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A DIASPORIC OVERCOAT?

Naming and affection in Jhumpa Lahiri's

The Namesake

Starting as an analysis of the relation between (self)-naming and (dis)-affection in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel The Namesake, this paper suggests that the problems described and their critical reception can be seen to reflect more substantial problems permeating contemporary discussions around so-called immigrant or diasporic literature and culture, and wider debates around multiculturalism and identity politics. It argues that discussions of diasporic literature are limited by the use of diaspora as an exclusive explanatory framework, neglecting the manifold, relational, and potentially conflicting dimensions of difference in cultural groups, as well as intercultural and transcultural differences and processes of differentiation. If used thus, the concept of diaspora does not suffice to explain and theorize some key aspects of what has come to be called diasporic literature.

Keywords diaspora; literature; American; immigration; novel; contemporary

"Don't stand there chattering to yourself like that," Humpty Dumpty said, looking at her for the first time, "but tell me your name and your business."

"My name is Alice, but"—

"It's a stupid name enough!" Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. "What does it mean?"

"Must a name mean something?" Alice asked doubtfully.

"Of course it must," Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh: "my name means the shape I am—and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost." (Carroll 219)

[T]he power to name, to inscribe, to describe, to essentialize, implies a power to invoke a world of moral relationships, a power underlined in the myth of Genesis. Naming constitutes a forceful act of leadership in its own right. (Werbner, "Essentialising Essentialism" 239)

Writing like a native

In reviewing Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), David Kipen writes that the protagonist's true identity is "hung up somewhere between India and the United States" (2), that "[n]ames have always been contested territory in immigrant families" (2), and finally that "[i]n the world of literature, Lahiri writes like a native" (3). The first quotation appears to suggest that the protagonist, the son of Indian immigrants, has a true identity to which he might have access were it not in fact suspended in midair, in the form of a letter bearing his name that never arrives. The second indicates that names and naming are of importance for all immigrants, possibly more so than for "natives", while the final comment could imply that Lahiri is a literary immigrant to the country of good writers where she writes "like", but is not, a "native".¹

I suggest that such statements, recurring in several reviews from the *Washington Post* to *The New York Times*, are indicative of more substantial problems permeating contemporary discussions—not only reviews²—around so-called immigrant or diasporic literature and culture. The wider ongoing debates around multiculturalism and identity politics in the US do not simplify the issue. The quotations above refer to three pertinent aspects of diaspora: (ethnic) identity, naming and belonging. They are not easily dealt with, particularly because they are intrinsic to diasporic studies and conventionally belong to the larger framework of postcolonial discourses. Furthermore, they have also been the subject of discussion in fields such as philosophy, political theory and social psychology, and therefore carry multiple contexts and implications outside postcolonial discourses. I suggest that this categorizing unsettles both the review and to a certain extent discussions of so-called diasporic literature: by using the concept(s) of diaspora as an exclusive explanatory framework, one risks neglecting "the interrelationships among various, often conflicting dimensions of difference (differentiation) in cultures, such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, language, region, or age" (Lenz 362, emphasis in original), as well as intercultural and transcultural differences and processes of differentiation. The concept(s) of diaspora(s) lacks a suitably complex formulation, one which adequately explains several contemporary features of so-called diasporic literature. I argue that a number of potentially insoluble uncertainties remain at its core and that the concept should be treated with caution.³ Indeed, one might ask what exactly counts as diasporic literature. This essay addresses these problems by discussing the function of naming in Lahiri's allegedly "typical" South Asian diasporic novel in the light of the theoretical frameworks of diaspora and/or postcolonial theory, specifically the South Asian diaspora in the US.

