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Writing India Anew

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A Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

Peter Liebrechts

Jhumpa Lahiri as a 'Global' Author

One of the most well-known and popular representatives of contemporary Indian English fiction is Jhumpa Lahiri (1967-), who was born in London as the daughter of Bengali Indian immigrants and moved to the US when she was three. As an academic who received several degrees in literature, including a PhD in Renaissance Studies, she is also a successful author who won the American Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000 for her debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Her first (and until now only) novel *The Namesake* (2003) was adapted for the screen, and another short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), immediately reached the number one spot on *The New York Times* bestseller list on publication. Many of Lahiri's feelings about growing up in the US are reflected in *The Namesake*, and in this context it is significant to note that Lahiri, seeing herself as an outsider but not as a foreigner, has stated that she feels more comfortable in America than in India (Minzesheimer).

Given the fact that in her work she focuses on aspects of Indian immigration in America, including the 'idea of India' for second- and third-generation immigrants born in the US, Lahiri can be seen as a 'global' author whose output challenges any assigning of her work to a too-specific national, monocultural or transnational canon. Although globalisation or diaspora studies or intercultural studies may suffer less from a too-strict adherence to national or cultural boundaries, in their approaches there is often the danger that any text is turned into a sort of sociological or political or anthropological document at the expense of its literariness. In this I agree with Ruediger Heinze who has argued that the use of diaspora as an exclusive framework to read texts labelled as diasporic fails to take into account some key aspects. **Most importantly, as 'the sole overcoat' or 'ontological and/or epistemologically**

privileged site of analysis', it 'cannot possibly do justice to literary texts' (Heinze 2007: 199).

The Namesake: A Return to a More Modernist (Neo-)Realism

This is not to deny that much valuable work has been done by critics approaching Lahiri's *The Namesake* from various theoretical angles, especially in terms of diaspora¹, but in this chapter I want to look at the adopted literary techniques in the novel, thus treating it in terms of its literariness. When Lahiri's text is set alongside such novels as J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) and *Saturday* (2005), to name but a few, *The Namesake* can be seen as part of a general trend in English fiction of returning to a more modernist (neo-)realism, without the naiveté of nineteenth-century realism because of the poststructuralist/postmodernist revolution.

Lahiri in her novel works very much in the tradition of literary realism, which offers a wealth of detailed, metonymic descriptions enabling the reader to imaginatively (re)create the settings and characters. *The Namesake* thus seems at first a *lisible* text (to use Roland Barthes' term) in its depiction of the particulars of Ashima's and Ashoke's looks (8-9), of their apartment and neighbours (29-32), and of giving specific names of products, both American and Bengali, such as Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts (1), Jell-O (5), Ashima's Murshidabad silk sari (2), and a list of Gogol's toys bought at yard sales, 'Tinkertoys, Lincoln Logs, a View-Master, an Etch-A-Sketch' (52). Such details serve not only to create a sense of authenticity, but through the careful balance between narrative perspective and focalisation, the use of names also become a means through which the characters show their wonder at the new world and come to terms with it by familiarising it. This applies both to the first-generation Gangulis in America, for whom much in the US is alien, as to Gogol when he is still growing up, and for whom any world would still be new. Thus the text suggests also on this level to what degree naming is a source of empowerment as well as a source of stability and comforting certainty. We may also see this in the way we get specific details of Ashima's stay in hospital, where she evokes for herself her parents' flat in Calcutta, 'on Amherst Street', with a servant pouring tea and serving 'Marie biscuits', and her father listening to the 'Voice of America' (4-5).

In the same vein, Lahiri creates historical contexts through period details, such as 'the riots that took place during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago' and the fact that Dr Benjamin Spock was sentenced to two years in jail 'for threatening to counsel draft evaders',

details read by Ashoke in a *Boston Globe* from July 1968. Lahiri later refers to the sound of the television of the upstairs neighbours, informing the Gangulis about the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy (31). These details also serve to underscore how much the United States was going through a period of great changes in 1968, the year of Gogol's birth, and that the future would be unpredictable and quite different from the past. Such a symbolic date is representative of the text's use of (not too difficult to decode) symbols and symbolic gestures (of which naming, as we will see, is the most significant). Thus we may see, for example, that before Ashima actually meets Ashoke, who is visiting with his parents, she sees his pair of shoes, with the initials U.S.A., which she then steps into, as if not only experiencing a closer physical contact with a possible prospective husband, but also trying on a new continent for size.

