Reading Focus

What's in a Name?
Has anyone ever called you by a nickname you loathe? Or mangled your name, or spelled it wrong? Imagine that you walk into a new school, and on the first day the teacher tells you that you won't be called by your own name anymore. Instead, the teacher assigns you a strange-sounding new name, one you've never heard before. Imagine, moreover, that the reason for this name change has to do with prejudice.

Quickwrite
How important is a person's name? Suppose that someone suddenly took your name away, and from then on you were referred to only by a seven-digit number: 5831680. How would that affect you? Quickwrite your response in two or three sentences.

Elements of Literature

Setting: Not Just Anywhere
In short stories, you've seen that setting may or may not be important. The writer may focus almost entirely on character and conflict against a fairly blank background. But in real life, time and place are crucial. The account you're about to read happened because of the setting: a small town in northern India during the British colonial rule.

Setting is the time and place in which the events in a story happen.
For more on Setting, see pages 50-51 and the Handbook of Literary Terms.

Background
At the time this account takes place, educated natives of India were expected to learn English in addition to their own native languages. (Hindi, Urdu, and Gujarati are just a few of the languages spoken in India.) The headmistress of the type of school in the essay was white and British. Many of the students were also white and British, from families of British civil servants sent to India as colonial rulers.

The title of the essay is from William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Juliet is wishing that her beloved Romeo's surname, Montague, were some other name because the Montagues are sworn enemies of her family. "What's in a name?" she asks. "That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet."
"Suppose we give you pretty English names..."

At the Anglo-Indian day school in Zarinabad to which my sister and I were sent when she was eight and I was five and a half, they changed our names. On the first day of school, a hot, windless morning of a north Indian September, we stood in the headmistress’s study, and she said, “Now you’re the new girls. What are your names?”

My sister answered for us. “I am Premila, and she”—nodding in my direction—“is Santha.”

Santha Rama Rau (right), her older sister Premila, and their dog in Simla, in India, 1927.
The headmistress had been in India, I suppose, fifteen years or so, but she still smiled her helpless inability to cope with Indian names.

Her rimless half-glasses glittered, and the precarious bun on the top of her head trembled as she shook her head. "Oh, my dears, those are much too hard for me. Suppose we give you pretty English names. Wouldn't that be more jolly? Let's see, now—Pamela for you, I think." She shrugged in a baffled way at my sister. "That's as close as I can get. And for you," she said to me, "how about Cynthia? Isn't that nice?"

My sister was always less easily intimidated than I was, and while she kept a stubborn silence, I said "Thank you," in a very tiny voice.

We had been sent to that school because my father, among his responsibilities as an officer of the civil service, had a tour of duty to perform in the villages around that steamy little provincial town, where he had his headquarters at that time. He used to make his shorter inspection tours on horseback, and a week before, in the stale heat of a typically postmonsoon day, we had waved goodbye to him and a little procession—an assistant, a secretary, two bearers, and the man to look after the bedding rolls and luggage. They rode away through our large garden, still bright green from the rains, and we turned back into the twilight of the house and the sound of fans whispering in every room.

Up to then, my mother had refused to send Premila to school in the British-run establishments of that time, because, she used to say, "You can bury a dog's tail for seven years and it still comes out curly, and you can take a Britisher away from his home for a lifetime and he still remains insular." The examinations and degrees from entirely Indian schools were not, in those days, considered valid. In my case, the question had never come up and probably never would have come up if Mother's extraordinary good health had not broken down. For the first time in my life, she was not able to continue the lessons she had been giving us every morning. So our Hindi books were put away, the stories of the Lord Krishna as a little boy were left in midair, and we were sent to the Anglo-Indian school.

That first day at school is still, when I think of it, a remarkable one. At that age, if one's name is changed, one develops a curious form of dual personality. I remember having a certain detached and disbelieving concern in the actions of "Cynthia," but certainly no responsibility. Accordingly, I followed the thin, erect back of the headmistress down the veranda to my classroom, feeling, at most, a passing interest in what was going to happen to me in this strange, new atmosphere of School.

