

# **Immigration: ‘A Lifelong Pregnancy’? An Analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction**

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## Chapter 2

### Transnational Belonging in *The Namesake*

Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), takes up many of the themes tackled in *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). The topics are roughly the same: immigration, assimilation, family relations, traveling, and an abiding tension while translating between Indian/Bengali and American cultures leading to fraught identity-formation processes. Hailed as an ethnic 'Bildungsroman' (Song, Concilio, De), *The Namesake* tells the coming-of-age story of Gogol Ganguli, the American-born son of Indian immigrants, spanning from his birth in 1968 to adulthood in the year 2000. Lahiri examines the social and, most of all, the psychological stages he goes through while dealing with his hyphenated status and eventually developing a transnational identity. In fact, all the main characters in the novel straddle multiple nation-spaces and cultures, blending elements from past and present in their efforts to forge a sense of identity. This identity is fractured, but by denying a single, homogeneous notion of self it actually acknowledges "the individual's affiliations to multiple nations and/or cultures" (De 2010: 12).

Consequently, Lahiri's characters become hypermobile global citizens, comfortably negotiating several spaces while transcending traditional geographic, social, and political boundaries. Therefore, I will argue that while it still includes numerous instances of cultural translations, her second book slowly moves the focus towards the hybridity of second generation characters. Moreover, she picks up the thread of the last story in *Interpreter of Maladies*, namely "The Third and Final Continent", and looks at the transnational potential of some of her first-generation immigrants and most of their children. Ashoke (Gogol's father) and Ashima (his mother) are more rounded versions of the narrator and his wife, Mala, in the above mentioned short story.

*The Namesake* is also a 'Familienroman' because it features four generations of the Ganguli family, in different corners of the world. The first generation is represented by Gogol's great-grandparents: his great-grandfather teaches Ashoke (his grandson) how important it is to read and his great-grandmother sends Ashima (her granddaughter) a letter containing what was supposed to be Gogol's 'good name'. Although the letter never reaches the American continent and Gogol never actually meets his great-grandparents, their influence definitely stretches from India to the United States in decisive ways. Gogol's grandparents never leave India either and

equally play a role in their grandchildren's development. Lahiri's main focus, however, is on the third and fourth generations of Gangulis. The immigrant couple, Ashima and Ashoke, shuttle back and forth between India and the United States, struggling to keep in close contact with their Indian background and insisting that their children do the same. At the same time, they work towards building a good, prosperous life in the adoptive country. The fourth generation is represented by Sonia and Gogol who are born in the United States but are often taken by their parents on long trips to India. As they mature, they also travel across the United States and to cities in Europe. Thus, readers follow Gogol, the protagonist, from his mother's womb to the symbolic womb of his room, to which he returns in the last scene of the novel and finds a link with his father and his Indian roots. His representations of India are always filtered through an "American prism" (Cabaret 333), nevertheless they constitute an important element of his identity.

The novel constantly plays with pairs (two countries and continents, two major cities - Calcutta and New York, two cultures, two names, and two identities) in order to project a recognizable narrative of the Indian-American experience. Its explicit intertextual reference to Nikolai Gogol's story "The Overcoat" (1842) provides another link which literally sets the scene for Gogol Ganguli's absurd troubles with his name. At first glance the two writers seem to have little in common, but I will show how Lahiri has woven the classic Russian author and his text into her novel. Moreover, critic Carmen Concilio claims that Lahiri's text echoes the first chapters of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759), and she also sees a parallel to Salman Rushdie's use of the same text in his groundbreaking work *Midnight's Children* (1981). According to Concilio, the reference in both works "pertains to the narrative mode of the carnivalesque: a case in point being the hero's birth, the comic choice of his name and the subsequent double or split personality of the subject, and the theme of orphanhood conveyed through a comic and ironic style" (90).

Interestingly, Lahiri has been added to the list of Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' alongside Kiran Desai or Chitra Davakaruni (see Jha and Katrak qtd. in Bhalla 182). Although all these successful female writers of Indian descent pursue a realist (rather than magical realist) approach to fiction, they continue Rushdie's patrilineage in constructing a transnational literary tradition. Jhumpa Lahiri fuses her American literary ancestry (she mentions Hemingway and Raymond Carver) with her love for the Russians (Chekhov, Nabokov and, obviously, Nikolai

Gogol), and with elements from Bengali culture. In *The Namesake* she specifically identifies her characters as Bengali, thus placing her work in a more ethnic context. Indian national identity is much newer than regional ones, and Sanjukta Dasgupta informs us that “the resident or non-resident Indian will invariably prioritize his or her regional identity and culture” (2007: 76) over the national one. At the same time, however, the varied influences mentioned above give Lahiri’s oeuvre a global dimension, and contribute to her unique mode of expression in which the writing style “is the meaning, not merely the means of conveying it” (Caesar 2007: 107). Caesar explains that Lahiri observes minute details of physical reality in order to imply the characters’ inner struggles.

Although the plot gravitates around the relationship between father and son, thus reenacting the “patriarchal and heteronormative tropes of the term ‘diaspora’” (Gopinath qtd. in Bhalla 2008: 192), I will demonstrate how Ashima, the wife and mother, stands out as a paramount character. Overcoming her status as ‘subaltern’ immigrant woman, she has the strength and ability to successfully negotiate two very distinct worlds and take in the best of each. National identity thus becomes a fluid concept even for a character presented in rather clichéd terms, easily recognizable by Indian-American readers. In fact, Lahiri has been criticized by Tamara Bhalla for perpetuating certain gender, class, and ethnic stereotypes in order to capture the complexities of the immigration process. However, Bhalla concedes that *The Namesake* remains “a watershed text of South Asian American experience because it stages the impasse of ethnic authenticity so completely” (2012: 109). That is why other scholars have dubbed Lahiri “a documentalist of the immigrant experience” (Goldblatt, Dubey).

Natalie Friedman, on the other hand, shows how the immigrant novel has changed, and claims that Jhumpa Lahiri is part of a group of contemporary ethnic American writers who no longer place assimilation at the heart of their stories, but focus on the children of immigrants and their conflicted plural identity “as it manifests itself in America and in the shrinking global community” (112). She thus moves beyond the stereotypical pursuit of the American Dream, and presents the second generation of Indian-Americans as cosmopolitan characters, belonging to a network of global travelers, simultaneously straddling the socio-political landscapes of Boston, New York, Paris, or Calcutta. Her characters are constantly traveling (common trope for immigration), and this has prompted Friedman to state that Lahiri fuses two literary genres - the immigrant and the travel narrative - in order to show how children of immigrants have gained a

certain power which “comes from economic and class ease, not from a sense of ethnic identity that is part of some mythic melting pot” (115).

The narrative voice also ‘travels’. The third person narration opens from the perspective of Ashima, then shifts for a short while to Ashoke, before focusing on Gogol’s development for most of the novel. At one point the omniscient narrator turns briefly to the perspective of Moushumi (Gogol’s wife), before returning to Ashima and Gogol in the closing sections. This “wandering narrative structure” (Friedman 113) gives insight into the subjectivities of four characters, while also pointing to the unfixed, mobile nature of contemporary migrants. I am arguing that the resulting pluralist identities of these ‘world travelers’, to use Maria Lugones’s phrase (qtd. in Soja 131), are best illustrated by the way in which they negotiate diverse spaces and places.

After dealing with these issues in the novel, towards the end of this chapter I will move to an analysis of how some of them are rendered in the filmic adaptation of *The Namesake* (2007). It is essential to see how different artistic genres represent the Indian diaspora in the United States, particularly since Indian film plays a key role in South Asia itself and in the imaginary of viewers worldwide. Without claiming expertise in cinema studies, I will attempt an overview of how Mira Nair, the film’s director, expresses the importance of space in her work. Thus, the film frequently switches from New York City to Calcutta and back, leaving the spectator with the impression that two apparently very different cities actually have many things in common. However, this ease of traveling between two worlds does not fully render the difficulties both of the first generation of immigrants to adapt in the ‘host’ environment, and of the second generation to integrate their parents’ values and culture.

#### Ashima: From Alien to Transnational Character

The novel debuts with Ashima Ganguli cooking in an apartment in Central Square in Cambridge, two weeks before her first child is due. The year is 1968, probably chosen by Lahiri because of its utmost importance for American history. Firstly, it is the year in which the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 became law, sealing the arrival of non-Western, educated professional men to pursue education and employment in the United States. The Act reverses the legal discrimination that had been enforced for half a century in conformity with the Asian exclusion laws of 1917 and 1924 (see Bhalla 2008: 26 for more detailed information). Concomitantly,

Great Britain increased immigration control in the 1960s, culminating with the 1971 Immigration Act that put an end to primary migration (see Cabaret 2010: 343-4). Therefore, skilled Indians turn to the United States instead of migrating to the former colonial center, and this results in the formation of what is usually called a ‘model minority’ (see Brennan 2011: 4), namely a category of upwardly mobile immigrants who fit neatly into American society. This idea suggests, on the one hand, that America is a welcoming society, rewarding hard work. On the other hand, it implicitly casts this ‘good’ minority (with its work ethic and family values) as a model for other ethnic/racial groups (such as African Americans, for instance, particularly since this myth developed in the 1960s).

Secondly, 1968 brought about the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, as well as massive street protests against the Vietnam War and other significant social movements that cannot be left out of any survey of post-1960s policies and attitudes towards race and ethnicity in the United States.

Thirdly, by 1968 the second wave of the women’s movement had gained significant ground, and Ashima probably benefits from that, even if indirectly. It is important, then, that Lahiri’s novel should open with an immigrant Indian woman, wife of an Indian academic, giving birth to their first-born in 1968 in a Boston hospital. According to Sue Brennan, the hospital is a biopolitical space which serves as a site of control and cultural assimilation, “where individuals are subjected to disciplinary regimes aimed producing ‘healthy’ and self-sufficient citizens of the nation” (6). Hence, the national political and social milieu unquestionably contributes to identity formation processes, and Ashima’s delivery in the American medical institution represents her first solid link with the host country.

It is apparent from the very first scene that Ashima is defined by her status as expatriate wife and (future) mother. Married off to a doctoral student in electrical engineering at MIT, she follows him to the United States, but after eighteen months she is still terribly homesick and slow to accustom to American ways. Throughout her pregnancy she craves for a strange combination of Rice Krispies, Planters peanuts, and chopped onion, to which she adds salt, lemon juice and green chili pepper. This ‘concoction’, in Lahiri’s term, reminds Ashima of a snack she used to buy on Calcutta sidewalks, but it is a “humble approximation” (*Namesake* 1), a savorless replacement, because in the American version, “as usual, there’s something missing” (1). Although she is desperately trying to replicate parts of India in her kitchen(s) in America, she has

to combine ingredients at hand here in order to prepare popular Indian dishes. Immigrants usually preserve their culinary ways in an attempt to articulate their difference and to maintain a strong connection with the homeland. Laura Anh Williams argues that: “These articulations are acts of subjectivity-making and self-assertion, expressions of desire and yearning which participate in a literary tradition connecting the Asian American immigrant experience with a visceral, embodied experience of difference” (78). But the same immigrants also integrate new elements into their cooking - cereals and peanuts in Ashima’s case, testifying to their gradual acculturation.

As Ashima approximates her favorite snack, she reaches for another onion and goes into labor earlier than expected. She calls out to her husband who is studying in the bedroom, but does not address him by his name, Ashoke, because tradition requires a Bengali wife not to do that. In fact,

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. (*Namesake* 2)

So instead of saying his name, which is so intimate that it has to remain unuttered, she uses an interrogative which “translates roughly as ‘Are you listening to me?’” (2) Lahiri does not mention what this interrogative is, but her metaphor informs the reader of the difficulties she, as an Indian writing in English, probably has to overcome while narrating her story. Words and their meanings are sometimes ‘untranslatable’, just like the food Ashima is trying to prepare. At the same time, one of the major themes of the novel, naming, is introduced by referring to Bollywood’s traditionalist stance when it comes to the portrayal of relationships.

If Ashima can somehow replicate elements of the home culture in her apartment, she can hardly do that in the space of the hospital she is taken to. She shares the maternity ward with three American women and registers some essential differences between their relationship with their husbands and hers with Ashoke. The American men tell their wives ‘I love you’ and these are words she has never heard, nor does she expect to hear from her own husband because “this is not how they are” (3). She is scared and wishes she could talk to the other women, but by now “she has gathered that Americans, in spite of their public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand-holding on the street and lying on top of each

other on the Cambridge Common, prefer their privacy” (3). Their community is inaccessible to Ashima metaphorically, but also literally, as she is separated from them by a curtain. There is nothing comforting in the whiteness of the room either, so her mind wanders to India again, where tradition says the woman should go back to her parents’ house to give birth. She is told by the doctor to time the contractions herself and she does so on her wrist watch, a bon voyage gift from her parents. This inevitably sends her thoughts to India and her family, so she calculates Indian time on her hands - nine hours and a half ahead in Calcutta. Just as in the case of the title character from “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, the second story from *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Ashima’s life also happens on the Indian subcontinent first. Going through a crisis in the unfamiliar, impersonal space of the hospital, Ashima calculates the time lag on her Indian watch which enables her to travel mentally to a familiar space of utmost intimacy – her parents’ residence in Calcutta. In this way, Lahiri deploys a Bakhtinian ‘chronotope’, “the textual union of time and space as it is manifested through objects, persons, places” (Brennan 2).

Since it is already evening in Calcutta, Ashima pictures her parents in their house on Amherst Street enjoying their after-dinner tea, and her younger brother, Rana, studying for an exam. She knows that soon her mother will be untangling her waist-long hair, while her father will be drawing some illustrations for the *Desh* magazine while listening to the Voice of America. Ironically, “American seconds tick on top of her pulse point” (*Namesake* 4) and interrupt this flash forward bringing her back to the lived space of the hospital. Fragmented images of “a blue strip of the Charles River, thick green treetops, cars gliding up and down Memorial Drive” (5) are juxtaposed to the previous imagined scene. Hence, the temporal and spatial dimensions of assimilation supersede Ashima’s own sense of time and space.

In Massachusetts it is eleven in the morning and Ashima is reassured by the American doctor, who looks “gauntly handsome in a Lord Mountbatten sort of way” (2), that they are “expecting a perfectly normal delivery” (5). The satirical reference to India’s colonial past (the former British colonizer symbolically helps an Indian woman deliver an American baby), might partially explain why nothing actually feels normal to Ashima in the United States. In addition, she cannot accommodate the idea of motherhood in a foreign land, and is actually terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, and “where life seems so tentative and spare” (6). Family members should be at her side and in their absence “the baby’s birth, like most everything in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true” (25). She pities her son

for entering the world already deprived of the extended family's affection, his birth occurring in a place most people enter to suffer or die. As we have seen in the case of *Interpreter of Maladies*, allegories of birth and death are commonly used by Lahiri to reflect the migrant's situation, correlated with the trope of children/childhood. Thus, Ashima is "astonished by her body's ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother and all her great-grandmothers had done. That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still" (6). Children of immigrants represent continuity with ancestors, but discontinuity and renewal as well. The immigrant woman bears a double burden: that of giving birth and that of making sure the link between past and future is not lost. Ashima undergoes all the stages women before her had undergone, yet she has to go through them alone in a faraway country. Therefore, what is perfectly natural for women worldwide becomes 'nothing normal' for lonely, uprooted Ashima Ganguli.

After the baby boy is born, Ashima and Ashoke decide to let the maternal grandmother choose the name of the family's first *sahib* (which literally means 'Englishman'). Trying their best not to cut the umbilical cord with the motherland, they are confidently waiting for a letter she has mailed, containing two names: one for a boy and one for a girl. Ashima has always had a special relationship with her grandmother, the only person who encouraged her to be brave and enjoy the adventure of migrating across continents. Before leaving, she advises her granddaughter: "Do what I will never do. It will all be for the best. Remember that. Now go" (38). In the film she optimistically reassures Ashima that a new life, full of joy and happiness is waiting for her. But her letter gets lost in the mail, exposing the limits of transnational communication, and symbolizing that the community at home can hardly influence life in the country of destination. The immigrant cannot continue to live in the imaginary space of the motherland, and the new country gradually pulls him or her in. The letter is forever suspended in-between continents, foretelling the baby's complicated identity quest. Rüdiger Heinze considers the significance of the travel trope in postcolonial theory, and concludes "it is ironic that, at the heart of Gogol's problematic name and identity, something is lost during travel" (194). An 'original' name does exist, but it is never disclosed, so it is both a presence and an absence at the same time.

In Calcutta, Ashima had been studying for a college degree in English before she was married. She even tutored neighborhood children, helping them memorize lines from the British

poets Wordsworth and Tennyson. One day after tutoring, Ashoke is waiting in the sitting room to meet her. At nineteen, she is in no rush to be a bride and would rather continue her studies than perform domestic tasks. Before entering the room, Ashima stops in the hallway and is unable to resist the urge of literally stepping into his shoes which were unlike “any she had ever seen on the streets and trams and buses of Calcutta, or even in the windows of Bata” (*Namesake* 8). The shoes are made of brown leather, have black heels and off-white laces, and are made in the U.S. Getting into Ashoke’s shoes is the closest thing she has ever experienced to the touch of a man, and her heart races as the “lingering sweat from the owner’s feet mingled with hers” (8). One of the crisscrossing laces has missed a hole, and this little sign of negligence gives her strength to enter the room, meet the owner of the shoes, and ‘walk’ henceforth on a common path with him.

The suitor is slightly plump, wears thick-framed black glasses, and has a moustache and a beard. He looks scholarly, but still youthful, with “an elegant, vaguely aristocratic air” (8). His father does all the talking, reporting that his son has graduated first from two prestigious institutions, and is pursuing a PhD in America. Ashima is put to the test and has to recite a few stanzas from Wordsworth’s “The Daffodils”, before being asked if she is willing to fly on a plane and move to Boston, a city she has never even heard of, characterized by severe, snowy winters.

Tellingly, she only learns her suitor’s name after the betrothal, and two weeks later she is already married. Eight thousand miles away from her hometown and from her family, however, she gets to know him and falls in love with him. Indeed, Lahiri sketches the two characters as halves of the same individual, united until Ashoke’s death. Their common initials, A.G., also point to this unity. In the United States Ashima perfects her cooking, and ethnic food provides her with the opportunity to establish an intimacy with the partner that was chosen for her. She quickly learns that he likes salty food, his favorite dish being lamb curry with potatoes, and for the rest of Ashoke’s life she will continue to cook for him. The only two instances in the book when she stops this activity are when she is pregnant with Sonia, their second child, and when they move to Calcutta for eight months. With Sonia she feels dizzy all the time, the smell of food making her sick, so every Sunday Ashoke is forced to prepare a week’s worth of chicken curry and rice which he eats with Gogol. Even the young boy concludes that it “is odd to see his father presiding in the kitchen, standing in his mother’s place at the stove” (54). When they move to Calcutta she spends all her time visiting relatives and friends, shopping at the New Market, going

to movies, or simply wandering freely around her hometown, so she has no time to waste in the kitchen. Besides, relatives are always willing to prepare delicious meals for them. After Ashoke's death, she symbolically stops cooking for eleven days as a sign of mourning. She is frequently shown in the other scenes in the book as attempting to transfer Indian cuisine into American domestic spaces. This may seem like a rather limiting and stereotypical characterization of an Indian woman: she is the obedient daughter who respects her parents' choice of a husband, the devoted wife who follows Ashoke to a foreign continent, and the loving mother who dedicates her life to raising two children. Yet in the denouement of her story I believe Lahiri breaks off with these clichés.

After the first difficult months abroad, Ashima starts to enjoy talking to Ashoke about the events of her day while lying next to him in bed every night. She describes at length her walks along Massachusetts Avenue, the shops she visits, and the pistachio ice cream cones she treats herself to in Harvard Square. Ashima is discovering the American city on her own while her husband is at work. Hers is a gradual emancipation, a movement from the inside to the outside, at first tentatively exploring the neighborhood and then the rest of the city. No longer confined to the house, she now records some rather negative impressions of the outside. For example, the shingled houses in the area are all "the same shape and size and in the same state of mild decrepitude, painted mint, or lilac, or powder blue" (30). This architectural monotony mirrors her homesickness and confirms her initial reactions. A year and a half before, when she first stepped outside into the frigid and piercing New England chill, she registered "[l]eafless trees with ice-covered branches. Dog urine and excrement embedded in the snowbanks. Not a soul on the street" (30).

It is intriguing that Lahiri reverses hackneyed images of dirty Indian urban spaces in another fragment: "The gray of the roof, the gray of cigarette ashes, matches the pavement of the sidewalk and the street" (29). Across the street there is a "musty shop that sells the newspaper and cigarettes and eggs, and where, to Ashima's mild disgust, a furry black cat is permitted to sit as it pleases on the shelves" (29). American landscapes look as gray to a foreigner's eyes as Indian places do. Years later when they travel by train to Agra, Gogol notices the grayness of the Indian landscape. On the streets of Calcutta he is unsettled by the sight of short, dark men pulling rickshaws, and of families boiling rice and shampooing their hair on the sidewalk. Ashima's gaze records the urban American scenery in gray tones, echoing her loneliness in the periphery,

whereas Gogol's gaze does the same with the Indian setting, showing he does not feel at home at all there.