Apart from adapting the conventions of literary realism, *The Namesake* also emphasises the act of reading, with many references to classic realist texts, as if the text were self-consciously inscribing itself into the tradition. Generally, the Gangulis are a family of readers. Thus Ashima is said to have been working toward a college degree in English before her marriage, and been teaching neighbourhood schoolchildren about Western culture, 'helping them to memorise Tennyson and Wordsworth' and 'to understand the difference between Aristotelian and Shakespearean tragedy' (7). Ashoke is depicted as a voracious reader when a teenager, going through all of Dickens and also the works of Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham, although his favourites are the Russians, a love he inherited from his paternal grandfather, a professor of European literature at Calcutta University. In fact, it is a Russian author who becomes a saving grace in his life. In 1961, at the age of twenty-two, while taking the train to spend time with his grandparents and read to his grandfather who had recently gone blind, and who actually will give his collection of books to his grandson, Ashoke survives a train crash only because he is noticed waving a page from 'The Overcoat', from an edition of short stories by Nikolai Gogol which he had been reading on the train.

The Inspiration Behind *The Namesake*: Nikolai Gogol's 'The Overcoat' (1842)

In honour of the writer who literally saved his life, Ashoke decides to name his first-born Gogol. For him the name becomes a locus of all of his feelings of survival, trauma, belonging and nostalgia. 'The Overcoat' is Ashoke's favourite story, and in *The Namesake* it becomes a self-reflexive, even allegorical tool for the compositional process and possi-

bilities of interpretation of the novel itself. 'The Overcoat' is one of the most important texts in Russian literature as it may be said to have heralded the beginnings of literary realism in Russia, a fact acknowledged by a famous statement often attributed to Dostoevsky (Gogol 1995: 346), quoted by Ashoke in *The Namesake*: 'We all came out of Gogol's overcoat.' (78) This statement, of course, gains in meaning in view of the plot of the novel.

In an interview about her novel, Lahiri gave the following response as to the influence of Gogol on her writing:

I'm not sure influence is the right word. I don't turn to Gogol as consistently as I do to certain other writers when I'm struggling with character or language. His writing is more overtly comic, more antic and absurd than mine tends to be. But I admire his work enormously and reread a lot of it as I was working on the novel, in addition to reading biographical material. 'The Overcoat' is such a superb story. It really does haunt me the way it haunts the character of Ashoke in the novel. I like to think that every writer I admire influences me in some way, by teaching me something about writing. Of course, without the inspiration of Nikolai Gogol, without his name and without his writing, my novel would never have been conceived. In that respect, this book came out of Gogol's overcoat, quite literally.²

summary

In 'The Overcoat', published in 1842, Gogol depicts the life of one Akaky Akakievitch Bashmatchkin, a poor government clerk and copyist of documents in St. Petersburg. Akaky is not held in high esteem by his colleagues, although he is a hard worker with a passionate zeal for copying. As his threadbare coat is the object of many jokes, he decides to save up money to buy a new one when his tailor Petrovich tells him the old coat is irreparable. Akaky's enthusiasm for a new coat even overcomes his devotion to copying, and when he finally is able to have Petrovich make one of the finest materials, the new coat suddenly makes him more respectable and liked by his colleagues. Unfortunately, after a party in honour of his new coat, Akaky is robbed of it by two ruffians in the street. He unsuccessfully seeks the help of the authorities to recover the coat, and is treated with great disdain by a high-ranking general to whom Akaky also turned for help. Falling ill with fever, Akaky curses the general just before he dies, after which his ghost is seen haunting the streets of St. Petersburg and robbing overcoats from people, including the cloak of the general, after which Akaky's ghost is seen no more.