The building was Indian in design, with wide verandas opening onto a central courtyard, but Indian verandas are usually whitewashed, with stone floors. These, in the tradition of British schools, were painted dark brown and had matting on the floors. It gave a feeling of extra intensity to the heat.

I suppose there were about a dozen Indian children in the school—which contained perhaps forty children in all—and four of them were in my class. They were all sitting at the back of the room, and I went to join them. I sat next to a small, solemn girl, who didn't smile at me. She had long, glossy black braids and wore a cotton dress, but she still kept on her Indian

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2. Hindi: official language of India.

Words to Own:
- precarious (pré-cahr'ē-as) adj.: in danger of falling down; unstable; dependent on chance or circumstances.
- intimidated (in-tim'ə-dət'id) v.: made afraid; daunted.
- provincial (prō-vin'shəl) adj.: belonging to a certain, usually rural, province; narrow-minded; unsophisticated.
- insular (in'sə-lər) adj.: isolated from one's surroundings, like an island; narrow-minded.
- valid (val'id) adj.: meeting the requirements of established standards.

1. postmonsoon: after the monsoon, or seasonal heavy rains.
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jewelry—a gold chain around her neck, thin gold bracelets, and tiny ruby studs in her ears. Like most Indian children, she had a rim of black kohl

around her eyes. The cotton dress should have looked strange, but all I could think of was that I should ask my mother if I couldn’t wear a dress to school, too, instead of my Indian clothes.

I can’t remember too much about the proceedings in class that day, except for the beginning. The teacher pointed to me and asked me to stand up. “Now, dear, tell the class your name.”

I said nothing.

“Come along,” she said, frowning slightly. “What’s your name, dear?”

“I don’t know,” I said, finally.

The English children in the front of the class—there were about eight or ten of them—giggled and twisted around in their chairs to look at me. I sat down quickly and opened my eyes very wide, hoping in that way to dry them off. The little girl with the braids put out her hand and very lightly touched my arm. She still didn’t smile.

Most of that morning I was rather bored. I looked briefly at the children’s drawings pinned to the wall, and then concentrated on a lizard clinging to the ledge of the high, barred window behind the teacher’s head. Occasionally it would shoot out its long yellow tongue for a fly, and then it would rest, with its eyes closed and its belly palpitating, as though it were swallowing several times quickly. The lessons were mostly concerned with reading and writing and simple numbers—things that my mother had already taught me—and I paid very little attention. The teacher wrote on the easel-blackboard with words like “bat” and “cat,” which seemed babyish to me; only “apple” was new and incomprehensible.

When it was time for the lunch recess, I followed the girl with braids out onto the veranda. There the children from the other classes were assembled. I saw Premila at once and ran over to her, as she had charge of our lunchbox. The children were all opening packages and sitting down to eat sandwiches. Premila and I were the only ones who had Indian food—thin wheat chapatis, some vegetable curry, and a bottle of buttermilk. Premila thrust half of it into my hand and whispered fiercely that I should go and sit with my class, because that was what the others seemed to be doing.

The enormous black eyes of the little Indian girl from my class looked at my food longingly, so I offered her some. But she only shook her head and plowed her way solemnly through her sandwiches.

I was very sleepy after lunch, because at home we always took a siesta. It was usually a pleasant time of day, with the bedroom darkened against the harsh afternoon sun, the drifting off into sleep with the sound of Mother’s voice reading a story in one’s mind, and, finally, the shrill, fussy voice of the ayah

waking one for tea.

At school, we rested for a short time on low folding cots on the veranda, and then we were expected to play games. During the hot part of the afternoon we played indoors, and after the shadows had begun to lengthen and the slight breeze of the evening had come up, we moved outside to the wide courtyard.

I had never really grasped the system of competitive games. At home, whenever we played tag or guessing games, I was always allowed to “win”—“because,” Mother used to tell Premila, “she is the youngest, and we have to allow for that.” I had often heard her say it, and it seemed quite reasonable to me, but the result was that I had no clear idea of what “winning” meant.

