

Nomenclature: The Key to Notoriety and Celebrity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* is an account of two first generation immigrants Ashoke and Ashima Ganguly as they struggle to adapt to the American culture, without losing their Bengali identity. It also traces the lives of their children as they're caught in the cultural conflict that arises between the old and the new. The novel revolves around Gogol Ganguly and the identity crisis he faces due to his name. *The Namesake* throws light on the havoc caused by a change in name, and thus focuses on the role names play in defining identities and relationships. The names of the characters when explained in the light of their life situations make the readers aware of the numerous identities an individual can adopt in a lifetime. Jhumpa Lahiri has also highlighted the roles names play in the Indian concept of identity by contrasting it with that of the American's. This paper focuses on the theme of naming and self-identification, Jhumpa Lahiri has flawlessly woven throughout the novel. It seeks to examine how the phenomenon of changing names influences a person's identity as perceived by others. The paper seeks to identify the novel as a reflection of the meanings of names and the effects they have on their bearers, and thereby throw light on the imperative role names play in the everyday life of an individual. Contrary to the popular idiom "What's in a name?" this paper seeks to interpret the novel as a proof of the statement "Everything's in a name."

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*, culture, identity, names, relationships.

"How many times does a person write his name in a lifetime- a million? Two million?" (Lahiri 98).

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake* is set in the USA, but the Indian city of Calcutta and Bengali culture loom large in its background. The story revolves around a Bengali couple, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguly, who after their marriage, translocate to the United States. Ashoke, familiar with life in the United States, adjusts, but his wife, Ashima being a first timer, pines for the familiarity and coziness of her native land. She experiences terrible loneliness, especially during the months of her pregnancy.

Gogol and Sonia are their two children who have been born and brought up in the United States of America. Towards the middle of the novel, the focus shifts from the experiences of Ashima to those of Gogol. The crisis in the novel develops when a letter from Calcutta gets lost in the mail. Ashoke and Ashima are in a dilemma as the letter sent by Ashima's grandmother, contains the name for their baby. Finally succumbing to societal pressure, Ashoke names his son Gogol, in memory of his favourite Russian author, Nikolai Gogol, to whom he feels indebted for his second life.

As a child, Gogol refused to answer to any name except the one familiar to him, thus thwarting his parents' attempt to rename him Nikhil for the purpose of his school records. As a teenager, in addition to the normal crisis, he faces gapes and gawks from strangers regarding the meaning, history of his name and his namesake. Unable to withstand the internal conflict, he adopts legal steps to change his name from Gogol to Nikhil only to regret it later. The awkwardness and confusion he experiences are the major themes explored in the novel. On the other hand, Sonia who grows up as a typical American, has no problem in adopting its culture as her own, and is perfectly comfortable with who she is. In fact she is more American than Indian.

Ashoke's death becomes a turning point in the life of the entire family. It is after his father's death that Gogol comes to terms with his dual identity, bonding closer to his family in the process. He acknowledges the uniqueness of his name and finally becomes at peace with himself.

At a single glance, *The Namesake* may seem to be an inquiry into the identity crisis faced by immigrants. But a closer look reveals the perfect penmanship of Lahiri in making the readers aware of the ways in which an individual's name affects both his public and private life. She harps on the intricate relationship between an individual's name and his multifaceted personality, through a graphic description of the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the characters - Ashoke Ganguly, Ashima Ganguly, Gogol, Sonia, Moushumi, Maxine and Dimitry. The novel also throws light on the arbitrariness of names.

Ashoke Ganguly is a Calcutta born, USA based first generation immigrant, who shares his first name with the Indian Emperor 'Asoka the Great', and his surname 'Ganguly', which is the Anglicized version of the name 'Gangopadhyay', with hundreds of other Bengalis. The name Ashoke means "he who transcends grief" (Lahiri 26). Emperor Asoka embraced and propagated Buddhism as a means to overcome pangs of guilt and grief caused by the Kalinga war. Similarly, true to the meaning of his name, Ashoke Ganguly, transcended many a harrowing experience to achieve his dreams.

Ashoke, who revered the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, gained unarticulated knowledge from the story that enabled him to be many people at once. He himself was both the dutiful son who returned to India every year to see his extended family, and the man who left this hurt and bewildered family behind, to begin life in another country, both a Bengali and the father of two Americans, both respected Prof. Ganguly and the patronized foreigner, both Ashoke, his good name and Mithu, his pet name.