A diasporic overcoat? Naming and affection in *The Namesake*

Jhumpa Lahiri is a relatively new star on the American literary scene. Her first book, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, a short story collection, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. *The Namesake* (2003) is her first novel. More than other South Asian writers (e.g. Gita Mehta, Ved Mehta, Meera Nair, Anita Desai) who are perpetual migrants or travellers, Lahiri's life story demonstrates most of the prototypical elements of the South Asian American diaspora, associating her with one *specific* diaspora. In fact, she could be

termed a quintessentially displaced person in a double diaspora, once from India, then from the UK. Born in London in 1967 as the daughter of Bengali parents, she moved to the US as a child.

Lahiri's biography, demonstrating prototypical diasporic issues, raises the question of whether it can be spoken of as diasporic. The Indian diaspora is usually identified by the umbrella term "Asian American" or is labelled "South Asian". It has arisen, as any diaspora does, from political and social processes (Ma 4), the Immigration Act of 1965 and a certain idea of multiculturalism.⁴ There is thus always a political background to "Asian American" studies (Grice 149), because "Asian America is formulated by immigration policy and Asian American demographics is dictated by US policy on immigration" (Ma 3). After 1965, Asian American immigration into the US was motivated largely by professional considerations and so constitutes a third kind of diaspora as defined by Fludernik ("Introduction" xiii), in addition to the two types that Vijay Mishra identifies (422–27).

"The problem lies in equating the diaspora with every form of migration or with every perception of powerlessness" (Paranjape 239): the Asian American diaspora of today, though formed by US immigration policy, cannot be properly characterized as powerless, since it consists largely of professionals with university degrees⁵ who entered the US volitionally and who did not experience separation from the homeland as a rupture which becomes "a trauma around an absence that because it cannot be fully symbolized becomes part of the fantasy itself" (Mishra 423). This signals that the South Asian diaspora is anything but monolithic, as sociological studies recognize more than literary diasporic theories, and its complexities cannot be accounted for by conceptions that are geared exclusively towards the Jewish diaspora, for example. Many contemporary diasporas result from migration triggered by the global market economy rather than purely imperialist national ventures, although the latter are still a source of dispersal of peoples from throughout the formerly colonized world. This should be remembered when identifying Lahiri as a South Asian American writer and her writings as diasporic, especially since her novel opens in 1968, shortly after the Immigration Act of 1965, aimed at recruiting professionals from overseas.

The entire novel hinges on a name: Gogol. Gogol is the protagonist and, beyond addressing obvious questions of personal identity, telling his story through a focus on his name reflects crucial issues of cultural identity, diaspora and multiculturalism. Gogol's story is dominated by the effect of his name on his relationships to family, friends and lovers; in other words on his affections. Gogol's parents, Ashoke and Ashima, belong to the migration wave of professionals to the US at the end of the 1960s.⁶ Naming and affection are linked from the start:

When she calls out to Ashoke, she doesn't say his name. Ashima never thinks of her husband's name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety's sake, to utter his first. It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do. Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over. (2)

Names are intimate, likened to a physical caress. It is not the utterance of the name that establishes intimacy but, on the contrary, the non-utterance. Ashima does not learn her

husband's name until after their wedding, but even before she meets him, she slips into his shoes, their sweat mingles and she experiences physical intimacy: "It was only after the betrothal that she'd learned his name" (9). It is not surprising, therefore, that the parents find themselves in a serious dilemma when they discover that they cannot take their newly born son from the US hospital until he is named. This is where Gogol's story starts. The changes that he and his name(s) undergo are identified in six stages, outlined below.

I Lost in transit

An Indian grandmother is authorized to name the child. She has posted a letter with the name to the US but the letter fails to arrive; she then falls into a coma and dies without having revealed the name. Not only does the original name from the home country never arrive—identities recurrently get lost within diasporic situations, inter- and intra-nationally—but more importantly the letter is *lost in transit*; it might yet arrive some time in the future. There is, therefore, a "real" name for Gogol, his original one, which no one knows and which remains an *absence*; simultaneously it remains an overshadowing *presence* because everybody knows it *does* exist—somewhere. Consequently, the name in transit is a signifier that, leaving the home country but never reaching its destination, remains unknown and unknowable; its absence comes to signify without the signifier being named. Gogol's Indian name is therefore at least twice removed and so remains part of the realm of the imaginary, with an imaginary connection to the homeland due to its origin and an imaginary connection to its destiny due to its constantly deferred arrival. At this heart of the fantasy about a true and original name, therefore, is difference: an absence and a constantly deferred presence. Given the significance of the travel trope in postcolonial theory, it is ironic that, at the heart of Gogol's problematic name and identity, something is lost during travel.