When we played twos-and-threes

that afternoon at school, in accordance with my training I let one of the small English boys catch me but was naturally rather puzzled when the other

5. chapatis (cha-pát’i-z): thin, flat bread.
6. ayah (ä’ya): Indian term for “nanny” or “maid.”
7. twos-and-threes: game similar to tag.

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**Words to Own**

palpitating (pal’pa-tát’-in) v.: throbbing; quivering; trembling.

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children did not return the courtesy. I ran about for what seemed like hours without ever catching anyone, until it was time for school to close. Much later I learned that my attitude was called "not being a good sport," and I stopped allowing myself to be caught, but it was not for years that I really learned the spirit of the thing.

When I saw our car come up to the school gate, I broke away from my classmates and rushed toward it yelling, "Ayah! Ayah!" It seemed like an eternity since I had seen her that morning—a wizened, affectionate figure in her white cotton sari, giving me dozens of urgent and useless instructions on how to be a good girl at school. Premila followed more sedately, and she told me on the way home never to do that again in front of the other children.

When we got home, we went straight to Mother's high, white room to have tea with her, and I immediately climbed onto the bed and bounced gently up and down on the springs. Mother asked how we had liked our first day in school. I was so pleased to be home and to have left that peculiar Cynthia behind that I had nothing whatever to say about school, except to ask what "apple" meant. But Premila told Mother about the classes, and added that in her class they had weekly tests to see if they had learned their lessons well.

I asked, "What's a test?"

Premila said, "You're too small to have them. You won't have them in your class for donkey's years." She had learned the expression that day and was using it for the first time. We all laughed enormously at her wit. She also told Mother, in an aside, that we should take sandwiches to school the next day. Not, she said, that she minded. But they would be simpler for me to handle.

That whole lovely evening I didn't think about school at all. I sprinted barefoot across the lawns with my favorite playmate, the cook's son, to the stream at the end of the garden. We quarreled in our usual way, waded in the tepid water under the lime trees, and waited for the night to bring out the smell of the jasmine. I listened with fascination to his stories of ghosts and demons, until I was too frightened to cross the garden alone in the semidarkness. The ayah found me, scolded me, hurried me in to supper—it was an entirely usual, wonderful evening.

It was a week later, the day of Premila's first test, that our lives changed rather abruptly. I was sitting at the back of my class, in my usual inattentive way, only half listening to the teacher. I had started a rather guarded friendship with the girl with the braids, whose name turned out to be Nalini (Nancy in school). The three other Indian children were already fast friends. Even at that age, it was apparent to all of us that friendship with the English or Anglo-Indian children was out of the question. Occasionally, during the class, my new friend and I would draw pictures and show them to each other secretly.

The door opened sharply and Premila marched in. At first, the teacher smiled at her in a kindly and encouraging way and said, "Now, you're little Cynthia's sister?"

Premila didn't even look at her. She stood with her feet planted firmly apart and her shoulders rigid and addressed herself directly to me. "Get up," she said. "We're going home."

I didn't know what had happened, but I was aware that it was a crisis of some sort. I rose obediently and started to walk toward my sister. "Bring your pencils and your notebook," she said.

I went back for them, and together we left the room. The teacher started to say something.

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8. sari (săr'i): long piece of cloth wrapped around the body. One end forms a skirt. The other end goes across the chest and over one shoulder.

9. donkey's years: expression meaning "a very long time."

10. jasmine (jaz'min): tropical plant with fragrant flowers.

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**Words to Own**

wizened (wiz'ən) adj: wrinkled and dried up.
sedately (sē'dātēlē) adv: in a calm and dignified manner.
tepid (tep'id) adj: neither hot nor cold.
just as Premila closed the door, but we didn’t
wait to hear what it was.

In complete silence we left the school
grounds and started to walk home. Then I asked
Premila what the matter was. All she would say
was, “We’re going home for good.”