Public American space is discouraging, but the privacy of the apartment itself is also disappointing. Although positioned only ten minutes by foot to Harvard and twenty to MIT, and thus centrally located, the first apartment Ashima experiences here has three rooms all in a row without a corridor, and is nothing like the houses she has admired in *Gone With the Wind* or *The Seven-Year Itch*. These staple American movies she has watched at cinemas in India have created an imaginary space which does not match the real space. On the contrary, the apartment is small and dark, cold and drafty in winter and intolerably hot in summer. The dark brown curtains are described as dreary, and the roaches emerging at night from the cracks in the tiles of the bathroom deeply disturb Ashima. But she never complains to Ashoke, nor does she write to her parents that America is not what she had expected, not wanting to worry or upset them. In her letters she includes only good things, such as the cooking gas available nonstop, or the hot tap water in which she can bathe and the cold water that is safe to drink.

Their landlords, the Montgomerys, who occupy the other two floors of this dull house, expose the big differences between their respective cultures. Alan is a sociology professor at Harvard, but he likes to be called by his first name and goes to work in rubber flip-flops. This causes Ashoke to remark that even rickshaw drivers dress better than professors here. Coming from a high class Indian family, Ashoke always wears suits to work and looks down on the American informality of dress and manners. For Akaky Akakyevich, Nikolai Gogol's nonpersonage, the new coat represents social status and a certain notoriety (though short-lived) in St. Petersburg. For Ashoke Ganguli, too, clothes symbolize social position. Alan's wife, Judy, wears denim shorts and usually dresses just like her daughters, Amber and Clover. Judy has given birth to them at home with the help of the midwives of the women's health collective where she works. Therefore she disapproves of Ashima's decision to deliver her baby in the hospital, revealing an involuntary exchange in roles: in accordance with her traditions, the Indian woman should have given birth at home, but the American woman actually does so because of her personal convictions.

One night Alan and Judy go out and ask Ashima to check on the girls. She remembers their apartment with horror: there were "piles everywhere, piles of books and papers, piles of dirty plates on the kitchen counter, ashtrays the size of serving platters heaped with crushed-out

cigarettes” (32). The girls sleep together on a bed piled with clothes. To Ashima’s disgust, there are numerous, mostly empty whiskey and wine bottles on the refrigerator. The piles of stuff show the negative consumerist side of American society, even in the house of peace activists. At the end of the novel, when Ashima sells the house and decides to divide her year between India and America, she too has piles of things to pack or give away, ‘collected’ during the three decades spent here. This messy apartment is just above the Gangulis’ and has a symmetrical design, yet it is a different world altogether. The Montgomerys could afford a housekeeper to tidy up their place, but do not get one. Ashima, on the other hand, had servants do the housework in India, but now is compelled to sweep the floors, cook, wash clothes and shop for groceries herself. Nevertheless, she keeps the apartment clean and tidy, in total opposition to the one upstairs.

The Montgomerys are New Age Buddhists, nonconformist and open-minded people. They are friendly and generous to the Gangulis, bringing them some old baby clothes, as well as the girls’ crib and pram. But at Gogol’s annaprasan, the rice ceremony, Judy eats a shrimp cutlet and whispers to Alan: “I thought Indians were supposed to be vegetarians” (39), showing there are certain stereotypes about their neighbors that they cannot shake off. Later on Lahiri unveils more instances of American superficiality in her novel, especially expressed through wrong assumptions or bad jokes.

After returning to the apartment as a mother, Ashima feels overwhelmed by the responsibility of taking care of the baby and the house, and urges Ashoke to finish his degree so that they could return to their homeland. He feels guilty for having brought her here, aware that she is lonely and often cries while rereading old letters from her parents. She is depressed for days on end, until one afternoon she pulls herself together and takes her son out for the first time, on a ‘trip’ to Purity Supreme to buy a bag of rice. To her surprise, she is stopped on the street and in the aisles of the supermarket by perfect strangers, all Americans, “suddenly taking notice of her, smiling, congratulating her for what she’s done” (34). They ask about the baby’s age, sex and name. They do not comment on the boy’s rather peculiar first name, Gogol, chosen by Ashoke. So unlike the Indian woman from “The Third and Final Continent” who is attacked on the street by an American’s dog, Ashima is complimented on her baby and begins to take pride in devising a daily routine of raising her child without the family’s help.

Every morning she gets dinner out of the way, and then wanders up and down the streets which have become familiar by now, running errands, or simply sitting with Gogol in Harvard Yard. Of course she still cooks Indian food, sings Bengali songs to her son, and sees pieces of her family on his face: her mother's eyes, her father's lips, or her brother's smile. But readers get the feeling that motherhood facilitates her gradual translation into the host culture, and that she is starting to live on 'American time'.

Her initial impossibility to communicate with the other women in the maternity ward is slowly overturned as she settles into a comfortable familiarity, starts interacting with people from the American neighborhood, and goes in and out of the house at will. One day she even goes shopping in downtown Boston, pushing Gogol's stroller for hours in the basement of Jordan Mash, and buying presents for her loved ones in India. Busy with the pram, and in panic that she will miss the station where she has to get off, Ashima forgets the presents on the train. But her stuff is returned the next day, connecting her to America in a way she has not thought possible. Later when she tells this story at dinner parties, Indian friends concur: "Only in this country" (43), acknowledging American fairness and organization.

As Gogol grows, so does their circle of Bengali acquaintances who act as a substitute for the relatives left behind in Calcutta. The families they befriend all have the same structure: the husbands are teachers, researchers, doctors, or engineers, embodying the 'model minority myth'. They have benefitted from the 1965 Immigration Act, and have brought their wives with them to the United States. But their spouses are "homesick and bewildered" (38), and they turn to Ashima for recipes and advice. She gives them tips about where in Chinatown they can buy carp, and what ingredients they can use as replacements for the ones that cannot be found in supermarkets. She is already adapted enough to know these things and has an extraordinary capacity to move easily between the two cultures. Thus, she is a biological mother to Gogol and a cultural one to the women in this Bengali community, easing their transplantation into American soil.

The Gangulis visit these families on weekends, eating familiar foods, talking about Indian films and politics, but also arguing about the politics of America, a country in which they are not eligible to vote. They are all invited for Gogol's rice ceremony, and on that occasion Ashima cooks for six days. The ritual is meant to introduce the baby to solid food, but also to predict what 'career' he is going to pursue. The boy, dressed as an infant Bengali groom, opens his

mouth obediently for each course but refuses to choose any object from the plate. Family and friends insist he pick the money, the pen, or the soil, thus already projecting onto him their expectations that he succeed in society. Yet by refusing to choose any object and thus failing to give any hint of his future profession, Gogol in fact refuses “to reflect back to others what they expect of him” (Song 256-57). Later on, he confirms what he indicated as a baby: he stubbornly resists going to MIT, something his parents would have ardently desired, but creates his own professional path and becomes an architect.

In 1971, the Gangulis move to an unnamed university town outside Boston where apparently they are the only Bengali residents. Ashoke now has his dream job: assistant professor of electrical engineering at the university, while Ashima is lonely once more, and the relocation to the suburbs feels more brutal than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been. She is shocked to discover the ‘unfriendly’ features of this town: the fact that it has no sidewalks, street lights, or means of public transportation. She does not want to learn how to drive the new Toyota they now own, so she is stuck in the house again. Since there are no stores nearby, she cannot even go shopping anymore. When she does venture outside, her walks are restricted to the university campus where on rainy days there is nothing to do but watch television in the student lounge. She sometimes roams the town’s historic district, “a brief strip of colonial architecture visited by tourists on summer weekends” (48). It has “a white steepled Congregational church, a stone courthouse with an adjoining jail, a cupolaed library, a wooden well from which Paul Revere is rumored to have drunk. In winter, tapers burn in the windows of homes after dark” (48). But all these landmarks of New England history and culture mean nothing to Ashima who struggles with the foreignness of the setting, alone and depressed because there are no other Bengali residents in the area. The quotation above is a direct reference to the country’s history of immigration, and the Gangulis are the first Indian ‘colonizers’ to reach this site.

Meanwhile, Ashoke is not bothered by the precarious living conditions in either apartment. Spending more time at work than at home, he enjoys the sweeping view from his fourth-floor office overlooking the quadrangle surrounded by vine-covered brick buildings. On pleasant days he takes his lunch on a bench, and listens ‘to the melody of bells chiming from the campus clock tower’ (49). As Brennan points out, the university is an American institution which functions as a key spatial and temporal setting for assimilation of Indian male immigrants willing to become part of the model minority and conform to American values and requirements

(12). Immigration is not such a painful process for a man, and the distinct way in which the husbands perceive the same setting proves it.

Thus, a combination of factors plays out differently for men and women in the migration cycle. Alfonso-Forero writes that the Indian division between *ghar* (the home, an inherently spiritual and female space) and *bahir* (the outside world, inherently male and dominated by material pursuits), “positions women as the guardians and propagators of Indian culture” (2007: 853-54). It follows, then, that the ‘duty’ of women is to preserve Indianness inside American homes. While the Indian man thrives professionally, for the Indian woman, usually a housewife, immigration provides limited options for development. In *The Namesake*, Ashoke has his own office in the university building and gives lectures to American students, thoroughly enjoying his work, while Ashima’s only ‘job’ is to make *samosas* once a week and sell them at the international coffeehouse. Womanhood and motherhood in a foreign land involve exclusion for Ashima who is a mere visitor in the public areas of educational institutions, and does not have access to the spaces that grant her husband many privileges. By telling the story from her female character’s point of view Lahiri exposes the gendered nature of seemingly democratic spaces like those of universities. Hence, Ashima places her *samosas* “next to the linzer squares baked by Mrs. Etzold, and baklava by Mrs. Cassolis” (*Namesake* 50). These other ‘ethnic’ women are probably also wives of academics, leading Ashima to conclude that for women immigration is like a lifelong pregnancy:

Though no longer pregnant, she continues, at times, to mix Rice Krispies and peanuts and onions in a bowl. For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (49-50)

In her case, as we have seen in the opening hospital scene, the travails of giving birth coincide with her efforts to fashion a new self in an alien land. The acculturation process is long and painful, mostly undergone alone by the diasporic woman who appears caught in a state of limbo. Lahiri reveals a gendered perspective on otherness, with the migrant woman (irrespective of geographic origins as the culinary details above imply) being subjected to a double bias before finally being empowered. The “pity and respect” that natives simultaneously pay her seem to

suggest that assimilation does bring in its tail some public recognition, but Ashima first has to go through the pains of pregnancy and transplantation alone.

After two years spent in the second apartment, Ashima and Ashoke finally start looking for a house to buy. As I have shown in the theory section, Vijay Mishra convincingly argues that owning a house is the ultimate evidence of belonging for an immigrant. The Gangulis drive to all-American neighborhoods where the houses have lawns and dogs play on them, and choose a newly-built house on 67 Pemberton Road. Ashoke photographs every room and sends pictures to relatives in India, priding himself in the achievement of owning a house in America, in a neighborhood inhabited by Johnsons, Mertons, Aspris, or Hills. They have four modest bedrooms, one and a half bathrooms, and a one-car garage. They move by U-Haul, and are surprised to see how many things they now possess. They had come to America with a single suitcase, carrying a few weeks' worth of clothes, and now they already have old issues of the *Globe* in which they pack their plates and glasses. They buy most of the furniture and the appliances from yard sales, although Ashima is reluctant at first to introduce such items into her home, and ashamed at the thought of buying what had originally belonged to American strangers. But the house, at least, had not been inhabited by anyone before them. Moreover, Ashoke explains that even his chairman, who lives in an eighteenth-century mansion in the historic district, wears secondhand pants bought for fifty cents. In the film, their move is celebrated by Ashoke and some Bengali friends with lines such as "Welcome to Suburbia" and "Everything bought at yard sales".

When they move in, the grounds of the property are *terra incognita* as they have not yet been landscaped. They plant trees, shrubs and put in a lawn, leveling the uneven and dirt-covered yard. This symbolizes their gradual transplantation. After they make "this small patch of America to which they lay claim" (51) into their home, they start going for long drives without a destination in mind, exploring their new environment, including neglected dirt lanes, shaded back roads, or farms where one can buy pumpkins in autumn and berries in summer. Sometimes they even reach the beaches of the Northern Shore. They do not swim or sunbathe, but walk on the shore or fly kites. Enjoying this time spent together as a family, Ashima lifts her sari and places her feet into foaming, ice-cold water, joking and laughing with her son, visibly happier and more acculturated. As years go by, and "their lives in New England swell with fellow Bengali friends, the numbers of that other, former life, those who know Ashima and Ashoke not

by their good names, but as Monu and Mithu, slowly dwindle” (63). Physical distance also inevitably brings about a distancing from the community they left behind, although the Gangulis still seek the companionship of other expatriates. But it becomes clear that Ashima finally starts to settle in this third American home.

Apart from the Indian surname on the mailbox and the issues of *India Abroad* delivered there, their house, the garage, and the barbecue look identical to those of the neighborhood. They even nail a wreath to their door in December, and Ashima has learned to roast turkey for Thanksgiving, to color boiled eggs for Easter, and to decorate an artificial tree for Christmas. Not only is the house a typical American one when viewed from the outside, but American rituals also infiltrate its interior. Gogol and Sonia love Christmas, and much prefer it to the worship of Hindu deities Durga and Saraswati. However, during pujos (sacred Hindu rituals) the children are dragged to a hall overtaken by Bengalis, where they have to throw marigold petals at a cardboard effigy of a goddess and eat vegetarian food. This celebration cannot compare to Christmas, when they hang stockings on the fireplace mantel, receive heaps of presents from Santa Claus, and stay home from school. Gogol and Sonia love mayonnaise, tuna fish, and hot dogs, so now Ashima prepares sandwiches with bologna or roast beef, as well as an American dinner once a week. Hamburgers prepared with lamb are other culinary and cultural concessions she makes at her children’s insistence. Of course Ashima and Ashoke do not eat these American foods. She still wears only saris and Bata sandals, but Ashoke learns to buy ready-made clothes, exchanges his fountain pen for ballpoints and his Wilkinson blades for Bic razors bought six to a pack. So they both do their best to mix elements from the two cultures, and they develop different ways of adapting to life in America.

Two decades later, Ashima will have a part-time job at the local public library, will know how to drive, and will even have befriended some American women her age, most of whom also have grown-up children, some of whom live alone because they are divorced. Occasionally she invites these friends over for lunch at her house, or they go shopping to outlet stores in Maine. When Ashoke moves to Ohio on a scholarship for nine months, Ashima’s small family is spread in different corners of the United States: Sonia now lives in California, Gogol in New York, and she is left all alone in her house in Massachusetts. Despite the security system her husband installed before leaving, she always double-checks all the window locks and is startled by any sound she hears in the middle of the night. Her Indian-American children tell her

everyone should live alone at some point in their life, but Ashima “hates returning in the evenings to a dark, empty house, going to sleep on one side of the bed and waking up on another” (161). Once again, the space of the house adequately reflects her emotional state. Since there is no one to cook for, she eats simple meals on the sofa, in front of the television. Ashoke comes home every third weekend, and on these occasions she cooks as she used to, while he does the things she still does not know how to do, namely pay the bills, or put gas into the car.

On the evening she receives the news of her husband’s sudden death Ashima is sitting at the kitchen table, drawing Christmas cards and addressing them to their friends whose contact details she keeps in three different address books. Each entry forms a record of all the Bengalis she and Ashoke have known over the years, “all the people she has had the fortune to share rice with in a foreign land” (159-60). She still remembers the day she bought the first of these address books, and recalls putting down her parents’ address in Calcutta, her in-laws’ address in Alipore and Ashoke’s extension at MIT, writing his name for the first time in her life. Once a year, she still rereads all the letters she has ever received from her parents, mailed weekly across continents.

But on that day all signs are predicting that something bad is bound to happen: “It’s one of the things she’s always hated about life here: these chilly, abbreviated days of early winter, darkness descending mere hours after noon. She expects nothing of days such as this, simply waits for them to end. She is resigned to warming dinner for herself in a little while, changing into her nightgown, switching on the electric blanket on her bed” (163-64). Even the petunias in the window box “have withered to shuddering brown stalks that she’s been meaning, for weeks, to root from the soil” (164). She thinks Ashoke will do that when he comes home and that very moment he calls, saying he has driven himself to a hospital in Cleveland because of some stomach problems. In “A Temporary Matter” (the first story from *Interpreter of Maladies*), the withered ivy stands for the dying love between Shukumar and Shoba; here the withered plant foretells Ashoke’s imminent death.

A few hours later, Ashima calls the hospital and learns her husband has expired because of a heart attack. Initially the verb ‘expired’ only makes her think of library cards and magazine subscriptions, but soon the true meaning sinks in and she starts to shiver, the house feeling much colder. She gets up and walks through all the rooms, turning on all the lights. Then she switches on the lamppost on the lawn and the floodlight over the garage before returning to the kitchen.

Hindu rituals for death and grief require a lamp to be lit in order to light the way for the departed soul, and Ashima instinctively respects this tradition.

Gogol flies to Cleveland to identify the body and clean up the apartment his father had rented, but Ashima tells him not to bring home any of her dead husband's objects because "[i]t's not our way" (175). Upon his return to Boston, Sonia comes home too, and they mourn 'their way' together with numerous Bengali friends. Now a widow, Ashima erases the vermilion from her parted hair, puts on a white sari, and takes off her wedding bracelets. For ten days, she stops cooking fish or meat, preparing only rice and vegetables instead. Gogol and Sonia partake in this ritual of eating light dishes, the enforced absence of certain foods on their plates conjuring Ashoke's presence. On the eleventh day they invite friends from six states to an elaborate meal cooked as he had liked it best, marking the end of the mourning period. They have a religious ceremony in the living room, with Gogol sitting in front of a picture of his father, while a priest is chanting verses in Sanskrit.

Gradually, each of them assumes a task Ashoke had performed. Ashima spends hours on the phone changing the names on the bank account, the mortgage, and all the bills. Friends suggest she should go to India for a while to visit her brother and cousins. But for the first time in her life she "has no desire to escape to Calcutta" (183) and refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life and the country in which he died. Although she scatters Ashoke's ashes into the Ganges, her fondest memories of him are always going to be in the house on Pemberton Road.

Ashima faithfully observes the traditional Indian mourning habits, but she is not a traditional Indian widow. She is by no means a *sati* (a widow burned on her husband's funeral pyre), or a subaltern in Spivak's definition. On the contrary, Ashima is an empowered woman who deliberately chooses to abandon any permanent residence and travel back and forth between her homeland and her adoptive country, countering the myth of a redeeming homecoming. Thus, at the age of 53, she sells the house to an American family, the Walkers, and decides to divide her year into six months in India with her relatives and six months in the United States with her children. This is a solitary version of the plans she and Ashoke had made for retirement. In Calcutta she will have a room of her own in her brother's spacious flat, the first room ever intended for her exclusive use, but not a home: "True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (276).

She will make the journey all alone, but this no longer terrifies her, as she has learned to do so many things on her own. Although she still wears saris and puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once left Calcutta. Her documents (American passport, Massachusetts driving license, social security card) prove her official belonging, but they cannot capture what a long journey it has been for Ashima, and they do not tell the whole story of the changes she has undergone. Unlike other Indian women, she has not resisted driving or getting a job, but has tried her best to raise her children in a balance between India and America. She has used the experience of living abroad to her advantage, having gained access to things unavailable to women in her traditionalist home country and having become a transnational character *par excellence*. Immigration is empowering for Ashima, who in the end can afford to follow through with her plan of traveling regularly between Bengal and New England.

Hence, in the final scene of the book she is throwing a farewell party in the house on Pemberton Road. On the day before Christmas, in the year 2000, Ashima is making mincemeat croquettes, one of her specialties. However, “after all these years she has still not quite managed, to her entire satisfaction, to replicate” (277) the exact taste of Indian foods. The novel ends as it began: with Ashima cooking in her kitchen, doing her best to give her dishes a genuine Indian flavor. But, as the cycle is closed, readers know she is no longer the uprooted, miserable character she had been at the beginning. Lahiri uses another culinary analogy to show her character’s radical transformation. Normally cooking for parties leaves Ashima without an appetite, but on this night she is looking forward to serving herself and to sitting among her guests. For the past twenty-seven years she has lived and cooked in this house, a symbol of fixity and stability in the United States. Throughout her life in New England, she has been the one who gathered her family and all the Bengalis in the area together. They have all come to rely on her to organize holidays and to introduce traditions to those who are new, and with her gone, they will probably not meet as often or translate as easily. Her achievement is exceptional since she has managed to be a wonderful mother for her own children as well as a cultural mother figure for the community.

As she is packing for her departure, Ashima is now the one who has piles of things, like the Montgomerys used to. It both saddens and thrills her to whittle down her possessions “to little more than what she’d come with, to those three rooms in Cambridge in the middle of a winter’s night” (278). The bare walls remind her of the new house they had moved in and of

Ashoke taking pictures and sending them to India, proud of his American property. Now his photograph is on one of the walls, and she will only remove it before closing the door behind her for the last time. The Walkers are planning renovations, and Ashima feels “a moment’s panic, a protective instinct, wanting to retract her offer, wanting the house to remain as it’s always been, as her husband had last seen it” (275). This house, so crucial for both of them in the early years spent in the United States, becomes something she must let go of. But by cutting these physical, material connections she achieves greater freedom. Although she feels “horribly, permanently alone” (278), she looks forward to coming back one day as a grandmother, arriving in America with hand-knit sweaters and other gifts, then leaving a month or two later to be with her family in India.