II Singularity

Ashoke and Ashima subsequently bestow on their son a provisional, pet name, Gogol, to identify him for bureaucratic purposes and to tide him over until his real name arrives. But the name they, or his father, give him is not really a first name: it is the last name of a Russian writer. Initially, the young Gogol is not aware of his name's heritage and accepts it simply as signifying who he is for his family. When he enters kindergarten, his parents want him to use his "good" name, "Nikhil", the name for the outside world, those who are beyond the circle of family affection. But he does not want this new name: "He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know. Who doesn't know him" (56). So he insists on remaining Gogol. In a crucial scene Gogol realizes that his personal name has no history, neither in his culture, his family nor anywhere else. Looking at the names on graves at a cemetery, he cannot find his name. He realizes that nobody else has his name (68ff.) and that, to make matters worse, he has a "last name turned first name" (78). His name starts to become estranged from him, he feels ambivalent about it. Again, details about the his name's fate and his "relationship" towards it are revealing, for his realization occurs in a cemetery, where names signify people no longer materially present, where personal histories are abbreviated, and names and dates converge in a

material location. Divergent pasts and life stories merge into the space of a continual presence: just like star-gazing means looking into a past in which every spot of light has a different age, cemeteries freeze the past(s) of the life stories signified by the names on the tombs into the present moment of scrutiny. Further, his realization about the particulars of his name creates a second absence: that of a cultural history in relation to his name. Even had his father not told him the particularities of the story behind his name, they would be perceived as idiosyncratic, accidental rather than cultural. As a first name, “Gogol” is indeed a singularity. No external meaning comes with it: it is Gogol’s alone. To complicate things, as a last name it does have a cultural history and it relates to his father’s survival in a train accident; yet no one else has previously had this as a first name. The simplistic but conventional opposition between invention and authenticity whereby one either innovatively invents one’s own identity or discovers one’s true authentic self in the process of maturing has become complicated.⁷

III Donning an overcoat

At school Gogol starts hating his name because he realizes that it originally belonged to the mentally troubled Russian writer genius, a heritage he does not want to identify with. At high school his name becomes explicitly linked to affection for the first time when, after initially refusing to date, go to dances or parties, he finally meets a girl. Reluctant to give his “awkward” name, he chooses Nikhil—his good name—on the spur of the moment.⁸ Kissing her, he is excited, feels brave, “protected as if by an invisible shield” (96). When his friends ask him,

[h]e shakes his head in a daze, as astonished as they are, elation still welling inside him. “It wasn’t me,” he nearly says. But he doesn’t tell them that it hadn’t been Gogol who’d kissed Kim. That Gogol had had nothing to do with it. (96)

He is only able to make contact because he adopts a name which is formally his, but because it lacks a history seems not to belong to him. He can presumably fill its emptiness with whatever meaning he chooses. Indeed, he feels safest when he throws on this “false” identity, the “wrong” name “without a past”, someone else’s overcoat, although ironically it is part of his identity, even though marked by an absence. Equating name and identity is misleading—he *is* not his name—and nothing will change physically when he adopts a different name. In despising his name, he does not fully despise himself, yet who he feels he is does relate to his name, its singularity and oddity. In changing his name, not only does he change his “overcoat” and his behaviour towards others but he also changes who he is, if that means his past, the complex concoction of his personal and cultural identity up to this point. Again, this is a play with difference.

