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**Displacement, an
Unknown Freedom:
Cultural Identity in
Jhumpa Lahiri's *The
Namesake***

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Characters	8
Gogol's namesake	18
Conclusion	27
Works Cited	30

“People keep asking me where I come from
 Says my son.
 Trouble is I’m American on the inside
 And oriental on the outside
 No Doug
 Turn that outside in
 This is what American looks like.” (Mitsuye
 Yamada, contained in Dorinne Kondo’s
 “The Narrative Production of ‘Home,’
 Community, and Political Identity in Asian
 American Theater” 99)

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri, the author of *The Namesake*, was born in London to Indian parents in 1967. She later moved to the United States to pursue her studies and lived there for a period of time. Although her knowledge of India is extensive, she has made limited trips to her parents’ land. She traveled to India in her childhood as a tourist: she has never lived there. As a writer, her first book was *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories, the themes of which are connected with Indian-American identities and diasporas. As noted in “Immigrant Motherhood and Transnationality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Fiction” by Ann Marie Alfonso-Forero, “[n]early all of these stories deal with the lives of Indian immigrants in the United States, rendering the difficulties of making personal connections across cultural boundaries-and sometimes even within families-palpable to readers” (852).

The Namesake, Lahiri’s first novel, was published in 2003. It deals with the themes of immigrant experience, identities and displacement, and ties and clashes between the generations. Even her later work, *Unaccustomed Earth*, which was published in 2008, is about immigration and its real and/or imaginary consequences for its characters. In her “From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri’s

The Namesake”, Nathalie Friedman writes that “scholars and critics have dubbed her [Lahiri] a documentalist of the immigrant experience” (111). In her works one can easily feel a sense of living in exile, loss of communication, the sense of belonging to nowhere, the inability to feel accepted, complicated social status, difficulties in relationships and different experiences which first and second generations of Indian immigrants have in the United States. All these revolve around a more general theme: displacement.

This thesis aims to discuss and question the sense of displacement in the lives of the characters in *The Namesake* and especially its main character Gogol Ganguli. Moreover, entities like culture, nationality and belonging--which are the main concerns of the characters in the novel and the reasons for their displacement--tend to be loose and changeable in a contemporary perspective, and a covetous sense of freedom and emancipation from these concepts could be traced in the course of the novel.

The rampant migrations and migratory lives in the contemporary world have led to the consideration of many aspects of these lives in many academic areas and fields, and naturally it has become a contemporary major motif for literature. Making its own way through diverse considerations like politics and economy, sociology, identity and subjectivity, language, gender and sexuality, literary studies pay attention to the multitude of these experiences. Transnational studies cannot possibly focus on one of these considerations and ignore the other factors entirely. For example, having a Marxist view, one cannot ignore the role of culture in the economy, the linguistic possibilities for propaganda, the role of sexuality and gender attitudes and preferences in the market and the role of diffuse subjectivities and identities on the global market for the ruling and the ruled classes of the increasing transnationalism of recent times. Therefore, a reasonable

study of the subject and its consequences will not be obtained by only clinging to a certain theoretical background in literature.

As we take distance from the colonial world when the transaction of cultures and identities seemed to be obligatory for the people who lived in such an era, we get closer to the world of transnationalism where that obligation seems to be intentional. This means that people in post-colonial times are not necessarily forced by war or colonization to abandon their homes or live under the hegemonic control of a foreign country. They have more freedom to move and choose where to live. Nevertheless, the later consequences of this movement are unknown and cannot possibly be controlled by these people. In this sense, they intentionally begin a new life in a new place that will have its own new necessities and obligations which can be unknown and unpredictable to them. Further, the exchange of cultures and adaptation to the new cultural urges, where experiences of in-betweenness, displacement and diaspora and so on, exist, are part of the natural outcomes of this intentional obligation. Tourism, the internet, the global market, different international festivals and sport events and overseas university studies, are features that have doubled the pace of transnationalism.

This crucial aspect of our times has led to an urgent field of study in literature which aims to explore the new subjectivity and its outcomes in a united globe: transnationality, and subsequently transculturality is born out of it. Therefore, literature also reflects these global trends. Transnational literature or criticism is a concoction of several trends and theories of literature in a new and wider ground which includes several theories of literature that existed before. But in important ways, it leads and/or changes the older directions. Like other theories of literature, it tends to use as many tools of

literature as it can to analyze literary works from different angles. It tends to use and produce theories of Inter- and Cross-Cultural Understanding which stem from a contemporary ideology- everyone in the world today shares features of life which are no longer national, from their clothes, to what they eat and what they see around themselves provided by the intensive and extensive communication technology and easy and fast availability of commodities and goods from all over the world. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen writes in his introduction to *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures*: “As most people have experienced in one way or another, globalization is no illusion, but real, and propelled by strong forces – particularly those of economics and the media- and for better and for worse” (1).