Ashima realizes that for decades she has missed her life and family in India, but from now on she will miss the house, her job at the library, and the women she has bonded with. Over time she has acquired financial independence and access to different spaces. Consequently, she will miss driving, going to movies with Sonia, and other pleasant moments of the ‘unexpected’ life Ashoke had given her in America. She has found a perfect balance between retention of core Bengali components and integration of new cultural elements, and she has done so on her own terms. Unlike Mrs. Sen, she learns early on that blending these two cultures and constantly translating are necessary processes in order to survive. Thus, Mrs. Sen is the ‘expatriate’, in Bharati Mukherjee’s differentiation, while Ashima is the ‘immigrant’. According to Mukherjee, expatriation is a refusal to assimilate in the new country, a constant process of looking back to the homeland. Immigration, on the other hand, has ‘exuberance’ and it is “a set of fluid identities to be celebrated” (qtd. in Himadri Lahiri 3).

In the course of her life, Ashima has lived in five houses: two in India (her parents’ flat in Calcutta, and her in-laws’ house for one month before they headed West), and three in the United States, all on the East Coast (the house they rented in Cambridge, living below the Montgomerys, the faculty apartment on the campus, and the property on Pemberton Road). She counts the houses the way she counted Gogol’s fingers at birth: “One hand, five homes. A lifetime in a fist” (*Namesake* 167). If she once compared immigration to a ‘lifelong pregnancy’, I am arguing that at the end of the book Ashima has managed to give birth to a powerful, autonomous self. She slowly emerges from the first rented apartment in Cambridge, a small and dark place, uncomfortable and quite ‘unhomely’, in order to discover the neighborhood and then

the city of Boston. Gradually, she starts to interact with American strangers who stop her in the street or in supermarkets and ask questions about Gogol, acting polite and welcoming. The second American house she inhabits is also a temporary lodging, an overheated faculty-subsidized apartment in an unnamed university town. Ashima feels uprooted again, and for her “migrating to the suburbs feels more drastic, more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge” (49).

But two years later Ashima and Ashoke are finally ready to purchase a house and move to their third and final home in the United States. They choose this house together, and they do not look for a home in the historic district, but on ordinary roads, where the houses are standard American, built in different architectural styles such as cape, saltbox, raised ranch, or garrison. The Gangulis eventually decide “on a shingled two-story colonial in a recently built development, a house previously occupied by no one, erected on a quarter acre of land. This is the small patch of America to which they lay claim” (51), like colonizers of a newfound land. Ashima has lived here longer than in any other house in her life (including her parental home in Calcutta), and has shared beautiful moments with Ashoke and the children. Almost thirty years later her metamorphosis is complete and Ashima is ready to move on. More importantly, the rootless existence that lies ahead does not scare her anymore, but it is a path she has voluntarily created.

Ironically, the house is bought by an American professor new to the university where Ashoke used to teach. As one family’s story ends, another’s begins. The new owners intend to convert the sun deck into a den, knock down walls, and even modernize Ashima’s kitchen. Instinctively, she wants the house to remain as Ashoke has last seen it, as they have always known it. But so much has changed (Ashoke is dead, the children are grown-ups living on their own in other cities), and the small piece of land they once proudly ‘colonized’ no longer belongs to them. The Walkers will put their name on the mailbox, repaint the walls on which the Gangulis marked their children’s heights, and redecorate.

Though she is virtually homeless, Ashima only now starts living according to the meaning of her name “she who is limitless, without borders” (26), a transnational citizen without a permanent home, a resident nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Her mobility has increased throughout the novel, until space and real borders have collapsed completely. She has constantly and consciously negotiated her identity from the interstices, as Bhabha would call

them, opened up by the act of living between cultures. She is now all too aware that Calcutta, “the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign” (278), is not home anymore. And that after missing her relatives and her life in India for thirty-three years, from now on she is going to miss throwing parties for Bengalis in the Boston area. Most of all, she will miss the opportunity to drive by the engineering building where her husband once worked, like she still does at times.

Although everything in this country reminds her of Ashoke, she has gradually acquired the confidence and independence of an American woman. She no longer is the insecure young girl who at the beginning of the novel follows her husband into the unknown. She has learned to love him here, and together they have built a house and a good life (their arranged marriage grew into love and respect). Ashima has evolved unexpectedly from her traditional roles of wife and mother into a transnational figure who now inhabits a “Thirdspace” like the one described by Edward Soja. The ‘Thirdspace’ he theorizes is a creative recombination and extension of the ‘real’, material space, with the ‘imagined’ representations of spatiality. There is an extraordinary openness to this space, which stretches beyond physical and mental dimensions, while encompassing them at the same time. Lahiri’s female character becomes a world traveler who moves freely in this third space, actively negotiating her identity as ‘flexible citizen’. It seems to me that this phrase coined by Aihwa Ong (qtd. in Goh 2004: 8) describes Ashima perfectly.

As I have mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Jhumpa Lahiri has been criticized by Tamara Bhalla for her limited, stereotypical representations of Indian women. In her PhD thesis, entitled *Between History and Identity: Reading the Authentic in South Asian Diasporic Literature and Community* (2008), she looks at the works of Chitra Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy, and Jhumpa Lahiri, all prominent writers of South Asian descent, and at the way in which members of a South Asian American book club receive and relate to these works. She argues that there is an acute necessity for a dialogical negotiation between lay and academic readerships. In the latter’s opinion, much of the fiction produced by representatives of the pan-ethnic group of South Asian writers “obscures class difference, reifies ethnicity, and generates a reductive East/West binary” (17) in which the ‘Orient’ symbolizes oppressive tradition, and the ‘Occident’ progressive modernity. However, the findings of her dissertation include the idea that lay readers “mobilize their interpretive desires for identification in an effort to strategically read beyond and through ethnic, cultural and gendered stereotypes” (17).

I believe this is precisely the case with the character of Ashima, who is much more than a mere repository of ethnic tradition abroad. After a lifetime of translating between Indian and American cultures, Ashima extracts and preserves the best features from both, opening up to an empowering transnational condition. In bringing this credible character to life, Lahiri has successfully carried out the mighty task of representing “issues of authenticity, exoticism, and cultural insularity in the lay and academic fields of reception” (Bhalla 18). Western readers might find her characterization simplistic and reductive, but I think they should keep in mind the fact that this character comes from the East and arrives in the United States in the 1960s. It is not an easy endeavor to translate from traditional gender roles, and she does much better than most characters from *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Ashima skillfully negotiates spaces and places, and deals elegantly with sensitive issues that set American culture in opposition to the Indian one. In the beginning the distinctions are blatant: Ashima gives birth in a hospital, and not at home like she would have done in her country of origin. She is appalled by the Montgomerys’ lifestyle, by the fact that they are ‘friends’ with their daughters, and by the naming process in America. When Gogol goes on a school trip to a cemetery she is outraged and cannot reconcile the fundamental differences as far as attitudes towards death are concerned. Later on Ashima has a hard time accepting the fact that her children have grown and they do not return home for all the holidays, and she even thinks “she has given birth to vagabonds” (*Namesake* 167). Having involuntarily parted with her own parents upon moving to America, her children’s independence and their need to keep their distance from her is something she cannot comprehend.

Relationships and marriage are also sensitive subjects. Generally, the Gangulis disapprove of Indian-American marriages. They do not want an American wife for Gogol, but after he and Moushumi (his Indian-American wife) separate, Ashima feels guilty for having set them up. At the same time she is also glad that they have not considered it their duty to stay in an unhappy marriage, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima’s generation had sometimes done. Representatives of the second generation “are not willing to accept, to adjust, and to settle for something less than their ideal of happiness. That pressure has given way, in the case of the subsequent generation, to American common sense” (276). Ashima admits that the fantasized unbreakable bond between individuals from the same country is just an illusion that should not be perpetuated. In this way she adheres to a more fluid pattern of ethnic affiliation. Gogol and

Moushumi's divorce becomes an example of 'common sense', a progress from restrictive Eastern mores to Western freedom and individuality. Therefore, Ashima does not oppose Sonia's decision to marry an American because she knows Ben (who is half-Jewish and half-Chinese) has brought happiness to her daughter, in a way Moushumi (despite her Indian descent) has never done to her son. Ben is thus introduced to the Bengali friends as the 'jamai-to-be', and he is willing to meet Sonia halfway and be translated into their culture. Their wedding takes place in Calcutta (a city Sonia hated as a little girl), on a day in January, just as Ashima and her husband were married nearly thirty-four years before.

In the end, Ashima is completely free and has evolved in many aspects. For her, happiness is no longer connected to a place, nevertheless keeping in close touch with children, relatives, and friends from and in different places does bring her happiness.

#### Ashoke: Comfortable in the Immigrant's Overcoat

Ashoke is sketched as a scholarly figure, a person who has always had a passion for reading, particularly Russian authors. In fact, images of people reading permeate Lahiri's novel. Sanjukta Dasgupta, among others, points out that Bengal is considered the cultural heart of India (2007: 75). With a high degree of literacy and numerous poets and writers originating from here, including Nobel Prize-winner Rabindranath Tagore, Bengalis consider themselves intellectually superior to the rest of the Indians. Thus, Bengalis love to read and they continue to do so after being transplanted to New England. For instance, Ashima reads the English classics in Calcutta and then Bengali novels in Massachusetts, before becoming a librarian and dealing professionally with a large variety of books. Gogol buys books of architecture and his girlfriends are booklovers as well: Ruth majors in English literature, while Moushumi only reads English classics in childhood and then turns this passion for reading into a career by pursuing a PhD in French literature.

One particular book, *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*, is an overarching presence in Lahiri's novel, as it is passed via three generations of men from Ashoke's grandfather down to Ashoke's son (his great-grandson). *The Namesake*, then, is a book about books that begins with a father reading Nikolai Gogol's short stories and ends with his son reading them. This book travels metaphorically from 1840s Russia to 1950s and 1960s India and to 1980s and late 1990s United States, transcending three continents and three very different cultures. And one particular

story from this book, 'The Overcoat', functions like a perfect *mise en abîme* for the entire Lahirian novel.

Since childhood Ashoke has had the ability to read while walking to school, or from room to room in his parents' house in Alipore, and even up and down the stairs. The Gangulis' privileged social position is illustrated by the big three-story house, but also by the fact that Ashoke's paternal grandfather is a former professor of European literature at Calcutta University (founded by the British in 1857). Coming from the most Anglicized of all Indian states, the Ganguli men are enabled by their colonial legacy to acquire Western education and travel abroad. Ashoke's grandfather used to read to his grandson for one hour each afternoon, mainly English translations of Russian classics, and urged him to read and reread all the Russians saying they will never fail him. A few years later, "while walking on some of the world's noisiest, busiest streets, on Chowringhee and Gariahat Road" (*Namesake* 12), Ashoke reads the British colonial canon (Dickens and Maugham), alongside Dostoevsky, Turgenev and Tolstoy, immersing himself in a third fictional space.

His grandfather's words came true in October 1961 when Ashoke is involved in a potentially fatal accident. Ashoke is twenty-two and a student at Bengal Engineering College. During a holiday he takes a train to visit his grandparents who had moved to Jamshedpur; his grandfather had gone blind and it is Ashoke's turn now to read out loud each afternoon. He carries a single book, Nikolai Gogol's short stories of course, and an empty suitcase since on this trip he will inherit his grandfather's library. Inderpal Grewal (qtd. in Dhingra & Cheung 2012: 36-7) establishes a clear link between Ashoke's grandfather's library and Amitav Ghosh's essay "The March of the Novel through History: The Testimony of my Grandfather's Bookcase" (1998). For Ghosh, the access of the Bengali middle-class to international literature (especially Russian) produced a paradoxical type of nationalist cosmopolitanism. The reading habits he describes are deeply gendered, and literary knowledge is viewed as a masculine articulation, as it is illustrated by the 'grandfather's bookcase', a trope used by Lahiri as well.

As the train pulls out of Howrah Station, Ashoke starts to reread "The Overcoat", his favorite story from the book. He had read it so many times that the spine of the hardbound copy had split, but he is still 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" (*Namesake* 14). He laughs

passionately at the account of Akaky's christening, "and the series of queer names his mother had rejected" (14). This sentence anticipates his own son's naming process in ways he could not foresee that night. However, he also pities this humble nineteenth-century Russian clerk, and is devastated when Akaky is robbed of his precious overcoat, catches a fever, and dies soon after. As he reads about the socially and politically disempowered man, "lost in the wide, snow-white, windy avenues of St. Petersburg, [he is] unaware that one day he was to dwell in a snowy place himself" (17). This is an interesting juxtaposition between the streets of 19<sup>th</sup> century St. Petersburg and those of 20<sup>th</sup> century Boston, Massachusetts. It shows, I think, how narratives enable human emotions to permeate any geographical boundary and connections to be formed across time and space. Paradoxically, though, the more Ashoke reads, the less the story seems to make sense to him. Likewise, to the readers of Lahiri's novel, the link between Gogol's masterpiece and her own literary creation is not apparent from the beginning.

So, why are these intertextual references significant for the interpretation of Lahiri's novel? First of all, *The Namesake* is a story about identity, just like "The Overcoat". Judith Caesar claims Akaky is a non-entity, merely copying out other people's writing, but this "very lack of identity is the source of his happiness" (2007: 104). When he buys a new overcoat, thereby acquiring both a 'material self' and a 'social self', people start noticing him, and he even gets invited to a party. Akaky develops a certain sense of identity, but soon after he is violently robbed and perishes alone and miserably. However, he returns as a 'bodily phantom' to haunt Kalinkin Bridge and steal overcoats from passers-by. From this fascinating and mysterious story Jhumpa Lahiri draws ideas about shifting and unfixed identities. Thus, her characters have plural, often contradictory identities, as they straddle several realities and spaces at once. Rüdiger Heinze concurs that the image of the overcoat "represents the continuously changing subject positions that we don, our 'identity choices' and cultural affiliations made in communicating with our surroundings" (197).

Secondly, as critics have observed, Lahiri shares with Gogol a preoccupation with the idea of the 'inbetween'. Sally Dalton-Brown argues: "For Lahiri, exile from one's birth or traditional culture results ontologically in a state of inbetweenness, or limbo, that is not necessarily a negative condition, but can be one of potential freedom" (333). In this 'deathlike' state of limbo, characters grasp the truth of life as inevitably fatal; and this understanding and acceptance gives way to liberation. Dalton-Brown continues that: "For Gogol's socially alienated

Akaky, inbetween the sense of being exiled from life, a ghost caught between life and death, limbo also turns out to be particularly liberating - a state of (uncanny) power that allows him to take revenge on those who tormented him while he was alive” (333-34). The critic links this inbetweenness with the Lacanian notion of Antigone’s living death, of being caught in a powerful state called ‘entre-deux-morts’. Carmen Concilio also suggests that the main link between “The Overcoat” and *The Namesake* is the preoccupation of both authors with the concept of the ‘inbetween’. Nikolai Gogol’s character, Akaky, is between life and death; an anonymous individual while he is alive, he is empowered after death and returns as a ghost to take his revenge. For Lahiri, this means the state of being stranded between cultures, focusing as she does on the struggles of Indians to adapt to life in America.

In the third place, Gogol’s book literally interferes with and influences Lahiri’s story. Akaky’s ghost haunts “a place deep in Ashoke’s soul, shedding light on all that was irrational, all that was inevitable about the world” (*Namesake* 14). In Lahiri’s narrative, ‘the irrational and inevitable’ happens in the middle of the night, 209 kilometers away from Calcutta. The train in which Ashoke is reading Nikolai Gogol’s story derails and Ashoke is nearly killed in the accident. Readers do not find out the cause of the derailment, but train violence is quite common in India as news reports have repeatedly shown throughout the years. Ashoke is thrust partway out the window, so badly hurt that he is unable to scream for help. Luckily, a few pages from the Gogol book fly out and the team of rescuers is able to spot him and extract him from the wreck. The Russian genius had indeed not failed him. In fact, he had saved Ashoke’s life.

Just before the accident, Ashoke talks to a man named Ghosh who has recently returned from England to India at the insistence of his homesick wife. He praises England, the country in which he had spent merely two years, but where his son was born. He idealizes it as a clean, organized dreamland, in stark contrast with dirty, chaotic India: “The sparkling, empty streets, the polished black cars, the rows of gleaming white houses, he said, were like a dream. Trains departed and arrived according to schedule. (...) No one spat on the sidewalks” (15). He urges Ashoke to “pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as he can” (16), while he is still young and free. The man had returned to his home country only to die in that train wreck, but his random meeting with Ashoke will definitely change the latter’s life.

For one year Ashoke lies in bed in his parents’ house, reading engineering books, but refusing to read the Russians or any other novels because “those books, set in countries he had

never seen, reminded him only of his confinement” (20). Ghosh’s advice haunts him, so once he is back on his feet he decides to walk away “as far as he could from the place in which he was born and he nearly died” (20) and continue his studies abroad. As Sally Dalton-Brown has argued, Lahiri’s characters journey across continents in a search for the self, “found ultimately through the courage of acceptance of ‘inbetweenness’ – achieved through acceptance of ‘death in life’, through awareness of life as accident, as always under threat” (336). Her characters must first learn to appreciate the fragility of life in order to discover the strength of their own self. As I have demonstrated above, this statement is true for Ashima (who discovers the frailty of life when she loses her husband, but this realization enables her to forge an independent, powerful self) and it is true for Ashoke as well (who is almost killed in the train wreck, but then finds the strength to start a new life abroad).

Hence, despite his father’s protests and his mother’s refusal to eat for three days, he embarks upon the journey to America. ‘Between two deaths’, he travels across continents in a search for his self, ready to access the interstitial space opened up by the experience of immigration as a positive, productive state. Because of the historical and political context I described earlier, Ashoke chooses America as his destination, and not England as Ghosh had done some years before. After he leaves India for good, Ashoke has to reconcile the target country’s culture with his home country’s ancestral traditions and values. The overcoat might then also function as a perfect metaphor for immigration: a migrant has to put on the cultural overcoat of the hostland in order to fit in.

The slight limp, claustrophobia, repeated nightmares, and Gogol’s prose will always remind Ashoke of the event that triggered the rest of his life. India is a perilous space, but he has come out of it alive, and while pacing the Boston hospital corridors, waiting for his son to enter this world, Ashoke thinks that he was born twice in India and a third time in America. He was thus given “[t]hree lives by thirty” (*Namesake* 21). The novel is fraught with metaphors about life and death, offering a beautiful meditation on existential matters. Ashoke thanks his parents and their predecessors for his first birth; and instead of thanking God in whom he does not believe he thanks Nikolai Gogol for his second birth. For his third he alone is responsible because he *chose* to be ‘born’ again in America. Nevertheless, emigrating is not a trifle for Ashoke either, despite the fact that he seems comfortable with his new status. The narrator reports that “[a]lthough it is Ashima who carries the child, he, too, feels heavy, with the thought

of life, of his life and the life about to come from it” (21). The way in which he escaped from the accident was a miracle, but his son and his life in America are personal achievements. Life is indeed dominated by chance (the ‘irrational’), and death (the ‘inevitable’), but human beings also have the freedom to act and change things along the way. Ashoke has taken life into his own hands and, like the narrator from “The Third and Final Continent”, has leapt into a new, open and free space.

Although both Ashima’s and Ashoke’s education had been in English, they experience a great cultural shock in the new land. For example, “Baby Boy Ganguli” needs a name for the birth certificate so he can be released from hospital. This official ritual puzzles his parents to whom it has never occurred to question Ashima’s grandmother’s selection and disregard an elder’s wishes in such a callous manner. When the doctor suggests they should name the baby after one of their ancestors, Ashoke thinks that this sign of respect in Western societies, this symbol of heritage and lineage, would be ridiculed in India: “Within Bengali families, individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared” (28). As David Kipen observes in his review of the novel, “[n]ames have always been contested territory in immigrant families” (2). On the one hand, they strive to embed ancestral traditions and values in their new life; on the other hand, they are aware names can hinder assimilation in the host country. However, the ‘perfect name’ occurs to Ashoke when Dr. Ashley says they might also name their son after a person they greatly admire. For the first time Ashoke thinks of the accident with gratitude rather than terror, as he whispers “Hello, Gogol” (*Namesake* 28). His wife approves, understanding that the name stands both for her son’s life, and for her husband’s.

When Ashima is going through post-partum depression combined with homeland nostalgia, Ashoke feels guilty for having brought her to America. But he remembers Ghosh’s confession who said coming back for his wife’s sake was his greatest regret. Therefore, one has the feeling that for Ashoke this option is totally out of the question. He is quickly acculturated, particularly since he easily fulfills his dream of becoming a professor. He thoroughly enjoys the official academic recognition he is getting and his newly-acquired social status. In fact, his ‘success story’ equals assimilation. Moreover, he is thrilled to be lecturing before a room full of American students, to be addressed ‘Professor Ganguli’ by the secretary, and to have his name written on the office door. While Ashima experiences loneliness and distress in their rented apartment, he greatly enjoys the view from his office, and takes pleasure in going to the library

and browsing through international newspapers. He reads about the US intervention in Cambodia, but also about Naxalites being murdered on the streets of Calcutta, and India and Pakistan going to war. Ashoke does stay informed about the political situation in his country, but, unlike the family from “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, he is not very concerned or involved. He is more preoccupied with browsing the aisles where the Russian literature is shelved. In this section he is always comforted by the sight of “his son’s name stamped in golden letters on the spines of a row of red and green and blue hardbound books” (49).

