



Caught between cultures: Naming, displacement, and hybrid identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* (2003) traces three decades in the life of the Ganguli family, Bengali immigrants who settle in the Boston suburbs, and their American-born son Gogol, who spends much of his life trying to escape the name his father gave him. This paper argues that Lahiri uses the act of naming, along with recurring motifs of food, ritual, and domestic space, to dramatise the condition that Homi Bhabha calls the "third space" of cultural hybridity. This position is neither fully Indian nor fully American but is continuously negotiated. Reading the novel alongside Bhabha's theory of hybridity and Stuart Hall's account of diasporic identity as a matter of "becoming" rather than "being," the paper traces Ashima and Ashoke's first-generation nostalgia, Gogol's adolescent rejection of his Bengali heritage, and his eventual, partial reconciliation with it after his father's death. The paper concludes that Lahiri resists offering a tidy resolution to the immigrant's divided consciousness, presenting cultural belonging instead as an unfinished, generational process.

Keywords: Diaspora, hybridity, generational conflict, postcolonial literature, immigrant experience

Introduction

This paper argues that Lahiri dramatizes that condition through three interlocking devices: The Bengali custom of pet names and good names, the sensory rituals of food and domestic ceremony, and the geography of houses, cemeteries, and train tracks that her characters move through. Read alongside Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space" and Stuart Hall's insistence that diasporic identity is a matter of continual production rather than a fixed inheritance, the novel emerges as a critical, largely unsentimental account of what it costs to live, as Gogol eventually learns to, in the hyphen between Indian and American.

When Ashoke Ganguli names his new-born son after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, he does so almost by accident, a stopgap decision forced on him by a lost letter from Calcutta and an American hospital that refuses to release a baby without a name on its birth certificate. That accident becomes the organizing metaphor of Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel *The Namesake* (2003), a book that is, on its surface, about a name, but that is more properly about the unsettled space between two cultures that no single name can hold. Lahiri, herself the American-born daughter of Bengali immigrants, resists writing either a simple story of assimilation or a simple tragedy of exile. Instead she builds a two-generation study of people who are caught, sometimes painfully and sometimes productively, between the culture their parents carried across the ocean and the culture their children absorb without even trying to.

Names in *The Namesake* are never neutral. Lahiri opens the novel by explaining the Bengali custom of the *daknam*, or pet name, and the *bhalonam*, or good name, a system in which every person carries an intimate self-reserved for family and a public self-reserved for the outside world. As Lahiri writes,

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. Every pet name is paired with a good name, a *bhalonam*, for identification in the outside world. Consequently, good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories, and in all other public places. (Lahiri 26)

This taxonomy of naming, comic and tender as Lahiri first presents it, becomes a trap once Gogol is enrolled in an American school system that has no patience for such doubling. When his parents' chosen good name, Nikhil, fails to arrive in time for his first day of kindergarten, the pet name sticks permanently to his official records, and Gogol inherits a name that fits neither category cleanly. It is not a *daknam*, because it is public and printed on transcripts and diplomas; it is not a proper *bhalonam* either, since it commemorates no family elder and carries no auspicious Bengali meaning. Md Abdul Jabbar Sk argues that this confusion of naming categories becomes, for Gogol, a lasting source of cultural displacement that shapes his sense of belonging fully to neither the Bengali world of his parents nor the American world of his classmates (122). The name Gogol is a hinge that will not close: it points backward to a Russian author whom his father associates with the train wreck that nearly killed him, and forward into an American adolescence in which the name marks Gogol as strange without connecting him to any heritage he can actually claim as his own.

The first-generation experiences this in-betweenness differently than the second. Ashima's homesickness is described early in the novel through one of Lahiri's most quietly devastating images: pregnant and alone in a Cambridge apartment, Ashima concludes that being a foreigner is, like being pregnant, "a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts," something that draws pity and curiosity from strangers in equal measure. Her attempt to recreate a favorite Calcutta street snack out of Rice Krispies, Planters peanuts, chopped red onion, and salt shows that hybridity is not only Gogol's predicament; his mother improvises a version of home out of whatever an American supermarket happens to stock, blending a foreign cereal with a taste she cannot otherwise reach. Ashoke, for his part, carries his own private negotiation with the past. The train accident that nearly kills him as a young man, survived because rescuers notice the pages of his Gogol volume fluttering in the wreckage, becomes a story he almost never tells his son directly, and its silence structures the entire novel: Gogol does not learn why he is named Gogol until he is nearly thirty. Vijay Mishra's account of the Indian diaspora as haunted by an "imaginary homeland," an India reconstructed from memory rather than encountered directly, describes Ashima and Ashoke precisely. They furnish their Massachusetts house with Bengali objects, host large gatherings of Bengali friends who function as a substitute extended family, and travel back to Calcutta for extended stays, yet each return trip only confirms how much they, too, have changed; Calcutta is no longer fully theirs either.