Naturally, where there is the theme of migration and related topics, there is also an automatic intention to investigate the theme of displacement and similar consequences in works of literature. Whatever seems to be missing in the majority of articles and critical writings on these works is the realization of the tangible facts and situations where most of the taken-for-granted(s) have disappeared or at least shifted in meaning.

Likewise, in almost all theories and articles written about migration and displacement--whatever the basis of these approaches, structuralism, feminism, postmodernism or post-colonialism--there is a recognition of the fact that displacement as a defining feature of the contemporary world is not a static phenomenon, but liable to change in meaning according to new conditions and perspectives in the ever-changing transnational world of today. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan in their “English Without Shadows, Literature on a World Scale” after discussing the linguistic aspects of ethnicity and international studies, come to mention that:

Feminists have noted that there would be no ethnic identity without the forced containment and channeling of women's reproductive capacities along consanguine family and clan lines and that the privileging of ideals of ethnic or national cultural identity conceals internal fissures of gender and sexual domination. And Post-Structuralists in the field suggest that other concepts of identity, from the nation of the ethnic group to the national culture, are no longer relevant to a transnational, migratory, and diasporic world culture. What the experience of geographic displacement teaches is that all the supposedly stable equations of place, ethnos, and national political institutions are imaginary constructs which displace displacement by substituting permanent migratory dislocation an ontologizing image of home or of a homeland, a proper place where a spuriously pure ethnos can authenticate itself. (853-54)

If there is displacement in today's world, it is not exclusive for the immigrants and their following generations: everyone in whatever situation, immigrant or not, is liable to be displaced. The borderline between the ethnic or cultural past and present is dissipated. Therefore, effects of a powerful ethnic or cultural past are not likely to last for a considerable period of time. Having a different past is not an eccentric fact for immigrants who can easily adapt themselves with their new lives in a different country and with people of that country who might have their own peculiar eccentricities and differences. Moreover, as the poem from Yamada at the beginning of this paper suggests,

a new cosmopolitan identity has emerged from the transitory lives of today which makes ethnic identity less-and sometimes more-significant for people who live in communities like the United States.

This study of *The Namesake* is based on actual observations of contemporary experience. *The Namesake* is a new work about recent times. The third-person omniscient narrator with her present-tense narration lets the reader accompany Gogol for a period of three decades-from the late 1900s into the new millennium.

The question of identity as the most tangible theme in *The Namesake* is no doubt a question of the “self”. Cultural factors are very important in the quest for the identity and self, especially for immigrants. As Jola Skulj notes in her “Comparative Literature and Cultural Identity,” “[t]he problem of cultural identity involves the question of the self and of culture. In other words, this means reflecting on the essence of culture itself and the implication that there is a reasonable motive of self-questioning” (2). The “self” reflects upon an autonomous subject or the subjectivity of every human being. As she elaborates further:

Understanding of identity was a result of the romantic interpretation of the self as the inner reality of a given subject. It revealed in itself the concept of the subject as an absolute and autonomous being and denied any decisive or obligatory references outside itself. It denied transcendence outside oneself and identified itself only with its immanent reality or with its own immanent validity. (2)

The existence of the “self” inevitably suggests the existence of an opposing factor known as the “other”, which also strengthens the comprehensibility of the self, or as Michael Bakhtin says: “The self is the gift of the other” (qtd. in Skulj 3). As Skulj writes: “No cultural identity can be identified or analyzed only on its national ground. . . . ‘Otherness’ is, irrevocably, cultural reality. The other does not necessarily endanger its selfness or its principles of identity” (2). Regarding this, the Indian immigrants involved in *The Namesake* have an internal dialogue and/or opposition between their ethnic culture and the culture of the country in which they abide: America. For the children of the immigrants who were born in America, the site of the confusion is their household or parental home in America where the Indian culture and customs still exist even if in a diluted form. As Natalie Friedman writes about the children of the immigrants in her “From Hybrids to Tourists: Children of Immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*,” “they can only define home as the place where their two cultures merge-the literal and metaphysical location is in their parents’ house. . . . Their behavior is akin to that of tourists in their home countries” (115).

