

Namesake dissertation essay



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In *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri provides an account of the Ganguli family, an Indian American family of educated, middle-class Bengali immigrants. Torn between two cultures and two worlds, the Ganguli's live in Suburban Massachusetts. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli have two children, Gogol and Sonia. The caste system in India impacts the lives of Ashoke and Ashima, whose marriage is arranged, but in suburban Massachusetts such distinctions are undermined through the common ties of class and ethnicity. Nonetheless, for Gogol Ganguli, born in Massachusetts, reconciling his ethnic background with American culture presents a crisis of identity.

Named after a Russian author, Gogol will become "Nikhil" in an attempt to forge an identity that is distinct from his ethnicity and distinctly his own. In *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri argues that naming is often a limiting process by showing how Gogol's effort to rename himself is an effort to resist the confining limitations of naming. Body The issue of naming is a pervasive theme throughout *The Namesake*. Naming in Indian culture involves several names that have distinct significance. Bengalis often provide two names to their children, one is a pet name and one is a good name. As Lahiri (25-6) writes, "Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person, two names.

In Bengali, the word for pet name is *daknam*, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments." The other type of name is known as *bhalanam* or a "good name" (Lahiri 26). This duality in naming both reveals and conceals identity. We see that each name connotes different ideas and values to the named, while the formal name provides a definitive denotation or meaning.

Pet names are considered for intimate use, without aspiring to any form of lofty pretensions or signifiers. However, bhalonam often reveal aspects of identity or character associated with the individual. For instance, Ashoke is the name of an emperor that means “ he who transcends grief” (Lahiri 26). Lahiri illustrates in *The Namesake* that the process of naming both reveals and conceals identity.

When born, Gogol was to be named by Ashima’s grandmother, but when her letter is late Ashoke and Ashimi cannot take their newborn son home from the hospital without bestowing a name on him. Reaching into a significant moment of his past, when he was rescued from a deadly train wreck, Ashoke comes up with a pet name he finds perfect for his son, “ He remembers the page crumpled tightly in his fingers, the sudden shock of the lantern’s glare in his eyes. But for the first time he thinks of that moment not with terror, but with gratitude. ? Hello, Gogol,’ he whispers” (Lahiri 28). Thus, naming his son, Ashoke lends to “ Gogol” significant meaning from his past but also provides a Russian name to an American born Hindu.

For Gogol’s pet name is an allusion to his father’s near death in a deadly train accident, something that carries with it specific associations. These conflicting identities will eventually impact “ Gogol” in a number of ways. Gogol’s name is intended for use as a pet name or daknam, but because he is never called by the formal bhalonam intended for him, Nikhil, he suffers discomfort. Gogol’s parents try to provide him with his bhalonam when he begins his education.

However, Gogol does not answer to “Nikhil” in school and school officials continue to know him officially by his pet name. By the time he enters college, Gogol is beginning to feel distanced from his parents and his ethnic background. It is not until he enters college that he learns what readers know much earlier, the origins of his pet name. Ashoke explains to Gogol he chose his pet name because of his fondness for the stories of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. However, he also says he has a fondness for the name because “He spent most of his adult life outside his homeland Like me” (Lahiri 77).

This anecdote from Ashoke’s life is used to show how naming often signifies specific incidences wrought with personal meaning. In this manner, we see that the name “Gogol” means a great deal to Ashoke but it does not provide a ready identity for Gogol. When Gogol learns the most significant reason his pet name was chosen, he initially believes the name signifies something bad. Ashoke informs Gogol about his train wreck and his rescue because of the fluttering pages of a book of stories by the Russian writer. When he explains this to Gogol, Gogol thinks his name is linked with the tragic event, “Is that what you think of when you think of me? Do I remind you of that night” he asks his father (Lahiri 124)? However, when his father explains what “Gogol” really reminds him of, Gogol is able to understand his father and himself more than he has up to then.

For Gogol’s father replies, “‘Not at all,’ his father says eventually, one hand going to his ribs, a habitual gesture that has baffled Gogol until now. ‘You remind me of everything that followed’” (Lahiri 124). This use of abstract language in the term “everything,” refers to many ideas or intangible

qualities that have occurred in Ashoke's life since he survived the tragic train accident that nearly ended his life. Once Gogol matures and enters college, he no longer feels that Gogol is a name that suits him despite its meaning for his father, causing him to adopt his bhalonam. Through a legal deed, Gogol takes his name of Nikhil, which means " he who is entire, encompassing all" (Lahiri 56). This effort by Gogol is an attempt to throw off the limitations and alienation he feels from his family, culture, and self in the name of Gogol.

Once he adopts this new name, Gogol engages in a freedom that is more encompassing than he ever found " Gogol" to be. The name frees him in many ways. It frees him from his family, who bestowed his pet name upon him. He has his first sexual encounter under the name Nikhil.

He also begins to date American women while keeping his parents in the dark about his activities. With his new name, Gogol virtually becomes a new identity in his early adult years, " His parents have expressed no curiosity about his girlfriend. His relationship with her is one accomplishment in his life about which they are not in the least bit proud or pleased" (Lahiri 16). This emotional appeal is meant by Lahiri to demonstrate the guilt Lahiri feels when he does something he knows would displease his parents, despite his desire to break free from them as he matures. In other words, as " Nikhil," Gogol begins to live his life for the first time as his own person, exploring his own interests and distancing himself from what he found to be a confining life as " Gogol.