It was a very tiring walk for a child of five and
a half, and I dragged along behind Premila with
my pencils growing sticky in my hand. I can still
remember looking at the dusty hedges and the
tangles of thorns in the ditches by the side of
the road, smelling the faint fragrance from the
eucalyptus trees, and wondering whether we
would ever reach home. Occasionally a horse-
drawn tonga\textsuperscript{11} passed us, and the women, in
their pink or green silks, stared at Premila and
me trudging along on the side of the road. A
few coolies\textsuperscript{12} and a line of women carrying
baskets of vegetables on their heads smiled at us.
But it was nearing the hottest time of day, and
the road was almost deserted. I walked more
and more slowly, and shouted to Premila, from
time to time, “Wait for me!” with increasing
peeviousness. She spoke to me only once, and
that was to tell me to carry my notebook on my
head, because of the sun.

When we got to our house, the ayah was just
taking a tray of lunch into Mother’s room. She
immediately started a long, worried questioning
about what are you children doing back here at
this hour of the day.

Mother looked very startled and very con-
cerned and asked Premila what had happened.

Premila said, “We had our test today, and She
made me and the other Indians sit at the back of
the room, with a desk between each one.”

Mother said, “Why was that, darling?”

“She said it was because Indians cheat,” Premi-
la added. “So I don’t think we should go back
to that school.”

Mother looked very distant and was silent a

\textsuperscript{11} tonga: two-wheeled carriage.
\textsuperscript{12} coolies: unskilled laborers.

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**WORDS TO OWN**

peeviousness (pē’vish-nes) n.: irritability; impatience.
Retirees Who, by the Way, Can Write

MICHAEL T. KAUFMAN

The other day Eileen Tobin, who is 79, and Mary Harkins, who is 77, came down from their respective apartments at Morningside Gardens for the weekly writing class that the novelist Mary Gordon teaches for 15 elderly people who live at the cooperative complex at 124th Street off Broadway.

Ms. Gordon, whose novels are rooted in her Catholic girlhood and her experiences as a young woman among the old, also teaches at Barnard. She has been astonished by the sophisticated writing of her Morningside Gardens students, who are, after all, ordinary old people, the kind of old people you can see sitting on benches, feeding birds, and watching things. Their writing, she says, exists much more in the present than that of her undergraduates, who generally focus on the future.

The class had been assigned to write about their names, and Albert Lu mentioned that though his Chinese name contains the ideogram for water, he never learned to swim. Dorothy Carter, who had been an actress, read a piece recapturing a time when as a plump child in rural Jim Crow Florida, she had been taunted with, "Taki waki, roly poly, Fatsie can't get through the kitchen door."

Then Ms. Tobin read her sketch, which recounted how three years before she was born, her father and mother, much in love, had seen Victor Herbert’s operetta “Eileen,” and how the name came to be engraved for her on a gold cross, a silver mug, and her satin-covered baby book. Then when she could not yet read, her tubercular father died.

“A week before our father’s death, my brother and I were separated and sent to stay with relatives until it was all over,” wrote Ms. Tobin, who never went to college. “We moved into very small quarters in an aunt’s house. I had gone to sleep one night in the security of a whole family and awakened to find it all blown away. The sound of my name now became a link with my past and my place in the present. When my mother called my name, I would immediately dig my feet into the sidewalk or grass or floor, not in disobedience, but in planting. My name meant I was. And the lost feeling of a life having blown apart would become a ‘Yes! I am here. I have a place.’ ‘Eileen,’ no matter what the tone, was an antidote to the early nightmare of running through a small town in the dark looking for a house that would emerge as solid and real, but disappear as soon as my feet touched the front porch.”

She went on for seven more remarkable paragraphs, and when she finished reading, her neighbors applauded.

Then Ms. Harkins, who had spent 36 years working in a Social Security office, read her account.

“I can’t remember when I first began to hate my name, but I suppose it was some time after we moved to Aunt Nell’s. There was already a Mary in the house: my cousin, next in age to Julia. She, naturally was called by her name, and I had to be identified as Mary Harkins. My mother, whenever she spoke of me, and often when she spoke to me, called me ‘Mary Harkins.’ It seemed that my name didn’t mean anything, even within the household which was supposed to be my home.”

There was more here as well, all of it alive and excellent, and Mrs. Gordon said it reminded her of Edna O’Brien’s writings in the way that it combined serious and comic aspects. The local roared by. Ordinary old people kept on reading their extraordinary words.

