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Names and Surnames -An Imperative Facet of Generation Gap and Cultural Conflict in Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake"

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ABSTRACT

A baptism ritual is the event at which an infant, an adolescent or an adult is given a name. Christening a newborn is considered to be sanctified and therefore is an important Hindu convention. Naming ceremonies differs according to religion and culture. In Bengal the paternal aunt has the honour of naming her brother's child. Jhumpa Lahiri is a celebrated expatriate writer who has exclusively dealt with the concept of Nomenclature in her novel 'The Name Sake'. It reflects the emotional side of Bengali family, "The Ganguli's" and through the protagonist "Gogol". This paper unleashes the importance of classification of name and the various emotional perspectives in the novel. Gogol Ganguli suffers as a consequence of his namesake. The practice of *Daknaam* and *Bhalonaam* is an exclusive practice dealt in the Bengali communities which is tinted in the novel to a great extent. The aim of this paper is to trace the psychological trauma of Gogol Ganguli who was torn between two cultures and nearly lost his identity in a foreign land due to his absurd name Gogol in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Name Sake'.

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Introduction

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet". - William Shakespeare

Nilanjana Sudeshna "Jhumpa" Lahiri is an Indian born American author. Lahiri was born in London, the daughter of Bengali Indian immigrants from the state of west Bengal. Her family moved to the United States when she was two; Lahiri considers herself as an American, stating,

"I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been." Lahiri's mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali heritage when she began Kindergarten in Kingston, Rhode Island, Lahiri's teacher decided to call her by her pet name Jhumpa, because it was easier to pronounce than her proper name. Lahiri recalled, I always felt so embarrassed by my name... You feel like you're causing someone pain just by being who you are. Lahiri's ambivalence over her identity was the inspiration for the ambivalence of Gogol, the protagonist of her novel *The Name Sake*, over his usual name. In 2003, Lahiri published 'The Name Sake', her first novel. The story spans over thirty years in the life of the Ganguli family. The Calcutta – born parents immigrated as young adults to the United States, where their children, Gogol and Sonia, grow up experiencing the constant generational and cultural gap with their parents. Jhumpa brings great empathy to Gogol as he stumbles along the first generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours and wrenching love affairs. In this novel '*The Name Sake*' Lahiri reveals the significant influence of the names, and prospect bestowed upon us by our parents.

The concept of Nomenclature in Bengali community

Nomenclature is a system of names or terms, or the rules forming these terms in a particular field of arts or sciences. Nomenclature plays a major role in the novel 'The Name

Sake'. As its title suggests, at its hub 'The Name Sake' tackles the question of forming one's own identity, and explores the power that a name can carry. In this novel Gogol's decision to change his name to Nikhil before leaving home for college demonstrates his desire to take control over his own identity. The name Gogol, which "Nikhil" finds so distasteful, is a direct result of the literal identity confusion during his birth, when the letter sent from India that contained his true name was lost in the mail. "Gogol" is also a name that holds deep meaning for Ashoke, since it was a book of short stories by Gogol, the Russian author, that saved his life during a fateful train crash – but this meaning is not conveyed to Gogol /Nikhil during his childhood. The main tension that drives Gogol aka Nikhil's identity confusion is the divide between his family's Indian legacy and his own desire for an Independent modern American approach. Because of the concept of Nomenclature the novel reveal an even striving for a clear identity, an effort which is made difficult by the alienated ambience in which he grows up.

Onomastics is a study of proper names, which has a wide – ranging scope encompassing all names, all languages, inclusive of geographical and cultural regions. There is a difference between onomastics and nomenclature, but it is not readily clear. Onomastics is an unfamiliar discipline to most people, where as nomenclature is used in an academic sense is also not commonly known. Although fields integrate, nomenclature concerns itself more with the rules and conventions that are used for the formation of names. Names provide us with a way of structuring and mapping the world in our minds so, in some way, the names mirror or reflect the objects of our experience. Naming process is considered to be a cultural activity. The culture of west Bengal is considered to be one of the richest cultures in India.

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In Lahiri's novel 'The Name Sake', she displays this panorama of the Bengali culture.