Moreover, American culture, which is a blend of different cultures, and being American add to the confusion of the characters in the story. The clash happens inside, having the “other” interchangeably replaced sometimes by the Indian and sometimes by the American side of their identities. Realization of, and coming into terms with their new and unique identities as cosmopolites take time, as reflected in the character of Ashima, and sometimes it never occurs, as in the character of Gogol.

It is here that the protagonist and the other characters in *The Namesake* are in the search of their identities; that is, in the in-betweenness of cultures: one as the “self” and

the other as the “other”. But it is impossible for the characters, as one can see in the course of the novel, to decide which is which. There also comes a third option, as evident with Ashoke and Moushumi, where they have their European side of their identity-formation. As, for example, Judith Caesar writes in her “Gogol’s Namesake: Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*” about Ashoke: “His world is not just India and America but the Europe of the authors he reads, his time both the twentieth and the nineteenth centuries” (106). Also, as regards Moushumi, her life in England with her parents and being a student in France add to the complexities regarding her identity.

The novel reflects on the sensibilities of three characters apart from Gogol. This thesis aims to elaborate the sense of cultural displacement of these three characters and then deal with Gogol, the protagonist of the novel. It aims to show how these characters share certain aspects of displacement while there are crucial differences in their ways of perceiving displacement and dealing with it.

Characters

Although *The Namesake* is essentially the story of Gogol Ganguli, there are more characters involved in the novel, for example Gogol’s family members and the girls with whom he has been involved. It is through their perspectives that the story is written. The novel provides more information about Gogol’s parents, Ashima and Ashoke, than his sister Sonia. Among the girlfriends, Maxine and Moushumi have more significance than Gogol’s other previous girlfriends. Maxine is an American girl who does not have a dual aspect to her identity or nationality as opposed to Gogol, and this characteristic of hers provides a deep and informative contrast to Gogol with his sense of difference and

multiplicity regarding his identity. Moushumi is Gogol's wife who in many respects resembles Gogol and is a child to Indian immigrants; however, she is different from him in her own way of perceiving her identity. Nevertheless, all these characters are inseparable parts of the network around Gogol and provide a sufficient lens through which the theme of displacement can be dealt with.

The smooth progression of the story does not easily let the reader realize that the main focus of the story will later be on Gogol and his namesake. It begins with Ashima and her pregnancy soon after her arrival in America. Not cut off completely from India yet, she is at the heart of an extremely foreign different land: "American seconds tick on top of her pulse point. . . . She calculates the Indian time on her hands" (Lahiri 4). Later, Ashoke enters the story with a flash-back to India, his marriage and emigration to America. The rendering of Ashoke's story to Gogol does not occur until Gogol is older. The novel also focuses on Ashima, Gogol's mother, giving an account of Gogol's birth and her hardships: "motherhood in a foreign land" (6) with no relatives around, and her reluctant and slow adaptation to her and her child's new land.

In fact, the beginning of the story summarizes and predicts the trauma and displacement of the rest of the story. While giving birth to her child in a hospital in America, "Ashima thinks that it's strange that her child will be born in a place most people enter either to suffer or to die" (Lahiri 4). Not only does Ashima, during this phase, think that she doesn't really belong to the American community, but also she fancies the same destiny for her new-born child: "As she strokes and suckles and studies her son, she can't help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived" (25). This is to some extent ironical, for the meaning of her name

in Indian is “she who is limitless, without borders” (26). Despite the contradiction between her name and her general description at the beginning of the novel, she is the only character in the novel that assimilates to the American melting-pot and adapts herself to a transcultural lifestyle at the end. As suggested by Alfonso-Forero, “the uncertain young woman we encounter in the novel’s opening pages attempting unsuccessfully to recreate a favorite Indian snack in her Massachusetts kitchen is transformed through her role as an immigrant mother and wife into a transnational figure” (852).

The main and primary reason for Ashima’s displacement in the American society is the distinction between two very different cultures: America and India. Culturally, they have crucial differences. While women and men seem to be equally independent in America, there are certain cultural peculiarities in the Indian perspective as to the role of the sexes in society. Ashima is the most spiritual and Indian figure of the family. Where there is a reminder of India and Indian customs, Ashima is at the heart of the matter. She establishes numerous parties with the invited Indian families in America--the circle of which grow larger each year--to maintain the Indian customs and create a surrogate India in America. Describing the Indian family culture, Alfonso-Forero writes:

The distinction between the material and the spiritual in the domain of culture is essential to how nationalism attempts to resolve the women’s question. . . . The division between *ghar*-the home, an inherently spiritual and female space- and *bahir*- the outside world, which is inherently male and dominated by material pursuits - determines not only the division of

labor in terms of how the Indian home is run, but more importantly it positions women as the guardians and propagators of Indian culture. In this manner Indian nationalism elevates the condition of the middle-class woman to a goddess-like status. . . . (853-4)