Ashoke in *The Namesake* likes 'The Overcoat' for various reasons. 'Each time he was captivated by the absurd, tragic, yet oddly inspiring

story of Akaky Akakyevich, the impoverished main character who spends his life meekly copying documents written by others and suffering the ridicule of absolutely everyone. His heart went out to poor Akaky, a humble clerk just as Ashoke's father had been at the start of his career'. (14) The Russian tale thus shows Ashoke the possibility of rising above one's station in life and carving out a new life. It is therefore no coincidence that Ashoke is reading this story on the train where he enters into a conversation with a Bengali businessman named Ghosh who urges Ashoke to go out and see more of the world. After the train accident and a long period of convalescence, Ashoke decides to take Ghosh's advice and to go away 'as far as he could from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died' (20), that is, he decides not to continue imitating his father's life and defy conventions and expectations. In other words, Ashoke, unlike Akaky, wants to become more than a mere copier, but like him, he also wants to don a new overcoat.

The ambiguity of taking on a new identity in *The Namesake* is much greater than in 'The Overcoat'. After Akaky has bought the new overcoat and gains the admiration and respect of his colleagues, he is offered a party by one of his superiors, who lives in one of the best parts of the city. The narrator gives in detail a picture of the luxuriousness of the area and of the chief's house, where Akaky's cloak is the object of much praise. Given the costs of Akaky's new coat, it may be said to represent false vanity, as it was really beyond his means. In the case of Ashoke, the donning of a new coat is actually the beginning of a happy new life, whereas it will take Ashima much time to find a balance between two identities. Gogol Ganguli's coat seems to be rather one of many colours before he, at the end of the novel, takes on one which seems the most fitting.

The narrator of 'The Overcoat' excuses himself for the oddness of the protagonist's name, with Bashmatchkin evidently derived from the word 'bashmak' (shoe). He does not explain the name Akaky Akakievitch, but comments that it 'may strike the reader as somewhat strange and contrived, but I can assure him that there was no contrivance in its selection, and that the very circumstances of his naming were such that no other name was possible'. (Gogol 1995: 115-16) This apology is used by Lahiri to serve as an epigraph to *The Namesake*. Akaky Akakievitch is a Russian equivalent for 'John Johnson' and the name thus may be seen as turning him into a sort of Everyman, while the Greek origin of the name as 'a-kakos' emphasises that this is a man 'without evil', 'innocuous'.³

At the beginning of 'The Overcoat', the narrator makes much of the circumstances which gave rise to the strange name of his protagonist, and it is hard not to immediately link his opening scene to that of La-

hiri's novel. (Indeed, when reading 'The Overcoat', Ashoke has to laugh aloud each time while reading 'the account of Akaky's christening, and the series of queer names his mother had rejected' (14).) We are told that Akaky's mother after his birth made all due arrangements to have him baptised. She is offered the choice of three names by the child's godparents, but the mother rejects them as 'poor', after which they offer a list of alternatives, none of which pleases the mother, who sees in this the hand of fate and decides to name her son Akaky after his father – which may offer another etymological explanation for his name, as 'tak kak' means 'just as', thus emphasising the lack of originality and neatly tying the name to his profession of being a copier of documents, almost as if *nomen est omen*.

Names and Naming in *The Namesake*: The Bengali Custom/s of Nomenclature

Names and naming are equally crucial elements in *The Namesake*. Lahiri uses the Bengali custom of nomenclature to great effect, in which each person has two names, a *daknam* or pet name, that is, the name used by family members and friends at home or in private circumstances, and a *bhalonam* or official name, used for documents and in public places. Thus Ashima and Ashoke are more familiarly known as Monu and Mithy respectively. Their 'good' names 'tend to represent dignified and enlightened qualities. Ashima means "she who is limitless, without borders". Ashoke, the name of an emperor, means "he who transcends grief"' (26). Both names indeed turn out to be ominous in the sense of determining their bearers lives. Where Ashima during her first years in America tends to cling to her Bengali past when feeling not at home in the American present, thus acknowledging a borderline, she gradually learns to cope. After Ashoke's death and her children having left the family home, Ashima at the end of the novel decides to spend six months in the US and the other six in India. Here the novel becomes rather over-explicit: 'True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere'. (276)

