

Gogol's search for greater understanding



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Jhumpa Lahiri eloquently points out in her novel, *The Namesake*, “ For his [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” (100). In this excerpt the reader explores the implications, consequences, and more of changing one's legal name. Gogol Ganguli wishes to change his name to his intended good name, or legal name, Nikhil, though he is already eighteen. His father questions his motivations by asking who did not take his son seriously due to his name alone. Gogol, about to embark on a new life in college, wishes to do away with the name he hates and attempt to try on a new identity, one that he has complete control over. This sentence from the novel manifests the protagonist's search for identity and understanding of self through name, culture, and society. Gogol has always hated his name. He never understood why he, and American-born Bengali, was given the last name of a Russian author. In Bengali tradition, a pet name means nothing; a good name holds the meaning for the world. A good name describes the person to all they encounter. His mother's name, Ashima, means the one without borders. His sister's name, Sonali, means “ she who is golden.” These names allow others to know and interpret the person that stands before them. Gogol, on the other hand, is a pet name, without meaning as far as Gogol can see. It means nothing, it comes from no tradition or culture, and it is merely the surname of a dead author that Gogol's father adored. A name in this sense can identify a person, and as far as Gogol can see, his name is silly and meaningless, two attributes he does not want to identify with. Gogol does eventually come to understand the reasoning behind his

seemingly thoughtless and meaningless pet name. Knowing the story of his father's lucky escape from death brings a newfound appreciation for his father, appreciation for his birth name. Even with this, knowing that his name marks the reason his father and consequently he exists does not solve the issue of identity. Gogol remains lost in a world full of confident, assured Americans that know who they are, where they came from, and where they are going. Gogol is constantly searching for his identity. He like the passage claims "constantly questioned it." He questions his parent's life, his culture, his heritage, and his role in the American society. For the majority of the novel Gogol spends his time searching for an identity as an American, rejecting the heritage of his family and the confusion of the names they give. Gogol wants nothing to do with the people that remain unchanging, foreign, and primitive when the world he is immersed in at school and with friends is full of new interesting ideas and experiences. Here experimentation, love, excitement, indulgence, and risk fill the gaping holes of Gogol's unknown identity. He is continually searching for himself in others as he moves from one love to another. His relationships with women, not unlike his exploration of different American lifestyles, demonstrate his constant questioning of identity. Along this journey of lifestyles there is one that he tries to continually reject. He rejects his parents' Indian-American lifestyle, or at least he is convinced that he has. The fact is that despite his attempts to explore identities of other Americans, he never truly rids himself of who he is. He is a Bengali-American. He never strays too far from his parents, and though he begrudges their way of life he also appears to find some solace in it. After his father's death it was Indian tradition that comforted him. Though sometimes he keeps his shoes on in the house, many times he openly

respects the traditions that his mother keeps. He speaks in Bengali with his parents, not always translating for those around him. At the same time, he is an avid member of the American economy and culture. He is an educated architect with an expansive knowledge. He is an independent man that is simply searching to understand life. This is no different than most. The key thing that Gogol is missing is the knowledge that humanity, not just him as an individual, struggles with identity in all its forms. Names, cultures, society, relationships, and family all contribute to one's identity, but none are the sole provider for that identity. It seems that Ashoke, Gogol's father is aware of this truth as he questions why his son must change a name that in one sense, means the world, but in another, means absolutely nothing. Plagued by the name that began his disorientation in life, Gogol attempts to start fresh, as he does many times, by changing what he believes is the reason for the demise of his identity. He never stops questioning himself, his names, his actions, his past, or his future. He simply lives, like many do, in search for a greater understanding.