

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

11th Year of Open Access

**Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal**

Vol. XI, Issue-3 (June 2020)

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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Naming and Social Clique: a Metacommunicative Study of the Character Gogol in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Article History: Submitted-30/05/2020, Revised-30/06/2020, Accepted-01/07/2020, Published-10/07/2020.

Abstract:

Let's imagine a world without any names. People will be recognized by some numbers. Will it have any impact to identify the differences of each individual in the society? Why then names have got so much of values in our life? Why parents spend months together to find a unique name to their child? Name has got a lot of significance in one's life event. It is not a label that distinguishes an individual from the rest of the society. One's name is of enormous significance to both the individual and the naming system in their society. In Indian culture names are given importance as they have many influences in establishing the identity in the society. Names are the first hint to assume one's identity, religion and gender. This is part of how you want to perceive yourself and how you want others to receive you in the society. This identity is self chosen. Though the names are given by the parents but the individual always try to establish a different recognition with which the world acknowledges him/her. The name influences a child's personality at the same time gives the society a clue to believe in their subconscious mind about one's identity from the name he/she bears. This present paper is an attempt to understand the underlying meaning of every name given to us.

Keywords: Names, clique, recognition, society, influence, personality.

Shakespeare in his play *Romeo Juliet* has said "What's there in a name? That which we call rose by any other name will smell as sweet." Why the family members are then so worried in case of finding a suitable name for the new born baby? Why a special occasion (Naamkaran Day) is designed to name the baby in the presence of the elders and the other relatives? Has this name got any influence over identifying and establishing the child's identity in the society? A person's name is important marker of their identity and it should be treated as such. One's name is of enormous significance to both the individual and the naming system in their society. In

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In this paper I am going to discuss the psychological journey of Gogol, the central character in *The Namesake*, through whom Jhumpa Lahiri has explored the importance of name in one's life and what does this communicate to the bearer and the outside world. The names of the characters identify the individuals to which social clique they belong to. The social clique is a collection of people who have the same social identity. These people have the same attribute with which they relate or distinguish themselves from certain social groups. The conflict of identity arises in the story when Gogol frames his personal identity. His inability to decide to stick to one society is the result of his social and personal identity. Michael, Dominic, Sabine & Steve in their research paper 'The Social Identity Perspective' write:

...in any given situation, only one identity is psychologically real—the salient basis of self-construal, social perception, and social conduct. Identities can change quickly in response to contextual changes; hence, social identity is context dependent not only in terms of which social identity is salient but also in terms of what form the identity may take. (252)

The present paper is a study of impact of name carried by Gogol at various stages of his life and how the name has changed his social belongingness. In *The Namesake*, Ashima and Ashoke after thinking for a long time named their first child as Gogol. For Ashima the name had its own value as this is the name that had a great importance in Ashoke's life. Ashok gave his consent to this name as this name had link with his rescue in a train accident. It is customary in Bengal that the eldest one in the family is supposed to name the new born baby. It is believed that the naming is the blessings of the elders to the baby. But in the case of Mr. and Mrs. Ganguli as they were far away in America, and there was a delay in getting a recommended name from their family back in India. So they had to choose a name of their own before the baby was

discharged from the hospital. In America it is compulsory to name the baby before getting discharged from the hospital. According to their culture the Second Baptism gives one ample freedom to change his/her name as many number of times as one wants. But in Indian culture name giving (Naamkaran Day) is a ceremonial day in the presence of the family members where the baby is given a name. This is the occasion where the baby is welcomed to the society with a different identity not as the biological child of the parents. So Gogol got his first name because of the social context he was in. he became the victim of the culture of the host country and the country he belonged from. Ashima and Ashoke might not have dreamt in their wild imagination how a name could disturb the life of their child. With the passage of time in his early childhood as he spent most of the time with his family members Gogol became very fond of his name. The Daaknam (Nickname) Gogol eventually became the official name. The name established his relationship with his family members. He could be easily identified from the rest of the Americans in his surroundings because of this unusual name. At the time of admission at school Ashoke wanted to enroll his son's name as Nikhil instead of Gogol as it sounded more formal. But as the name Gogol appeared in the birth certificate it was impossible to change the name at the time of admission. On the other hand Gogol was very much attached to the name by which his parents called him as he connected to their affection through this and the idea of changing the name at the beginning of the school career was not appreciated by him. He cannot relate himself with that new name.