Ashoke's name is equally fitting. Unlike Ashima, Ashoke tries to forget about his past as much as possible, as it is so much taken up by the traumatic memory of his train accident, which still influences some of his behaviour and habits. Ashoke very much looks forward, emphasised by the fact that the 'Favre Leuba strapped to his wrist is running six minutes ahead of the large gray-faced clock on the wall' of the hospital where Ashima is about to give birth to Gogol (11). Given the importance placed on names, it is striking that in the Ganguli marriage they are not

explicitly used as terms of endearment. Thus Ashima never calls Ashoke by his name, as this is 'not the type of thing Bengali wives do', as it is something intimate, better left unspoken. In fact, she 'never thinks of her husband's name when she thinks of her husband' (2).

In contrast to good names, pet names are usually meaningless, 'deliberately silly, ironic' (16). Moreover, each individual receives his or her own specific name and is not named after family members, as 'individual names are sacred, inviolable' (28) – here the link between a name and an individual rather than communal identity is stressed. When the letter from Ashima's grandmother, containing the name to be given to the baby, fails to arrive, Ashima and Ashoke are not concerned, whereas in India parents sometimes would take years before deciding upon the best possible name. However, the hospital requires a name to be put on the birth certificate. Thus by naming his son 'Gogol' out of reverence for the man who had saved his life, Ashoke gives more weight to a pet name than customary, in contrast to Ashima who, despite understanding his reasons, still regards it as 'only a pet name, not to be taken seriously' (29). Yet the name will determine in a serious manner a great deal of Gogol Ganguli's life. It is therefore highly significant that the letter containing his name is, as Heinze calls it, '*lost in transit*' (194), as it neatly symbolises the loss of Gogol's link to his Indian homeland (just as, as we will see, significant events in his father's and his life also take place on board trains, that is, in transit). At the end of 1969, 'Gogol' becomes his official name when his parents have to fill out a form for a passport when they go to Calcutta for a family visit.

However, when Gogol first enters kindergarten at the age of five, his parents inform him that he will now be called by his good name, Nikhil, which is 'artfully connected to the old. Not only is it a perfectly respectable Bengali good name, meaning "he who is entire, encompassing all", but it also bears a satisfying resemblance to Nikolai, the first name of the Russian Gogol' (56). Yet Gogol does not like the idea that he will now have two names, especially since 'Nikhil' is 'someone he doesn't know. Who doesn't know him' (57). The principal of the school is equally confused by the use of two names, and seeing that Gogol does not really respond to his formal name, she registers him as 'Gogol'.

To avoid the same sort of difficulties they had with Gogol, his parents decide to have the same name serving both as *daknam* and *bhalo-nam* when his sister is born in May 1974, and given the name Sonali, 'she who is golden' (62). Still, at home she is called Sonu, then Sona, and finally Sonia, which 'makes her a citizen of the world. It's a Russian link to her brother, it's European, South American. Eventually it will be the name of the Indian Prime Minister's Italian wife' (62). The

difference between the two children and their meaningful names is made clear through the parallel description of rice ceremony or *annaprasan*, during which a Bengali bab is offered several objects in a ritual to predict the direction their life will take. Where most babies would grab one or more objects, Gogol does not touch anything but simply cries (40), a scene which seems to emphasise the whole uncertainty of his identity or even his unconscious rejection of Bengali customs. To stress how Sonia will be facing fewer difficulties, the narrator describes how she refuses all food at her *annaprasan*, but plays with the dirt and the dollar bill, eliciting a comment by one of the guests that she 'is the true American' (63). This is why we do not see that much of her in the course of the text, and at the end she seems to have attained a problem-free American existence in a straightforwardly happy relationship with Ben, who is half-Jewish, half-Chinese, and raised close to where the Ganguli children grew up. In view of the fact that the majority of diasporic novels are written by women and feature women as suffering the most in the migration process, this is rather striking, to say the least.

