

A Brief History of My Name: Five Letters of Poetry Shyam Patel, University of Ottawa

For a long time, or at least for most of my life until now, it has been difficult for me to say my name, to speak it without hesitation. When I am finally able to utter the five letters, stringing them together in unison like pulling a thread, I am still trepidatious, circumspective of the needle slipping. Unfortunately, it is my own tongue that betrays me as I smooth out this name of mine to make it “easier” for others. In a single breath, I start to taint my own history in the following sequence:

s like the sharp edge of a knife

h like the hand that holds it

y for all the years the blade sharpened

a for the tooth that now resembles an axe

m for this mouth of mine that feels jagged

But like Hiwot Adilow, “I’m tired of people asking me to smooth my name for them” (Hope Music Ethiopia, 2012, 0:47). In that reckoning, while expressed as such, this is not necessarily a brief history of my name. Rather, it is also a desire, framed in the mechanics of reclamation, to piece together something that has been broken. Said differently, it is a redressal of sorts, an attempt to make history out of a name that I have otherwise buried and burnt. That, in carrying it so long with such unease, I come to (re)name myself through the act of historicizing a part of my culture and identity in the hope of reclaiming what has been lost.

Accordingly, inspired by Madubuike (1976), I see a need to decolonize my name, and perhaps even, suturing a wound into five letters of poetry. For me, however, this engagement of decolonizing my name is difficult because it is the site of schooling and the classroom, with everyday encounters of racism (Sue et al., 2007), where my name is erased and where an archive of its adulteration commences. It is there that such a sacred name is slain by the wearied and rudimentary act of mapping it orthographically to English. What is one syllable, said in the poetics of Gujarati, turns into “She-am,” “Shy-am,” and sometimes “Shy-um”. None are as dreadful as hearing someone refer to me as “Shame” in the careless English that breaks the foliage of my name, and butchers it altogether. By the time I come to reach high school, I am used to having my name distorted (Saleh et al., 2018). In this experience, I do not interrupt the massacre about to take place. Instead, I stay quiet, and in that silence the pronunciation of my name is murdered.

It is specifically in that location of the classroom where its subsidence, along with its history, comes into formation. My name—its melody—is never given a constitutive turn. Instead, the careless English continues to slip, turning five letters into a thousand lashes. Collapsed in this history is also the cultural disrespect that students of colour in particular experience through their K-12 education (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). In the classroom, when I attempt to say my name correctly, to remedy its mispronunciation, the question of “What kind of name is that?” emerges from other students. Kohli & Solórzano (2012) suggest that teasing someone for their name can create racial hostility, and to avoid that,

I dare not let out the Gujarati that scratches the surface of my throat, and instead, I let it subside against the backdrop of English. I experience as such, drawing on Shariff (2008), the Anglicization of my South Asian name, and by default, a part of my South Asian-ness is shattered. Unfortunately, I learn very early on that if my name is not welcome somewhere then other parts of what make me South Asian are also to remain hidden unless I wish to be further stripped down and ridiculed.

Over time, its repetition—one of incorrectly being pronounced over and over—engenders my name, its enunciation stripped away, into something that loses its vigour by way of acculturation. Through that repeated act, I am also informed that it is “difficult” and “ethnic” in the way it sounds. In that remark, there is an underlying tone that such a name, ascribed as “foreign” and as being from somewhere else, does not fit the dominant culture, namely of being situated through the so-called standards of European-ness and whiteness. Reduced by that—by way of being shrunk by the colonizer—names are taken out of ordinary personhood and stigmatized (Pina-Cabral, 2015). Not surprisingly, I start to wish for another name (Saleh et al., 2018), running away from decolonial underpinnings and instead inundated into assimilative politics of (re)naming through English, a language that refuses to bend to match the volition of my ancestors. Yet again when my name is marked as being difficult, the lazy English version replaces it. Even worse, I introduce it and welcome it as such and remove any trace of its proper pronunciation within the bounds of school. As Shariff (2008) points out, my adolescence is where I solidify my disconnect from my ethnic name.

In assaulting my own name, by way of gleaning it myself, a part of my cultural history continues to be fractured. According to Kohli & Solórzano (2012), “When a child goes to school and their name is mispronounced or changed, it can negate the thought, care and significance of the name, and thus the identity of the child” (p. 455). And because names shape identities (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012; Pennesi, 2016), my own culpability leads me to lose a part of my culture and identity. Through the years, however, there is still a part of me that seeks to shift away from this reality. I do not want to be trapped in this brief history. I am thinking here with Muna Saleh: “My name’s meaning lives somewhere in the spaces between longing and desire” (Saleh et al., 2018, p. 332). That desire, or rather piecing it together, only comes back to me in my mid-20s when I work in Ahmedabad, Gujarat as an elementary school teacher. Almost immediately, I hear my name said, powerfully pulled, as it should be. I think about how my name also returns to me when I travel every now and then to my village, with my grandmother waiting for me to visit—her arms outstretched to embrace me. Heeding the words of Wong (2018), I pause for a moment and take notice in the pausing, and in this moment with my grandmother, her calling my name sounds like a song that I have been waiting to hear my whole life.

In that embrace, my name has a history. It carries with it a sense of belonging and personhood (Pina-Cabral, 2015), yet when it is mispronounced, a part of my ancestry is taken away from me. It feels like English, in its indolent manner, maligns me in some manner, as if my name is tainted. However, I come back to Adilow who reminds me of the following: “This is my religion, you are tainting it” (Hope Music Ethiopia, 2012, 1:39). In that recognition, I no longer want to be complicit in that homicide. So, here I am, having once briefed my history by betraying my own culture and identity, and I am now retrieving what Wong (2018) calls my “true name”. In the words of Toluwanimi Obiwole, “it is your crown, so wear it” (TEDx Talks, 2017, 3:29), and as Madubuike (1976) notes, it is the only possession that survives after death. I will wear that crown even after I am no longer alive.

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