He who was destined to lie flat on his back due to a debilitating train accident, that “broke his pelvis, his right femur and three of his ribs on the right side” (18), rewrote his destiny through grit and determination. “He imagined, not only walking, but walking far away, as far as he could, from the place in which he was born, and in which he had nearly died” (28) . Not only did Ashoke transcend his physical grief, but also bolstered his mind to overcome his nightmares.

Ashoke is forced to swallow yet another bitter pill, when his son, unaware of the link between the name and his father’s life, wishes to change his name to Nikhil. Ashoke is unable to explain the circumstances of his name and stoically grants permission. As Lahiri explains: “[He] . . . sign[ed] his consent...inwardly calculating the loss” (100). Contrary to Ashoke’s fears, Gogol did accept the uniqueness of his name, at a later period of time which brought him closer to his father thus comforting Ashoke. Lahiri has depicted Ashoke as a survivor in the following words: “He was raised without running water, nearly killed at 22 . . . He survived it. He was born twice in India, and then a third time, in America. Three lives by thirty” (21).

On the other hand, his wife Ashima Ganguly, belonged to a traditional orthodox Bengali family, and began her life as Ashima Bhaduri. “Ashima” means “she who was is limitless without borders” (26). True to the age-old custom of Indian women adopting their husband’s name as surnames after marriage, she replaces Bhaduri with Ganguly.

If her maiden name Bhaduri defined her as a daughter, an elder sister, a diffident girl who never crossed the threshold of her house, the surname Ganguly added a new dimension to her identity. It defined her as the wife of an Indian American Professor, a mother of two children, a confident young lady who travels alone, across continents, and sets up a new home in a foreign land, introduces first timers to traditions, provide comfort, advice and a haven to young mothers. In short Ashima Ganguly is the individual who transplanted a tiny bit of Bengal in USA. “They have come to rely on her...to collect them together, to organize the holiday...to introduce the tradition to those who are new” (286).

Not only does Ashima widen the physical boundaries that limited her, she has widened her outlook as well. While giving birth to her child in a hospital in America, “Ashima thinks that it is strange that her child will be born in a place most people enter either to suffer or to die” (4).Not only does Ashima during this phase, think that she doesn’t really belong to the American community, but also she fancies the same destiny for her new born child. “As she strokes and suckles and studies her son, she can’t help but pity him. She has never known a person entering the world so alone, so deprived” (25). This is, to some extent, ironical, to the meaning of her name.

Despite the contradiction between her name and general description at the beginning of the novel, she is the only character in the novel that assimilates to the American melting pot and adapts to a trans-cultural lifestyle at the end. Wherever there is a reminder of India and Indian customs, Ashima is at the heart of the matter. As time goes by, Ashima indulges herself more in the American

way of life, which gradually provides her with the sort of the confidence and independence that a typical American woman is supposed to have. She finds a job as a librarian, which exposes her to more contact with the outside world. She makes friends with American colleagues, takes over her husband's responsibilities like paying the bills, buying tickets, driving cars, changing houses. Realization dawns on her that her life in America exceeds her life in India. After her husband's death she decides to live between her roots in India and her family in America.

As suggested by Alfonso-Forero, "the uncertain young woman, we encounter in the novel's opening pages attempting unsuccessfully to recreate a favourite Indian snack in her Massachusetts kitchen, is transformed through her role as an immigrant mother and wife to a transnational figure" (857). Thus, is Ashima's transformation to a trans-national figure. "true to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (276).

Sonia Ganguly, Gogol's sister has been portrayed as an accompanying background character in *The Namesake*. Sonia shares most of her incidents in the novel with Gogol, till they both leave for their respective colleges. More than the individual, it is the name that plays a significant role in the novel, as a contrast to Gogol's. "Sonia makes her a citizen of the world. It is a Russian link to her brother; it's European, South American" (Lahiri 62).