It is inside the house that India should be preserved, for the outside is inevitably America. This is what Ashima is trying to do all the time: to preserve her family's Indian identity "against the appeal to assimilate" (Forero 854). But she gives birth to children who are fated to be Americans, so she must adapt to the American mainstream. It is time for her as the spiritual and domestic leader of the household, to make concessions: having Christmas ceremonies, Roasted Turkey on Thanksgiving and cooking American food once a week for the children (Lahiri 64). The children in the parties lead their own American adolescent ways, watching TV or eating American fast food instead of sitting with parents and socializing with them, or eating Indian traditional food. Even Gogol is allowed to have separate, characteristically American and Indian birthday parties (Lahiri 72).

As time goes by, Ashima indulges herself more in the American way of life which gradually provides her with the sort of confidence and independence that a typical American woman is supposed to have. She finds a job as a librarian which results in more contact with the outside world and becomes friends with her American colleagues, a kind of relationship that she had never experienced before. She eventually does her husband's duties like paying the bills, buying tickets, driving the car and changing the house which she never did before his death. She later realizes that her life in America

exceeds her life in India: she is as much American as Indian. She gains cultural and geographical fluidity by the very practice of her life through the decades. After her husband dies, she decides to divide her time between India and America: living between her roots in India and her family in America. Thus is Ashima's transformation to a transnational figure, "[t]rue to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere" (Lahiri 276). Or as stated by Alfonso-Forero: "Ashima's conception of what constitutes *homeland* has been altered to take into account the role the United States has played in shaping her family's identity, and by definition, her own" (857).

Ashoke, Gogol's father, is also an important figure in the story. He is a defining character both for the family and for Gogol as the protagonist. His accident in the train in India, his decision and effort in moving to America and his death in America are three ways in which he is important to the novel.

Ashoke as an Indian young man moves to America after a suggestion given to him by a stranger on the train in India who had the experience of living in England for a while: "Do yourself a favor. . . . pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will never regret it. One day it will be too late" (Lahiri 16). Although, this meeting was short - the man died in the train accident a few hours after they met- the idea given to Ashoke remained with him until he eventually made the journey to America together with his wife.

His rescue from the train- by holding a page of Nikolai Gogol's book and dropping it to attract the attention of the rescuers - was a strong and constant memory for him which later caused him to name his son after the Russian writer. It was an

affectionate relic of his personal life, told to Gogol, the protagonist, by the time that he had already begun to hate his name and had changed it.

His death is also very important since it is a turning point in the lives of the other characters both physically and emotionally. It is through his absence that Ashima and Gogol enter and gain new and different perceptions of life and make crucial changes to their lives. After Ashoke dies, Gogol breaks up with his American girlfriend Maxine and is more concerned about his family and retains some of his buried Indian side of identity, especially by taking his mother's advice to marry Moushumi, a family acquaintance of his parents' Indian network of friends in America. Ashima's world also changes by losing Ashoke, her husband and the only Indian expatriate in her family; not only does she have to live alone but she also has to limit her ways of life to the American side of the family (her children) and do the household responsibilities which were previously Ashoke's.

Despite Judith Caesar's claim that Ashoke is the only character among the Indian- American characters of the novel who has found the balance in himself and is able to live comfortably in a foreign land (108), Ashoke is the first person in the novel who is actually displaced. This displacement began when he was in bed for two years after the deadly accident of the train in India. Resting on his bed and unable to move, he fancies leaving India not for an ambitious goal but to escape: "He imagined not only walking, but walking away, as far as he could from the place in which he had nearly died" (Lahiri 20). At the same time, he refuses to read the books written by foreign writers, especially Russian authors that his grandfather had given to him, because he cannot imagine finding comfort outside of India: "Those books set in countries he had never seen, reminded him only of his confinement" (Lahiri 20).

This carries over to the time that he is in America and Ashima is in hospital giving birth to Gogol: “Although 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” (Lahiri 21). He takes refuge in America, and in fact by this time, he is neither Indian nor American: “He was born twice in India, and then a third time in America” (Lahiri 21). He has his firm ties to his family in India and Indian traditions- which is clear by his complete cooperation with Ashima in maintaining them inside the house and establishing and keeping their Indian network of friends in America until his death, his regular visits to India and even taking his sabbatical to India. Nevertheless, unlike Ashima who wears saris until the end, Ashoke’s appearance has changed to a complete American academic in the way he dresses. Moreover, the train accident has changed him ideologically as well: “He openly reveres Marx and quietly refuses religion. . . . Instead of thanking God he thanks Gogol, the Russian writer who had saved his life” (Lahiri 21).