Gogol's Wrestling with His Name/Identity – As a Boy, an Adolescent and a Young Adult

It also seems as if Gogol is, in many ways, simply an all-American boy, who as a youth is not very conscious of the possible difference between himself and others. For him, India is indeed an unknown country, and Indian culture something of a minor factor in his life. Ashoke and Ashima try to get their children acquainted with the Bengali language and culture, but they raise them more and more as American children, celebrating Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. And a telling detail lies in the description of the food they buy at the supermarket for their children: 'individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, hot dogs' (65). This recurrent motif of belonging and rootedness through metonymic listing of American products (with metonymy being a hallmark of the conventions of literary realism) also concludes a section describing the longest period of time spent in India by the Ganguli family in 1985. In tune with the choice for literary realism in combination with not so covert symbolism in *The Namesake*, the description of a trip to Delhi and then Agra to see the Taj Mahal evokes the narrative atmosphere of E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View*, as Friedman has rightly noted (117), where Lucy Honeychurch and her aunt have a look at Italy with a Baedeker and are confronted with (in their eyes) the frightening but alluring dangers of being in an alien environment. In *The Namesake* we may read:

They depart from Howrah, that immense, soaring, echoing station, where barefoot coolies in red cotton shirts pile the Gangu-lis' Samsonite luggage on their heads, where entire families sleep, covered, in rows on the floor. Gogol is aware of the dangers involved: his cousins have told him about the bandits that lurk in Bihar, so that his father wears a special garment under his shirt, with hidden pockets to carry cash, and his mother and Sonia remove their gold jewels. (84)

The visit to Agra awakens Gogol's interest in Mughal architecture, but on the way back to Calcutta, 'bad luck trails them'. At Benares, Sonia has an allergic reaction to some jackfruit, and somewhere in Bihar, a businessman in the train is stabbed in his sleep and robbed. On their return to Calcutta, both Gogol and Sonia get ill, and do not recover until it is time to return to the United States. There, they soon feel at home again, once the refrigerator and cupboards are filled 'with familiar labels: Skippy, Hood, Bumble Bee, Land O'Lakes' (87).

This was not Gogol's first visit to India. By the age of ten, Gogol has already visited India four times, and although he does not feel at home in Calcutta, his stays there make him aware of how common his last name 'Ganguli' actually is (67), thereby emphasising a sort of rootedness and familiarity he cannot internalise. The feeling of belonging and not belonging at the same time also permeate an 'American' journey, a school field trip at the age of eleven, which includes a visit to a graveyard, where the children rub the gravestones with pieces of paper and crayons when they discover someone buried there carrying their own names. I agree with Himadri Lahiri that this passage may be seen as 'a metaphor, suggesting Gogol's lack of roots in the country'. Yet I disagree with his observation that Gogol's discovery is 'a source of anxiety for [those] who passionately seek acculturation and integration' (Lahiri 2008: 6). Not only do I doubt whether Gogol himself at this point does not simply consider himself as an American, but this scene at the cemetery also offers a sign of hope about the link between names and identity, as it reveals that the names of several of the dead are no longer in use and, in a manner of speaking, have died out. Thus Gogol sees the graves of Abijah Craven (making him wonder whether it is a man's or a woman's name), Anguish Mather, Peregrine Wotton, Ezekiel and Uriah Lockwood, all of them Puritan names belonging to the 'very first immigrants to America' (71), thus making him see the value and permanence of names in a new relativist perspective. This scene shows how Gogol realises that he has no roots in America, but also that one almost literally can and has to make a name for oneself.

Immediately following is a depiction of Gogol's fourteenth birthday in 1982 at the opening of chapter 4, which is almost fully devoted to

Gogol's wrestling with his name, and ending with him adopting his formal name Nikhil. At his birthday he is given a copy of the short stories of Gogol by his father, who at that point still has not told him about his accident. By this time Gogol has begun to dislike his name, which 'has nothing to do with who he is', as it is neither Indian nor American (76). Gogol also realises that his first name was the author's last name, so that there will be no one in the world who will share his name, not 'even the source of his namesake' (78). As such, the text stresses how much Gogol, at this point, wants to stress each person's unique individuality and identity, apart from any cultural or diasporic context. In this sense, the choice for 'Nikhil' with its overtone of 'nothing' seems to be a double-edged sword in view of subsequent developments.

