs naming as a metaphor for dislocation from culture and redefinition of self, particularly through Ashoka's train accident, Gogol's naming, and subsequent renaming. Positioning the novel in migration, hybridity, and intergenerational conflict contexts, this paper applies identity theory and diaspora studies to argue that identity is flexible and shaped by personal choices, cultural pressures, and the battle over heritage and self-conception.

**Key Words:** Cultural Conflict, Diaspora, Gogol, Identity, Self-perception.

**Introduction**

Personal identity, cultural heritage, and social belonging are intrinsically connected to one's Name. They not only serve as tags but also shape an individual's self-consciousness and clout in how others perceive them. In literature, naming is most commonly associated with profound symbolic meaning, and names may represent change, discovery, or cultural

conflict. The leading voice in modern literature, Jhumpa Lahiri, has made a name for herself as a writer, specifically renowned for her sensitive examinations of the lives of immigrants. Her novel, *The Namesake*, is a beautiful story founded on the refined themes of identity, cultural integration, and the complex issues faced by a Bengali immigrant family attempting to settle in America. The novel closely follows the life of the Ganguli family, particularly their son, Gogol, whose life is a fascinating lens through which Lahiri examines the themes of belonging and self-discovery. Throughout the novel, names are not only identifiers but also powerful symbols that play a significant role in affecting the sense of self of characters, their relationships with others, and their cultural identity within a diasporic context. This article delves into the importance of etymology in *The Namesake*, contending that names are powerful signifiers that intricately weave together the threads of identity, lineage, and integration within the lives of the characters.

The novel also recognizes the quintessential dilemma between self-concept and imposed other identity and explores how a person's names work as an interface between someone and the set of cultural prescriptions related to the same. The struggle of Gogol with the name closely resonates with him finding out his true nature. In his bid to control his identity, he changes his name legally to Nikhil before he goes to college, hoping that the change will enable him to recreate himself. The new name provides him with confidence and distance from his Bengali heritage so that he can adopt a more Americanized self. But this renaming does not bestow upon him a sense of belonging he craves; instead, it creates an even deeper tension between his two identities. Lahiri uses this change to illustrate the subtleties of self-acceptance—renaming oneself may provide one with a shallow sensation of control, but one cannot erase history or family.

Gogol's struggle to reconcile with his name reflects the larger immigrant experience, particularly for second-generation immigrants who must balance two worlds. His parents, Ashoke and Ashima, represent the first-generation immigrant experience, in which identification with the culture of origin is strong, yet accommodation is required. Gogol, who was born and raised in the United States, feels a sense of cultural disconnection, neither fully Indian nor completely American. The novel illustrates the incessant push and pull between assimilation and cultural retention, underscoring the psychological and emotional cost of juggling multiple identities. Lahiri skillfully renders the nuances of this tension, illustrating how names are a space of both connection and conflict within immigrant communities.

The author's journey of nomenclature in the novel *The Namesake* goes beyond Gogol's inner turmoil and is concerned with larger issues around the immigrant condition, the construction of identity, and the validity of cultural tradition. The novel shows that identity is not static but is not able to be enclosed in a single given name or cultural category. As the years go by, Gogol realizes that his name, just like his identity, is one that he cannot so easily relinquish. His ultimate acceptance of his birth name is the moment of transformation for him, a reconciliation with his past and an acknowledgment of the richness of his heritage.

#### **Self and Identity in *The Namesake***

In The very title of the novel itself, Jhumpa Lahiri accentuates the thematic

importance of the symbolic aspect of their names, introducing the reader to ponder the significance throughout the book. Furthermore, the novel's inquiry into naming far exceeds the limits of personal identity and alludes to broader concerns of cultural heritage, assimilation, and the complex immigrant experience in a more highly integrated global society. The struggles between the characters and the names are intimately connected to the experiences of the characters as immigrants and struggling with reconciling the culture of home with the dictates of a new world. That means names exist as a microcosm reflecting the larger challenge of coping with cultural differences and forging a unifying sense of belonging in the globalized world.