The confusion Gogol experiences due to his pet name turned good name, is not experienced by Sonia, as her parents thought it best to confer a single name on her as both pet name and good name. Apparently, they were not keen to repeat the experience they had with Gogol. As Lahiri explains:

This time, Ashoke and Ashima are ready. They have the names lined up, for a boy or a girl. They've learned their lesson after Gogol. They've learned that schools in America will ignore parents' instructions and register a child under his pet name... For their daughter, good name and pet name are one and the same: Sonali meaning 'she who is golden'. (62)

Literally Sonia is a true American, a 'golden haired girl', who unlike her co-operative brother, "threaten[ed] to put the dollar bill into her mouth, [inviting a prophetic utterance from one of the guests], this is a true American" (63). Sonia is claimed to be the Russian link to her brother as it coincides with the name of the Russian painter, Sonia Delauney, who was the pioneer of abstract art and who first introduced the style of painting known as Orphism. 'Sonia' resembles 'Gogol' in that both are Russian in origin and belong to artistes.

While the name Gogol reflects the difficulty faced by the Gangulis in imitating their culture in their adopted nation, the name Sonia symbolizes the first attempt of the Gangulis to adapt to the American culture, thus signalling their changing identities from stereotypical Bengalis to trans-national immigrants.

A great part of the novel has been devoted to the confusion, the awkwardness and the identity crisis experienced by Gogol Ganguly due to his name, which was not a premeditated one, but a necessity. Unable to delay the discharge of mother and child from the hospital, Ashoke and Ashima settle for a temporary name till they can decide on an official one. They decide to name him after Ashoke's savior, the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. As Ashoke explains:

After all . . . an infant doesn't really need a name . . . Names can wait. In India parents take their time. It wasn't unusual for years to pass before the right name, the best possible name was determined . . . Besides; there are always pet names to tide one over: a practice of Bengali nomenclature grants to every single person, two names. (25)

The name Gogol becomes a means to escape some sort of trouble. In the case of Ashoke, it snatches him from the clutches of death, while for his son, it acts as a means to escape further amendment and consequent red tape. In the words of Mr. Wilcox, "I don't recommend it, . . . The red tape is endless." (27)

The Gangulis' plans to choose a good name for Gogol while applying for his passport go awry. Fate had other plans; they were forced to stick to the name Gogol, as they had to fly back to Calcutta at short notice to attend the funeral of Ashima's father. As Lahiri explains: "In those six days' time, there is no time to think of a good name for Gogol" (46). The next attempt is defeated by Gogol on his first day of kindergarten. He refuses to answer to the name Nikhil, thus forcing his teacher to register him as Gogol Ganguly.

The name Gogol evoked different memories and responses to different people. For Ashoke, Gogol reminded him of his favourite Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, the long vacations he spent with his grandfather who inculcated in him the habit of reading, it also brought back memories of Mr. Ghosh, whom he befriended during the fatal train journey who advised him to travel and see places before it was too late. And it also reminded him of his son, who was a pleasant reminder of all that he had regained. Nikolai Gogol, who was to him a reminder of the gruesome journey, he turned into something pleasant- his second life, his son. "But for the first time, he thinks of that moment, not with terror, but with gratitude" (28).

For Ashima, it stood for her husband's life, without whom she would never become Mrs. Ganguly. To Sonia

The person who was influenced the most by the name was the bearer himself. The name Gogol reminded him of his unpleasant encounter with his namesake in his English class. Although Gogol received on his fourteenth birthday, a volume of Nikolai Gogol's writings as a gift from his father, Ashoke did not force him to read the book or learn more about the author. Later in the novel, Gogol had no other option but read about Nikolai Gogol in English class, as it was a part of his syllabus. Nikolai Gogol's biography was so gruesome that Gogol did not fantasize being named after the author. As Mr. Lawson explained to his class:

‘But during his life he was understood by no one, least of all himself. One might say he typified the phrase ‘eccentric genius.’ Gogol’s life, in a nutshell, was a steady decline into madness. . . He was reputed to be a hypochondriac and a deeply paranoid, frustrated man. He was, in addition, by all accounts, morbidly melancholic, given to fits of severe depression. He had trouble making friends. He never married, fathered no children. It’s commonly believed he died a virgin’. (Gogol 91)

Not only did Gogol feel ashamed and disgusted, but also guilty. He felt as if he were responsible for the turn of events in the author’s life. He was gripped by a fear that his life too would come to such a pass. The classroom felt like an arena, where he was confronted by his destiny. His reaction has been described by the author as: “Warmth spreads from the back of Gogol’s neck to his cheeks and his ears. Each time the name is uttered, he quietly winces. He feels angry at Mr. Lawson suddenly. Somehow he feels betrayed” (91). Mr. Lawson’s description of the author’s terrible end nauseates Gogol. He wishes the floor of the classroom to give way and swallow him up. “He lowers his head over his desk, discreetly presses his hands against his ears. It is not enough to block out Mr. Lawson. Please stop, he says, mouthing the words” (92).