In his junior year at high school, Gogol's class has to read 'The Overcoat', with the teacher giving them a detailed overview of the author's life on the basis of a full biography on his desk, significantly titled *Divided Soul*.⁴ The portrait painted by the English teacher is not an attractive one, as it presents Gogol as an eccentric and frustrated, melancholy hypochondriac who slowly declined into madness, leaving no wife or children (90-93). Young Gogol Ganguli becomes very much self-aware, and although he refuses to read the story as it 'would mean paying tribute to his namesake' (92), he does feel as if his own work were being criticised when the students complain about the reading assignment. Yet Mr Lawson's description of the Russian's life and character may well be the impetus for Gogol to adopt the name Nikhil when he introduces himself to a girl at a party, and on hearing that it is 'a lovely name', has enough courage to dispense his first kiss, 'protected as if by an *invisible shield*' (my italics). Afterwards he more or less feels that it was not his 'real' self that was able to kiss the girl, as 'Gogol had nothing to do with it' (96). Here the text plays with the possibility of the 'zero' meaning of the name 'Nikhil', and seems used here mainly to present Gogol's self-conscious awkwardness as an American teenager. This is already an indication that too much has been made of the link between a name, loss of cultural identity due to migration and diasporic resettling.

This one-sided approach is also undermined in the novel itself at the opening of chapter 5, which offers all sorts of reasons as to why people would change their names, to account for Gogol's decision to officially change his first name in 1986: 'Though Gogol does not know it, even Nikolai Gogol renamed himself, simplifying his surname at the age of twenty-two from Gogol-Yanovsky to Gogol upon publication in the *Literary Gazette*. (He had also published under the name Yanov, and once signed his work 'OOOO' in honor of the four o's in his full name.)' (97). The latter statement again emphasises how little there actually is

in a name, almost literally represented by four vowels that look rather similar to four zeros, which in turn provide a connection to the name 'Nikhil' and its possible connotation of 'nothing'. Still, although he literally starts a new life as a freshman at Yale under the name Nikhil, he does not feel like himself, especially since he seems unable to integrate his past (as Gogol) with his present.

Ruth, Maxine, Moushumi: The Learning Curve of Gogol's Successive Relationships

Given the fact that Ashoke had a sort of life-altering experience on board a train, it is no surprise that throughout the text some of Gogol's major steps in life are also connected to trains and railway stations (in themselves overt symbols of 'being in transit'). During his sophomore year, he meets his first real girlfriend on a train. Ruth was raised on a hippie commune in Vermont, and it is rather ironic that Gogol feels that his own upbringing is bland and less exotic by comparison with hers. The narrator, using Gogol as focaliser, makes us see how he does see himself less as an American outsider than Ruth and her hippie background (120). In this context, her name may be said to rather ironically evoke the word 'roots'. They start a relationship that lasts for two years, and when they are close to a break-up, the narrative has Gogol again on board a train on his way to meet his father for Thanksgiving. Underway the train has to stop because of a suicide, and when Gogol eventually arrives, his anxious father finally tells him the true reason for his name, and that it represented 'everything that followed' (124). Thus at the symbolic age of 21, Gogol becomes aware that his name actually embodies his father's 'second baptism'.

There is a gap of five years between chapter 5 and chapter 6, which is set in 1994, with Gogol living in New York, having graduated in architecture. At a party he meets Maxine, a graduate of art history and coming from a wealthy family. She lives with her parents in a luxurious house, and Gogol very soon feels at home there and part of the Ratliff family. They seem to have everything his own family never had, not only in a material sense, but also in terms of intellectual conversation and physical contact. Here perhaps the link between the donning of the new overcoat by Akaky in 'The Overcoat' and becoming invited to the world of the rich and the position of Gogol is the most apparent, as it seems at this point he denies his own cultural background and heritage the most.