"Naamkaran" or christening of the baby has always been an important and meaningful event in all communities. Bengalis all over the world perform the naming ceremony with utmost sincerity. They give only the meaningful names to their babies. In Bengali culture it is generally believed that the names decide the character of the babies. In this novel 'The Name sake', novelist tackles the question of forming one's own identity, and explores the issues that a name can carry. In the novel Lahiri explores this tug between the two worlds – the Indian World and the American one. Gogol is a troubled character who was born to Bengali parents. His father is a fan of the nineteenth – century Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, and slaps that name to his child. Growing up Gogol absolutely despises it. He seems his name as both the cause and the symbol of the way he feels as an *American Born Confused Deshi (ABCD)* caught between the Bengali heritage of his parents and the American culture he lives in. The character of the protagonist, Gogol (his pet name) versus Nikhil (his good name) back and forth is a source of constant frustration, consternation and alienation for him. It is the central question of the novel: *who exactly is Gogol Ganguli? and what in the world are we supposed to call him?* The fact is that Nikhil is a Bengali name and Gogol is an elderly Russian writer's last name.

Discussion

Traditions and customs are the most important factors among the people of every religion and ethnicity. But Bengali traditions are very unique and quite different from the other states of India. As the tradition of the Bengali family, the name is given to a new born child only by the eldest person of the family. So was in the case of Gogol, Ashima's grandmother sent a letter to the expecting couple in which the name of their new born baby was also mentioned. *"When her grandmother learned of Ashima's pregnancy, she was particularly thrilled at the prospect of naming the family's first sahib. And so Ashima and Ashoke have agreed to put off the decision of what to name the baby until a letter comes, ignoring the forms from the hospital about filling for a birth certificate. Ashima's grandmother has mailed the letter herself, walking with her cane to the post office, her first trip out of the house in a decade. The letter contains one name for a girl, one for a boy. Ashima's grandmother has revealed them to no one."*(pp.25) But unfortunately the letter never reached and lost somewhere between Calcutta and Cambridge. Gogol's parents wanted the name because in America, without a birth certificate a new born cannot be released from the hospital. So in emergency they were forced to give their son a name. The name "Gogol" had special meaning to Ashoke for various reasons. Ashoke Ganguli used the first name that popped into his head. Ashoke recollected his train accident in which he narrowly escaped and in that wounded stipulation the only thing which remained with him was a page from the book of Russian author Nikolai Gogol which was a blessing to Ashoke and hence entrusts the name "Gogol" to his son. Ashima also approves the name not because she likes it as her husband but because it will help her husband to recover from the memories of that disastrous accident: *Besides, there are always pet names to tide one over: a practice of 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. (pp. 25-26) Thus in the novel "The Name Sake" Gogol is the namesake of Nikolai Gogol who is a famous Russian author. But the irony in the book is that Nikolai was only the favourite author of Ashoke but his own son dislikes the name and never shared the emotional bond that Ashoke had with the name "Gogol". Naming and nicknames are also a symbol of the bonds shared by different characters throughout the novel, they mark the significance of the concept of nomenclature. *Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated. They are a reminder, too, that one is not all things to all people. They all have pet names. Ashima's pet name is Monu, Ashoke's is Mithu, and even as adults, these are the names by which they are known in their respective families, the names by which they are adored and scolded and missed and loved.* (pp.26) At first Ashoke and Ashima give this name "Gogol" to their son. But they were proved wrong as later at that time of his admission in a school, Ashoke and Ashima try their best to change his name to Nikhil but they failed. Gogol also wanted to change his name to Nikhil before leaving home for education. And he was teased by his classmates as "giggle" or "gargle", he recognizes pieces of himself in road signs "Go left, Go right. Go slow". (pp.67) *His parents have told him that at school, instead of being called Gogol, he will be called by a new name, a good name, which his parents have finally decided on, just in time for him to begin his formal education... 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.* (pp.56)

Towards the end of the novel Gogol tries to rediscover himself through the book his father presented him on his fourteenth birthday, *...anxious to return to his room, to be alone, to read the book he had once forsaken, has abandoned until now. Until moments ago it was destined to disappear from his life altogether, but he has salvaged it by chance, as his father was pulled from a crushed train forty years ago.* (pp.290) Gogol is set on a path where he finally finds the source and true meaning of his namesake.

Conclusion

Lahiri uses Gogol to convey her own experiences and the concept of nomenclature. Lahiri struggled with her own name in a way that mirrors Gogol's: *I always felt so embarrassed by my name... You feel like you're causing someone pain just by being who you are.* Gogol learns a person's identity encompasses both their past and future and the need to accept one's own namesake. Gogol is the vehicle through which Lahiri communicates personal truths in 'The Namesake'. This Paper points out the concept of generation gap that emerges out through the name sake and the emotional connection shared by the Bengali immigrants towards their identity; the importance of their names as a social makeover in new lands through the fictitious characters of The Namesake.

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