As Heinze writes in his “A Diasporic Overcoat? Naming and Affection in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*”, Gogol’s story is dominated by the effect of his name on his relationships with his family, friends and lovers, in other words on his affections (193). Gogol describes his name as “ludicrous . . . lacking dignity or gravity” (Lahiri 76). According to Heinze, Gogol’s name is singular. This is because it has no meanings. It is neither a first name nor a last name in either America or India- the two places that Gogol knows and is intimate with. The name is absent but is also present since everybody knows that it exists somewhere, but as Heinz says, it is “lost in transit” (194). Gogol’s life story resembles the fate of his name i.e. his identity and sense of self are in permanent transit.

Just like the name Gogol, the name Nikhil too evokes different responses from different people. For Ashoke, Nikhil was the good name he had wanted to give his son at one time, but later on it symbolized his son’s disregard for the father’s sentiments as well as his rebellion. As Ashoke explains the reason for his choosing Nikhil as Gogol’s good name:

The name Nikhil is artfully connected to the old. Not only is it a perfectly respectable Bengali good name meaning ‘he who is entire, encompassing all,’ but it also bears a satisfying resemblance to Nikolai, the first name of the Russian Gogol. . . He [also] pointed out that it was relatively easy to pronounce . . . (Lahiri 56)

On the other hand, Ashima nods in agreement, but weeps silently. For the good name Nikhil, reminds her of the lost letter- the one her grandmother sent, which contained the good name for Gogol. As Lahiri explains: “She told him she liked it well enough, though later alone, she’d wept, thinking of her grandmother, who had died earlier in the year, and of the letter, forever hovering somewhere between India and America, containing the good name she’d chosen for Gogol” (56).

Later on, the same name turns out to be a source of distress to both Ashoke and Ashima, as it represented Gogol's unintentional disregard for the Bengali culture. Furthermore, it reminded them of the fact that Gogol was in the process of shedding his Indian identity for an American one.

To Gogol, the name Nikhil was a passport out of his cocoon into the outside world. It was the key to freedom, to be a part of the American culture, without being pulled back by Bengali norms. The first time he uses the name Nikhil is to introduce himself to a girl he met at a party and that was before he changed his name legally. "I am Nikhil," he says for the first time in his life" (96). The reason he gives is: "He doesn't want to tell Kim his name. He doesn't want to endure her reaction, to watch her lovely eyes go wide. He wishes there were another name he could use, just this once, to get him through the evening. . ." (96).

Nikhil is not only a new name; but also, the symbol of his new life. The name empowers him with a sense of self confidence and self-esteem in a short period of time with which he ignores his family, smokes and loses his virginity: all that he would not dream of doing as Gogol. As Lahiri explains: "But now that he's Nikhil it's easier to ignore his parents. . . [S]tart smoking Camel Light at parties . . . [get] himself a fake ID that allows him to be served liquor in New Haven bars. It is as Nikhil that he loses his virginity at a party...." (105).

From Gogol's perspective on the subject of baby names it is evident that he has been scarred by his fluctuating identities. As Gogol explains: 'There is no such thing as a perfect name. I think that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen,' he adds. 'Until then, pronouns'" (245)

Gogol hated not just his name; he hated the name of Moushumi's lover, the one that wrecked his marriage. As Lahiri puts it: "And for the first time in his life, another man's name upset Gogol more than his own" (283). He referred to his failed marriage as a name not used any longer. "His time with [Moushumi seemed to him] a name he'd ceased to use" (284).

Eventually Gogol refers back to his name, to find his identity, a name he shirked since adolescence, because of its hated oddity. He missed the name his parents gave him.

Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter he himself lives, Gogol Ganguly 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 at all. (289)

And when he realizes the peculiar link between his name and father's salvation, he accepts the identity that is part of his namesake. He realizes that there was absolutely no need to deny one culture to embrace the other.

The novel provides an insight into the role names play in defining traditions and relationships, and the memories invoked by these names. Lahiri has introduced the Indian tradition of

conferring pet names and good names along with its American parallel of nicknames and good names, to help compare and contrast both cultures. In India, every individual is guaranteed a pet name, i.e. “daknaam” (25) that is a term of endearment that holds the key to the private life of a person, in relation to family and friends. As Lahiri writes: “Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is not always too serious, so formal, so complicated. They are a reminder too, that one is not all things to all people” (26).