“Welcome to elementary school, Nikhil. I am your principal, Mrs. Lapidus.” Gogol looks down at his sneakers. The way the principal pronounces his new name is different from the way his parents say it, the second part of it longer, sounding like ‘heel’.” (58)

Ashoke thought of the name, Nikhil, as it sounded connected with Nikolai, the famous Russian writer whom he had read a lot. Further the name had also a complete Bengali meaning which meant “he who is entire, encompassing all”. Yet the name Nikhil gave Ashoke a threat that there was every possible chance of abbreviation to Nick as the Americans may find the sound difficult to pronounce. However, his wish didn't materialize.

Being referred as Gogol by his family members he had become narcissistic towards this name. He was boastful of his name and loved to place it everywhere on the crafts and the book covers (60). As young boy Gogol could relate his name to be omnipresent even in the road signs where it was written Go Slow, Go Left, Go right etc. He was told that he had been named after a famous Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. By naming him so his parent's psychology was that their son will be recognized all over the world because of bearing the famous writer's name and will be remembered for ever. Regarding the surname "Ganguli" it was a proud moment for Gogol when he came to know that it was the anglicized version which had been derived from the original Bengali name Gangopadhyay. Thus he develops belongingness to his surname which he used and got angry whenever the street boys made fun of it (67).

R.Ruskin and H.Terry in their essay 'A Principal-Components Analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and Further Evidences of its Construct Validity' have analyzed the term Narcissist as a behavioral phenomena that includes:

- (a) A set of attitude a person has towards oneself, including self-love, self-admiration, and self-aggrandizement;
- (b) several kinds of fears or vulnerabilities related to a person's self-esteem that include the fear of loss of love and the fear of failure;
- (c) a general defensive orientation that includes megalomania, idealization denial, projection, and splitting;
- (d) motivation in terms of the need to be loved, as well as strivings for self-sufficiency and for projection; and
- (e) a constellation of attitudes that may characterize a person's relationship with others. (890)

In this essay they advocate that such people tend to be intolerant towards the criticism of others and they love themselves a lot and that directs their interpersonal relationship. Ashoke, a highly ambitious person who migrated from Calcutta to Boston in search of his fortune might have wished his son to bear a unique personality in these migrated Indo-Americans. So he might have thought of incarnating that personality to his son by naming him after the great Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. The daknaam Gogol gave the identity to his son in the Bengali community who are known for their taste of literature. But when Gogol grew up this daknaam "Gogol" created embarrassing situations for him in his surroundings. As he was a second generation migrant who was born and brought up in America, he accepted the American culture as his own. But the name which was a reflection of his parent's emotions now distinguished him from the

American society. His friends and colleagues made fun of his name and as a result he tried to avoid the social gatherings and introducing himself to anyone with that name. He often wondered that he could have lived with any other Russian writers name like Anton or Leo but this weirdest name Gogol. When asked his father responded that Gogol was not only his favorite writer but he shared good kinship with him. Like him the Russian also had spent most of his adult life in a foreign land (77). But to some extent he was responsible for his name. He could have been called as Nikhil at school but he responded to Gogol during his early stages of life. As a matter of fact Gogol thought of himself as an outsider in his friend circle. They made fun of his name and he felt as if he has lost his identity. Research psychologist David Figlio in his essay 'Boys Named Sue: Disruptive Children and their Peers' has mentioned that the names have an impact on the character of the child. For the initial days of elementary schools the names have no impact on the behavior of the child but as they gradually enter into the sixth grade children with awkward names start behaving in a peculiar way.

This theory was well supported by another psychology professor Jean Twenge of San Diego State University who advocated that:

People who particularly dislike their name and also if other people think it's an odd and unlikeable name that can cause some problems.

<https://www.livescience.com/6569-good-bad-baby-names-long-lasting-effects>)

Gogol suffered from such problem in his early school days when he was made fun of his name in the school. He used to avoid parties and started remaining aloof of his American friends. Teachers found it difficult to utter the name Gogol. Whenever there was roll call for his name a giggle went across the room. Sometimes he was called as 'Giggle', 'Gurgle' and it appeared in the chart of Christmas play too. As a matter of fact Gogol felt as if he had been stripped of his self respect and his personality.