IV The doppelgänger

Finding that with his good name and allegedly new identity he feels different, Gogol legally changes his name when he goes to college, saying “I hate the name Gogol [. . .] I’ve always hated it” (102). One could argue that this change is part of growing up. But

Lahiri makes it clear that his new name: “as Nikhil” (104) allows him to do things and test this feeling out. He first has sexual intercourse with a girl whose name he cannot remember (105). “There’s only one complication: he doesn’t feel like Nikhil” (195). People know him “in the present” not “in the past”: he feels like acting the part of twins in a play, indistinguishable but fundamentally different (105); the narrator likens it to a physical pain. When his parents call him by his new name, he feels it is “correct but off-key” just as when they speak to him in English. Here, issues of personal and cultural identity are linked: Gogol becomes a double, he has a *doppelgänger*, and with it two different histories, identities, affiliations, affections. That this is not just a binary opposition but a complex interplay becomes clear when one considers that “off-key” means a note that is inaccurate in pitch, which still carries traces of the pitch that it diverges from, oscillating between the two. Gogol takes on an *Indian* name, one he has always had but not used. It is part of his family, their cultural past and his past, but it has not been filled with its own past, not in a way that he can identify with. Would he have changed his name had he known the story behind it which his father later tells him? Regardless, his new name allows him to establish several relationships in which the issue of his name inevitably surfaces. Interestingly, his affections in these relationships vary according to his changing relations to his family. The more he detaches himself from his family, the better he feels with his WASP girlfriend. When his father dies and he grows close to his family again, he leaves the girlfriend.

V Namelessness

The penultimate stage of the novel occurs with Gogol’s marriage. His last love—whom his mother sets him up with and whom he marries—knows both his old and new names. She shares his cultural background and is almost family; yet the relation starts to decline when she humiliates him, as he perceives it, by revealing his secret (his name change) to her friends, and then because someone from her past affectionately uses her old nickname, starting an affair. Significantly here his wife as the focalizer refers to Gogol only as “her husband”. Thus, when affection turns into disaffection he no longer has a name but instead becomes “anonymous” or nameless.⁹ The fact that a new name allowed him to approach a woman, while namelessness is a corollary to the loss of affection, adds to the irony. In addition, the focalization on Gogol rather than through Gogol allows no access to his feelings and thoughts, turning him momentarily into a cipher, further reinforcing the absence of his name in the focus of the narrative.

VI Arrivals and departures

Gogol returns to his family or what remains of it, but his mother is just moving back to India. The novel finishes with Gogol finally reading Nikolai Gogol’s story “The Overcoat”. It appears that while his mother literally departs for the home country after her 30 years in the US, Gogol has at least metaphorically arrived at the story that so dramatically changed his father’s life and subsequently his own.

By now it should be obvious that the protagonist’s “real” personal identity, like his cultural identity, remains ultimately indefinable because there is no such thing as a

“real”, “original” identity. The notion of an original name and identity is just that. That he has not one name but several, forming a complex interplay of history, stories and personal and cultural identities, makes sense. For any attempt to focus on one name and circumscribed identity reveals inaccessible absences and deferrals in one’s concept of self and relationships, suggesting that the components of personal and cultural identity do not necessarily create a unified whole; furthermore, they occur across various fields of difference: affections, relations, food, clothing, etc. Gogol consciously chooses a name and identity from his “ethnic” background, but does not have absolute control over it. As the narrator says: “He had tried to correct that randomness, that error. And yet it had not been possible to reinvent himself fully, to break from that mismatched name. His marriage had been something of a misstep as well” (287).