Pet names represent a world guaranteeing total freedom to an individual, a world comprising pure and innocent relationships that are not utilitarian, where care, concern and love are the dominating emotions, a world providing the basis for all the other identities one will adopt during a lifetime. Lahiri enumerates the features of pet names when she writes: “Pet names have no aspirations... are never recorded officially, only uttered and remembered. . . [They] are frequently meaningless, deliberately silly, ironic, even onomatopoeic” (26). Pet names reveal a second side to a person’s identity. Lahiri has portrayed the changes that occur in Ashoke and Ashima on reaching familiar surroundings where they are addressed by their pet names. They become “bolder, less complicated versions” (81) of themselves with louder voices and wider smiles, and reveal a confidence not shown anywhere else.

In the west, pet names are replaced by nicknames that are defined by their characteristic ease of utterance. While pet names are links between an individual and family, nicknames can be conferred by anyone who thinks that the official name is too long. As Gogol’s teacher explains to Ashoke on the first day of school: “Many of the children go by nicknames here” (58). The American tradition is well demonstrated in Gogol’s kindergarten classroom; “Inside the classroom, it is a small universe of nicknames-Andrew is Andy, Alexandra Sandy, William Billy, Elizabeth Lizzy” (60). Nikhil being shortened to Nick by Moushumi’s friends, Moushumi being christened Mouse by Dimitry reflect the American tradition of shortening names for the user’s convenience.

Although both Indians and Americans do bestow a second set of names for official purposes, the method of choice and the signified concept differs widely. For the Americans, the practice of naming children after one’s ancestors was considered a “sign of respect [and] a symbol of heritage and lineage” (28). As Mr. Wilcox explained to the Gangulis, “You can always name him after yourself, or one of your ancestors . . . It’s a fine tradition” (28). Later in the novel, when the subject of changing names is discussed, Edith exclaims; “God, I would never change my name...it’s my grandmother’s” (243). In India, official names are chosen with great deliberation as they are “sacred, inviolable . . . not meant to be inherited or shared” (28). As Lahiri explains: “A good name, a bhalonaam [is] for identification in the outside world. [They] represent dignified and enlightened qualities” (26).

Names also play an irreplaceable role in life after marriage in the novel . Lahiri has succeeded in depicting the differences between the Indian and the Western notion of marriage, through the lives of Ashima and Moushumi as typical representatives of the East and the West. Ashima Ganguly, true to her traditional upbringing, submitted to an arranged marriage, decided by

her parents. Not only did she not see the face of her husband until the appointed time, but also didn't know his name until after the betrothal. (9) For Ashima, her husband's name is sacred, not something for casual utterance, which is why she refrains from using his name either in his presence or absence. As narrated in the novel:

When she calls out to Ashoke, she doesn't say his name. Ashima never thinks of her husband's name, when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is . . . a husband's name is something intimate, and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over. (2)

Ashima's relationship with her husband is not influenced by his name. For her, he is the person into whose shoes she put her feet into, whose sweat mingled with hers, who lies beside her listening to her recount the day's events. "At nights, lying beside her in bed, he listens to her describe the events of the day" (10).

Just as the relationship between Ashoke and Ashima can be summed up in Ashima's attitude to her husband's name, Moushumi's attitude to the name Gogol is predictive of the calamity that is to befall them. Moushumi is in stark contrast to Ashima. Moushumi like Gogol, belonged to a Bengali immigrant family, and was younger to him by one year. Unlike Gogol, who took his own time in accepting both cultures and deciding which he wanted to adhere to, Moushumi, even as a young girl was sure of what she wanted and what not to follow. For her Bengali culture was suffocating and she rebelled at every single opportunity she got. Lahiri describes the reason for her rebellion:

She hated the way; [her relatives] would talk of the details of the wedding, the menu and the different colours of saris she would wear for the different ceremonies, as if it were a fixed certainty in her life. She hated it when her grandmother would unlock her almari, showing her which jewels would be hers when the day came (213).

Compared to the suffocating Bengali culture that was hers by birth, and the American culture which reminded her of her parents' restrictions, Paris was pure heaven, with no one to regulate or control her. As the narrator explains: "She was exactly the same person, and behaved the same way, and yet suddenly, in that new city, she was transformed into the kind of girl she had once envied, had believed she would never become" (215).