Through the experience of Ganguli's family, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* delves into the Bengali naming traditions, particularly the practice of giving both a 'pet name' (dak naam) for family purpose and a 'good name' (bhalo naam) for official purpose. Traditionally, the family, especially grandparents, selects the "good name" with propitious meanings. Such tradition is ruined when Ashoke and Ashima move to America as a consequence of losing a letter containing Gogol's "good name," which leads them to enter him as his pet name out of hospital coercion. Breaking convention sets the stage for the conflict Gogol will face as his secret name becomes the public name by which he is known, blurring cultural lines. The missing letter underscores the struggle to keep their traditions alive in immigrant families by adapting to a new environment. With Gogol's negotiation of cultural concerns versus individual identity throughout the novel, the disruption also foreshadows greater themes of identity conflict, flexibility, and cultural negotiation.

Throughout the novel, Gogol grapples with alienation because of his strange name, wishing to have a more typical American identity. He is socially awkward and sometimes teased, which results in his adamant assertion, "I've always hated it" (88). showing his intense dislike for his name. He rejects it because it is strange, and he wishes to be completely a part of American society. Ironically, the name that torments Gogol is significant to his father, Ashoke. While he was reading Nikolai Gogol's short stories, Ashoke narrowly survived a train accident that could have been fatal, and 'Gogol' became synonymous with survival and gratitude. But this meaning is unspoken, and Gogol is left to interpret it as a name "that is neither Indian nor American" (67). The generation gap is evident—Ashoke finds the name precious, while Gogol finds it "a constant burden" (46). This chasm is around the challenge immigrant families face in preserving personal and cultural histories across generations.

As Gogol becomes mature, his dislike of his name also grows, and he legally changes it to Nikhil on his eighteenth birthday, just before he goes to college. The change represents his effort to lose the unwanted identity and adopt a more traditional Indian-American image. Nevertheless, even after his name has been changed, Gogol feels a sense of dualism, admitting, "There is only one complication: he doesn't feel like Nikhil. Not yet." (90). He feels as though he is "acting the part of twins" (90), entangled between two identities. While 'Nikhil' makes him feel a little more at ease in American society, it still fails to make him feel more grounded in his Indian identity. Ironically, the name is Nikolai's Indian counterpart,

affirming his hybrid identity. His parents' continued insistence on 'Gogol' reminds him that a name change cannot undo the past. Lahiri points out that identity is not only formed by names but also by lived experience and personal history, so self-discovery is a continuous process.

The names given to the characters in *The Namesake* are portrayed as powerful symbols of inner turmoil, reflecting cultural evolution and personal histories. The meaning of Ashima's name is "she who is limitless, without borders" (27), which reflects her immigrant experience—always juggling her life in America with her Bengali heritage. Her nickname, Monu, marks her inner self in contrast to the public persona she creates in her new country. Gradually, Ashima manages to get through this dual life, creating for herself a space in an unknown culture yet without losing the link to her heritage.

Ashoke's given name, "he who transcends grief" (27), is closely related to his survival in a devastating train crash. This experience redefines his outlook on life, motivating him to give his son the name 'Gogol' after the Russian author Nikolai Gogol, whose novel he was reading when the accident occurred. However, the seriousness of this name is never mentioned during most of Gogol's childhood, opening up an unbridgeable chasm between son and father. Ashima upholds the Bengali custom of never uttering her husband's first name, indicating affection and respect, and upholding traditional gender roles in the marriage.

Moushumi's name means 'charming and beautiful like a season,' which reflects her ephemeral and restless personality. Despite her and Gogol's connections being based on their similar cultural background, her strong desire for freedom leads her to separate herself from both her Indian traditions and her marriage. She finds an intellectual and cosmopolitan identity rooted in French culture, underscoring the fluidity of identity among second-generation immigrants.

Maxine's Western name represents the privileged and irresponsible American world to which Gogol is initially attracted. Her family's liberality and facility are a sharp contrast to his background, and her lifestyle appears to be an escape from the cultural restrictions placed upon him. His subsequent realization that he can't entirely repudiate his heritage, however, reinforces the inescapable nature of cultural identity. Rather, Moushumi's name suggests the meaning "like a season," which characterizes her restlessness and eventual rejection of traditional expectations that focus on the fluidity of immigrant identities. The name of protagonist Gogol, given by Lahiri, shows his initial detachment and later unwillingness to forge connections with his heritage. Lahiri also gives meaning to the names Ashoke's and Ashima's, confirming themes of loss, survival, and accommodation. At the end of the novel, Lahiri demonstrates how names build identity and perception, confirming that cultural identity is not fixed but rather an ongoing negotiation between internal experience and external forces. Gogol's experience captures the challenges of self-definition within an immigrant life. In these names, Lahiri braids exquisitely themes of identity, self-perception,

and the weight of heritage. The novel informs us that while names delineate, they don't delineate in full measure; identity is rather a fluid combination of personal history, cultural expectation, and search for meaning.