The end of chapter 6 harks back to the end of chapter 3, where Gogol visited the graveyard containing the Puritan names. Here he visits the private graveyard of the Ratliffs where 'Maxine will be buried one

day' (153), underlining their rootedness and sense of belonging (also evoked a few pages later when Gogol imagines her growing old in the summer residence). There is a great emphasis on the absence of social obligations, as well as on the solitude of the place, very much unlike the vacations to Calcutta with their obligatory family visits, dutiful sightseeing trips, and spending most of the time in the large company of family members. In this way, the presentation of Gogol's own sense of Americanness is rather over-emphasised, and there is a bit of overkill in this regard when at the end of the chapter a guest of the Ratliff's is surprised to hear that Gogol still gets ill during his visits to Asia:

'But you're Indian', Pamela says, frowning. 'I'd think the climate wouldn't affect you, given your heritage'.

'Pamela, Nick's American', Lydia says, leaning across the table, rescuing Gogol from the conversation. 'He was born here.' She turns to him, and he sees from Lydia's expression that after all these months, she herself isn't sure. 'Weren't you?' (157)

It is not until after his father's death that Gogol becomes more aware of his Indian heritage, and consequently, more closely involved with his family. Their plan to visit Calcutta in the summer without Maxine has led to a break-up between the two of them. The restoration of the Indian connection is deepened by his meeting up with Moushumi Mazoomdar, daughter of friends of his parents, whom he vaguely remembers as a bookish girl with a British accent. (She attended Gogol's fourteenth birthday, but spent most of the time reading *Pride and Prejudice* (73), another realist classic.) Having been raised in England before her family moved to the US, Moushumi has lived in Paris after her graduation from Brown, and 'spent the past summer temping, working for two months in the business office of an expensive midtown hotel. Her job was to review and file all the exit surveys left by the guests, make copies, distribute them to the appropriate people' (195). It is hard not to miss again the possible link to the copying existence of the protagonist of 'The Overcoat'. All her life Moushumi had avoided getting involved with Bengali men; her choice for a double major in French had been a means of escape from obligations and expectations: 'Immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge – she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favour of one that had no claim whatsoever'. (214) Having lived in Paris for a while, Moushumi currently lives in New York as a graduate student of French literature, whose intended marriage to an American fell through. This linking up of information suggests that both she and Gogol have had their experi-

ence with prospective American (exogamous) partners, and now have returned to their Indian roots.

Both Gogol and Moushumi feel attracted to one another, an attraction reinforced by their familiarity as children coming from the same background, and very soon they practically live together. Chapter 9 deals with Gogol and Moushumi being married, having done so in Bengali fashion. Friedman has argued that this is 'the first real sign in the novel that Lahiri is not entirely ready to submit that her characters are fully entitled Americans; Lahiri seems to retract her initial endorsement of the idea that an Indian American has every right to feel wholly American only because he has ascended to the upper-middle class. It is ethnic identity, not class, that brings them together' (122). Yet where Moushumi perhaps may not feel truly American, Gogol in many ways still does. This is why their relationship will fail; it is not 'ethnic identity that drives them apart', as Friedman suggests. Moushumi is not able to shed her sense of cosmopolitanism and freedom and to assimilate to an American existence. Significantly, she has not adopted Gogol's family name, not even with a hyphen after her own. When they go to Paris together, Gogol observes how his wife had been able to reinvent herself there and 'realises that this is what their parents had done in America. What he, in all likelihood, will never do' (233). Moushumi's choice for a sort of European performative identity is emphasised by her unwillingness to seek roots under Gogol's name. In fact it is the very importance of names again that crops up symbolically in a scene set a few months after their return, when Moushumi and Gogol attend a party of her friends. At one point the conversation focuses on naming children, with all the consequences of parental decisions involved. When Moushumi informs her friends that her name means 'a damp southwesterly breeze' (and any reader will know that any wind will blow where it will), Gogol is surprised about this, not only because he did not know this, but also because she seemed to want to reveal something about herself to her friends that she had kept hidden from him. When the conversation turns to a possible change of names, Moushumi reveals that Gogol, who is known to them as Nikhil, had changed his, although he had assumed she would never tell anyone. Suddenly he is forced to reveal his *daknam* in public, and feels betrayed by Moushumi, as she knows why he had changed his name. His statement that perfect names for babies do not exist, and that 'human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen' (245), is met with dismissal and silence. On that note the chapter ends.

