

Before You Read

By Any Other Name

Make the Connection

Quickwrite

This essay's title comes from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Juliet wishes that Romeo had a different surname because his family and hers are enemies. "What's in a name?" she asks. "That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet."

How important is a person's name? How would you react if someone took your name away and then referred to you only by a number? Quickwrite your response.

Literary Focus

Character and Autobiography

You've seen how fiction writers use methods of **indirect characterization** to create characters that seem real. They *show* (rather than *tell*) what their characters look like and what they say, do, and think. So how does a nonfiction writer (in this case a writer of **autobiography**) reveal what her real-life characters are like? Notice how Santha Rama Rau brings her characters and their conflicts to life. Are her techniques the same as a fiction writer's, or are they different?

Reading Skills

Comparison and Contrast

When the sisters in this account enroll in a school run by teachers from England in their native India, they encounter cultural differences ranging from the different foods the students eat to more important conflicts of values and attitudes. As you read, **compare and contrast** these cultures and the different reactions of the sisters.

Background

At the time of this account (around 1928), India was a colony of Great Britain, and educated Indians were expected to learn English in addition to their native languages. (Many languages are spoken in India.) The headmistress of Rama Rau's school is British, as are most of the students, children of British civil servants sent to India as colonial rulers.

Vocabulary Development

precarious (pri-ker'ē-əs) *adj.*: in danger of falling down; unstable.

intimidated (in-tim'ə-dāt'id) *v.*: made afraid.

provincial (prə-vin'shəl) *adj.*: belonging to a province, especially a rural one; also, unsophisticated.

insular (in'sə-lər) *adj.*: isolated from one's surroundings; narrow-minded.

valid (val'id) *adj.*: meeting the requirements of established standards.

palpitating (pal'pə-tāt'in) *v.* used as *adj.*: throbbing; quivering.

wizened (wiz'ənd) *adj.*: wrinkled and dried up.

sedately (si-dāt'lē) *adv.*: in a calm and dignified manner.

tepid (tep'id) *adj.*: neither hot nor cold; lukewarm.

peevishness (pē'vish-nis) *n.*: irritability.



INTERNET

Vocabulary Practice

Keyword: LE5 10-2

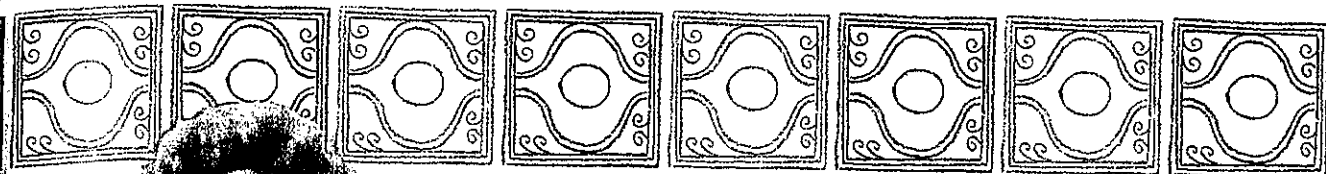
SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills

Understand character and autobiography.

Reading Skills

Compare and contrast.

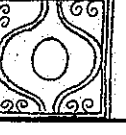
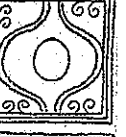
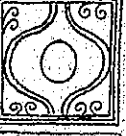


“Suppose we
give you pretty
English names.”

Santha Rama Rau (right),
her older sister, Premila,
and their dog in Simla,
India, 1927.

By Any Other Name

Santha Rama Rau



At the Anglo-Indian¹ day school in Zorinabad 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."

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 postmonsoon² 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

1. **Anglo-Indian:** English and Indian; also refers to the British colonists living in India.

2. **postmonsoon** *adj.*: after the monsoon, or seasonal heavy rains.

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 Hindi³ books were put away, the stories of the Lord Krishna⁴ 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.

3. **Hindi:** official language of India.

4. **Lord Krishna:** in the Hindu religion, human form taken by the god Vishnu. Many Hindu stories recount episodes in the life of Krishna.

Vocabulary

precarious (pri·ker'ē·əs) *adj.*: in danger of falling down; unstable.

intimidated (in·tim'ə·dāt'id) *v.*: made afraid.

provincial (prə·vin'shəl) *adj.*: belonging to a province, especially a rural one; also, unsophisticated.

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valid (val'id) *adj.*: meeting the requirements of established standards.

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 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 kohl⁵ 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

5. kohl (kōl) *n.*: dark powder used as eye makeup.

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 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,⁶ 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 ayah⁷ waking one for tea.

6. chapatis (chə-pāt'ēz) *n.*: thin, flat bread.

7. ayah (ā'yə) *n.*: Anglo-Indian for "nanny" or "maid."