Identity metacommunicated through the name as it is pronounced:

Language works as a vehicle to convey one's identity and culture. The way we utter the words it creates an image to our surrounding. Human reactions are based on the sound that we hear. Our personality consists of many different aspects which, when added up frames "our

identity". What aspects of ourselves we choose to present at any given moment will depend on whether the people surrounding us are family members, schoolmates, fellow sportspeople, close friends, acquaintances, a girl or boyfriend, our boss, colleagues or subordinates. The choice we make will often manifest itself through the name by which we choose to present ourselves to the surroundings. Do we include our title, given that we have one? Do we state our given name, our surname, or both? Maybe we choose to state a nickname or a pet name instead of the name our parents have decided for us. This may seem like a casual choice, or maybe just a matter of habit, but the fact is that the way we use our name constitutes an important part of the impression we want other people to form of ourselves. The self concept of a child grows with him/her. The parents, school mates, neighborhoods all play a significant role in the development of this self concept of the child. The message one receives from the surrounding is sometimes verbal and sometimes non-verbal. If there is any unusual name then the reaction it receives from the peer group members, the person becomes self conscious and hesitates to maintain a healthy social contact. The worst impact of this teasing comes when the name is made fun of in public by the elders. The person loses confidence and develops a negative personality towards the society. The same happened with Gogol Ganguli. Unaware of his unusual name he was very much accustomed to his name in his childhood, but later in his life his name was the subject of fun for his friends.

When asked about the act of naming babies in India Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev in one of his interviews said:

Language was not created for communication. The language is not a made-up language for the sake of communication. It is a language that evolved out of observation not out of imagination. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAk7KaGhsRA>, Youtube, March 4, 2014)

Naming a person is a very complex process. According to Sadhguru when an individual turns out to be saint he has to be renamed. This name is not the same name that he was used to be known with. The new name is bestowed to the individual on the basis of observing the characteristics he/ she bears. Psychologists are of the opinion that the common names draw favoritism from the society. It is quite evident that the names that are easy to pronounce are easy to remember. It is also favorable in case of searching for jobs. But the psychologists negate the

fear of adverse effect uncommon names to an individual. They advocate that unusual names come with a different context of perception. Not being a part of the stereotype these names bias the human psychology to come out of the jinx of being perceived on the basis of sound. As the pressure of proving yourself according to the sound is released the individual's self concept develops freely. Psychologists say that a name is not merely a label that distinguishes one from other. It is more than a name where the name holders carry an impression of them towards others. Although different names are there which are given at various settings of life and such names are not planned. People are not always attuned how others are evaluating, perceiving and treating them all the time. The impression management theory says that people try to alter one's self presentation according to ones goal. They do so by regulating and controlling interaction in the social context. Erving Goffman, the famous American sociologist in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* has said that:

The individual's initial projection commits him to what he is proposing to be and requires him to drop all pretenses of being other things. As the interaction among the participants progresses, additions and modifications in this initial information state of course occur, but it is essential that these later developments be related without contradiction to, and even built up from, the initial position taken by the several participants. It would seem that an individual can more easily make a choice as to what line of treatment to demand from and extend to the others present at the beginning of an encounter than he can alter the line of treatment that is being pursued once the interaction is underway. (10-11)

Un-naming and Renaming:

After his fourteenth birthday Gogol finds his name to be ridiculous and very funny. So he thought of avoiding the name given by his parents. He was trying to find his belongingness with any other new name. While Gogol was sitting in the dentist's waiting room he came across the article 'Second Baptism'. This article depicted about the change of names by Americans as a common thing which they do every year. All that they need is a legal petition and they change their name according to their choice. He thought of finding his name in that list of famous persons who have changed their birth names (99). That night he discussed this matter with his parents. He was unhappy to get a pet name as his first name. Gogol was not a Bengali name and

he was not able to relate himself neither with Bengalis nor with the Americans. Furthermore what he had read about Nikolai Gogol in Mr. Lawson's class perturbed him more. Nikolai Gogol was a person who was lifelong unhappy and was mentally unstable.

“Gogol's life, in a nutshell, was a steady decline into madness. The writer Ivan Turgenev described him as an intelligent, queer, and sickly creature. 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.”(92)

This information disturbed Gogol as he was bearing the name. Identity is a very complex thing and it is often used superficially with the name one bears. There is a great Chinese saying: “One does not fear if he/she has a bad fate; what one fears most is to be given a bad name” (Justina Cheang, 197). According to the Identity Control Theory (1997) by Kerpelman, Pittman, & Lamke, “Personal identity is not a given entity but a process; it is constantly under construction through interaction with others and with us. New aspects are added, old ones questioned, others stabilized”.