Being aware that his new-born son is an American, Ashoke decides to wait for the name to come from India. In this way he follows the Indian tradition that the oldest in the family chooses the name of the new-born: the family extends from Boston to Calcutta. Also, according to their inside the home rule which is to create a private India in the United States, Ashoke chooses a pet name “Gogol”- a reminder of his savior in his big accident-for their son while waiting for the good name to come in a letter from the grandmother in India. Caesar suggests that the choosing of the name “Gogol” is also a connection to Ashoke’s own family:

[T]o his grandfather who told him to read the Russian realists, and whom he is going to see at the time of the train wreck. There is an identity here that transcends culture, as generations of Indians (Ultimately, Gogol Ganguli becomes the fourth) find a sense of life's essence in an English translation of a Russian work. (109)

The delivery of the letter never happens. Meanwhile the grandmother dies and the good name is never revealed. The juxtaposition of the cultures leads to the acceptance of the pet name as the good name, which remains with Gogol and causes the proceeding identity-related problems for Gogol and subsequently for his family. The meaning of the name "Ashoke" in Indian is "he who transcends grief" (Lahiri 26). Thus is the transcendence of grief by Ashoke to his child Gogol. It is Ashoke's huge grief binding him with his horrible past and his never-ending nightmare that is transmitted to his son by the name Gogol. Later he gives the name Nikhil to his son by which he doubles his son's identity into a transcultural identity that he himself has. For Ashoke that is the end of the journey as symbolized in his saying to Gogol that "[r]emember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go" (Lahiri 187).

As an Indian and a husband to an Indian, also father to his American children, he lives between two different identities. He feels that he should be able to fulfill his responsibilities regarding everyone in the family. This quality of his, makes him a character who seems to be comfortable with the different aspects of his life, but the reality is that he does not seem to have been able to come to terms with himself by the

time he dies in the middle of the novel; he did not have the opportunity, like Ashima, to experience the loss of a dear one and feel lonely. By his death the reader is not given the chance to see if he realizes the duality or multiplicity of his identity. One can see that he is never relieved of the train experience and Akaky Akakievich, the main character of Nikolai Gogol's short story "The Overcoat", who was both his savior and his symbol of fluidity of identities, irrationalities and displacement: "Just as Akaky's ghost haunted the final pages, so did it haunt a place deep in Ashoke's soul, shedding light on all that was irrational, all that was inevitable about the world" (Lahiri 14).

Sonia, Gogol's sister, is in fact an accompanying background character who is not described elaborately in the novel. She shares most of the incidents of the novel with Gogol during the time that Gogol lives with their parents. But as Americans do, they lead their own private lives after entering college. Since then, there is merely news from her which does not seem to have significance in the mainstream of the novel. Still, her naming as Sonia is significant as a contrast to Gogol's naming: "Sonia makes her a citizen of the world. It's a Russian link to her brother, it's European, South American" (Lahiri 62).

Moushumi, Gogol's wife, is the most complicated character in the novel regarding the concept of identity. Having Indian parents, being born in England, having lived in England, America and France together with having several relationships with people from diverse backgrounds and nationalities, makes her an intricate personality who is also in search of a fixed identity without noticing it. She seems to be reluctant in accepting a fixed and defined identity due to her way of living.

She identifies herself as an Indian to such an extent that she breaks up with her former fiancé Graham because she cannot tolerate him “reject[ing] her background, be[ing] critical of her family’s heritage” (Lahiri 217). At the same time she shows distaste and disrespect for the Indian ways that are around her: “She hated the way they would talk of the details of her wedding, the menu and the different colors of saris she would wear for the different ceremonies, as if it were a fixed certainty in her life” (Lahiri 213). She identified herself as an English person for long after she had settled in America: “She speaks with nostalgia of the years her family had spent in England . . . She tells him [Gogol] that she had hated moving to America, that she had held on to her British accent for as long as she could” (Lahiri 212). As an adolescent in America she envies the American style of life (having boyfriends and dating), but she has to practice it elsewhere because her parents forbid her to lead that kind of life. She took refuge in Paris: “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”(Lahiri 214).