As the concept of culture “disintegrates at first touch into multiple positionings, according to gender, age, class, ethnicity, [... and] culture evaporates into a war of positions, we are left wondering what it might possibly mean to ‘have’ a cultural ‘identity’” (Werbner, “Introduction” 3). It might therefore be more appropriate to talk of subject positions rather than subjectivity. One may sift “one’s traditions and retain some [...] while allowing others to be dissolved” (Kain 241); some character traits can be “assumed like clothing, or embraced through conversion, consumed like food and culture, and practiced by choice” (Ling 227). In the end, however, free choice (or invention) is just as much an illusion as is determination (or authenticity) because of

the irreducible immediacy in which human beings are born in society: not as pure unattached individuals free to choose their social affiliations (whether gender, ethnicity, or class) but as already ascribed members of society [... T]he question of choice here is itself fallacious, for human beings cannot exist as “individuals” before they are born (Chatterjee 232)

Incidentally, the purpose of the name, Nikhil, that Gogol chooses for his “new self”—i.e. feeling more “at home” with it, belonging, becoming inconspicuous—subverts the idea that it is a return to the homeland. It removes him from his family affections. Is his repeated failure to establish a lasting relationship caused by the failed idea of a long-term stable cultural identity? Under what conditions is affection possible? Do we need a name to know who the other is? And that question of who the other is, riddled by fallacies and possible misconceptions, is one to which there is no simple answer as the novel consistently affirms. Finally, Gogol’s affections are in permanent transit, just like his original name. Would he need the concept of a stable personal and cultural identity for a stable relationship, i.e. a marriage with a happy ending? Lahiri does not describe new or entirely unfamiliar phenomena. Rather, in using a unique name as the thematic focus of her book and making it strange, she highlights processes which once naturalized are always likely to be ignored. This is the context in which the reference to Gogol’s short story can best be discussed. The image of the overcoat, if taken as a metaphor for personal and cultural identity, represents the continuously changing subject positions that we don, our “identity choices” and cultural affiliations made in communicating with our surroundings. It could also serve as an ambivalent metaphor for immigration, where the target country’s culture is donned—individually and communally—over the home country’s traditions and values, suggestive of both the old and the new culture. By implication one is never totally free of an overcoat, there is no such thing as a pristine

and authentic identity which might then be covered by a free choice of cultural, personal attire, habits, norms (Brombert 50–55).

A diasporic overcoat? Diaspora in transit

Ali Behdad recently claimed that diaspora and colonial displacement remain largely unexplored (396). However, for about a decade diasporic literature and studies have increasingly attracted attention, especially in postcolonial and multicultural discourses (Fludernik, "Introduction" 2003). One sign that "diaspora" has firmly arrived on the academic map is that its politics are the subject of heated debate. The arguments run along lines similar to those around the terms "postcolonialism", "postcoloniality" and "hybridity": discourses of the latter are critiqued for their "[s]yndicated oppositionality" (Huggan 9), for "marketing the exotic" and for politicizing and mystifying cultural difference (13, 31) now quite comfortably accommodated by hegemony (Hutnyk 119). Collaterally, "[h]ybridity is meaningless as a description of 'culture'" because this "'museumises' culture as a 'thing'" (Werbner, "Introduction" 15) so that the celebration of hybridity by diasporic intellectuals is seen as just a "form of moral self-congratulation" (15). In the more restrained versions of this chorus of excoriation, Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity has to be used differently or redefined for the specific historical background and situation of the US, because it has grown "out of the specific experiences and constellations in colonial and postcolonial India" (Lenz 373). "Diaspora" has achieved a similarly fashionable and "despicable" status. This should not be cause for surprise: according to James Clifford, "in the late 20th century, all or most communities have diasporic dimensions" (quoted in Lenz 376) so that discourses of diaspora even replace those perpetuating the binary relation of minority and majority. Within such ambitious frameworks "[p]ostcolonial narratives of diaspora and exile situate the stranger as the archetypal figure of a globalising modernity" (Werbner, *Imagined Diasporas* 6) and thus run the risk of establishing diaspora as the master trope "for the analysis of modern and postmodern identities and communities" (Lenz 381). When used in the service of an uncritical multiculturalism, "diaspora" tends "to exaggerate cultural 'difference'" (Werbner, "Introduction" 21) and in effect romanticizes itself as the ideal social condition (Paranjape 238)¹⁰ for aspiring cosmopolitans and political dissidents. As Fludernik says, for the politics of identity, multiculturalism and cultural difference, the "move towards privileging diasporic communities within postcolonial literary theory serves to underwrite a politics of dissidence comparable to the colonial politics of insurgency so prominent in Spivak and Bhabha" ("Constitution of Hybridity" 47). Where postcolonial theory markets hybridity, diaspora, and so on, as ideals of "oppositional, redemptive, transformative" communities (Behdad 399), their factual conditions are uneven, unequal (400), often characterized by hardship and exploitation rather than a preoccupation with an enlightened, politically dissident consciousness.