Vocabulary

palpitating (pal'pə-tāt'in) *v.* used as *adj.*: throbbing; quivering.



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-threes⁸ 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 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,⁹ 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,

8. **twos-and-threes**: game similar to tag.

9. **sari** (sā'rē) *n.*: long piece of cloth wrapped around the body. One end forms a skirt; the other end goes across the chest and over one shoulder.

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.”¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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, shouted at the cook’s son, scolded me, hurried me in to supper—it was an entirely usual, wonderful evening.

10. **donkey’s years**: expression meaning “a very long time.”

11. **jasmine** (jaz'min) *n.*: tropical plant with fragrant flowers.

Vocabulary

wizened (wiz'ənd) *adj.*: wrinkled and dried up.

sedately (si·dāt'lē) *adv.*: in a calm and dignified manner.

tepid (tep'id) *adj.*: neither hot nor cold; lukewarm.

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 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



Interior of a historic mansion in Goa, India.

tonga¹² 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 coolies¹³ 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 peevishness.

12. *tonga* *n.*: two-wheeled carriage.

13. *coolies* *n.*: unskilled laborers.

Vocabulary

peevishness (pē'vish·nis) *n.*: irritability.

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 concerned 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," Premila added. "So I don't think we should go back to that school."

Mother looked very distant and was silent a long time. At last she said, "Of course not, darling." She sounded displeased.

We all shared the curry she was having for lunch, and afterward I was sent off to the beautifully familiar bedroom for my siesta. I could hear Mother and Premila talking through the open door.

Mother said, "Do you suppose she understood all that?"

Premila said, "I shouldn't think so. She's a baby."

Mother said, "Well, I hope it won't bother her."

Of course, they were both wrong. I understood it perfectly, and I remember it all very clearly. But I put it happily away, because it had all happened to a girl called Cynthia, and I never was really particularly interested in her. ■

Meet the Writer

Santha Rama Rau

A Stranger in Her Own Land

Santha Rama Rau (1923–) was born into one of India's most influential families but has spent most of her life in other lands. Her father was a knighted diplomat, her mother a social reformer. Santha Rama Rau made her first trip to England at the age of six and returned for a much longer stay when she was eleven. In 1939, as war was breaking out in Europe, Lady Rama Rau took her two daughters back to India for safety. Feeling somewhat like an outsider, Santha made a conscious effort to reorient herself to her homeland and her extended family, and she recorded her impressions in her first



book, *Home to India* (1944). In 1947, she witnessed the turmoil of India's independence from Britain. Five years later she married an American and settled in New York City.



Rama Rau eventually published many insightful travel books, as well as two novels, *Remember the House* (1956) and *The Adventuress* (1970). She also adapted E. M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India* into a play. Her autobiography *Gifts of Passage*, from which this selection is excerpted, was published in 1961.

Response and Analysis

Reading Check

1. Why are Santha and Premila sent to the English school?
2. How does the headmistress react to their names? What does she do?
3. Name two ways in which the Indian girls who have been at the school awhile imitate the English girls.
4. Why does Premila take Santha out of school in the middle of the day?

Thinking Critically

5. What does the mother mean when she makes the remark on page 114 about burying a dog's tail? Do her daughters' experiences in school prove she is right or wrong? Explain.
6. **Compare and contrast** aspects of Indian life and values with the values promoted in the English school. What other examples of cultural differences do you find in this story? 
7. The selection has two **main characters** (Santha and Premila) and two **subordinate characters** (the mother and the headmistress). How would you describe each character's traits? Find details of **characterization** to support your descriptions.
8. Based on the last paragraph, explain how Santha resolves her **conflict** with the headmistress.
9. How do you think Santha 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 notes from page 112—have your ideas changed? How?) 

10. This story takes place more than seventy years ago and half a world away. Do you think events like these stemming from prejudice take place today in other settings? Explain. Then, express what you think is the story's **theme**, or insight about life.

Extending and Evaluating

11. Santha Rama Rau doesn't directly tell us her thoughts and feelings as she looks back on her experiences as a five-year-old. Do you think her story would have been more powerful, or less, if she'd stated her thoughts and feelings directly? Explain.

WRITING

Between Two Worlds

Rama Rau had the experience of living in two cultures. Can you think of someone—a relative, friend, or neighbor—who has come to this country and has had to adapt to American ways? Write a short biographical narrative describing the person and some experiences he or she had. If you don't know anyone personally, research and write about an author such as Julia Alvarez or Judith Ortiz Cofer.

➤ Use "Writing a Biographical Narrative," pages 122–129, for help with this assignment.

Name Yourself

Think 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. Visualize yourself as the bearer of that name. Then, write a brief **character sketch** of yourself with your new name.



Literary Skills
Analyze character.

Reading Skills
Compare and contrast.

Writing Skills
Write a biographical narrative. Write a character sketch.