Moushumi’s multiplicity is not limited to her nationality or cultural identity, and in fact this characteristic of hers does not let her stick to anything in life permanently: “[S]he feels unmoored . . . beyond the world that has defined and structured and limited her for so long” (Lahiri 253). When she marries Gogol she does not accept to change her last name to Ganguli and keeps her own name. She loves the way she is and the sense of herself. Changing the name would suggest her acceptance of the sense of being

somebody else, even if this person is Gogol: “[S]he tells him that for most of her life he was exactly the sort of person she had sought to avoid” (Lahiri 212).

For Moushumi, marriage with Gogol is in fact another camp in the long line of camps in which she takes refuge. Her previous relationship devastated her and while she wanted to take refuge from that by going to Paris again, she took her mother’s advice to date and finally marry Gogol: this was a period of her life which ended by taking refuge in having an affair with another man: “The affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day” (Lahiri 266).

Gogol’s namesake

At the beginning of her “Gogol’s Namesake: Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*,” Caesar explores the ties of *The Namesake* with Nikolai V. Gogol and his short story “The Overcoat”. Doing this, she thinks, gives important clues to understanding the confusion of *The Namesake*’s main character Gogol. Describing the problems of the first-generation Asian-Americans and connecting them with Gogol’s “The Overcoat”, she writes that for them the awareness of two cultures is a kind of curse which does not let them understand who they really are: “Read with an understanding of the significance of the Gogol story, however, the novel is much more clearly an elucidation of the causes and meaning of that confusion, which comes not only from having a multiple cultural identity, but from some of the ways in which people in modern American society tend to view identity” (103).

Caesar relates Gogol Ganguli’s confusion in *The Namesake* with the aspects of selfhood suggested by the American renowned psychologist, William James: the material

self which consists of one's surroundings, clothing, food, and possessions; the social self which consists of the loves and friendships; and the essential self which is "the organizing consciousness that strives to understand the meaning and patterns of the events of one's life in this world, that searches for continuity, or that seeks a way to make peace with the irrational" (104).

Akaky Akakyievitch, the protagonist of "The Overcoat", is a scrivener who copies other people's writing while he is unable or unwilling to write anything of his own. When he buys a new overcoat, he becomes another person: he becomes his overcoat. Wearing his new overcoat, he goes to a party after which the overcoat is stolen on his way home. Then Akaky catches a cold and dies. The story ends ambiguously with Akaky's ghost haunting the people in the same square that he was robbed. As Caesar suggests it is a story about the undesirability of having a fixed identity and "the ending is deliberately ambiguous so as not to impose a meaning, an identity, on the story itself" (105).

Just as Akaky changes identities in writing numerous copies from other people, or passively becomes the overcoat he is wearing, Gogol Ganguli in *The Namesake* takes several identities in the course of the novel via his relationships and his name which one by one are rejected since none of them fit him properly. Caesar writes that Gogol confuses his material and social selves for who he is (his essential self) and "because these outer selves are sequential rather than simultaneous, they provide him with no sense of continuity, which is part of their function on the lives of more contented and secure people" (106).

As Ruediger Heinze writes in his "A Diasporic Overcoat? Naming and Affection in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*": "Gogol's story is dominated by the effect of his

name on his relationships to family, friends and lovers; in other words on his affections” (193). Thus, the role of his name and namesake is prominent in *The Namesake* and the study of the displacement in the main character Gogol is weaved around his name. “Gogol’s story is . . . generally about naming and the inherent strangeness in names and naming, which personal and cultural naturalization blunts” (200).

When Gogol is born at a hospital in America, it is more than a month after Ashima’s grandmother, hearing about her pregnancy, has posted a letter which contains two names: a girl’s and a boy’s. The letter does not arrive until Ashoke and Ashima decide to put the pet name “Gogol” in the birth certificate to release him from the hospital according to the American law that the birth certificate should contain a name. The letter containing Gogol’s original or real name is lost and the grandmother who has revealed the name to nobody dies after a coma. Thus the name is absent, but it is also present since everybody knows that it exists somewhere but as Heinze says it is “lost in transit” (194). The resemblance of Gogol’s life story with his name’s fate similarly draws his identity into consideration: Gogol’s identity and the sense of self are in permanent transit. It is never delivered to him until the end of the story.

According to Heinze, Gogol’s name is singular. This is because it has no meanings for Gogol. It is neither a first name nor a last name in America or India, the two places that Gogol knows and is intimate with. He cannot imagine his connection with the last name of a Russian writer. This “singularity” of his first name frightens and displaces him particularly after he learns about the absurdity of the Russian writer at school as a mentally troubled genius. This is the beginning of his hatred of his name. He is scared to introduce himself as Gogol to the girl whom he kissed for the first time in his life, so he

says to her that his name is Nikhil, another name which was suggested by his parents as a good name but had never been used: by doing this “not only does he change his ‘overcoat’ and his behaviour towards others but he also changes who he is, if that means his past, the complex concoction of his personal and cultural identity up to this point” (Heinze 195).