—from The New York Times
Making Meanings

- First Thoughts
  1. What do you think of the way the teachers treat the Indian girls in Santha Rama Rau's story? What do you think of the action Premila takes in response?

Shaping Interpretations
  2. What does the mother mean when she makes the remark on page 368 about burying a dog's tail? Do her daughters' experiences in school prove she is right or wrong? Explain.

  3. There is a lot in the news today about school tests that have built-in cultural biases. Why is the word apple incompressible to Santha?

  4. What differences do the girls discover between Indian life and values and the values promoted in the English school?

  5. In what ways are the two girls made to feel like strangers in their own country?

  6. After Premila tells their mother about what happened at school, her mother "looked very distant and was silent a long time" (page 371). What can you infer about the mother's thoughts and feelings?

  7. How do you think Rama Rau would answer Juliet's question "What's in a name?" How important do you think a person's name is to his or her sense of identity? (Look back at your Quickwrite on page 366 and the news feature on page 372. Have your ideas changed?)

Extending the Text
  8. What does the essay say to you about the nature of prejudice? Could events like these take place in other settings today?

Challenging the Text
  9. Unlike Malcolm X, Santha Rama Rau doesn't directly comment on what the experience meant to her but lets the reader infer it. Tell what you think she intends us to understand about how she feels and what she thinks about the incident. Do you think the story would have been more powerful, or less, if she'd said this directly? Explain.

Reviewing the Text
  a. Why are Santha and Premila sent to the English school?
  b. How does the headmistress react to their names? What does she do?
  c. Name two ways in which the Indian girls who have been at the school awhile try to be like the English girls.
  d. Why does Premila take Santha out of school in the middle of the day?
**CHOICES: Building Your Portfolio**

**Writer's Notebook**

1. Collecting Ideas for an Autobiographical Incident

So, what’s your insight? Santha Rama Rau tells about an incident from her life that shows how we need to respect other cultures. Perhaps, for the Writer’s Workshop on page 380, you’ll want to focus on some personal experience with a clash of cultures or with prejudice of any sort—whether directed at you or at someone else. Jot down notes about what happened. Try to define the lesson you learned from your experience. Rama Rau’s incident is set in a very particular context. Where does your experience take place?

| Experience: Time an exchange student from Japan cooked dinner for a bunch of us. People were rude. |
| Lesson: Like Rau—he was being generous. We were insular. |
| Setting: My house, small New Jersey town, winter night. |

**Creative Writing**

2. Your Name, Yourself

Write a brief essay about your name (as the retirees did in the article on page 372), or write about a different name you’d choose for yourself. It might be a name you’ve sometimes wished you had; it might be a perfectly ordinary name that just happens to be different from yours; it might be a name you’d take if you lived in another culture. Take a couple of minutes to visualize yourself as the bearer of that name. Now write a one- or two-paragraph character sketch of yourself with a new name.

**Creative Writing**

3. “That’s Not What I Meant at All!”

Imagine that it’s three decades after the events in “By Any Other Name” took place, and the headmistress of the Anglo-Indian school has retired. Reading a magazine one day, she unexpectedly discovers an essay that describes her and her school, written by a former student, Santha Rama Rau. How might she react? What would her feelings be? Write the headmistress’s response to Santha in a journal entry, a poem, or a letter.

**Critical Thinking**

4. Resolving Conflicts

Premila’s decision to leave the school is one way of handling an unpleasant situation. With two or three partners, try to come up with other ways Premila could have handled the situation.

**Research/History**

5. Spotlighting India

India is the second most populous country on Earth, and it has one of the oldest, most complex civilizations. Form a group to research and present a report on one aspect of the culture or history of India. Begin by reading an encyclopedia article and the other articles that are cross-referenced in it. Explore biographies, art books, travel books, history books, TV serials, and movies (such as Gandhi and A Passage to India and the films of the great Indian director Satyajit Ray).

Possible topics to look up include Hinduism, the caste system, the history of India as a British colony, Mohandas K. Gandhi and Indian independence, Indian art and literature, Indian food. One of your tasks will be to narrow your topic to a subject you can handle in a brief report.

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