Daphna, Kristen and George in their article ‘Self, Self-Concept and Identity’ published in *Handbook of Self and Identity* edited by Mark R. Laery and June Price Tangney describe identity as :

Identities are the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is. Identities can be focused on the past-what used to be true of one, the present-what is true of one now, or the future-the person one expects or wishes to become, the person one feels obligated to try to become, or the person one fears one may become. Identities are orienting, they provide a meaning-making lens and focus one's attention on some but not other features of the immediate context. (69)

Self-identity is a reflection of the social relations between the social group members. It is the meaning-making to who they are and whom they belong to. Gogol often had a doubt of his self identity. He often thought that due to his name, which had the similarity with the name of

famous Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, he might face the fate of the writer who was not a sociable person. He preferred to remain isolated to avoid being made fun of his name. He mixed with very limited friends and never attended any parties. So he wished to un-name himself and to get a new name that would be accepted by the Americans. Ashoke and Ashima were not in favor of change of name after so many years. Gogol has been known by the name given to him at the birth time. All of a sudden changing to a new name was unacceptable by them and they cited the practice as anti-Bengali tradition. Gogol was disturbed because of his inner conflict. He was the only person who always questioned the name and tried to find the historical belongingness of his name. He couldn't relate with emotion attached with the name of his father's favorite author. When Gogol made a field trip from school to a graveyard (70) he was surprised to find the awkward names which were even very difficult to pronounce on the tombstones. He was told that these were the unique names like his and are not found any more in the society. So he realized that even names also die if they are unique. Since that day he disliked his name and cursed the moment when he could have been called as Nikhil. But it was only his mistake that he is officially known as Gogol. So he introduced Kim as 'Nikhil', the name which once appeared alien to him. Gogol changes his name officially from Gogol to Nikhil. Three copies of the affidavit were issued for the legal changes of his name in the society. He was asked to keep the documents with him. That day coming out of the courtroom he felt relaxed. 'Gogol' the word itself appeared very heavy for him. The day he changed his name legally to 'Nikhil', he felt relaxed as if he has got free from bondage of his childhood. He was now eager to move around mix with people and let everyone know his name. He was feeling very proud of his name. It was a new beginning for him. The change of name brought a change in personality in Gogol. Gogol, a shy and unromantic person, gave way to 'Nikhil', a romantic and ambitious person. He wanted to live a break free life. As Jhumpa Lahiri narrates the situation in *The Namesake*:

He wonders if this is how it feels for an obese person to become thin, for a prisoner to walk free. (p. 102)

A person's identity is shaped by the past, present and future activities. The inter relationship of these activities shape up an individual's identity. In the modern world without an identity one will go mad. Identity is an ongoing process. It keeps on changing till the time one is not settled down. The name stands for individualization which is the aspect to make one unique

and distinguished from the crowd. This confrontation of an individual for the search of belongingness with the outer world is a meaning making process. The meaning of a name is not static. It is interpreted in different situations of life. Throughout the life one's name is perceived in various ways which is process of negotiation and re-negotiation. Gogol who was accustomed to the American culture though having the base of Bengali culture was in a bewildered state of his self esteem. His desi name was taunting him as a non-American where as he never accepted the Bengali lifestyle. So he decided to renegotiate his self-identity by changing his name. But changing his name he has not revolted against the Bengali culture rather he has linked himself back to the culture. Nikhil was the name that was phonemically similar to Nikolai, the Russian writer. Furthermore this name also has a link with the Bengali culture where the name means he, who is entire, encompassing all. In this process of naming un-naming and renaming himself unconsciously he has agreed to the name that was suggested to him at the time of his school admission. So he respects his ethnic culture prefers to be called as Nikhil instead of Nick which could have been the best replacement as name for him in the American society. After his father's death Nikhil comes to know about the relevance of the word Gogol in his father's life. So again he develops a feeling towards the name given to him by his father.

Conclusion:

Self identity is a part of the social identity which is a Contextual element of the individual's practices, culture, the time and place in which one lives. Gogol's self doubt crept up because of the different social context he inhabited into. His unusual name became the driving factor behind the confusion. In order to establish his social identity Gogol had to undergo a journey of naming, un-naming and renaming himself. During this entire process of renaming of a person Jhumpa Lahiri has revealed various emotions attached to a name. A name that Gogol was accustomed to for eighteen years suddenly embarrassed him in his friend circle. His cognitive organization of self-structure made him to change his name from Gogol to Nikhil. Doing so he framed a self- categorization with his American friends and detached from the Bengalis. He made sense of the social context by virtue of people's attitudes and behaviors towards him. To fit into this categorization of the social group he continued with his new name. But within a short span of two months it gave him a pain of filled tooth. After sporting the changed name for few years he finally finds his belongingness in the pet name Gogol given by his parents. He valued

the emotion through which his parents had chosen that name. So a name is not a label that one bears from his or her childhood. This is a vehicle of identity and social recognition as long as he/she fits in to a specific society.

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