Eventually, he changes his name to Nikhil officially at the court, a change which makes him a different person but also cuts him off from his cultural past, and his family. There is no past to be identified by the new name. Still, he is called Gogol by his own family and the people who know him from the past. He feels like an actor: “At times he feels as he’s cast himself in a play, acting the part of twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different” (Lahiri 105). This new quality of character which is created in him by changing his name while the other is valid among his family and the related network of friends from the past is referred to as “doppelganger” by Heinze (195).

By entering university in another city he separates himself from his family geographically. After this he can claim a new world and personal identity for himself in a place where everybody would know him as Nikhil. “Nikhil is his overcoat which makes the ways in which he is different from other Americans invisible” (Caesar 110). It is in this phase of his life that he begins his several relationships with girls who know only his second name.

But it is also after changing his name that he is disturbed by the knowledge of his namesake revealed to him one day by his father in the car. It is hard to imply how this knowledge affects Gogol but certainly he is not impervious to the news. He can’t conceal his being ostensibly offended by being told about this after so many years but it is a

sudden shock for him to contemplate more around his name and his affections for his family and especially for his father. This is what shows itself more clearly towards the end of the novel and particularly after his father's death. In fact the last scene of the novel is when Gogol is sitting at his parents' home reading "The Overcoat" for the first time since he was given the book when he was fourteen. It was a gift from his father with his handwriting on the front endpaper: "For Gogol Ganguli" and then toward the upper right-hand corner of the page: "The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" (Lahiri 288). That is a reminder of the day his father gave him the book quoting Dostoyevsky's saying that "We all came out of Gogol's coat", and in the answer to Gogol who had asked him about the meaning of that phrase he had said: "It will make sense to you one day" (Lahiri78).

Caesar believes that "[f]or Ashoke, Gogol is a new life, a rebirth, the creation of another life in another country, both his own life and his children's" (110). By giving this name to his son he tries to give him a transnational identity but Gogol rejects it. In fact, the three different scenes mentioned are connected because Gogol's identity-related preoccupations regarding his name mingle with his affections to his father towards a more displacing factor: his father's savior and the means of his happiness have been exactly what he has hated all his life.

Gogol does not have lasting relationships with girls. This is a typical American style of transitory relationships. But for Gogol they are not merely relationships. These relationships together with changing his name from Gogol to Nikhil were the beginning of a project in search of a self and an investment in constructing a new identity for him. But the inconsistency of these relationships deprives him of having a sense of continuity

and thus a fixed and established self and identity. He passively seeks for a self in every emotional relationship. By the beginning and the end of each relationship he is in and out of a new self. Each relationship which is part of his social self becomes a new overcoat for him and accordingly he mistakes it for his material self and consequently for his essential self.

The culminating point of his passive relationships is his second love Maxine in New York: a juxtaposition of two very different identities-Gogol with his complicated background, a first-generation American with parents who are Indian-Americans and his discomfort with his own sense of the self and lacking identity which provides him with a peculiar identity in having no identity; and Maxine, an American girl with American parents from generations of Americans who is absolutely comfortable with her own sense of the self, its continuity and her simply-defined identity as an American. Despite Maxine's initial attempt to absorb him, Gogol's unconscious thirst for adopting an identity and his passivity regarding his relationships let him succumb to Maxine and Maxine's family's way of life very soon in their relationship. He abandons his own apartment and comes to live with Maxine in her parental home. This is while he tries to be as distant as possible from his own family in Massachusetts for as long as possible. He does not even answer his mother's phone calls, and when his mother asks about the reason he does not tell her that he did not want to. Of course, he is very well aware of this: "[H]e is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own" (Lahiri 141), but he needs this distance partly because in this way, he can concentrate more on his new relationship which is of an absolutely different nature from all his past and by which he feels exotic, and partly because "[h]e feels free of

expectation, of responsibility, in willing exile from his own life” (142). Maxine’s family, their house in New York, their summer cottage in New Hampshire, their food and wine, their dressing and expensive and comfortable way of life-“The Ratliffs own the moon that floats over the lake, and the sun and the clouds” (Lahiri 155)-which are symbols of the material life of the family construct Gogol’s new identity.