Obviously, the Indian diaspora in the US, largely the result of immigration policy, differs in history and characteristics from other diasporas inside and beyond the US. As Fludernik says: "Nobody has the same dream entirely; and nobody's diaspora therefore looks wholly like their neighbor's" ("Introduction" xi). The consequences of this deceptively simple statement should be emphasized in the face of wholesale representations of "diaspora" as an exclusively privileged and salutary epistemological framework.

Holistic and exclusive conceptions of diaspora tend to posit unity (even if imaginary) where there is none, except possibly for legal and expressly political ascriptions and labels. Even an imaginary unity is fractured, as appears in symbolic struggles (over food, clothing, relationships, etc.) that occur between different diasporas but also within a single diaspora across several fields of difference. Diaspora conceptions always risk diluting acute identity politics because they inadvertently downplay the fact that identities, intra- and inter-diasporic, personal and cultural, “are founded in antagonism” (Appiah 106),¹¹ and facilely celebrate multiple identities while ignoring the need created by politics and issues of agency, for alignment with certain positions. Charles Altieri describes this structural problem:

it is comparatively easy to recognize the tensions between ideals of identity politics and efforts to create a heterogeneous multicultural stage on which competing versions of identity can coexist. The challenge is figuring out how alternatives might be possible [. . .] [T]he effort to construct identity gets transformed into a celebration of participating in multiple identities, and sophisticated theory provides a self-congratulatory alternative to the kind of cultural work that requires aligning the self with specific roles and fealties. (38)¹²

Diaspora conceptions that ignore this are in a double bind: they posit a cultural identity, albeit an imaginary one, while working within a framework that would seem to favour multiple subject positions over subjectivity. As Fludernik points out, diaspora politics is a politics of difference. Accordingly, the function of diaspora appears as the attempt to resolve the problems underlying the concept of individualistic hybridity in a shift towards an identity politics which answers to the tensions in the contemporary politics of multiculturalism (“Introduction” xiv). However, although she identifies as individualistic only one of the two meanings of Bhabha’s hybridity (stating that the other is functional rather than ontological), diaspora politics needs to be a politics not of difference—which inevitably tends to become hypostatized—but of differences in order to address “the interrelationships among *various, often conflicting dimensions of difference* (differentiation) in cultures” (Lenz 362, emphasis in original). “Diaspora” is only one possible overcoat in which “diasporic” literature (and thus *The Namesake*) can cloak itself; it is only one, albeit powerful, ascription available, not only for identity politics on the stage of multiculturalism but also for grappling with the complexities of literature per se. As the sole overcoat, it cannot possibly do justice to literary texts.¹³

It is customary for any critical term eventually to come under attack for being too exclusive, vague, insufficient, for being subject to semantic sprawl. “Diaspora” has fared no better than most, and this essay partly collaborates in that demotion. However, responses which make the term more inclusive (of even more differences) or more exclusive (more precisely specifying diverse diasporic communities and their literature) are dubious. Although this paper might appear to differentiate the concept to the point where it is no longer serviceable as a term for a complex phenomenon (because only details can be sensibly grasped), or widen it to apply to more diverse diasporas (and thus potentially lose sight of the specifics of each diaspora), it does not endorse that particular rhetoric of complaint. This analysis aims to reinforce awareness of the inherently political and heuristic function of “diaspora” and to caution against perceiving it as an ontological and/or epistemologically privileged site of analysis.