Through the differing perspectives on names within the Ganguli family, Lahiri navigates the reader through the generational and multicultural strife in the novel *The Namesake*. Perceiving the Gogol's name as a hurdle to adjusting his inner and outer conflicts with his given name, and his parents cherish it as an important link to their heritage and personal lineage. This struggle reflects the broader inter-generational divide between Indian-born parents who cling to cultural traditions and their US-born offspring, who desire to be part of American society. Ashima's reluctance to name her son without first consulting her Indian family is matched by Gogol's later readiness to abandon his birth name, emphasizing their differing attitudes toward identity. His renaming is a repudiation of his Indian heritage in favor of being American, but his parents' refusal to accept 'Gogol' as a used name indicates that they will not go along with his redefining of himself. Even Sonia's affectionate nickname, 'Goggles,' is indicative of the ambivalence of naming in family life.

The turning point in the relationship between Gogol and his name is when Ashoke presents him with a set of Nikolai Gogol's stories, planning to disclose the individualistic significance of the name. Feeling the indifference of Gogol, Ashoke doesn't quite define its meaning. It is not until the death of Ashoka that Gogol finally reads the book, which leads to a deeper understanding of his father's relationship with the writer and, by extension, his own name. This act marks a turning point in his self-discovery, indicating a slow acceptance of his heritage. The novel's conclusion, where Gogol reads the stories, is a metaphor for his acceptance of his complete self, embracing both his Indian and American lives. The novel is a physical connection to Ashoke's history, reminding us of the lasting power of family and heritage. In the end, Lahiri suggests that one's true self is the synthesis of accepting all aspects of one's history, not the rejection of one in favor of another.

Names within the book are powerful indicators of cultural identity, assimilation, and individual autonomy. Renaming is a force of resistance to parental will and inherited cultural norms, signifying the second generation's search for definition. Gogol's choice is a choice about belonging and the establishment of a new identity that diverges from his parents' past. In this way, Lahiri portrays the greater issues that immigrant families are facing, where names are employed as symbols of heritage, belonging, and the constant tug-of-war between heritage and self-definition.

### **Conclusion**

Briefly, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* offers a rich and complex exploration of the intricate interplay between names, self, and identity, all set against the immigrant condition. The novel masterfully shows that names are far more than mere labels; they are multilayered symbols imbued with cultural meanings, personal history, and the ability to fashion a person's sense of place and sense of self. The hero, Gogol Ganguli, is an eloquent testament to the problems of second-generation immigrants as they struggle with the intricacies of their dual

identity, his growing relationship with his odd name providing a unifying thread throughout the book.

Lahiri's work stands as a powerful reminder of the multifaceted nature of identity, especially for those navigating multiple cultural influences, and how seemingly simple identifiers like names can carry significant emotional and cultural weight. Ultimately, then, *The Namesake* suggests embracing one's total history and culture, symbolically embodied in the form of some aspect of oneself, such as one's own name, to be an integral step toward fulfilling a sense of wholeness and self-acceptance. Gogol's path to learning to like his name, after all those years, finally demonstrates the need to accept and incorporate all aspects of oneself in order to attain a more authentic and whole sense of self in a more multiculturalized and globalized world.

With the lens of naming, *The Namesake* shows a profound meditation on identity and self-discovery. Lahiri's portrayal of Gogol's internal struggle reveals the deeper emotional realities of the immigrant experience, where names become markers of both belonging and alienation. The novel shows that names do hold cultural and familial significance, but authentic identity is constructed through lived experiences, personal decisions, and a changing sense of one's place in the world. Ultimately, *The Namesake* instructs that identity cannot be completely evaded or remade—it is a continuous process of negotiation, accommodation, and acceptance.

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