

MY NAME SHOULD BE KHAN

A million things come to my mind when I think of what's in a name. As a Pakistani, everything is in a name. In Pakistan, if you happen to be named Zardari (the current President of Pakistan), you can rob a bank or a steel mill without moving your little finger. Or, if your name is Bhutto, you could own thousands of acres of land without spending a single penny; then, you could also become a feudal lord, end up in the Parliament and become the Prime Minister of Pakistan. So I have learnt that a name is not only a mark of identity but also a tool of power, particularly if you have the right name.

Now why do I say the right name? There is an example that I would like to share with you today. When one of Pakistan's popular political leaders, Benazir Bhutto, was recently assassinated, the political scene in Pakistan flipped from semi-military rule to a democratic republic. Benazir Bhutto's husband, Asif Zardari, blessed by some technical miracle, became the President of Pakistan. As a first step, even before diving into presidential business, he changed the surname of his son from Bilawal Zardari to Bilawal Z. Bhutto, which is something very unusual in Pakistan. But Mr. Zardari, after spending more than a decade in jail on corruption charges and many other criminal acts, realized that in the future his son Bilawal would only be able to benefit and seize his turn on the musical chair of Pakistan's power politics if his surname was the same as his mother's. So he gave his son the 'right' name.

Now, the above example was maybe a selfish one, of a political family trying to achieve power using their names. Let me mention another interesting way in which power can be displayed through a change of names. Since Turkey was ruled by one empire after another, its capital city Istanbul has carried several names, such as Byzantium, Augusta Antonina, Constantinople and Kostantiniyye. All these changed names were used to signify the power and dominance of the ruling empires.

Since the personal is also the political, name changes have been an active tool for discarding identities of oppression. The charismatic African American leader Malcolm X gave up his surname "Little" because it was a symbol of his slave background, and gave himself the surname "X" to signify a lost tribal identity. In his autobiography, he wrote: "The Muslim's 'X' symbolized the true African family name that I never could know. For me, my 'X' replaced the white slave-master name of 'Little', which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears."

Not only did African Americans change their surnames; they also took on African names in an effort to regain the lost identity. For instance, Audre Lorde took the name Gamba Adisa in an African naming ceremony right before her death. The new name meant "Warrior: She who makes her meaning known."

Names do transform personalities. In the showbiz industry where I belong, changing one's name is a regular practice, especially for women. In the Pakistan film industry, the names of actresses need to have sex appeal. Irtiza

Rubab, upon advice from a film guru, changed her name to Meera, and became a star overnight. This has become a fashionable trend for actresses in Pakistan and India.

Men too have changed their names. The famous 1960s superstar, Dilip Kumar, from the small Pakistani town of Peshawar (which also happens to be my hometown) surrendered his original name, Yousaf Khan, in order to win over the Hindu audience in the Indian film industry. Fortunately, today Khan has become the winning name in Bollywood—Aamir Khan, Salman Khan, Saif Ali Khan and The King of Khans, Shah Rukh Khan are the ruling superstars of the Indian film industry. This reminds me of a major blunder I made a long time ago. My name was Azeem Khan at school. As there were too many Khans around me, and I wanted a unique identity, I changed my name from Azeem Khan to Azeem Sajjad, taking my father's first name as my surname, a common practice in Pakistan. While many people seem to have gained from a change of name, I seem to have lost something by giving up Khan as my surname, especially when I look at the Khans of Bollywood. As I realize this, I am thinking of changing my name back to Azeem Khan. Next year, if you happen to see this same face, with a different surname, walking the red carpets at the Oscars, please do not be shocked.