In 1982 he gives his son a rare edition of Gogol’s short stories for his fourteenth birthday, trying to connect him both to his namesake and to the outstanding Russian culture in the way his grandfather had done. He does not tell him the story of the accident, but expects his son to appreciate the gift. He only mentions a special kinship he feels with Nikolai Gogol due to the fact that the Russian writer also “spent most of his adult life outside his homeland” (77). But the teenager is totally unmoved; his only feeling is relief that he does not resemble the author physically. Before leaving the room Ashoke tells his son to keep in mind Dostoyevsky’s famous remark: “We all came out of Gogol’s overcoat” (78). In an online interview, Lahiri describes “The Overcoat” as a superb story, and claims to be haunted by it just like her character Ashoke is in the novel. She adds: “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” (qtd. in Dalton-Brown 333). Of course all of this makes no sense to fourteen year-old Gogol Ganguli who has neither read ‘the Russians’, nor has any urge of doing so. Ashoke adds vaguely that it will make sense to his son one day, but unfortunately he will not be alive anymore when it does.

The following year Ashoke is up for a sabbatical and chooses to move the whole family to Calcutta for eight months. Although during the stay Ashoke delivers lectures at Jadavpur University, he and Ashima act as if they were on a long vacation. The experience is narrated from a third-person point of view from Gogol and Sonia’s perspective. The children witness their parents’ quick, unusual transformation immediately after they land in India: “Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road” (81-2). Although Ashoke is conveniently translated into American culture, he still displays more confidence when going back to India as an accomplished representative of the

diaspora. What is more, he keeps close ties with other Bengalis in the United States, and permanently cooperates with Ashima in recreating an Indian ‘universe’ in their American house (turned into a protective womb from the foreign exterior world).

In truth, Ashima and Ashoke are stranded between two worlds: when they travel to Calcutta, they revert to their old selves, but, when they return to Massachusetts, they appear no different from their American neighbors. However, both are unsettled by the fact that their children sound just like Americans, so they send Gogol to Bengali lessons, where he learns to read and write his ancestral alphabet until he is able to cobble the intricate shapes into his (foreign) name. Gogol has always hated these boring lessons because they prevent him from attending a drawing class during which the students go for walks in the historic district where they sketch the façades of different buildings. Moreover, the handouts used for these lessons of Indian history and culture are printed “on paper that resembles the folded toilet paper he uses at school” (66). This is a degrading reference to India as poor, developing country, and it signifies that his parents’ attempts to indoctrinate him with Indian/Bengali culture ultimately fail.

Train accidents happen in America too, and Gogol is involved in one when he comes home for Thanksgiving one year. Gogol’s train is delayed for almost two hours because someone had jumped onto the tracks. Ashoke has been waiting at the station all this time, and when they get into the driveway he finally tells his son the story behind his name. Gogol is perplexed, makes great efforts to absorb the information and is unable to get out of the car. He asks if his sister knows, and Ashoke replies: “In this country, only your mother knows” (124). The absurdity of the situation and the lapse in communication is striking to Gogol who had meanwhile changed his first name into Nikhil. He wants to know if his father is reminded of the accident every time he thinks of his son. Ashoke reassures him that is not the case. On the contrary, Gogol reminds him of everything that followed, of the new and blissful life he built in America.

Ashoke dies in a hospital in Cleveland, away from his country of birth, but also from his house on Pemberton Road, the home he has inhabited for over twenty years. His life seems an embodiment of his name which means ‘he who transcends grief’. After narrowly escaping a tragic accident, he overcomes the drama and is ‘reborn’ on a different continent. Completely free and comfortable wearing the immigrant’s overcoat, Ashoke skillfully negotiates his inbetweenness, and apparently never looks back in regret. Sometimes diasporic overcoats do not

fit as well as they should, so they are discarded. But Ashoke ‘adjusts’ his as much as necessary for succeeding in his adoptive country and feeling fulfilled.

### Gogol’s Namesake

From the very motto of the novel, taken from Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat”, Lahiri points to the fact that Gogol Ganguli’s story is inextricably linked to the story of his name. Thus, her Russian predecessor writes: “The reader should realize himself that it could not have happened otherwise, and that to give him any other name was quite out of the question”, and Lahiri’s narrative works towards the same outcome. “The Overcoat” also opens with the birth of its main character, but in his case it is the mother who chooses the name. She rejects all the choices presented by the baby’s godparents, and eventually decides to give him a saint’s name, which is the same one his father had carried. This is how Akaky Akakyevich (the patronymic which is created by taking the father’s name and adding the suffix meaning ‘son of’) comes into the world. Yet his naming indicates he is a mere copy of his father, not a full-fledged individual. The job he takes later on confirms his status of non-entity, as Judith Caesar has noted (2007: 104). In *The Namesake*, doctors suggest naming the newborn after someone in the family, but the Gangulis dismiss the alternative as a ridiculous Western habit.

Yet Gogol Ganguli’s names immediately mark his difference: his first name is Russian and his surname is the Anglicized version of an Indian name, prompting Karen Cardozo to highlight the fact that “both ‘Gogol’ and ‘Ganguli’ are an intertextual hall of mirrors signifying that there is no ‘there’ there – no single point of cultural origin” (18). At eighteen, he changes his first name into Nikhil (also of Indian resonance), a decision which opens up a space in which he can negotiate his notion of self. But his journey is circular, since at the end of the novel he realizes it is in fact the name of Gogol that has held the key to self-knowledge all along, and “he reconciles himself to his unique position as a diasporic individual situated on a strategic border zone between cultures” (De 2009: 36). Of course, ideas of naming and name-changing provide Lahiri with the perfect metaphors for the state of hybridity connected to migration.

While his parents wait for the letter from India to arrive, they are not very concerned about the question of their son’s name. The child has other, more stringent needs, such as “to be fed and blessed, to be given some gold and silver, to be patted on the back after feedings and held carefully behind the neck” (*Namesake* 25). Names are not so crucial in India where it is not

uncommon for years to pass before the ‘right’ name is found. Moreover, Bengalis recognize a major distinction between a pet name and a good name, thus in their nomenclature practice every single person has two names:

In Bengali the word for pet name is *daknam*, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments. Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated. They are a reminder, too, that one is not all things to all people. (25-6)

Lahiri goes on to explain that a good name, or *bhalonam*, is used for identification in the outside world, therefore “good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories, and in all other public places” (26). Ashima’s pet name is Monu, and Ashoke’s is Mithu; even as adults, these are the names by which their families call them. For this reason, letters from Ashima’s mother say ‘Ashima’ on the outside, ‘Monu’ on the inside. From the onset this gives them two distinct (not contradictory!) and simultaneous identities, an idea that Gogol will be unable to grasp until the novel’s conclusion. One does not have to choose in the sense of an either/or, but can embrace a both/and.

Lahiri’s pet name is Jhumpa; she has two good names, Nilanjana Sudeshna, but her kindergarten teacher decided to call her by her nickname which is easier to pronounce. Hence, she is all too familiar with the dichotomy brought about by this tradition. By explaining the difference at length and by placing many other references to the region she comes from, Lahiri tries to educate American/Western readers about specific Bengali customs and repudiate assumptions that Bengaliness equals Indianness. In the former’s tradition, good names represent “dignified and enlightened qualities” (26). As we have seen, Ashima means ‘she who is limitless, without borders’, and Ashoke, the name of an emperor, translates as ‘he who transcends grief’. Both names are highly appropriate for the characters that bear them. Pet names, on the other hand, are not recorded officially, only uttered among family members and close relatives or friends. Unlike good names, “pet names are frequently meaningless, deliberately silly, ironic, even onomatopoeic” (26). But Gogol’s pet name is recorded in his official birth certificate, causing subsequent confusion and identity-related dilemmas for him. In addition, it appears peculiar that two Bengalis should choose a pet name for their son born in America after a Russian writer’s surname.

Of course they mean to find a good name for Gogol, but several unfortunate events prevent the Gangulis from doing that: Ashima’s grandmother has a stroke and remains paralyzed,

unable to send another letter after they realize her initial one is still hovering somewhere between India and America, and Ashima's father dies so they have to travel to India urgently. Years go by and only when Gogol is five and starts going to kindergarten do they decide upon a good name: Nikhil. But he does not want to be called by the new name, nor does he understand why he should have a good name that his parents are not even going to use. In fact, the boy instinctively rejects his dual identity: "He is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know. Who doesn't know him" (57). The 'good' name had come to Ashoke while staring at the spines of Gogol's books in the university library, and he had rushed home to ask Ashima her opinion. He points out to her that this name is relatively easy to pronounce, "though there was the danger that Americans, obsessed with abbreviation, would truncate it to Nick" (56). However, 'Nikhil', meaning 'he who is entire, encompassing all', is connected to their Bengali heritage and also resembles Nikolai, the first name of the Russian Gogol. Although it all makes perfect sense to Ashima and Ashoke, they face the difficult task of explaining to little Gogol why he needs to have two names. They try to reassure him that all Bengalis have two names and that it is part of growing up and of their ethnic identity. Ashoke eventually dismisses the child's concern altogether by saying: "To me and your mother, you will never be anyone but Gogol" (57).

When Gogol is taken to elementary school, Mrs. Lapidus, his principal, pronounces 'Nikhil' differently from his parents, adding to the confusion. She makes the second syllable longer so that it sounds like 'heel', hinting to the fact that the 'name problem' is and will remain the boy's Achilles' heel. What is more, Ashoke addresses his son first as Gogol, then, before leaving, with Nikhil, and tries to explain the difference between the good name and the pet name to the woman. He insists that the "boy's good name, his school name, is Nikhil" (59), but Mrs. Lapidus notices that in the official documents he is registered as Gogol. Regarding the name Ashoke is very traditionalist and does not want to conform to American ways. After he is gone, the principal asks Gogol if he wants to be called by another name and he says no, so he is taken to the classroom where there is "a small universe of nicknames – Andrew is Andy, Alexandra Sandy, William Billy, Elizabeth Lizzy" (60). Obviously there is no other Gogol, but the only official ritual in class is "pledging allegiance first thing in the morning to the American flag" (60). Gogol will perform this ritual alongside his mates, identifying with American national symbols, assimilating in the homogenous, unquestioned 'melting pot' of his peers.

When Sonia is born they are better prepared and they do away with the pet name altogether, having learned that schools in America ignore parents' instructions and register a child under his/her pet name. For their daughter the good name and pet name are one and the same: Sonali, meaning 'she who is golden', showing willingness to adapt to American cultural norms while preserving some of the Indian ones. But, they soon begin to call her Sonu, Sona, and eventually Sonia, which "makes her a citizen of the world. It's a Russian link to her brother, it's European, South American" (62). It is even the name of the Indian prime minister's Italian wife, forecasting Sonia's transnational future. Unlike her brother, during her rice ceremony she refuses all the food but chooses from the plate both the dirt from the yard and the dollar bill. She threatens to put it in her mouth, prompting one of the Bengalis to exclaim she "is the true American" (63). Sonia shares all the childhood events with Gogol, but she is a background character, perhaps because she is the most 'American' member of the family and allegedly does not have to negotiate her ethnic origins as much as her brother. Hence, after the brothers go to college, Lahiri merely records news about her, without a major impact on the development of the plot.

As a young boy, Gogol does not mind his name and the fact that it is so rare that it never appears on key chains or refrigerator magnets. His parents explain to him that he was named after a famous Russian author, and "[t]hat the author's name, and therefore his, is known throughout the world and will live on forever" (66). In the beginning, the other students tease him by calling him 'Giggle' or 'Gargle', but after a while they shout "Go, Gogol!" during physical education class. Only Sonia will call him 'Goggles' for the rest of their lives, perhaps implying that he should correct his perspective on certain things.

By the time he is ten, Gogol has already been to Calcutta three times, and he remembers seeing his last name, Ganguli, in different places. He is astonished to see six pages full of Gangulis in the telephone directory. He even wants to rip out a page as a souvenir, to the amusement of one of his Indian cousins. Ashoke explains that "Ganguli is a legacy of the British, an Anglicized way of pronouncing his real surname, Gangopadhyay" (67). The colonizers have erased the suffix "-opadhyay" which signifies membership in the Brahmin caste. Dhingra and Cheung clarify that 'Gangopadhyay' means "teacher from the village of Ganga" (2012: 33), thus it is another reference to Ashoke's grandfather. But in America even Ganguli is mocked; Gogol discovers one day that their family name has been vandalized on the mailbox. Someone had

shortened it to ‘GANG’ and had scrawled ‘GREEN’ after it. Although apparently integrated in the neighborhood, their surname is forever a sign of otherness and ‘nonbelonging’. The incident sickens Gogol, who runs back into the safe space of the house, certain of the insult his father must feel: “Though it is his last name, too, something tells Gogol that the desecration is intended for his parents more than Sonia and him” (*Namesake* 67). He is already aware that cashiers smirk at his parents’ accent, that some salesmen prefer to address him directly, as if “his parents were either incompetent or deaf” (68). But Professor Ganguli is unmoved by such instances of American discrimination; he seems determined to acknowledge only the positive sides of his host country. He dismisses the whole thing by saying that it is only boys having fun, and immediately goes to the store to buy the missing letters.

Not long after this episode, Gogol is in the sixth grade and goes on a school field trip, first to a textile mill somewhere in Rhode Island, then to a small wooden house with tiny windows, placed on a large plot of land, which used to be the home of a poet. Inside the austere residence, students stare at the poet’s inkwell set on his desk, at the soot-stained fireplace, and narrow bed. The final stop of their trip is the graveyard where the unnamed poet is buried. For a few minutes they wander from stone to stone, among thick and thin tablets, some of which are square and arched, others are black and gray, covered by lichen and moss. Inscriptions have faded on many of the stones, and Gogol, who has never set foot in a cemetery before, feels a chill. Then their teachers give them a name-related project that is going to make the hero all too aware of the chasm between Indian culture (burning the dead) and American habits (burying the dead), but also of his lacking American roots. The peculiarity of his name(s) becomes even more conspicuous to him after this experience. The students receive some sheets of newsprint and colored crayons and are asked to rub the surfaces of the gravestones in order to discover their own family names. Most children soon holler triumphantly ‘Smith’, ‘Collins’, or ‘Wood’, claiming “a grave they are related to” (69).

The cemetery is an example of Foucauldian heterotopia, being a Western space “connected with all the sites of the city, state or society or village etc., since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery” (Foucault 25). Until the end of the eighteenth century, graveyards were placed at the heart of the city, next to the church, but with the secularization of society they were moved to the outside borders of towns. This school trip is Gogol’s cultural encounter with “the other city” (Foucault 25), where each Western family has a resting place.

Even before starting to work on the project, the American-born Indian knows that he is different from his colleagues and that he will not find his surname on any stone: “Gogol is old enough to know that there is no Ganguli here. He is old enough to know that he himself will be burned, not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will ever bear his name beyond life” (*Namesake* 69). He remembers seeing dead bodies of strangers carried by people through streets of Calcutta, corpses decked with flowers and wrapped in sheets. Although his displacement is not physical (having been born in the United States), he somehow feels he does not fully belong because he has to negotiate continuously between his family space (where Indian traditions are zealously upheld) and the American social space (with its different set of rules).

Gogol has no ancestral connection to this land or its history; nevertheless he takes the task seriously and walks to a “slim, blackened stone with a pleasing shape, rounded at the top before rising into a cross” (69), and rubs the newsprint. The name ABIJAH CRAVEN and the years 1701-1745 appear “magically” on his page. ‘Abijah’ is also a peculiar name, and Gogol wonders how it is pronounced and whether it belonged to a man or a woman. He goes to another small tombstone, and discovers ANGUISH MATHER, A CHILD. Trying to identify in a way with American culture, he imagines bones no larger than his own lying below the ground. While the other children (with strong roots) are quickly bored of the project and start chasing one another around the stones, he goes from grave to grave and brings to life more bizarre names: PEREGRINE WOTTON, EZEKIEL AND URIAH LOCKWOOD. One chaperone walks by and remarks that these names are rare nowadays. But Gogol likes these names, their “oddness” and their “flamboyance” (70). They are outsiders, just like him, so Gogol invents a kinship with these unknown people. Digging up the American immigrant past he tries to make sense of his present and future in the country repeatedly called ‘a nation of immigrants’, where during his lifetime he will remain part of a minority, an Indian-American. It occurs to Gogol that names die over time, that they perish just as people do, and all that is left to tell the personal history of these individuals are brief inscriptions on a headstone.

On the way back the other children either tear up their rubbings, or crumple and toss them at each other, while Gogol remains silent and guards his ‘discoveries’ carefully. At home, Ashima is outraged that American teachers take children to cemeteries in the name of art, and concludes Americans do not take death seriously. She says bitterly it is already bad enough “that

they applied lipstick to their corpses and buried them in silk-lined boxes” (70), and adds that in Calcutta “burning ghats are the most forbidden of places” (70). Consequently, she refuses to display Gogol’s rubbings in the kitchen, alongside his other drawings of a Greek temple, or of the public library’s façade. Her son was ranked first in a contest regarding these sketches, hinting at his future career as an architect. Ashima claims she could not possibly cook with names of dead people on the walls of her kitchen. Yet Gogol is attached to these names, and connects his own unusual, foreign name to the history of this land, establishing a future as an American through this connection: “For reasons he cannot explain or necessarily understand, these ancient Puritan spirits, these very first immigrants to America, these bearers of unthinkable, obsolete names, have spoken to him, so much so that in spite of his mother’s disgust he refuses to throw the rubbings away” (71).

By the age of fourteen Gogol has come to hate his first name, which he considers both absurd and obscure. He hates signing his name on the drawings he makes in class, or constantly having to explain that it does not “mean anything ‘in Indian’, (...) that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian” (76). Living with a Russian name, particularly during the Cold War, must indeed have been distressing for an adolescent. He would obviously have preferred a first name like Leo (Tolstoy), Anton (Chekhov), or Alexander (Pushkin), and is dismayed that his parents chose the strangest of namesakes. He is a teenager now, his body changing in unexpected ways, and the obscurity of his name makes him feel even more insecure. In fact, “[a]t times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, manages nevertheless to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear” (76). Jayadev, the other Indian boy at school, can shorten his name to Jay and pass easily for an American. But Gogol cannot be shortened, and it “sounds ludicrous to his ears, lacking dignity and gravity. What dismays him most of all is the irrelevance of it all” (76), the fact that it is his father’s favorite author, not his. He is still unaware that had it not been for Gogol’s book, his father would have died and his lineage would have ended on that terrible day. However, Gogol does realize that it is his own ‘fault’ as well, because he could have accepted to be called Nikhil at school. In that case, he would have been Gogol only fifty percent of the time: “Like his parents when they went to Calcutta, he could have had an alternative identity, a B-side to the self” (76).

After he receives Nikolai Gogol's collection of stories for his birthday, the main character becomes even more miserable when he ponders that not only does he have a pet name turned into a good name, but he also bears a Russian author's surname turned into a first name. To his mind, this double difference marks his 'othering' and subsequent exclusion from American society in which he longs to assimilate. It also occurs to him that no one he knows in the world shares his name or the source of his namesake. Instead of being a positive thing, a sign of his uniqueness, the 'odd' name he bears feels like a heavy 'overcoat' to Gogol Ganguli. He is yet unable to accept and integrate his transculturality, but continues to yearn for a monocultural, mainstream American identity.

In high school they actually study Nikolai Gogol's short story "The Overcoat", which is listed after Faulkner and before Hemingway, therefore 'inbetween' two American iconic writers. As the teacher writes 'Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol' on the board, Gogol tries to convince himself that the whole situation is not so strange since "there is, after all, a William in the class, if not an Ernest" (90). He is embarrassed nonetheless, and then has to listen to a detailed biography of the writer, including the fact that he was an 'eccentric genius' who lived for a long period of time abroad, in places like Paris and Rome, but most of all, stressing that Nikolai Gogol's life "was a steady decline into madness" (91). The English teacher lists phrases like 'hypochondriac', 'deeply paranoid', 'frustrated man', and 'morbidly melancholic', in order to make a lasting impression on the minds of teenage Americans. He mentions that Turgenev once described his compatriot as a 'queer and sickly creature', and stresses that Gogol had few friends, never married, and is commonly believed to have died a virgin, details that must seem horrifying and incomprehensible to young, contemporary Americans. Gogol Ganguli blames his parents for never having told him any of these abnormal biographical details, but, luckily, his classmates seem indifferent and continue to copy the information obediently as the teacher goes on emphasizing the Russian writer's eccentricity, not his genius.

Everything culminates with data about how he starved himself to death as a result of a prolonged writer's block, severe depression, and mental decline: "In attempts to revive him on the day before his death, doctors immersed him in a bath of broth while ice water was poured over his head, and then affixed seven leaches to his nose. His hands were pinned down so that he could not tear the worms away" (92). Gogol, at the end of his tether, shuts his eyes while the whole class starts to moan. Eventually, the teacher disappears to have a cigarette, temporarily

releasing Gogol from his turmoil. The other students lament that the story is too long and hard to get through, that Russian names are difficult to pronounce. Nobody says anything to Gogol Ganguli, and he himself has not read the story, nor does he intend to. His attitude is ambivalent though. To his mind, reading the story would mean paying tribute to his namesake and accepting it somehow. Still, as he listens to his classmates complain “he feels perversely responsible, as if his own work were being attacked” (92). In the film the classmates mock him (“Hey Gogol, it’s your namesake”) and he makes an obscene gesture.