In the following chapter, set in 1999, one year into their marriage, Moushumi begins to realise that in many ways Gogol had served as a rebound after the break-up with Graham. The sudden death of an ad-

ministrative assistant at university as well makes her see that she needs to take her life into her own hands again; this is reinforced by coming across a letter of a former lover, Dimitri. Unable to pronounce her name, he had called her 'Mouse', which had 'made her feel foolish, but she was aware that in renaming her he had claimed her somehow, already made her his own' (258). Significantly, Gogol never had a name of endearment for Moushumi. She and Dimitri renew their relationship, and in tune with the rest of the novel, it is only appropriate that Gogol should find this out on board the train they take to visit his family for Christmas in 1999. Gogol becomes just as emotionally upset as on the night when his father had told him the reason for his name (282) (thus establishing various links with other incidents involving trains). After Christmas, Moushumi leaves for France.

In the last chapter, set in December 2000, so on the cusp of a symbolic new threshold, Gogol realises how the departure of his mother means that he, in a sense, will lose a home, and despite his years spent away while studying, he never had to take that big leap of turning a wholly different environment into something familiar as his parents had done, who had left everything behind and always experienced a degree of loss in doing so. At their last collective Christmas family gathering, Gogol meditates on how

in so many ways, his family's life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, one incident begetting another. It had started with his father's train wreck, paralyzing him at first, later inspiring him to move as far as possible, to make a new life on the other side of the world. There was the disappearance of the name Gogol's great-grandmother had chosen for him, lost in the mail somewhere between Calcutta and Cambridge. This has led, in turn, to the accident of his being named Gogol, defining and distressing him for so many years. 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. And the way his father had slipped away from them, that had been the worst accident of all, as if the preparatory work of death had been done long ago, the night he was nearly killed, and all that was left for him was one day, quietly, to go. And yet these events have formed Gogol, shaped him, determined who he is. They were things for which it was impossible to prepare but which one spent a lifetime looking back at, trying to accept, interpret, comprehend. Things that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end. (286-87)

I have quoted this long passage as an example of how in such neo-realist texts as Lahiri's, there is still the possibility of a (post-)modern textual self-reference, where Gogol's attempt to find a pattern and meaning in his life is inextricably bound up with a summary of the plot line of the text of which he is the protagonist. In fact, such self-reflective meditations, mirroring textual developments, is what *The Namesake* has in common with the novels by Coetzee, Smith and McEwan I referred to earlier. It is no coincidence, then, that at this point the protagonist of *The Namesake* finds the edition of Gogol given to him by his father in 1982, bearing the inscription 'For Gogol Ganguli ... The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name' (288). He turns to the first story in the book, 'The Overcoat', having 'salvaged it by chance, as his father was pulled from a crushed train forty years ago' (291). **The very last scene suggests that Gogol has finally accepted his heritage when he begins to read, thus offering us both closure (as in a nineteenth-century realist novel) and an indeterminate open ending (to mark the text as a neo-realist one).**

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Sen 2009, who reads *The Namesake* in the context of the 'Bengal connection' – the history of Bengal's commercial and intellectual contacts with New England from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries – as a diasporic novel by which the Bengal heritage is inscribed on to the cultural topography of America. The result is a questioning of the transatlantic connection as the sole marker of multiethnic 'Americanness' and a restoration of the awareness of the importance of the American-Bengal contact in the production of what Sen calls 'intrinsic otherness' (62); Alfonso-Forero 2007 focuses on Ashima as exemplifying motherhood as a site for agency for negotiating a transnational identity for the postcolonial female subject in diaspora.
- 2 See <http://hinduism.about.com/library/weekly/extra/bl-jhumpainterview.htm>.
- 3 Indeed, as Schillinger 1972 has suggested, Akaky's name may evoke St Acacius, one of the many saints of the Orthodox Church, and Gogol in 'The Overcoat' may be creating a parody of the hagiographic tradition.
- 4 This is most likely the 1973 translation by Nancy Amphoux, *Divided Soul: The Life of Gogol*, first published in French in 1971 by the Russian-born French author Henri Troyat (1911-2007), known as a novelist but perhaps even more for his biographies of, among others, Chekhov and Tolstoy.