" Gogol is not the only family member to change his name to become more true to his own identity, for Sonia also changes her name to throw off the

limitations of naming. Her bhalonam is Sonali, or “ she who is golden,” but she changes this to Sonia and then Sonu and Sona in order to fit in more with American culture (Lahiri 62). Unlike Gogol, however, Sonia changes her name also to pay homage to her father’s love of Russian literature. Showing how naming can be limiting or confining, Lahiri (62) maintains that the name Sonia makes her “ a citizen of the world,” something that is less limiting than being distinctly Indian or ethnic in nature.

Lahiri uses hyperbole here by maintaining that the name Sonia makes Sona a citizen of the “ world,” when in fact she is merely a citizen of America. However, Lahiri uses this exaggeration to show that Sonia also tries to take on a name that is more encompassing than her Indian name. In this sense, we see that the theme of naming is used by Lahiri to show how ethnic labels or cultural background can often be as limited to confining as names, especially for those like the Ganguli’s who exist between two cultures and worlds. With his formal name Nikhil, Gogol enters the adult world of education, work, and serious relationships, but this name appears to bring him no less dissatisfaction that he experienced with “ Gogol.

” We see that Gogol has often felt different because he is an Indian with a Russian name. We see that when he visits M. I. T. he meets a beautiful white woman named Kim.

However, when he meets her he is remiss to tell her his name is “ Gogol,” fearing that she will react unpleasantly to such a name that he feels misrepresents him. As such, he uses his formal name for the first time and is treated to a kiss, “ But he doesn’t want to tell Kim his name. He doesn’t want

to endure her reaction, to watch her lovely blue eyes grow wide? He remembers the other name that had once been chosen for him, the one that should have been. ‘I’m Nikhil,’ he says for the first time in his life” (Lahiri 96). In this passage, Lahiri again resorts to the use of an emotional appeal to demonstrate the impact naming can have on individuals.

Adolescents are terrified of being different from others and they also have great fear and anxiety when first reaching out to someone they truly like on a deep level. Gogol’s reluctance to use his name demonstrates this emotional condition of adolescence and shows he thinks “Gogol” does not suit the image he wishes to project to those he admires. Before Gogol leaves for college, he has an encounter with his father in which he tells his father he wishes to change his name legally to Nikhil, something his father accepts to his surprise. Gogol believes confronting his father about this desire will not be easy, but his father readily agrees to his decision to become Nikhil officially: “‘Then change it,’ his father said simply, quietly, after a while. ‘Really?’ ‘In America anything is possible. Do as you wish.

” (Lahiri 100) We see that Lahiri once more uses the rhetorical device of hyperbole in revealing Ashoke’s response to Gogol’s desire to change his name. For in American anything is not possible, even though this myth often abounds about American culture. By using hyperbole, Lahiri makes a distinction between Indian culture, which is more limiting than American culture, and the freer nature of American society. As well, the author is showing the duality that exists within the Ganguli family, both in the sense of names and cultures. The effort to become “Nikhil” as an adult is actually Gogol’s effort to reconcile his two names, two cultures, and two worlds into a <https://assignbuster.com/namesake-dissertation-essay/>

cohesive whole. His relationship with Maxine is a purposefully effort for him to remove himself complete from the influence of his parents and his Indian culture.

Maxine is a sophisticated, attractive woman who works as an editor for a New York art publisher. After meeting her, Nikhil moves in with her and initially it appears that he and she are a perfect match for each other. However, it is precisely because Nikhil is unlike Indians that he is accepted by Maxine and her parents, who are “intrigued by his background, by his years at Yale and Columbia, and his career as an architect,” (Lahiri 134). Likewise, they are fond of his Mediterranean looks and Lydia tells him “You could be Italian” (Lahiri 134). Lahiri is using irony here.

She is being ironic in having Lydia accept Nikhil because he looks Italian, when, in fact, he is Indian. This further reinforces the point that appearances and perceptions are often all that matter, despite one’s background, culture, or name. It also shows that Gogol, as Nikhil, is desperate to be anyone so long as he is not perceived and as long as he does not appear to others to be an immigrant who is torn between different identities, an ABCD (American-Born Confused Deshi) (Lahiri 118). ABCD is jargon used by cultural groups to define those who are torn between cultures and identities. Lahiri uses it here to illustrate that what keeps Gogol/Nikhil from becoming whole is his desire to be anything but someone who is an ABCD. Conclusion Multiple cultures, multiple societies, and multiple names often require reconciliation to forge a unified whole of identity.

It seems this is the main point argued by Lahiri in *The Namesake*. Until Gogol can reconcile all of these different worlds and parts of identity, he will never be completely whole. Despite his attempts to distance himself from his family and background, none of his relationships work out successfully, including his marriage to an Indian woman. At first Nikhil and Moushumi appear to be a perfect match for each other, but what actually connects them is that they both harbor a desire to be other than who they are, for Moushumi prefers to consider herself a French artisan more than an Indian woman. When his father dies, both Sonia and Nikhil move back home to help their mother overcome their grief. At this point, we see that Ashimi begins a process of exploration and cultural integration that she formerly held back from when Ashoke was alive.

Together, the Ganguli family must continue to explore their identities and where they fit into a culture that is distinct from their own but is home. Ashimi will exist between both worlds and cultures, while Gogol appears to revert back to adolescence by spending his time watching television and staying single. As such, the dilemma of naming is that it often fails to provide a distinct identity to those who are named even when their names have definitive denotations for them and connotations to those that know them.

Work Cited Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*.

New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.