After refusing to date throughout high school, partly because of his awkward name, one night while his parents are out of town he goes to a party in a dorm. He introduces himself as Nikhil for the first time, to a girl simply called Kim. She repeats ‘Nikhil’, and adds that it is a lovely name. This gives him the courage to kiss her; it was thus not Gogol, but Nikhil who kissed for the first time. Rüdiger Heinze interprets this scene: “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” (195). It is an Indian name he has had since childhood, but because he has never used it until now, it is not connected to a cultural and personal past, which gives him the freedom to create any future.

So in 1986, at eighteen, Gogol finds himself in the waiting room at the dentist’s, flipping through an issue of *Reader’s Digest*, when he comes across an article called “Second Baptisms”. The article provides a whole list of famous people who have changed their names, including Bob Dylan, Gerald Ford, Molière and Leon Trotsky. Although the article does not mention it, Nikolai Gogol himself published under different pseudonyms before actually changing his name, that is “simplifying his surname at the age of twenty-two from Gogol-Yanovsky to Gogol upon publication in the *Literary Gazette*” (*Namesake* 97). But the article stresses that changing one’s name is a right belonging to every American citizen, and every year tens of thousands actually use it. Slaves renamed themselves once they were emancipated, and European immigrants had their names changed at Ellis Island. Ironically, by the time he moves to New York, Gogol has already exercised this right, and hereby reassured himself of his Americanness. Thus, in the waiting room he suddenly envisions ‘Gogol’ added to this list of names, and ‘Nikhil’ printed in tiny letters upside down. He talks to his parents about it, stressing that it is high time he had a good name. But his father points out that, in his case, the pet name actually became his good name long ago. Gogol protests that it is not even a Bengali name; it is a name which belonged to

a mentally-unstable Russian man, and because of this nobody takes second-generation Indian-American Gogol Ganguli seriously. This is a lie and Gogol knows that “the only person who did not take Gogol seriously, the only person who tormented him, the only person chronically aware of and afflicted by the embarrassment of his name, the only person who constantly questioned it and wished it were otherwise, was Gogol” (100). Still struggling with his individuality, Gogol feels as if his name were a medical condition he is determined to treat.

Resigned to the fact that in America anything is possible, Ashoke signs the change-of-name form. In India such a thing would be inconceivable, yet Gogol insists that he is going to bear a Bengali name from this moment on. So he goes to Boston, alone for the first time, and “gets briefly lost on his way to Middlesex Probate and Family Court” (97). This first symbolic journey on his own marks the beginning of a constant flux of traveling in Gogol’s life: from Boston to New Haven (during college years), from New York to Boston, and from New York to Europe. These voyages are added to those he was ‘forced’ by his parents to take when traveling to India and back throughout his childhood and adolescence.

The Boston courthouse is an imposing old brick building, with a beautifully carved plaster ceiling, and marble interior. Gogol has to empty his pockets as he steps through a metal detector, “as if he were at an airport, about to embark on a journey” (98). While he is impatiently sitting in the waiting room, Gogol practices his new signature. The judge motions Gogol Ganguli to approach the dais, and it saddens him a little that this is going to be the last time he will hear this name in an official context. Nevertheless, he is still convinced he has taken the right decision and that by changing his name he is actually correcting a mistake his parents have made. The judge asks why he wishes to have this name change, and he says he has always hated it, unable to find a plausible reason and unwilling to tell her the whole saga of his good name being lost in the mail, between continents.

Although the setting is imposing, in agreement with the cases normally presented here, Gogol’s name-changing procedure is “entirely unmomentous” (102), taking only ten minutes. The narrator records in a neutral tone that no one accompanies Gogol on this legal rite of passage. The novel documents several rites of passage, starting from birth(s), continuing with baptism(s), birthdays, graduation ceremonies, marriage(s), divorce, and death. And, of course, there is migration as a crucial ritual, metaphorically representing death but also rebirth. But Gogol’s self-naming is the most significant initiation, an event he has to undergo alone.

Afterwards he wanders the streets of Boston in this new ‘overcoat’, apparently a reborn man, like Akaky. But for his family he will always be Gogol, no matter what ‘overcoat’ he puts on. And the narrator will also continue to refer to him as Gogol, except for a very brief section when the narrative voice switches to Moushumi’s perspective.

Under the name of Nikhil he has his first sexual experience with a girl whose name he ironically cannot remember. Now a student at Yale and physically dislocated from his parents, he acts as if he were totally independent from them. Although the big move to New Haven coincides with the time of the name change, he is aware that his parents, their friends, and all his own friends from high school, will never call him anything but Gogol. So it is awkward for everyone (including Gogol) when his parents phone and ask to speak with Nikhil. It makes him feel that he is not related to them, not their child anymore. But at home ‘Gogol’ claims him again, illustrating Foucault’s opposition between family space and social space (“Of Other Spaces” 23). The conundrum of his two names and conflicting identities makes him feel “as if he’s cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different” (*Namesake* 105). His act of renaming himself automatically involves an unnamings, as he officially gives up Gogol, his birth name, for good. Aparajita De claims that “[h]is old and new names unassumingly embody the plurality of his diasporic identity. He is initially disconcerted by it (an individual inherently desires to be a synthetic and unified entity), and identifies his American location to be the *only* signifier of his identity” (2010: 15).

It is ironic that Moushumi (his future wife) is the only woman he has ever gone out with who has known him by that other name. Interestingly, although she has known him from childhood, she thinks of him and refers to him as ‘Nikhil’. At a party thrown by some of Moushumi’s friends Gogol does not fancy at all, there is a long discussion about names triggered by the fact that one of the guests is pregnant and thinking about possible names. Moushumi’s own name, she explains to a friend, means “a damp southwesterly breeze” (*Namesake* 240). She does not like it at all, rather argues that a foreign name like hers is a curse because no one can say it properly and it permanently underlines her difference. She has had the same problems as Gogol, hence their shared identity as children of immigrants. In school, for example, the students pronounced her name ‘Moosoomi’ and mockingly shortened it to ‘Moose’. Later, her lover Dimitri Desjardins calls her “Mouse”. The conversation gets to name changes, and Moushumi reveals Nikhil’s secret: that he had changed his. He is embarrassed, has to say out loud the name

he was born with, which after all these years “sounds as it always does, simple, impossible, absurd” (243). Unexpectedly, the former name comes back to haunt him. He feels betrayed, wishes he had never told her the story behind his naming, and is forced to explain to the guests that his father was a ‘fan’ and that is why he was named Gogol. Someone jokes that they should name their baby Verdi, deriding him, his father, and their heritage. He knows Moushumi’s cosmopolitan friends will not do “something so impulsive, so naïve, to blunder, as his own parents had done” (244). Someone says the perfect name will occur to the future parents in time, and Gogol bursts out proclaiming there is no such thing as a perfect name, and that human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen. The guests quickly change the subject, but for Gogol this moment marks the rupture from his wife.

Tellingly, in this scene she does not call him by any of his names, but refers to him as her husband. This episode contrasts with the opening one in which Ashima does not address her husband by his name either, but she does that out of respect for tradition and as a token of intimacy and affection, whereas this is not so in Moushumi’s case. Had she followed the Indian tradition she would not have exposed him in front of her American friends (notably, as a couple, they do not have any Indian friends). Although she likes the fact that he had changed his name because it made him somehow a new person, not the one her mother had mentioned, to her it is a trivial matter. More importantly, perhaps, Moushumi has kept her last name, not adopting Ganguli, “not even with a hyphen” (227), to Gogol’s disappointment. She publishes articles on French feminist theory and signs them Moushumi Mazoomdar, which is already long enough, so she does not want to change her surname. The underlying assumption, however, is that the relationship is not important enough for her. Again unlike Ashima, who has adopted Ashoke’s name and followed him across the world, Gogol’s wife does not commit herself entirely to the marriage. She does not want to be the submissive Indian woman/wife, and in this way she downplays Gogol’s patriarchal hopes: “Though he hasn’t admitted this to her, he’d hoped, the day they’d filled out the application for their marriage license, that she might consider otherwise, as a tribute to his father if nothing else” (227). The subsequent dissolution of their marriage ultimately stems from Moushumi’s reluctance to conform to the cultural expectations of the Bengali-American community (including her husband).

When Gogol finds out about her affair with Dimitri, he realizes that for the first time in his life another man’s name upsets him more than his own. Subtle analogies with names and

naming continue. Thus, after the break up, his time with Moushumi seems like a name he has ceased to use. He realizes that by changing his name “it had not been possible to reinvent himself fully, to break from that mismatched name” (287), and that his marriage has been a misstep as well. While he is disappointed by his past failures, Gogol is now at ease with the fact that his personality consists of several parts which are in dialogue with one another. His attempts to circumscribe one separate, pure identity have tormented him for too long. In the process he has renamed himself, removed himself from his family, and experienced several love relationships. But all of these have failed partly because he was not comfortable with his hyphenated status and plural identity.

### An ABCD returns to the *desh*

As I have shown so far, Gogol has had to negotiate two very different cultures throughout his life, as well as a third brought about by his name. When he turns fourteen, for example, he has a party with his friends from school, with pizzas that his father picked up on his way home from work, a baseball game watched together on television, and some ping-pong played in the den. The next day they have another celebration, a Bengali one this time, to which forty people from three different states are invited. As usual, Ashima cooks for days beforehand, cramming the refrigerator with lamb curry and potatoes, luchis, channa dal with raisins, pineapple chutney, and sandeshes molded out of saffron-tinted ricotta cheese. However, she is much more comfortable with cooking all these dishes than she is with “feeding a handful of American children, half of whom always claim they are allergic to milk, all of whom refuse to eat the crusts of their bread” (72).

Thus, the father is responsible with the ‘American’ party (involving less food, not prepared in the house, and some sports), whereas the mother takes care of the ‘Indian’ celebration (involving plenty of food, all cooked in the house, numerous Bengali families with children who play hide-and-seek and watch *The Love Boat* and *Fantasy Island*). It is at this second party that Gogol meets Moushumi, a thirteen-year-old girl who has just moved with her parents from England to Massachusetts. They are new in this Bengali circle of friends, and Moushumi is different from the other Indian-Americans her age in that she speaks with a British accent, reads *Pride and Prejudice* (replaced by *Bonjour Tristesse* in the film) and proclaims she

detests American television. Gogol's only connection with English culture is represented by his love for The Beatles, hence he and Moushumi have nothing in common at this age.

When his parents announce they are all moving to Calcutta, Gogol "dreads the thought of eight months without a room of his own, without his records and his stereo, without friends" (79). He and his sister will be uprooted not only from the American environment to which they are used, but also from school. They leave on Christmas Day, with a massive collection of luggage, instead of staying home and opening gifts. They fly to London, Dubai and, finally, Calcutta. On past trips Gogol was thrilled to fly over so many countries, and he would trace their itinerary on the map in the seat pocket, feeling somehow adventurous. But this time he is frustrated that they always go to Calcutta where apart from visiting relatives there is nothing to do. He has already been to the planetarium, the Zoo Gardens, and the Victoria Memorial a dozen times. Having ticked the touristic sites, Gogol knows he will not feel at home in the foreign, faraway town. The only other city they have ever visited is London, but only during a layover of a few hours when their plane to India was delayed. So Gogol wishes they went to Disneyland or the Grand Canyon instead, stereotyped sites Lahiri uses in order to show how her protagonist insists on identifying only with his Americanness.

As they land on the tarmac of the Dum Dum airport, the air is "sour, stomach-turning" (81), and a row of relatives is "waving madly from the observation deck" (81), aunts and uncles and cousins whose pet names Gogol and Sonia will have to remember and whom they will have to kiss and hug once the doors slide open and they are no longer in transit. Their parents are instantly transformed: "Ashima, now Monu, weeps with relief, and Ashoke, now Mithu, kisses his brothers on both cheeks, holds their heads in his hands" (81). The children know these people, but they do not feel close to them. In fact, Sonia whispers to her elder brother in English that she is scared, takes his hand and refuses to let go. During the stay she will be his only ally, the only person to speak and sit as he does, to understand what he goes through. Although they sometimes fight over the Walkman and the collection of tapes recorded by Gogol in his room at home, they both feel an impossibility to adapt, and share "excruciating cravings, for hamburgers or a slice of pepperoni pizza or a cold glass of milk" (84). Both children desperately want to return to their house in America, the only place where the two very distinct cultures blend in an acceptable way.

From the airport they are taken by taxi, and the chaotic Indian city mirrors Gogol's discomfort. He recognizes the scenery, as they roll down VIP Road, past a huge landfill and into the heart of North Calcutta. However,

he still stares, at the short, dark men pulling rickshaws and the crumbling buildings side by side with fretwork balconies, hammers and sickles painted on their façades. He stares at the commuters who cling precariously to trams and buses, threatening at any moment to spill onto the street, and at the families who boil rice and shampoo their hair on the sidewalk (82).

When they eventually get to the flat on Amherst Street, where Ashima's brother now lives, curious neighbors look from windows and roofs. Everyone is staring at the 'American' children who "stand out in their bright, expensive sneakers, American haircuts, backpacks slung over one shoulder' (82). Inside, he and Sonia are given plates of *rossogollas* for which they have no appetite but which they have to eat. Next they have their feet traced onto pieces of paper, and a servant is sent to Bata to buy rubber slippers for them to wear indoors, as is customary in India.

Everything is radically different and in Gogol and Sonia's perceptions in a very negative way. They have to adjust to sleeping under mosquito nets, bathing by pouring tin cups of water over their heads, and watching cousins go to school while they sit around the house all day. Although they have rented their house on Pemberton Road to a couple of American students for the period in which they are gone, they do not rent an apartment in Calcutta, but spend the whole period living with various relatives, shuttling from home to home. All their relatives are fascinated by life in America. They ask about what they eat for breakfast, what they do in school, and are impressed by simple elements like the fact that they have carpets in the bathroom. Gogol and Sonia have little to do but witness how one of their aunts "presides in the kitchen all morning, harassing the servants as they squat by the drain scouring the dirty dishes with ash, or pound heaps of spices on slabs that resemble tombstones" (82). The interesting association between 'ashes' and 'tombstones' reminds one of Gogol's trip to the Rhode Island graveyard and his dilemma of being caught between cultures.

The use of space in this section of the book reflects Gogol's hybrid state and his cultural ambiguity. On the one hand, he knows the language and is accustomed with the foods and most of the Bengali traditions. On the other hand, he feels uncomfortable and alien in the midst of 'native' Bengalis, and desires nothing more than to be back in the familiar Boston area. Thus, in spite of his numerous visits, Gogol has no sense of direction in the huge Indian metropolis. Once he tries to run on the "cracked, congested, chock-a-block streets" (83), and his aunt promptly

sends a servant to follow him and make sure he does not get lost. So he chooses to stay in the house most of the time, sitting at his grandfather's drawing table, sketching what he can see through the iron window bars: "the crooked skyline, the courtyards, the cobblestone square where he watches maids filling brass urns at the tube well, people passing under the soiled canopies of rickshaws, hurrying home with parcels in the rain" (83). Sometimes Gogol goes to the roof to smoke a flavored bidi with one of the servants. From the rooftop there is a view of the imposing Howrah Bridge, but Gogol is not tempted and perhaps not even allowed to walk this bridge and thus symbolically close the gap between the two cultures. On the contrary, his self-imposed seclusion in the house marks his uneasiness in an unfamiliar, even hostile, environment.

In the summer, the four of them travel by train first to Delhi, and then to Agra to see the Taj Mahal. They have been warned that there are bandits lurking in Bihar, so Ashoke wears a special garment under his shirt, with hidden pockets for the cash, while Ashima and Sonia have to remove their gold jewels. Everything about this country seems inauspicious to Gogol, and even the landscape they see through "the tinted window of their air-conditioned car (...) is gloomy and gray" (84). Unlike Calcutta, where at least Ashima and Ashoke feel at home, Agra is foreign to all of them. They are tourists, staying at a fancy hotel with a swimming pool, drinking bottled water, eating in restaurants with forks and spoons, and paying by American credit card. Paradoxically, Gogol notices that in certain restaurants they are the only Indians apart from the serving staff. They admire the Taj Mahal, as well as Agra Fort (we are told nothing about Delhi), and Ashima ties red threads for good luck in Salim Chishti's tomb. To no avail, however, since on their trip back to Calcutta bad luck trails them. Sonia eats a slice of jackfruit which makes her lips itch unbearably and swell to three times their size. Predictably, somewhere in Bihar a businessman is stabbed and robbed of three hundred thousand rupees, and the train is stopped for hours while the police investigate the case.

When they finally arrive in Calcutta, both Gogol and Sonia get terribly ill. Doctors give them local remedies, and the relatives presume the 'American' children got sick because of the air, the rice, or the wind. It is obvious to the Indian family that "they were not made to survive in a poor country" (86). When they recover, it is already time to go back to the United States, and "the caravan of taxis and Ambassadors comes to whisk them one last time across the city. Their flight is at dawn, so they must leave in darkness, driving through streets so empty they are unrecognizable, a tram with its small single headlight the only other thing that moves" (86).

Probably this is the memory Gogol and Sonia will keep: a dark city they are relieved to escape from.

Back on Pemberton Road, jet-lagged and confused, they have to readjust. At first they are disconcerted by the space and by the uncompromising silence that surrounds them. “They still feel somehow in transit, still disconnected from their lives, bound up in an alternate schedule, an intimacy only the four of them share” (87). Yet, in their lives they are in fact in a perpetual transit between cultures, and the ever-present planes and trains stand for migration, mobility, and permanent fluctuations. The train metaphor often used by Lahiri in this text is perfect to capture the complexity of the above mentioned state(s). Michel Foucault has pointed out that “a train is an extraordinary bundle of relations because it is something through which one goes, it is also something by means of which one can go from one point to another, and then it is also something that goes by” (23-4).

After only one week the Gangulis have unpacked the eight suitcases, eaten the smuggled mango, and shopped in supermarkets. They already feel as if they have never been gone and they cozily retreat to their three rooms, sleep again in their three separate beds, with their thick mattresses, comfortable pillows, and fitted sheets. Refrigerator and cupboards are once again filled with familiar labels such as Skippy, Hood, Bumble Bee, Land O’Lakes. They settle back in the American matrix with ease, relieved to be back in a world with superior consumer goods. Ashima enters the kitchen for the first time in almost a year, while Ashoke drives the car, mows the lawn, and returns to the university. Their children watch television, eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, take hot showers and ride their bicycles around the neighborhood. Their American friends are happy to see them, but do not ask where they have been, unaware of how confusing it must be to occupy a space inbetween cultures. “And so the eight months are put behind them, quickly shed, quickly forgotten, like clothes worn for a special occasion, or for a season that has passed, suddenly cumbersome, irrelevant to their lives” (*Namesake* 88).

Time passes and Gogol takes an introductory course in architecture, combining his talent in drawing with his search for roots and identity. Sonia is in high school, having a “confident, frequent, American smile” (107), but dyeing almost all her clothes black, threatening to get additional holes pierced in her ear lobes, and to color a streak of her hair blond. This is shocking to Ashima who has never quite understood why her children need to go to what she considers such extremes. But Sonia’s experiments with looks parallel Gogol’s decision to change his name,

and reflect different ways of dealing with their ABCD status. In college Gogol attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English and hears for the first time an explanation of this acronym. One of the panelists, Amit, is a distant cousin from Bombay whom he has never met, but Ashima insists he should go and greet him. During the presentations he is bored by the repetitive mentions of “something called ‘marginality’, as if it were some medical condition” (118). Lahiri half-jokingly introduces the clichéd postcolonial trope of marginality. Although totally unaware of the fact that he inhabits this space, the phrase ABCD catches Gogol’s attention, and he gathers that it stands for ‘American-born confused deshi’. He learns that *C* could also stand for ‘conflicted’, and understands that he fits right in this category. He knows that *deshi* means ‘countryman’ or ‘Indian’ and that his parents and all their friends always refer to India simply as *desh*. But Gogol “thinks of it as Americans do, as India” (118).

However, there is a ‘little India’ recreated in their house, and Gogol constantly moves between this private sphere and the public American space. He and his sister are used to continuously translating between cultures, but this theoretical presentation makes him confront certain ambivalent realities he has lived with all his life:

For instance, although he can understand his mother tongue, and speak it fluently, he cannot read or write it with even modest proficiency. On trips to India his American-accented English is a source of endless amusement to his relatives, and when he and Sonia speak to each other, aunts and uncles and cousins always shake their heads in disbelief and say, ‘I didn’t understand a word!’ Living with a pet name and a good name, in a place where such distinctions do not exist – surely that was emblematic of the greatest confusion of all. (118)

Just like he hated and avoided learning the ancestral alphabet, so he avoids other ABCDs on campus and does not want to join the Indian association because its members remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people for the roots they happen to share and not for other things they might have in common. Still, when he renamed himself he could have chosen any name, but he went for Nikhil, thus affirming the Indian part of his hyphen. The new name is a mark of his ethnicity, whereas Gogol, the name he rejects, is Russian or universal, but not Bengali in any case. Moreover, even though he is disconcerted and distressed by his hybrid ‘condition’, it is something that does not go away.