Although she agreed to meet Gogol as per the wishes of her parents, she termed it a "blind date". The fact that she walked out of a relationship didn't deter her from accepting Gogol's proposal, whom she later deceives. She did agree to a traditional Bengali wedding but didn't follow Ashima's footsteps in replacing her maiden name 'Mazoomdar' with 'Ganguly'. For her, such a replacement signified her willingness to be defined in relation to someone else, which she didn't fancy, not even her husband. It meant a destruction of her sense of herself. For Moushumi, 'Ganguly' was a hyphenated surname which "prevented her from fitting into the window of a business envelope" (227).

Contrary to the plans she had for herself ,she ended up marrying a Bengali. Even then, the dominant feelings of hatred towards her own culture, surface in a conversation with Gogol: "...[S]he tells him that for most of her life, he was exactly the sort of person she had sought to avoid" (212) .These repressed feelings of hatred, desire for adventure and romance, together with the nostalgia evoked in her by the name Dimitry Desjardins prompt her to have an affair.

Dimitry Desjardins shares his first name with the adulterous protagonist in Anton Chekhov's novel *The Lady with the Pet Dog*, and the tormented brother in the story *The Brothers Karamazov*. His surname Desjardins sounded French with an Anglicized pronunciation. It reminded Moushumi of her life in Paris, and the multicultural cosmopolitan identity she always wanted to own. Moreover, it was the same name that helped her get over the shock at witnessing a death on the streets. It reminded her of the nickname he had given her. As Lahiri explains: "The nickname had irritated and pleased her at the same time.... she was aware that in renaming her, he had claimed her somehow, already made her his own" (258). Her secret liaison with Dimitry provided her with the anonymity she yearned for. As Lahiri writes:

On Mondays and Wednesdays no one knows where she is. There are no Bengali fruit sellers to greet her on the walk from Dimitry's subway stop, no neighbours to recognize her once she turns onto Dimitry's block. It reminds her of living in Paris- for a few hours at Dimitry's she is inaccessible, anonymous (264).

Compared to the structured life she led as Mrs. Ganguly, the expectations of her as a wife, she enjoys perfect freedom with Dimitry. His way of "living out of a series of mammoth duffel bags" fascinates her (267). Although Moushumi's upbringing reminds her of the fact that extra marital affairs are not a part of the Bengali custom; she pacifies her conscience by listing Dimitry's number under no name, for only the name could remind her of her mistake, not a series of numerals. As Lahiri writes: "Finally she writes it on the D page, but she doesn't include his name beside it. Just the numbers, disembodied, don't feel like a betrayal. They could be anybody's" (261). True to the meaning of her name, "a damp southwesterly breeze" (240), she breezed into the lives of total strangers, and vanished without a trace.

The theme of identity crisis and preferred nomenclature portrayed throughout the novel has been interpreted as an autobiographical attempt by Jhumpa Lahiri who shared Gogol's problem of pet name turning good name. As she reveals in an interview:

I'm like Gogol in that my pet name inadvertently became my good name
Jhumpa was the easiest of my names to pronounce and that was that. To this day, many of my relatives think that it's both odd and inappropriate that I'm known as Jhumpa in an official public context. (Lahiri)

Through an objective graphic depiction of the characters, their interaction with others and their immediate surroundings, Jhumpa Lahiri has succeeded in creating an awareness of the inseparable role of names in the creation of a unique identity. The powerlessness and meaninglessness the characters experience have been interpreted in terms of their names.

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri has made use of the omniscient third person narrator with a viewpoint that is neither impressionistic nor subjective. She has suggested the theme of bondage started and suggested in a name, through the name of the protagonist. While the author gives a tone of finality to the lives of Ashoke and Ashima, the story of Gogol is open ended. Both the style and plotline of the novel and the repetitive behavioral pattern of the characters provide hints to the influence of names on the interaction of various aspects of the self and identity.

The Namesake throws light on the hardship faced by an individual, in particular, an immigrant to adapt amidst collision of cultures, by providing a vivid description of the attitude of the characters to their own and the names of others. In the novel this predicament is experienced more by the protagonist, but the other characters experience it too, in a milder way. It is this predicament that confers on the novel its title. The distressing situation centering names can be interpreted as a metaphor for the feeling of dislocation and identity crisis that the characters experience as well as for an individual's firm belief in a set of values or traditions.

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