Conclusion: it could not have happened otherwise

The Namesake's accomplishment is in analysing how personal and cultural identities and processes establish differences and differentiation, including the recognition of something by a name. These are seen as complexly interwoven and working across several fields. Among them, diaspora vs surrounding nation/nationality is only one differentiation, though decidedly a powerful one. The entire novel underwrites the impossibility of a monolithic personal and cultural identity drawn from our various names and their meanings in the context of our diverse affections. It also emphasizes the importance of our personal and cultural stories, affiliations and affections. These form communities: "without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist" (289). It is also a novel about the South Asian US diaspora, confirming provisionally the existence of a diasporic literature. Arguing otherwise would mean endorsing a politics where a notion of cultural variance can be overcome by a coherent national identity. But Gogol's story is also generally about naming and the inherent strangeness in names and naming, which personal and cultural naturalization blunts. Diaspora, immigration and acculturation are simply fields in which that strangeness most patently comes to the fore, demanding a response.

Notes

- 1 Many reviews misrepresent aspects of the story by artificially opposing ordinary "native" experience and extraordinary immigrant experience: Gogol is inaccurately described "as hyphenated an American as his parents" (Kipen 2); his "experiences with girls and sex are affecting, blissfully ordinary" and his parents are "often stymied by low-level bureaucrats" (Tilghman 1).
- 2 For example, Nelson argues for a "shared subcontinental experience and consciousness" (xi); Tapping contends that "writing by immigrants from the Indian subcontinent is concerned with personal and communal identity, recollection of the homeland, and the active response to this 'new' world" (285).
- 3 Zygmunt Bauman and Jonathan Friedman, for example, have used a more complex view of diaspora and migration, often rooted in quantitative research or ethnographic fieldwork, than literary critics. For a literary investigation their results are helpful reminders of complexity but seldom useful for analysis.
- 4 Numbers of immigrants depend on the source. Paranjape estimates *c.* 11 million, but also claims that recent estimates figure *c.* 20 million (232). The *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (2000) estimates *c.* 11 million Asians, of which *c.* 8 million are foreign born; South Asians make up *c.* 1.679 million.
- 5 Forty-three per cent of Asian Americans currently officially residing in the US—a higher percentage than for other US diasporas—have a BA or other higher degree (*Statistical Abstracts of the United States*). The average South Asian immigrant/diasporic is in the high socio-economic bracket.
- 6 The novel is an elaboration of the short story "The Third and Final Continent" in Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*.
- 7 For an excellent discussion see Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* 17–21.

- 8 It is ironic that he substitutes for his unwanted name “Gogol”, “Nikhil”, which echoes the Russian writer’s first name “Nikolay”.
- 9 Disaffection, expressed through anonymity, contrasts structurally to the novel’s opening, where *not* using her husband’s name is a token of affection for Ashima. Gogol and his wife Moushumi reverse their Indian tradition, or, more radically, abandon it during acculturation. Notably, as a couple, they have no Indian friends.
- 10 Mishra, for example, argues that diaspora is attractive because it is “not linked to the control of the nation’s social, political and cultural myths” (441). This is untrue especially of the US, whose immigrants constitute a defining and important aspect of national identity.
- 11 This also implies that the diasporic imaginary, or imaginaries, is/are at least as much a product of an “*outside*” of as of an “*inside*” of diaspora, in fact a complex field that offers itself up for identification and identity politics from a whole array of (subject) positions.
- 12 According to Jonathan Friedman, this “serious escalation of identity politics” reflects “declining global hegemony” as “new solidarities” form in an “era of increasing disorder” (233).
- 13 Most diasporic overcoats do not fit as well as they should. This is a potential experience in much personal and cultural identity “building”. In a rough paraphrase of Clyde Kluckhohn: *everyone* is simultaneously alike, the same and different. Zygmunt Bauman emphasizes that there can be no self-determination without social solidarity.

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