But Gogol is only beginning to understand that he should consciously integrate the Indian side of the hyphen in his sense of self. Much more has to happen until he actually achieves this reconciliation.

### Gogol's Women: Three Sequential Selves

Gogol's self-discovery is influenced by three long relationships which reflect different sides of his developing identity. In fact, critics (Gopinath, Bhalla) have noted that the female characters (including Gogol's three partners, but to some extent also his mother) are objectified foils to the male protagonist's development, or 'overcoats' he wears at some point in his life. Thus, his first girlfriend, Ruth, stands for Gogol's desperate wish for American roots. Maxine, on the other hand, represents his ambition to access a higher class status in American society. Moushumi, the one he actually marries, marks a return to his ethnic roots.

He meets Ruth on a crowded train back home from university. She is majoring in English, and they have seen each other on campus before but have not been introduced. She is the child of hippies, a natural beauty who wears no make-up or nail polish. She was raised on a commune in Vermont, and educated at home until the seventh grade. Her parents are divorced now. Her father lives with his new wife, raising llamas on a farm, while Ruth's mother, an anthropologist, is doing fieldwork on midwives in Thailand. Gogol cannot imagine coming from such a family of "utopian enthusiasts" (Song 357), who expose themselves to the wilderness in search of a perfect way of life, leaving behind the corrupted urban lifestyle. These characters hint at the Protestant settlers who came to New England centuries before and founded what Michel Foucault would call some "absolutely perfect other places" (27). Although Ruth expresses interest in his background, asking about visits to Calcutta, Gogol thinks that his own upbringing feels "bland" (*Namesake* 111) compared to hers. Natalie Friedman claims that Lahiri's choice of adjective indicates that Gogol does not see himself as an outsider, or as a person with a unique immigrant background. On the contrary, to him Ruth, the Yankee, is 'exotic', while he is a 'bland' American suburbanite (Friedman 120).

Her parents had been to an ashram in India before she was born, and Ruth is curious what the streets and the houses are like over there. So Gogol draws a floor plan of his maternal grandparents' flat on his school book, and navigates Ruth along the verandas and the terrazzo floors, "telling her about the chalky blue walls, the narrow stone kitchen, the sitting room with came furniture that looked as if it belonged to a porch" (*Namesake* 111). Then he draws the room where he and Sonia sleep when they visit, and describes the view of the tin-roofed businesses. Ruth says she would love to go to India, and he imagines her staying at the Grand, walking along Chowringhee, and shopping in New Market as other Western tourists do. He realizes that in

Calcutta Ruth would be the tourist and he the local. His grandparents were born and died there, their photographs are still hanging on the walls of their house in Amherst Street, so Gogol has firm roots in India and he is starting to relate to them. He continues to tell Ruth about meals they ate on Indian trains when they traveled to Delhi and Agra, about Indian tea with milk and sugar bought through the window from men on the platform, about how the crude clay cups were smashed afterward on the tracks. She appreciates these details and Gogol feels flattered, especially since he has never spoken of his experiences in India to any American friend. Indeed, Ruth in Hebrew means both ‘companion’ and ‘compassion’, another link with the Puritans, among whom Old Testament names are prominent.

They start dating, but he has no desire to tell his parents about Ruth, and he cannot picture her at their kitchen table on Pemberton Road, in her jeans and sweater, politely eating his mother’s food. What is more, he cannot imagine being with her in the house in which he is still Gogol. When they find out, Ashima and Ashoke are obviously displeased and claim he is too young to get involved in a serious relationship, particularly with an American girl. They give examples of Bengali men who have married Americans and then have gotten a divorce. It is interesting how Ashoke, otherwise so well-adapted to American ways, in certain matters betrays a very Indian attitude. Neither he, nor Ashima believe interethnic marriages have any chance of working. Gogol wishes his parents could accept Ruth, like her father and stepmother have accepted him, without any pressure at all.

Instead of bringing her home during Christmas break, they meet in Boston one day. They go to a movie at Brattle, have lunch at Café Pamplona, and exchange presents. They wander the streets of Boston hand in hand, discover a small shop selling architecture books, and Gogol buys Le Corbusier’s *Journey to the East*. They walk the very streets on which he was pushed in his stroller as a child, and he shows Ruth the Montgomerys’ house where he spent the first years of his life. He wishes they could go inside and suddenly feels strangely helpless because access to the house is denied. It now belongs to other people, and Gogol feels both happy to be there with Ruth and disappointed that until now this first house his parents have inhabited in America did not mean anything to him. This brief visit represents a first acknowledgement of his parents’ efforts to re-root themselves in a foreign land.

Ruth goes to Oxford for a semester and Gogol “longs for her as his parents have longed, all these years, for the people they love in India” (117). He starts to empathize with what they

must have gone through when they moved across continents. For Ruth it is easier to leave since she has no history of immigration in her family; traveling does not entail a drama for her and her parents. So she stays in England for a summer course after the semester is over and by the time she returns to Boston the distance between them is already too wide. Although they move together in a rented apartment for a short while, Ruth is determined to go back to Europe for graduate school. She mentions he could come too, but Gogol is still dealing with his roots and routes between India and the United States, and is obviously not ready for a transatlantic move. After a relationship of two years, they break up, and Ruth moves to England. Her trajectory resembles a reverse migration path, going back on the tracks of the Puritans. She is his only stable girlfriend during his years at Yale, and when she exits his life she “takes with her the self he was with her” (Caesar 2007: 111).

Gogol’s second significant relationship is with Maxine, another American woman, but one who is almost the opposite of Ruth. Gogol meets her at a posh party, and this affair marks a brutal distancing from his parents. While dating Ruth he would keep in touch with them, but after getting together with Maxine, he is absorbed by her sophisticated world and almost forgets about Ashima and Ashoke.

The year is 1994, and Gogol now lives and works as an architect in New York. His firm is in midtown, and although he apprentices with ‘big names’, it is not the job he had envisioned as a student. His dream was to design and renovate private residences; instead, he works with a team and designs for hotels, museums, and corporate headquarters in foreign cities he has never even visited, such as Brussels, Buenos Aires, Abu Dhabi, Hong Kong. His office faces the “tawny brick wall of a neighboring building across the air shaft”, and his work “is incidental, never fully his own: a stairwell, a skylight, a corridor, an air-conditioning duct” (125). Nevertheless, each component of a building is important, and he finds it gratifying that after all his years of schooling, his efforts have some practical end. He works hard even on weekends, but as he is still putting together parts of his identity, Gogol Ganguli is not ready to build houses, only parts.

He rents a studio in Morningside Heights, with two windows facing west, on Amsterdam Avenue. This is the first apartment he has to himself, after sharing rooms with a series of people all through college and graduate school, but it reflects the provisional stage he is in. There is a lot of street noise and the space is extremely small. It will remain an impersonal place, and he will

never attempt to decorate it or make it into a home. Although he still depends on his parents' money, New York to Gogol is the city of opportunities (on personal and professional level).

Maxine studied art history and works as an assistant editor for a publisher of art books. She is very assertive and calls him the day after the party, inviting him for dinner at her house in Chelsea where she lives with her parents. She had moved back with them after a failed relationship with a man with whom she had shared a house in Boston. Maxine is described almost exclusively in relation to her wealthy parents, their impressive house, and their class privilege. When he gets to the address she had indicated, Gogol is stunned by the beauty of their brownstone (a sign of their status as American citizens for many generations), and stops to admire it like a tourist before opening the gate.

Lydia, Maxine's mother, is in the kitchen. Yet she is nothing like Ashima: she is a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and only cooks exquisite foods. Her husband, Gerald, works as a lawyer, and the Ratliffs are in perfect antithesis to Gogol's parents. Thus, for dinner they have steak and dark beans, drink wine, followed by chocolate, seasoned with intellectual conversation about movies, exhibitions, and restaurants. They are New Yorkers and speak about their spectacular house and the history of the neighborhood. They also have a dog and epitomize the high class American family, belonging to this city by right of birth and heritage. This immediately fascinates Gogol, the son of immigrants. Although they are intrigued by his Indian background, his years at Yale and Columbia, and his promising career as an architect, he comes from a very different milieu. In fact, Lydia comments that he could be Italian, revealing stereotypes about darker skin and negating his Indianness by placing him in a more familiar European context. She wants to know whether Calcutta is beautiful, and Gogol is caught a little off guard since he is usually asked about the poverty, the beggars, and the heat. He says: "Parts of it are beautiful. (...) There's a lot of lovely Victorian architecture left over from the British. But most of it is decaying" (134). He refers to the colonial legacy, maybe because his hosts can relate better to that. The implication is, however, that Indians are not taking good care of their legacy. Gerald remarks it sounds like Venice (another comparison to Italy), and Gogol replies that there are canals in Calcutta only when the streets flood during the monsoons season. Maxine proclaims she wants to go to Calcutta, but quickly after gets up to make some tea, abruptly putting the whole discussion behind them.

Yet Gogol is “effortlessly incorporated into their lives” (136). Soon he accompanies Maxine when she goes shopping on Madison Avenue, where she buys “cashmere cardigans and outrageously expensive English colognes (...) without deliberation or guilt” (136). Together they eat in restaurants downtown, with tiny tables but huge bills, and afterwards the two always end up in the Ratliff residence. They sleep in the room she grew up in, making love just above her parents’ bedroom. So, “[q]uickly, simultaneously, he falls in love with Maxine, the house, and Gerald and Lydia’s manner of living, for to know her and love her is to know and love all these things” (137). Indeed, as Judith Caesar observes, part of Gogol’s unnecessary turmoil when it comes to his identity search arises from the fact that he tends to identify his self with what William James has called the ‘material self’ (one’s surroundings and possessions, including the houses), and the ‘social self’ (the relationships in one’s life), while leaving his ‘essential self’ (the organizing consciousness that helps one understand the meanings of events in one’s life) largely underdeveloped (Caesar 2007: 103-4). Throughout the novel he explores a series of sequential identities, and his troubles come from a lack of continuity and from a lack of a unitary sense of self. He seems unable to see the bigger picture: one can be many things at the same time, and plural identities are in fact preferable to either/or self-definitions.

Maxine and her ‘things’ thus constitute his next identity. She is superficial, surrounded by a mess, her hundreds of things always covering her floor. Still, Gogol is charmed by her unkempt ways and he loses his self in the material and emotional comfort of this relationship, to the point that her parents introduce him to their friends as “the architect Max brought up with her” (*Namesake* 157). He is an accessory to this young woman who always acts as if she has grown up but not matured. For example, she claims it has not occurred to her she could live on her own after returning from Boston, preferring the cocoon of her parental home. Gogol, on the other hand, could not even imagine going back and living with his parents. Instead, he learns to eat the refined foods the Ratliffs eat, polenta and risotto, bouillabaisse and osso buco among others, and adopts their ways, while they adopt him apparently without questions or obligations. Interestingly, Lahiri repeats the verb “learns” four times, stressing Gogol’s eagerness to absorb their lifestyle.

Maxine represents Western cosmopolitanism and upper-middle class status; she becomes a “cultural usher, teaching Gogol how to affect the highbrow tastes that would enable him to realize the cultural capital of his Ivy-League education and gain proximity to the advantage of

whiteness” (Bhalla 2012: 113). Her white, wealthy body holds the promise of power that tempts Gogol. She is objectified in order to represent everything that the male, ethnic subject is not but thinks he wants to become.

Consequently, he participates in the dinner parties they throw for their friends, all carefully selected, mainly painters, editors, academics, or gallery owners. He is impressed by the intelligent conversation and compares these classy events with his parents’ parties. Although their circle of Bengali friends is also an elite group, formed by educated people (Indian teachers, doctors, researchers), they would eat in shifts, out of the pans in which the food was cooked, sitting wherever they could, sometimes in different rooms of the house. Furthermore, their house is in the suburbs of Boston, whereas Gogol’s relationship with Maxine unfolds in a fancy house in Manhattan, during a period in which he is trying to make a name for himself in New York. Perhaps this is why, like Sanjeev from “This Blessed House”, Gogol is enticed by the standard of life these Americans display in their sumptuous residence.

At the same time, he is conscious that this immersion in Maxine’s life is a betrayal of his own. He cannot picture his parents sitting at Lydia and Gerald’s table, enjoying their excellent food and wines, contributing to one of their dinner party conversations. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Lahiri underlines that class is not just an ‘English’ obsession:

I think that class works differently in the United States, but it’s not that it’s not there, that people don’t think about it and have attitudes and live their lives according to certain notions. I’ve never felt a freedom from that. I mean, classes exist and you’re born into one and that’s it. Well, that’s not it, but there’s no escaping the fact that you were born into one specific circumstance or another. (Tayler, 2008, para 12)

Therefore, most of her characters, whether Indian, American, or Indian-American, are described in terms of social class and their houses and properties are accurate indications. But, apart from their affluence, there is another insurmountable difference between the Ratliffs and the Gangulis. Gerald and Lydia are secure in a way Gogol’s parents will never be, namely they are confident of their Americanness. Similarly, Maxine is comfortable with who she is, and, more importantly, “she has never wished she were anyone other than herself, raised in any other place, in any other way” (*Namesake* 138). This is the biggest difference between her and Gogol, a distinction correlated to the house she has grown up in compared to his. Maxine’s relationship with her parents is very open, again unlike his with Ashima and Ashoke. Hence, although Lydia and Gerald pressure her to do nothing, “she lives faithfully, happily at their side” (138).

Max is surprised to hear that Ashima and Ashoke have had an arranged marriage, that Ashima cooks Indian food every single day, and that she wears saris and a bindi. She exclaims in disbelief: “But you’re so different I would never have thought that” (138). Gogol does not feel insulted, but he realizes a line has been drawn between them because to Maxine, who is used to her father bringing flowers and expensive jewels to her mother and to the two of them kissing and going out, an arranged marriage is inconceivable. He knows his parents would want him to marry a girl of Indian descent, and this thought upsets him, maybe even makes him have relationships with American women as a late act of rebellion.

During his time with Maxine, Gogol seldom calls his own parents and does not go home to Massachusetts for the whole summer. Unable to reach him at the apartment, unaware that he has moved in with somebody else’s parents, Ashima calls his office one evening. She asks him to come home the following weekend because Ashoke is moving to Ohio for nine months on a grant. Gogol knows that his parents never regard the act of travel casually, and “that even the most ordinary of journeys is seen off and greeted at either end” (144). He and Maxine are supposed to go to New Hampshire for two weeks, but he reluctantly agrees to stop off at Pemberton Road for lunch. She is curious to meet his parents, amused that they do not drink wine and do not even own a corkscrew (Hinduism forbids alcohol, which seems funny to a liberal American). Gogol dreads the moment, especially since she is the first girlfriend he had ever brought home and she is not Indian. Additionally, he goes by Nikhil now, but in the shingled suburban house of which his parents are so proud, he is still Gogol. Hence, he feels uncomfortable throughout the rich Indian meal, and relieved to be back in her world as he pulls out of the driveway and heads North across the state border. During the ride he tells Maxine about his name change, and she exclaims it is the cutest thing she has ever heard, but never mentions it again, “this essential fact about his life slipping from her mind as so many others did” (156).

In New Hampshire he loves the fact that he is disconnected from the world, and is particularly glad that his parents cannot reach him. So he decides that here, “at Maxine’s side, in this cloistered wilderness, he is free” (158). During this holiday he turns twenty-seven, and it is the first birthday in his life he has ever spent away from his own family. Instead he spends it with Maxine, her family, and their friends. An unpleasant conversation, however, shadows his birthday party and reminds him of his status as ABCD. Pamela, a friend of the Ratliffs, says she

had a girlfriend who went to India and “came back thin as a rail” (157) and remarks that Gogol must not get sick when he goes to India, presuming that the climate does not affect him given his heritage. He replies he is from Boston, born and raised, and the climate conditions are tough for him too when he travels to India. Lydia intervenes, telling Pamela ‘Nick’ is American and he was born here. But she is not sure, after all this time, and asks: “Weren’t you?” (157). His hopes for national belonging and assimilation are shattered. He might have been effortlessly ‘adopted’ in their family, but it is only a partial, temporary, and surface integration.

He is not like them and ethnic differences prove unyielding a few months later, when his father passes away and Gogol finally understands he cannot and should not sever his roots. Maxine is unable to relate to what he is going through - first of all because she has not lost a parent, and secondly because she has no knowledge about Indian mourning rites. Their interracial relationship is eventually wrecked by cultural incompatibility, evoked in the movie by a powerful image in which she is the only one dressed in black during the ceremony held after Ashoke’s death. This comes in stark contrast with Indian tradition which asks for the color white to be worn at a funeral. Moreover, Gogol does not include her in his plans to go to Calcutta and scatter Ashoke’s ashes in the Ganges. She had opened her world to him, whereas he is shutting the gates to his. A few months after their break-up, he meets Lydia and Gerald in a gallery and finds out that Maxine is already engaged to another man. Once the object of his desire in his quest for national belonging and a higher social position, Maxine is now brutally relegated as an object of undesired alterity.

It is not surprising, then, that Gogol’s third significant relationship is with Moushumi Mazoomdar, a woman he has known from childhood and who stands for the ethnic identity he has now decided to adopt. She is a PhD candidate at NYU, writing a dissertation on francophone poets from Algeria. She is the first Bengali he has ever been involved with. In fact, it is the first time either of them has allowed their mothers to arrange a date. Moushumi’s parents have always tried to set her up with an Indian-American, but from early childhood she had been determined not to let them have a hand in her marriage. So she rebuffed all the Indian men, and as a teenager she was forbidden to date. She rebelled against her parents who made her major in Chemistry by secretly pursuing a double major in French: “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 favor of one that had no claim whatsoever” (214). Moushumi seeks refuge in French culture, and after graduating from college she moves to Paris in an attempt to escape as far as possible from her family and the two cultures she had been caught in between her whole life.

She is a hybrid, just like Gogol, his mirror image. Her dislocation is more violent though: he changes his name but stays in the United States, close to where his parents live, whereas she remorselessly turns her back to the two countries that could ‘claim’ her and escapes to a third, totally unrelated, where she eventually asserts her individuality by denying any roots. In this third space everything is easy: “She was exactly the same person, looked and behaved the same way, and yet suddenly, in that new city, she was transformed into the kind of girl she once envied, had believed she would never become” (215). She starts dating, having numerous affairs (like Gogol when he ‘escaped’ to New Haven). Uninhibited, she sleeps with French, German, Persian, Italian, and Lebanese men. This is her second rebellion, this time away from her parents and the city she grew up in. Her sexual behavior is extreme (there are days in which she sleeps with several men on the same day), but self-conscious, a reckless attempt to annihilate her family’s influence and the constraints of their Indian mentalities. Somehow it also seems like she is taking revenge on herself, disintegrating violently only to reconstruct a transnational identity as far as possible from her previous influences. Born in England to Indian parents, having lived in the United States before fleeing to France, she has relationships with men of several nationalities in order to eschew questions regarding her own national belonging.

It is in Paris that she meets Graham, an investment banker living there for a year, and moves back to New York with him. Surprisingly, her parents are relieved she is seeing someone; by now she is ‘old’ by Bengali standards so it does not matter anymore that her boyfriend is American. Plus, Graham is Ivy educated and has an impressive salary, which makes them overlook the fact that his parents were divorced and his father had remarried twice already. Moreover, many of their friends’ children had married Americans and “had produced pale, dark-haired, half-American grandchildren, and none of it was as terrible as they had feared” (216). They are accepting Western mores in a way they never did when their daughter was growing up.

Graham and Moushumi get engaged after she proposes one night in a taxi. Although he agrees to a Hindu wedding and even flies with her to Calcutta to meet the extended family, he later makes fun of the trip during a meal with American friends. He reveals that he found the

culture provincial and repressed, and the only thing to do in India was to stay at home or to visit relatives without even being allowed to drink. A chasm opens between them because “it was one thing for her to reject her background, to be critical of her family’s heritage, another to hear it from him” (217). This is somewhat unexpected, but it proves that Moushumi does identify with her Indian/Bengali side quite strongly, to the point that she removes the engagement ring, his grandmother’s diamond, and tosses it away in the middle of the street. Graham then strikes her in the face publically in front of pedestrians, sealing their break-up. Like Gogol and Maxine, they too part because of cultural differences. Interracial relationships, however, are not impossible in principle. Sonia and Ben seem to be a solid couple, so maybe it is just that upper-class Americans look down on the people with immigrant background although they do grant them temporary access to their elite circles.

Gogol and Moushumi, both having gone through failed relationships with Americans and having finally embraced their Indian heritage, meet for the first time since childhood at a small bar in East Village. He notices she no longer has a British accent, but “sounds as American as he does” (193). She explains that she hated moving here and that is why she preserved the accent for as long as she could. Her parents feared America because of its vastness and because in their minds it had less of a link to India than England. Their cultural translation is toilsome; America is perceived as foreign and even dangerous (when Moushumi was growing up, children mysteriously disappeared from their yards). Moushumi and Gogol do not really have many shared memories, but she remembers the house on Pemberton Road, and “he is secretly pleased that she has seen those rooms, tasted his mother’s cooking, washed her hands in the bathroom, however long ago” (200). He, too, remembers going to a Christmas party at her parents’ home in Bedford. Moushumi played a short piece by Mozart on the piano, and then she played ‘Jingle Bells’ over and over again, as gifts were being distributed. They have never before met outside the context of their families, yet he decides “it is her very familiarity that makes him curious about her” (199). Their shared Bengaliness, constructed in America, is suddenly intriguing and makes him want to see her again.