Gogol's own relationship to his divided inheritance follows a different trajectory, one of active rejection followed by a grudging, partial return. As a teenager he is humiliated by his name in ways his parents cannot fully register, changing it legally to Nikhil the moment he leaves for college and constructing, through his relationship with Maxine Ratliff and her wealthy, unruffled WASP family, an entire alternate life in which his Bengali background barely registers. Lahiri is careful not to present this as liberation without cost. The Ratliff household, with its effortless entitlement and its casual, unexamined Americanness, offers Gogol a fantasy of belonging that depends on his own self-erasure; he enjoys it precisely because it asks nothing of him. His father's sudden death recalls him from that fantasy. Sitting at his father's borrowed apartment afterward, sorting through his belongings, Gogol begins to understand that the accident of his name was never trivial to his father, and the novel pivots from a story about escaping inheritance to one about learning to carry it differently. His later marriage to Moushumi Mazoomdar, another second-generation Bengali American who resists her own inherited expectations by refusing to take his surname and by conducting an affair that has nothing to do with either culture, suggests that shared background offers no automatic solution to the problem of belonging; hybridity, Lahiri implies, cannot be resolved simply by marrying within one's own diasporic community.

By the novel's final pages, Gogol has begun to understand what his name has meant, and what its loss will mean. Reflecting on his mother's decision to sell the family house and divide her time between India and the United States, Gogol imagines a future in which no one who remembers him as a child will be left to call him by his oldest name:

Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all. (Lahiri 289)

The passage marks a striking reversal from the adolescent who once wanted nothing more than to be rid of the name. What Gogol mourns here is not the name's oddness but its mortality, the fact that identity, once tied to specific people who use a specific word for you, is always more fragile and more relational than a legally correct good name can capture. In the novel's closing scene, alone in his childhood bedroom on the night of his mother's farewell party, Gogol finally opens the book of Nikolai Gogol's stories his father gave him decades earlier, the gift he "had glanced at but never read," and begins, at last, to read it. Lahiri does not describe this as a triumphant homecoming. It is a small, private, unresolved gesture, and that restraint is part of the novel's argument.

This oscillation between rejection and return maps closely onto Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity. Bhabha argues that identity in colonial and postcolonial contact zones is not simply a blend of two prior, stable cultures but something newly produced in an interstitial "third space," a space that unsettles the very categories of "Indian" and "American" that the Gangulis' friends and neighbours want to keep separate (Bhabha 37). Gogol is never simply failing to be Indian enough or failing to be American enough; he is generating, however uncomfortably, a third position that both of those labels obscure. Stuart Hall makes a related point when he insists that cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being,' "always subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power rather than fixed in some essential past (Hall 225). Read through Hall, Ashima's late-novel decision to split her year between Calcutta and the United States, belonging fully to neither and partially to both, is not a failure to choose a side but an honest acknowledgment of what diasporic life actually is. Suneeta Rathore and Om Prakash Tiwari make a similar argument in their reading of Lahiri's fiction more broadly, suggesting that her characters achieve not a final, settled identity but an ongoing negotiation that each generation must perform anew (124).

Food and domestic ritual reinforce this argument throughout the novel. Bengali ceremonies mark Gogol's life at every stage, from his annaprasan, or rice ceremony, to the mismatched, half-remembered rituals his own American-born children will presumably inherit in even more diluted form. Lahiri treats these ceremonies neither as quaint cultural colour nor as oppressive obligation; they are simply the medium through which Ashima and Ashoke try to hand their son something of value, even when he cannot yet recognize it as such. Sonia's own rice ceremony, staged with visibly less anxiety than her brother's, suggests that the family's relationship to ritual

loosens with each passing year, not because Bengali custom matters less to Ashima but because she has learned, through raising Gogol, which battles over identity are worth fighting and which are not. The cemetery scene in which a young Gogol makes rubbings of old New England gravestones bearing names like Abijah Craven and Peregrine Wotton, delighting in names stranger than his own, quietly foreshadows his adult realization that every name, American or Bengali, carries its own buried history; none of them are natural or self-evident, and all of them are, in their own way, invented. In this sense Lahiri extends her argument about naming beyond the Ganguli family specifically: the Puritan settlers whose gravestones Gogol copies were themselves engaged in acts of naming and self-invention on foreign soil, a quiet suggestion that the immigrant condition Lahiri describes is older and more American than the novel's surface plot might imply. Lahiri's refusal to resolve Gogol's divided inheritance into a single triumphant identity is, finally, the novel's most serious critical achievement.

Conclusion

The Namesake does not suggest that immigrant families eventually assimilate fully, nor that they should instead retreat into an unchanging preservation of the homeland culture. Instead it insists, through Gogol's slow, incomplete return to a name and a father he once wanted to escape, that cultural belonging for the diasporic subject is never a finished project. It is renegotiated in every generation, in every kitchen, in every mispronounced name at a school roll call, and in every letter that does or does not arrive in time. Caught between cultures, Lahiri's characters are not victims of a problem waiting to be solved; they are, more truthfully, ordinary people improvising a life in the only space diaspora actually offers them, the space between. What makes *The Namesake* a genuinely critical text, rather than a comfortable immigrant fable, is Lahiri's refusal to let that space resolve into either full assimilation or full return. Gogol's final act of reading is not an ending so much as a beginning, an admission that the work of understanding one's own divided inheritance is never really finished.

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