During a lunch at an Italian place, the waiter asks if Moushumi is his sister and insists that they strongly resemble each other. Gogol laughs, yet realizes “they share the same coloring, the straight eyebrows, the long, slender bodies, the high cheekbones and dark hair” (203). He feels uncomfortable, his attraction to her made somehow illicit, incestuous by the implication

that they are siblings. However, he is “at once insulted and aroused” (203). Their parents went to great lengths to raise them as if they were all part of a surrogate extended Bengali family, and now, in a totally different context, a stranger actually believes that they are related. Gogol is pleased by this familiarity. At her place he recognizes versions of things he knows from home: Kashmiri carpets on the floor, Rajasthani silk pillows on the sofa, a cast-iron Natraj on one of the bookcases. And when they make love it feels as if they have known each other’s bodies for years.

Three months later, they already have things at each other’s apartments, and within a year they get married at a DoubleTree hotel in New Jersey, City where her parents now live. The Hindu ceremony is organized by them, so that the bride and groom are almost like witnesses at their own wedding. They would have preferred a sit-down dinner, with jazz played during a reception held at the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, the Metropolitan Club or the Boat House in Central Park. Instead, their families invite three hundred people, serve Indian food, and make them wear traditional outfits. Gogol is dressed in his father’s Punjabi top, a dhoti with drawstring waist, and a pair of slippers with curling toes. Nervous to be literally in his father’s shoes, he is afraid he cannot quite fill them and thinks the ensemble looks silly on him while it would have looked dignified on his father. Moushumi wears a sari and about twenty pounds of gold. For the reception he changes in a suit, and she in a self-designed red Banarasi gown. Both are aware that they are fulfilling a collective, longstanding cultural obligation: that of marrying a fellow Bengali and thus ensuring continuation of Bengali-American generations. In a way, they are giving in and doing what is expected of them, and “because they’re both Bengali, everyone can let their hair down a bit” (224). They are like two actors trying to play the parts distributed to them, but not feeling entirely comfortable with their roles.

As Min Hyoung Song observes, Gogol is making a choice that is not a choice, “reminiscent of being a six-month-old infant made to face his destiny in the form of symbol-laden objects” (359-60). It is symbolic, then, that he does not participate in the wedding preparations. Although it feels strange not to be involved in his own wedding, this reminds him of the numerous other rites of passage in his life, all the birthdays and graduation parties his parents have thrown in his honor, but which were attended by his parents’ friends, making him feel like an outsider. He is relegated to the status of a son once more, but this time he is finally

doing what his parents had expected him to do all along. The ‘American solutions’ had failed, so he is trying the ‘Bengali one’.

About half a year after their wedding, they travel to Paris together. Moushumi has to deliver a paper at a conference at the Sorbonne and Gogol accompanies her, eager to visit the French capital. They stay in an apartment in the Bastille, which belongs to a friend of Moushumi’s who is away at the time of their visit. The apartment is small, dark, and uncomfortable, and this is how Gogol feels throughout the vacation. Moushumi is fluent in French and seems to know every corner of Paris. He has never been to Paris and feels useless, with her taking all the decisions: where to go for meals, what to visit, how to spend time. When they meet her French friends he is “particularly mute” (*Namesake* 231), and does not even share their conversation topics about the Euro or the Y2K problem. Eventually he tells her he would like to explore the city like a tourist without the advantage of having a guide, to see the architecture he has read about for so many years, to look at a map, or just to get lost.

Roaming the streets on his own he understands why she lived here for many years, away from her family and the United States. He thinks of the way in which Moushumi had reinvented herself in Paris and admires her, “even resents her a little, for having moved to another country and made a separate life. He realizes that this is what their parents had done in America. What he, in all likelihood, will never do” (233). Moushumi, on the other hand, also thinks that the one thing about her parents’ lives that she truly admires is their ability to turn their back on their homes and their beloved ones and start anew in a totally different culture. Yet, she dreads becoming like her mother, a woman who has never worked, who was married off at twenty-two and has ever since been totally dependent on her husband. On their last day in France, she confesses to her husband she wishes she had never left Paris, and suggests they move here together one day. But Gogol does not feel a connection with French culture or with Paris; he is a tourist and does not empathize much deeper than that. In contrast, Moushumi feels at home and does not let him take her photo in a café, afraid that Parisians might mistake her for a tourist.

Back in New York, they attend a dinner party held by some of Moushumi’s closest friends, a crowd Gogol does not really like or has much in common with. Her friend Donald proves Gogol does not know his wife as well as he thought. Donald asks when they are going to move to Brooklyn, telling him Moushumi loves the area whereas Gogol is convinced she prefers Manhattan, like he does. Apart from the Bengaliness, it seems more and more obvious that they

do not share many other things. For Moushumi, “the familiarity that had once drawn her to him has begun to keep her at bay” (250). He represents an identity she thought she wanted at one point, but now realizes does not really suit her. In fact, she starts to associate Gogol with the very life she had resisted, showing that a quasi-arranged marriage does not work out for the second generation. She comes to understand that he was not who she saw herself ending up with, and he had never been that person. “Perhaps for those very reasons, in those early months, being with him, falling in love with him, doing precisely what had been expected of her for her entire life, had felt forbidden, wildly transgressive, a breach of her own instinctive will” (250). Particularly the last part of this phrase hints again at an almost incestuous relationship: the two are like family, and this brings them together but in the end tears them apart.

Hence, on their first anniversary dinner she does not like the place (although her yuppie friends had recommended it, the restaurant is hard to find and unimaginatively decorated) or the food (over-priced and served in tiny portions), and leaves still hungry (symbolizing he can no longer satisfy her). At one point she looks at his plate and even feels slightly repulsed by his dish, wishing he would finish sooner so she could light a cigarette. What is more, the shawl he had given her drops to the floor. The whole scene evokes the falseness and fragility of a marriage approaching its end.

Soon after, Moushumi starts an affair with a former crush of hers from high school. Dimitri Desjardins has a multicultural name: his first name is Russian and reminds us of the tormented brother in Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, while his surname sounds French. He is the opposite of her husband: unemployed, living off an inheritance from his grandmother, not considering getting married although he is thirty-nine. He spends his days cooking, reading, and listening to classical music. They always meet at his bohemian apartment and she loves the fact that on these days, during those hours, no one knows where she is. Moushumi transgresses all norms and, during this affair, she wonders if she is the first woman in her family to have betrayed her husband. Ironically, Gogol finds out about her infidelity on a train while they are traveling to spend Christmas with Ashima and Sonia.

A few months after their divorce he learns that she is moving back to Paris. Interestingly, Tamara Bhalla claims that Moushumi is defined by a choice between brown and white men, “the former representing oppression and the latter rescue from that oppression” (2012: 117). After her American fiancé, Graham, leaves her before the wedding, she seeks comfort in a relationship

with a fellow Indian-American, only to cheat on him with a white man. She is thus 'rescued' by a white man from the expectations of a brown man, echoing Gayatri Spivak's famous words. Hence, Bhalla concludes that Lahiri's novel subtly "reinscribes reductive and gendered Orientalist paradigms" (2012: 117). Yet this affair only represents one step in her liberation, and she eventually moves to Paris alone, rejecting once again any familial expectations to pass down her Indianness through generations. I think her body is her own, and she radically refuses to be a mere bearer of Indian culture, like her mother had been throughout her life in America. She is a global citizen in a 'world without borders', not tied down to a place by any man or any roots.

The shared Bengali-American identity which they needed to explore at one point proves too restrictive in the end; both Gogol and Moushumi need to assert their individuality and transcend ethnic obligations. But Gogol, who had rebelled against his family and heritage by changing his name, realizes that his ties are too strong and impossible to cut for good. So unlike his former wife, he travels to Europe but comes back to the United States. After having temporarily functioned as "cultural correctives for one another, remedying not only their heartbreak, but also feelings of ethnic alienation" (Bhalla 2012: 116), their relationship eventually falls apart because it was based on a false sense of authenticity. For second-generation Indian-Americans, shared experiences and ancestry are not enough anymore. Thus, Lahiri offers a rewriting of the trope of 'happy arranged marriage', and refuses to foreground intraracial romance as the perfect solution to ethnic dilemmas.

After trying to match different, separate sides of his identity with the women he is romantically involved with, Gogol is single at the end of the novel. Has he finally found his self? Is he eventually 'whole' on his own? The third path opening up for him, namely encompassing all dimensions of his identity without being in a sentimental relationship, seems to suggest that the answer to these questions is yes.

#### Gogol's Journey from Hybrid to Transnational Character

Two major moments in Gogol's life mark his dramatic transformation. The first is when he hears the story that has led to his naming. He is stunned by Ashoke's confession, looks at his father as if he were a complete stranger, a man whose past he does not really know. He tries to imagine life without his father, a world in which he does not exist, but is not able to until his father's

death actually does occur. This is the second huge shock Gogol suffers, one that ultimately makes him put together all the pieces of his identity and harmonize past, present, and future.

On a train to New York he inevitably links his father's life and death with his own life and name. Gogol thinks of that other train that had nearly killed his father, "of the disaster that has given him his name" (185), and of the significance this name had for Ashoke. He probably also grasps the consequences his name change must have had on his father, and all of these thoughts trigger a mitigation with his cultural hybridity. Gogol now remembers the cold Sunday afternoons when his family would drive to the sea. Once they went as far East as Cape Cod and "he and his father walked to the very tip, across the breakwater, a string of giant gray slanted stones, and then on the narrow, final inward crescent of sand" (185). His mother waited with Sonia, while he literally walked in his father's footsteps until they reached the lighthouse. Gogol's legs were aching and they were dangerously surrounded by water on three sides but incredibly satisfied to have made it. He recalls Ashoke telling him to keep this day in mind for ever: "Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go" (187). With Ashima he had taken the journey of migration from India to the United States, with his son he walked to the easternmost point of the state of Massachusetts. Although he will probably never move to a new country, Gogol has learned from his father that one should be brave enough to explore new territories, to travel until there is nowhere left to go. Metaphorically, Ashoke was urging his son to test his limits, push any boundary, and explore the plurality of his identity.

Gogol is the one who flies to Cleveland to identify his father's body. Maxine offers to go with him, but he does not want to be accompanied by someone who barely knew his father. In the waiting room Gogol thinks that only twenty-four hours earlier he was having dinner with Maxine at a fancy, bustling restaurant in Chinatown, feasting on delicious and expensive foods, while his father was already dead in this hospital. He takes Ashoke's belongings, and arranges to have the ashes sent to Pemberton Road. The task of emptying the rented apartment leaves him exhausted, his father's presence still contained in all the objects he had used. Ashima had told him to bring nothing back, so he keeps only the wallet and a photograph of the family in front of the Indian landmark Fatehpur Sikri. He spends the long, painful night in the apartment, despite Maxine's advice to go to a hotel. Although he "is accustomed to obeying her, to taking her advice" (177) he does not want to check into an anonymous room, but stays in the space that his

father has inhabited for the last months of his life. He understands the guilt that his parents carried inside at being able to do nothing when their parents had died in India, and blames himself for not having kept in touch more often.

Not only does he understand, but he also feels the need to respect all the stages in the Indian mourning rituals. Thus, he shaves his hair, a Bengali son's duty when a parent dies, and identifies with his father who had done the same when his father passed away. Gogol stays with Sonia and Ashima during the entire mourning period, and when Maxine drives up from New York to bring some of his things, he does not care anymore how his modest parental house might look to her. Throughout the ceremony she feels useless and excluded in the house full of Bengalis, but Gogol does not bother to translate what they are saying or to introduce her to everyone. For the first time in his life, he does not want to get away from his roots and family, and feels no urge to return to New York. Instead, he parts with the American woman who is unable to relate to his culture.

A year after Ashoke's death, Gogol returns to the house on Pemberton Road almost every weekend. His father's photograph, hanging on a wall in the upstairs hallway, draws him back again and again. One day, as he glances at his father's smiling face in the picture he realizes that this is the closest thing Ashoke has to a grave. The house is both a symbol of Ashoke's stable life and identity in America, and the place where he lives on after death. It is intriguing that, although Ashoke's remains have not been buried but burned, Gogol associates the house with a sanctuary for his father. I think it shows how important the symbol of the house is in Lahiri's work, how life and death are inextricably bound together in the sacred space of the home. Sonia, too, has moved back to the room she occupied as a little girl. She now works as an attorney in Boston, but has returned to the parental house in New England which is the *axis mundi* of the Gangulis.

When Ashima sells the house and hosts one last Christmas party there, Gogol goes to his room to clean up. Most of his things are packed already, such as essays written in high school under the name Gogol, different records and clothes that he had left behind. Among his old books he discovers *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*, his father's present for his fourteenth birthday. He opens it and finally connects this gift with his name and identity. He notices an inscription written in his father's tranquil, optimistic hand: "For Gogol Ganguli (...) The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" (288). He remembers Ashoke standing in the doorway, an arm's reach from where he is sitting now, handing him the book

without mentioning the accident he had narrowly escaped. Gogol realizes he has obstinately concentrated his efforts on changing his name, “the very first thing his father has given him” (289), on becoming a different person, and on rejecting his filiation by correcting a presumed ‘error’ his father had made. He knows now that it is impossible to prepare for all the accidents and losses one suffers, and understands such incidents have shaped him and determined who he is.

The idea of the inevitable and the irrational surfaces again, this time in Gogol’s train of thought: “Things that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end” (287). Indeed, while Ashima is the one who gave birth to him, his father is the one who gave him his name. But, he is also the one who passed down to his son a complex cultural heritage, combining his origins with his experiences and beliefs. Ashoke is what Genna Welsh Kasun calls “the bearer of cultural maternity” (14), enabling his son to carve out his own transcultural identity. Although he rejects it brutally in the beginning, Gogol ends up accepting it years later, albeit in his father’s absence. For as long as he lived, Ashoke continued to call him by his pet name. His name has always been an open invitation to explore his uniqueness, a cultural chance provided by his father to step out of restrictive matrices such as Bengali, Indian, American, Bengali-/Indian-American. And, at the same time, his name was a vivid warning of the “absurd tragedy of mistaking yourself for your overcoat” (Caesar 2007: 118).

As he browses Nikolai Gogol’s book and skims through the biography which had terrified him as a schoolboy, Gogol continues to meditate about existential matters. Ashima, who is now moving to a different world, will call and write emails from time to time, so for a while he will still hear ‘Gogol’ over the wires and see it typed on a screen. But once she passes away too, the name Gogol Ganguli “will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all” (*Namesake* 289).

In an article entitled “My Two Lives” (2006), Lahiri envisions her own situation when her parents are no longer alive. She lives three hours away from them, and sees them about once a month. Yet everything will change once they die because “[t]hey will take certain things with them - conversations in another tongue, and perceptions about the difficulties of being foreign. Without them, the back-and-forth life my family leads, both literally and figuratively, will at last

approach stillness. An anchor will drop, and a line of connection will be severed” (2). Similarly, the ultimate erasure of her character’s pet name is no comfort to Gogol Ganguli at all. Luckily, this revelation helps him recuperate the part of his identity corresponding to the name he had once officially deleted. For the first time, Gogol wonders if he is ever going to have a child of his own to name. When he becomes an associate at the new firm he works for, his name will be incorporated, and then “Nikhil will live on, publicly celebrated, unlike Gogol, purposely hidden, legally diminished, now all but lost” (*Namesake* 290). Nevertheless he preserves a connection with the Russian writer (Nikhil/Nikolai), and with his father (Ganguli).

Ashoke felt reborn in America, and so does Gogol. He has changed his name at eighteen and now, already in his thirties, he is finally ready to put the pieces together and generate a new, all-encompassing self. This phenomenon of polygenesis is defined by Aparajita De in her PhD thesis, *Mapping Subjectivities: The Cultural Poetics of Mobility and Identity in South Asian Diasporic Literature* (2009), as “a continual self-refashioning that characterizes diasporic identity” (37). In her work, De looks at the impact of the politics of location on Gogol’s identity, and she concludes that “space becomes the medium for articulating subjectivity based on theories of national origin, gender, geography, movement and/or displacement” (38). Thus, identity is a continual birthing process unfolding in a productive inbetween space.

Gogol starts to read, knowing that the book could have disappeared from his life, like his pet name. The ‘rescued’ book closes the distance between India and the United States, between past and present, between grandfather, father, and son. Gogol/Nikhil is now comfortable with his multiple affinities, achieving a seemingly more stable, yet heterogeneous identity. Like Moushumi and Ashima, but to a different extent, what he needs is a global citizenship and a sense of transnational belonging. It is not random, then, that Nikhil means “he who is entire, encompassing all” and “sky” in Bengali at the same time.

### Spaces and Places

Throughout this thesis I have shown how Jhumpa Lahiri uses houses, cities, and other spaces and places as filters for the ways in which her characters negotiate their ethnic identities. A number of cities are featured in this novel, the most important of which are Boston, Calcutta, and New York. Interestingly, all three are presented alternatively from the point of view of Ashima and

Ashoke (at home in Calcutta and foreigners in American cities), and from the perspective of Sonia and Gogol (at home in America, but uncomfortable with the foreignness of India).

Other American sites of significance in the book are: New Jersey (where Gogol and Moushumi have their wedding), Cleveland (where Ashoke finds his death), and San Francisco (where Sonia lives for a few years). The place in New Hampshire that draws the Ratliff family every year in June is also important. They have a private graveyard here, epitomizing their roots and genealogical right to the land, and paralleling at a microcosmic level the cemetery in Rhode Island visited by Gogol as a student. The Indian cities in which various plot scenes unfold are Calcutta, Alipore, and Agra (where the famous Taj Mahal is located). Several landmark European cities are also dealt with: Paris is described in detail, and Oxford, London, and Venice are briefly visited.

In the first part of this chapter I have discussed at length the quiet ways in which Ashima asserts herself as a transnational character. She is born in Calcutta, but lives most of her adult life in Massachusetts. After a lifetime of homesickness, she realizes she feels at home in her house on Pemberton Road and is distressed that she has to sell it after her husband's death. Nevertheless, she deals with these emotions and decides to continue her life without a permanent residence, at home wherever her family members are. Ashoke originates from Alipore, but after immigrating to the United States he settles in the Boston area. He dies away from both these 'homes', having a heart attack in Cleveland, a city to which he has no connection except through a work contract valid for a few months. Their daughter, Sonia, is born in the United States and seems to be the most American member of the family. She goes to college in California, lives for a while in San Francisco, but after her father's death returns to Massachusetts to be close to her mother. In the end she moves to Boston with her American fiancé, with whom she is going to have a Hindu wedding in Calcutta. As a child Sonia had hated their journeys back East, but now she willingly returns to her Indian roots and actively explores her heritage.

As a child and then teenager Gogol, too, had been utterly uncomfortable with his Indianness, especially during his travels to India. Born in an apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he relocates with his parents first to an unnamed university town outside Boston, then to the house on Pemberton Road where he grows up. He goes to Boston to change his name, and then moves to a dorm in New Haven as a freshman at Yale. This is the first space he inhabits without his parents and under a different name. He is independent now and lives in this

temporary, impersonal space as if he were unrelated to Ashima and Ashoke. Foucault argues that the dormitory (or boarding school) is an example of 'crisis heterotopia', described as "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, the elderly etc." ("Of Other Spaces" 24). Thus, Gogol starts his sex life in this place, chooses a different major than his parents would have liked, and generally breaks loose from them.

Still in search of a fixed identity, he believes he has found it in the Gothic architecture of the campus: "He likes its oldness, its persistent grace. He likes that so many students have occupied it before him. He likes the solidity of its plaster walls, its dark wooden floorboards, however battered and stained. He likes the dormer window he sees first thing in the mornings when he opens his eyes looking at Battell Chapel" (*Namesake* 108). Resembling his father in this respect, Gogol is comfortable in the American university setting. He is convinced that the lasting beauty that surrounds him here also roots him to the environs. Strangely, he feels at home, in a way he has never felt while growing up on Pemberton Road. He is inspired to sketch these buildings for his drawing class, to learn the vocabulary that classifies them, and eventually to pursue a career in the field of architecture.

By 1994 he has graduated from the architecture program at Columbia, and has rented a small, noisy apartment in New York. It is the first place he has ever inhabited alone, without his family or a roommate. By no means a cozy place, it illustrates his yet uncertain social position in the metropolis. Hence, the entrance in the building is easy to miss, placed between a newsstand and a nail salon; the kitchen is built into an entryway, the space being so small that the refrigerator stands several feet away, over by the bathroom. Had he chosen MIT and moved back to Massachusetts, he would surely have had a better lodging. But Gogol has no intention of returning to "the one city in America his parents know" (126). He does not want to live his parents' life, to rent an apartment in Central Square and walk the same streets his parents reminisce about. His distancing is deliberate: he refuses to go home on the weekends, to join their Bengali friends at pujos, and to remain unquestionably in their world. He prefers New York precisely because it is a city his mother and father do not know, "whose beauty they are blind to, which they fear" (126) and which allows him to assert his independence and difference from them.

In Gogol and Sonia's childhood, the Gangulis once visited some Bengalis who lived in Queens. They went on a tour of Manhattan by car, past sites like Rockefeller Center, Central Park, and the Empire State Building. Extremely impressed, Gogol had ducked his head below the car's window to see how tall these edifices were. While his parents remarked that it was noisier and had heavier traffic than Calcutta, the boy was fascinated. He laughed at Sonia when she said she wanted to visit Sesame Street, and was upset they only got out of the car on Lexington Avenue, to have lunch at an Indian restaurant. He wished they had gone to the Museum of Natural History to see the dinosaurs, or simply walked through a park or ridden the subway. But they went shopping for Indian groceries instead, his parents showing no interest in exploring 'The Big Apple', feeling uneasy amidst all the cars and skyscrapers. Years later, when they drive here for Gogol's graduation from Columbia, the trunk of the car is broken into in the first five minutes and their suitcase is stolen. Thus, Ashoke has to attend the ceremony without a jacket and tie. This is another reference to Nikolai Gogol's story, where Akaky too is robbed of his overcoat in the street. Ashoke is confident and well-established in Massachusetts, but his social position seems threatened in the bigger and more cosmopolitan metropolis.

New York City is a symbolic point of arrival for Gogol, with the apartment on Amsterdam Avenue being a substitute for Ellis Island, the gate through which so many foreigners entered in America. The city remains an iconic locus for immigrants, providing a democratic space for them to negotiate their ethnic identities. Yet it is a socially layered town, where Gogol is a social 'subaltern' as proven during his relationship with Maxine Ratliff, a wealthy American woman. The Ratliffs' place is an impressive Greek Revival in Chelsea, an absolutely stunning house that the young architect admires like a tourist. He notices the "pedimented window lintels, the Doric pilasters, the bracketed entablature, the black cruciform paneled door" (130). Maxine takes him first to the kitchen, which is down a flight of stairs and seems to occupy an entire floor; it has a large farmhouse table, and French doors that lead into the garden. Ceramics are displayed on open shelves, along with hundreds of cookbooks, food encyclopedias, and other volumes about eating. Lydia Ratliff prepares meals in this kitchen, an exclusively American space, nothing like Ashima's cooking 'temple'.

Neither the modest house on Pemberton Road, nor Gogol's unappealing apartment can even come close to this splendid house, clearly evoking the class difference between them. In postcolonial narratives, houses have status symbol and they show the achievements of immigrant

subjects. Gogol's parents live on a street where American families live, so they have probably achieved the maximum a diasporic individual can achieve. Indeed, Gogol notes that the Ratliffs' house has two immense rooms per floor, each of which is larger than his own apartment. He adores the plaster cove moldings, the ceiling medallions, and the marble mantelpieces, things he has learned about but has never seen in any of the residences he and his family have inhabited. He is impressed by the walls which are painted in flamboyant colors and are crowded with clusters of paintings, drawings and photographs. He is dazzled by the shelves ascending to the ceiling, crammed with novels, monographs of numerous artists, and all the architecture books Gogol has ever coveted. The top floor is Maxine's space, filled with shoes and clothes scattered across the floor of her gray sitting room or piled on a couch. But to Gogol these elements of disorder make no difference: "it is a house too spectacular to suffer distraction, forgiving of oversight and mess" (132).

Maxine has grown up in this house and cannot really imagine living anywhere else, while Gogol cannot picture going back to live with his own parents. Maxine does not like his small apartment, so she seldom visits; when she does come over, she quickly fills up the small space with her perfume and her things. She eventually declares his place is awful and adds she will not let him live there any longer. He is thrilled to officially move in with her and her parents, but takes only a few bags of clothes and continues to pay rent for his apartment. He is equally captivated by his girlfriend, her parents, and the amazing house they own. When Lydia and Gerald are off to their lake house in New Hampshire, "an unquestioned ritual, a yearly migration to the town where Gerald's parents live year-round" (141), Gogol and Max have the house in Chelsea to themselves. Living alone with her for the first time, he feels dependence, not adulthood: "He feels free of expectation, of responsibility, in willing exile from his own life. He is responsible for nothing in the house; in spite of their absence, Gerald and Lydia continue to lord, however blindly, over their days" (142).

He reads their books and listens to their music, takes down their telephone messages, and sleeps in their daughter's bed. He is responsible for nothing in their house and feels grateful to them for the luxurious living conditions and the opportunities of assimilation they provide. Yet despite its beauty, the house has certain faults he only now notices: it lacks air-conditioning and the enormous windows do not have any screens, so it becomes unbearably hot during the summer months. They have to leave the windows open at night, so they are invaded by

mosquitos which always bother him and leave Maxine unbitten. These small, inauspicious elements from the otherwise breath-taking house foretell problems in their relationship as well.

Gogol is also in love with the Ratliffs' lake house in New Hampshire; he admires the landscape and adores the intimacy it provides. It is close to the border with Canada, the farthest North Gogol has ever been. The house is located in a clearing, in the middle of a forest, with the mountains rising up behind them, and the lake "a blue a thousand times deeper, more brilliant, than the sky and girded by pines" (151). Gerald says "Welcome to paradise" (152) and Gogol concludes that the Ratliffs "own the moon that floats over the lake, and the sun and the clouds" (155). These celestial symbols illustrate how rich this family is and how they can grant his boldest wishes. The house is not like their New York residence though: it is dark, musty, and full of mismatched furniture. On the walls they have framed butterflies, as well as photographs of the family taken here over the years. Gogol and Maxine sleep in a small, unheated cabin which was built for Max to play as a little girl and is scarcely furnished, making them feel as if being at camp. Gogol, however, has never been to camp, and although he is only three hours away from his parental house, this is an unknown world to him, a kind of holiday he has never experienced.

The Gangulis' vacations in Calcutta are nothing like the yearly 'migration' of the Ratliffs to this lake house. Although they come here to visit Gerald's parents, they travel for relaxation purposes more than out of duty, taking with them exquisite food and cases of wine, as well as books and games. Their preparations for departure remind Gogol of his parents packing for Calcutta every few years, when they would crowd the living room with suitcases, fitting in as many gifts as possible for their relatives. The main difference is that Ashoke "was always anxious about the job of transporting the four of them such a great distance. Gogol was aware of an obligation being fulfilled; that it was, above all else, a sense of duty that drew his parents back" (141-42). They take these trips so seriously because they never know how long it will be until the next visit, and loved ones might in the meantime die.

Gogol realizes in New Hampshire that his family's trips to India were never really true vacations at all, but "overwhelming, disorienting expeditions, either going to Calcutta, or sightseeing in places they did not belong to and intended never to see again" (155). Even when they went on road trips with other Bengali families to Toronto, Atlanta or Chicago, they rented vans and consulted maps like foreigners do. They stayed in low-priced motels, whole families

sleeping in a single room. Their relative economic success does not automatically entail full assimilation, nor does it grant them the advantages of owning a summer residence.

So Gogol thoroughly enjoys swimming naked in the lake with Maxine, walking barefoot about the Ratliffs' property, or running around the lake with Gerald, stopping to catch their breath near the private family graveyard where Maxine and her parents will undoubtedly be buried one day. Most of all, he enjoys being cut off from his parents' world, and loves the idea of returning year after year to the same place that is not Calcutta and does not involve the anxiety of traveling so far. He thinks his parents would feel lonely in this setting and would surely remark they are the only Indians, still obsessed with their ethnic difference, still longing for their homeland.

Gogol, on the other hand, does not miss India or his relatives over there at all. In fact, despite the numerous journeys to Calcutta, he never could get any sense of direction in the major Indian city. Unlike his mother, wandering freely the familiar streets of her home town, he prefers to stay inside lest he should get lost. When he tries to go jogging, he is deterred by the "cracked, congested, chock-a-block streets" (83). During a taxi ride he notices the crumbling buildings, and people riding on the stairs of trams and buses. He and Sonia are scared and uncomfortable throughout the eight months they have to spend there one year, feeling lost like their parents when they visit New York. Gogol hates how they shuttle from home to home, how they never really have a space of their own while in India.

When the family travels to New Delhi and Agra, they leave from Howrah, described as an "immense, soaring, echoing station, where barefoot coolies in red cotton shirts pile the Gangulis' Samsonite luggage on their heads, where entire families sleep, covered, in rows on the floor" (84). From the train, the scenery looks gloomy and gray, but once they get to Agra they wander around the marble mausoleum and are fascinated by its glowing tones of yellow, pink, and orange depending on the light. For two days they are all tourists, since even Ashoke and Ashima are unfamiliar with the famous site. They admire the perfect symmetry of the Taj Mahal and pose for photographs beneath the minarets from which they find out that tourists used to leap to their deaths. They learn that after the building was finished, each of the twenty-two thousand men who contributed had their thumbs cut off so that they could never replicate the structure. Gogol and Sonia are terrified by this cruel legend; the girl has repeated nightmares, and her elder

brother is haunted by this story and unable to sketch the dome and a portion of the façade. Despite his efforts, “the building’s grace eludes him and he throws the attempt away” (85).

Yet, no other building he has seen affected him so powerfully, so he starts studying the history of Mughal architecture and memorizing the names of the emperors. Like Raj from “Interpreter of Maladies”, Gogol immerses himself in a guidebook in English to find out about India’s history and culture. Both characters (Raj and Gogol) are born in the United States and need an ‘American’ filter to mediate their firsthand experience of India. In fact, the whole trip reminds readers of the aforementioned story, with Agra described as an unknown and inauspicious territory. The Gangulis then visit Agra Fort, an emperor’s tomb in Sikandra, with gilded frescoes that have been chipped, ransacked, burned, and the gems gouged out with penknives. At Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar’s abandoned sandstone city, they wander among courtyards and cloisters as parrots and hawks fly menacingly overhead. All of these ill omens eventually materialize in the sickness of the two American-born children.

Therefore, Gogol obviously prefers the lifestyle and the type of family relationship that the Ratliffs have. They adopt him without too many questions, without invading his private space. Maxine tells him the New Hampshire property is her favorite place in the world; it is where her roots are firmly planted and he understands that this landscape, this particular lake in which she first learned to swim, represent an essential part of her, even more important to her evolution than the house in Chelsea. Her past, present, and future are here. It is here that she has grown up, here that she comes every summer to relax, here that she will bring her own children, and eventually she will be buried in the small graveyard here, next to whole generations of her family. This is the second instance in the book when Lahiri uses the metaphor of the cemetery in order to show belonging or, on the contrary, lack of belonging to a place. Gogol can picture all these stages in Maxine’s life clearly, knowing that she and her family will never stray too far from this place.

On the other hand, as he discovered long ago while studying the stones in the cemetery from Rhode Island, he does not have any roots in the United States, nor will he be buried in any of these graveyards. He is a tourist in Maxine’s houses/world, a foreigner who feels good in New Hampshire and enjoys life in New York City, but neither represents his ‘home’. Luckily, for second generation characters like Gogol and Moushumi, a ‘third space’ opens up generously,

allowing them to go beyond their initial state of hybridity and explore different 'soils' where they might want to grow roots.

Immediately after his father's death, Gogol gets over the fascination with the houses possessed by the affluent Ratliff family and sees the unrelenting differences between him and Maxine. They split and he marries fellow Indian-American Moushumi; together they buy a one-bedroom apartment in the Twenties, off Third Avenue. It is quite a small place, "but luxurious, with built-in mahogany bookcases rising to the ceiling and dark, oily, wide-planked floors. There is a living room with a skylight, a kitchen with expensive stainless-steel appliances, a bathroom with marble floor and walls" (*Namesake* 228). The bedroom has a Juliet balcony, and if one leans far enough outside the bathroom window it is possible to see the Empire State Building.

The couple shops at the farmers' market in Union Square and sometimes goes to a restaurant in Queens to eat Indian food. Lahiri hints here at immigrants from the lower social classes who come to the U.S. and work in basements or kitchens, as opposed to the Indians who usually form her cast of characters and who belong to a diasporic middle class. Western consumerist society is based on working class migrants, whereas Lahiri's immigrants have become consumers themselves, belonging to the academic group of immigrants. Gogol and Moushumi invite their families over for Thanksgiving, entertaining them on this American holiday in their posh American flat. The writer plays with the dichotomy of high and low class, distinguishing between native-born Americans (such as the Ratliffs) and immigrants (the Gangulis), but also between groups of immigrants themselves. Representatives of the diaspora all feel 'unhomely', but to different extents, echoing Bhabha's statement in *The Location of Culture* that the 'unhomely' "has a resonance that can be heard distinctly in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites" (1994: 9).

While Moushumi is in Palm Springs for a conference, Gogol goes to his office in midtown to finish working on a project. Afterwards he stops at an Egyptian restaurant to get a falafel, and walks south as he eats, towards the Flatiron and lower Fifth Avenue. He strolls the streets like a New Yorker, noticing that the sidewalks are crammed with shoppers. He sees "the twin towers of the World Trade Center looming in the distance, sparkling at the island's end" (*Namesake* 271). New York is a vertical city, famous for its tall buildings representing fantasies of opportunity and upward mobility. But the twin towers have crumbled, and this catastrophe can epitomize Gogol's thwarted dreams of a successful career and a happy marriage.

He is not looking forward to Christmas; he and his wife are going to Pemberton Road this year. He does not know what to get Moushumi, so he wanders absently from store to store, but nothing catches his eye in the maze of stalls in Union Square that sell candles, shawls, and handmade jewelry. This description reminds readers of the crowded streets in Calcutta, populated by vendors fretting to sell their merchandise. Gogol next goes into the Barnes and Noble at the northern edge of the square and buys a travel guide for Italy, a country whose architecture he had studied so thoroughly as a student, but has never visited. It strikes him that a trip together, to a place neither of them has been to, might be what he and Moushumi need. Unlike the trip to Paris, he could plan this one himself, deciding what cities to visit and what hotels to book.

Excited by the thought and anxious to see her, he crosses the park toward their apartment and stops off at a gourmet grocery on Irving Place to buy some things she likes, anticipating she will return hungry from Palm Springs. His trajectory on a map goes south/down, but when he looks up, the sky is dark, “the clouds a deep, beautiful gold”, and he is

momentarily stopped by a flock of pigeons flying dangerously close. Suddenly terrified, he ducks his head, feeling foolish afterward. None of the other pedestrians had reacted. He stops and watches as the birds shoot up, then land simultaneously on two neighboring bare-branched trees. He is unsettled by the sight. He has seen these graceless birds on windowsills and sidewalks, but never in trees. It looks almost unnatural. And yet what could be more ordinary? (272)

He thinks of the pigeons in San Marco Square he is soon going to visit with Moushumi, but as the birds seem to have predicted he will end up taking the journey to Venice alone. On the train to Massachusetts for Christmas, Moushumi slips about her infidelity. So he goes to Venice on his own for a week, “saturating himself in its ancient, melancholy beauty” (283). He loses himself in the dark, narrow streets, crosses countless bridges, sits in squares and draws palaces and churches, “unable ever to retrace his steps” (283). Wandering aimlessly as a tourist in an unknown city enables him to come to terms with events in his life before going back to the United States.

After the divorce Moushumi moves to Paris, showing that in today’s world America is not the endpoint of an immigrant’s journey anymore. She was born in London, then taken across the Atlantic by her parents who lived first in Massachusetts, and later moved to New Jersey. She relocated to Paris after college, returned to the United States for two failed relationships (one with an American, one with a fellow Indian-American), before finally settling in France. She

breaks off with Gogol completely, radically, not wanting anything from their life together. So, like he had done with his father's things, he has to remove her possessions from the apartment, putting her books into boxes on the sidewalk for people to take and throwing out the rest. The apartment is now all his, the first property he actually owns, but there are nights when he falls asleep on the sofa like a mere visitor. Their marriage has failed as if it were a building he had been responsible for designing and which collapsed for all to see. Yet it was a mistake they both made, namely that of seeking comfort in "their shared world, perhaps for the sake of novelty, or out of the fear that that world was slowly dying" (284).

The most pivotal house for Gogol's development remains the property on 67 Pemberton Road. His earliest memories are of playing in the dirt-covered yard of their newly-acquired household. He recalls the warm day when the topsoil was poured, and a few weeks later, coming out of the house one morning and seeing the first blades of grass emerge from their lawn. This represents concomitantly a rooting for Gogol and a re-rooting for his mother and father. In this house he has the first room of his own, filled with Tinkertoys, Lincoln Logs, and other games bought from yard sales. Gogol grows up in this space, living his teens to the beats of The Beatles, refusing to read Nikolai Gogol's book which he receives from his father in this very room. When they return from trips to Calcutta, the modest house seems gigantic to him and he finds pleasure in retreating to the privacy of his room.

Years later, after his father's death and Ashima's decision to sell the house, he has the task of emptying his childhood's room and of tossing away every last scrap. It saddens him that the house will be occupied by strangers who will gradually redecorate it and erase any trace that they were ever there. Gogol contemplates that there will be nothing "left to signify the years his family has lived here, no evidence of the effort, the achievement it had been" (281). Like the narrator from "The Third and Final Continent", Gogol acknowledges the merits of the immigrant generation his parents belong to, praising the bravery it takes to succeed in a different country. For months he will be separated from his mother, without having the possibility of catching a train and coming to see her. He understands the trauma his parents have gone through when they left their own parents thousands of miles behind, seeing them so seldom and living in a perpetual state of longing. While he has spent years maintaining distance from his origins, his parents were struggling to bridge that distance as best they could. "And yet, for all his aloofness toward his family in the past, his years in college and then in New York, he has always hovered to this

quiet, ordinary town that had remained, for his mother and father, stubbornly exotic” (281). Without this house, he has absolutely no roots in America, no home to return to. With his father dead, Ashima gone, and Sonia married in Boston, he is free of permanent roots, no longer a four-hour train ride away from ‘home’.

Ironically, he thinks of these things while stepping off a train that brings him to his parental house one last time. Keenly aware that no more journeys like this will follow, is Gogol also freed of the constant cultural negotiations? His parents’ generation achieved an extraordinary success by transplanting themselves in a new soil. Gogol’s generation is admirable because it gives up on the need for firm roots and travels globally, uncovering unlimited opportunities. Lahiri’s short stories and novel celebrate these contemporary journeys, showing that concepts like national belonging tend to be less fixed in our times. Consequently, ethnicity appears less relevant in this transnational world in which everyone is liable to be displaced. Therefore, the negative prefix ‘dis-’ no longer bears the negative and violent connotation it used to.

At peace with these changes and new realities, Gogol reunites with his family to spend one last Christmas on Pemberton Road. Together with Sonia he assembles the artificial tree they have had for decades, and adorns it with ornaments they made in elementary school. Gogol knows now that for his and Sonia’s sake their parents had gone to the trouble of appropriating Western customs. Interestingly, despite their efforts, Christmas “has always felt adopted to him, an accident of circumstance, a celebration not really meant to be” (286). Had they stayed on the other side of the world, they would not have celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> of December. When they are finished decorating, Ashima reminds her children of some awful colored lights they used to put on the fir tree. Then she comments half-jokingly that she did not know a thing back then, showing that what was at first her son’s whim now is a tradition she actually relates to, illustrating Ashima’s Americanness and her evolution towards achieving it.

Picking up the rare edition of Nikolai Gogol’s short stories, Gogol shuts the door to his room and starts to read, disregarding the farewell party that is going on downstairs. He imagines Ashima coming to his room, summoning him to put the book aside and join the party, unaware, like he has been, that Ashoke “dwells discreetly, silently, patiently” (290) within the book’s pages. Gogol’s journey towards self-definition, gone through different stages including that of self-naming, ends up in his childhood room, in the first house he has memories of. He is now

ready to embrace his plural affiliations and to act towards changing his life. Although living alone, he keeps tighter relations with what is left of his family. He is not a passive character anymore but one who has consciously rounded up his development. At thirty-two he is already married and divorced, and his time with Moushumi is already put behind him. Having closed this chapter of his life, Gogol changes his job as well and moves to a smaller firm where he has the opportunity to be more creative and innovative. By implication the protagonist is now ready to build his identity outside the constraints of ethnicity (name) and relationship status.

In addition to the houses in which he has lived with his parents, Gogol has had three lodgings in New York. From the first room of his own on Pemberton Road, through the houses owned by the Ratliffs, to the apartment off Third Avenue in New York, Gogol Ganguli has evolved in many ways. His identity quest is illustrated by the spaces he inhabits, but also by his profession. In fact, as an architect, he is now doing what he has always wanted: producing his own designs, combining his talent for drawing with his passion for buildings and his search for roots and fixity. Eventually he understands identity is perpetually in transition and under construction, and he becomes the architect of his own fate.

#### The Film: An Indian-American Tale of Two Cities

With the same task in mind, namely showing that spaces and places are crucial for identity formation processes, I will now look at Mira Nair's filmic adaptation of *The Namesake* (2007). While trying to avoid falling in the traps of merely comparing the two texts or of implying that one is richer or 'better' than the other, I will concentrate my analysis on the visual, aural, and verbal signifiers that point to the importance of two cities in Nair's work. During this analysis I will keep in mind Thomas Leitch's warning that fidelity of the film to its source text is "unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense" (161), and focus on its originality as a valuable intertext, generating additional meanings.

Mira Nair, the Indian-born director of *The Namesake* (2007), was educated at Delhi University before attending Harvard. Several documentaries paved the way for her remarkable debut film *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), nominated for an Academy Award and a Golden Globe. Her filmography includes *Mississippi Massala* (1991), starring Denzel Washington, *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1996), *Monsoon Wedding* (2000), and *Vanity Fair* (2004) with Reese Witherspoon. More recently she directed *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012), a film based on the bestseller

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