Gogol’s father dies from a heart attack in Ohio when Gogol is still with Maxine. He goes there to collect his father’s body and then prepares for the funeral in Massachusetts. His father is dead but what is left of him, in his possessions, his house, his wife and children, his friends and the memory of him are his material and social relics. Gogol breaks up with Maxine because he realizes that he is tacitly out of her world. He thinks that it is impossible for her to understand and sympathize with the complications of his life and his past: “He remembers Maxine’s reaction to his telling her about his other name, as they’d driven up from his parents’ house. ‘That’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard,’ she’d said. And then she’d never mentioned it again, this essential fact about his life slipping from her mind as so many others did” (Lahiri 156). To continue with her means the continuance of his negligence of his family. But he has already entered his father’s world even if it is his material world: “He doesn’t want to be with someone who barely knew his father, who’s met him only once” (Lahiri 170). A detailed description of Ashoke’s possessions in this part of the novel together with Gogol’s trying to connect emotionally with his father or the grief of his loss through his belongings reinforces the idea that he wants to make his way back to his previous life as symbolized by his family. Now, he is at the threshold of changing the self again. As Caesar argues:

The self that he assumed with Maxine is abandoned, an empty shell of a self he can walk away from with few regrets. It is not who Gogol is. Indeed, Gogol defines himself primarily by who he isn't, by rejecting or refusing to choose potential definitions as he did when he was a baby and refused to choose the object that was supposed to foretell his occupation in life. (113)

The advent of his relationship with Moushumi is also a passive response to his mother's will which is fortified by his own inclination to his past and family roots especially after his father's death. Beginning his relationship with Moushumi, Gogol is a spectator again. He enters Moushumi's life when he is ready to adopt another identity and self for himself through a constructed personality that he sees in Moushumi especially her experience of living in France: "Here Moushumi had reinvented herself, without misgivings, without guilt. He admires her . . . He realizes that this is what their parents had done in America. What he, in all likelihood, will never do" (Lahiri 233).

Moushumi is the only woman among Gogol's relationships who recognizes him by both of his names. Moushumi reveals his previous name to her friends in a party. This offends him and it is simultaneous with the decline in their relationship. Even when she has an affair with her ex-boyfriend while she is still married to Gogol, she refers to Gogol only as "her husband". It is in this relationship that Gogol loses the effect of his name on himself to the verge of being indifferent and nameless: "His time with her seems like a permanent part of him that no longer has any relevance, or currency. As if that time were a name he'd ceased to use" (Lahiri 284). Since he had changed his name to Nikhil, people

who knew him by the new name called him “Nick”. Knowing about his name-change, one of the people in the party pronounces Nikolai Gogol as Nick-oli Gogol (Lahiri 244). Changing the name has not relieved him of the Russian writer. He wishes that his name was never revealed to anybody and he could simply be referred to by pronouns (245).

Towards the end of the novel, pondering upon his life and relationships, Gogol is different. He feels guilty about his own ways of life through the years. Family is vital for him now. And looking into the past he is frightened to see that not only it has been his own routine to abandon the family but also it is a family tradition done by his parents as well: “He wonders how his parents had done it, leaving their respective families behind, seeing them so seldom, dwelling unconnected, in a perpetual state of expectation, of longing” (Lahiri 281). Contemplating “with a stamina he fears he does not possess himself. He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins . . . a distance that had not troubled [him] in the least, until it was too late” (281). He does not hate his name any more, instead now that he is losing the emotional network of family one by one he misses the 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 last lines of the story illustrate Gogol’s preoccupation with his future. He has plans: “A month from now, he will begin a new job at a smaller architectural practice, producing his own designs” (289). As an architect working for other firms and designers up to now, he intends to be more original regarding his job. Like his decision regarding his job, he seems to be ready to be an

architect of his own life, self and identity. At this point the story comes to its end, leaving the reader unaware of what could follow.

Conclusion

The Namesake is a story of identities. It begins with a migration in the first generation and follows with its specific concerns to the second generation. The family is split; two are Indians and the other two are born in America. The juxtaposition of the different nationalities creates further tensions for the characters involved. As one sees all through the novel each Ganguli family member is a singular case and unique version who seeks for his or her own real self and tries to answer the question of identity. Although they live together and share much, they still have differences in their life orientation and their experiences with their identities which are mostly related to their Indian-American lives.

“The kaleidoscopic quality of the world geography, its conditional elasticity and flexibility, leave the contemporary subject at a loss, on shaky ground and struggling to find his or her bearings in a world where new territorialities have emerged at the crossroads between the actual and the virtual” (Kral 75). François Kral concludes his “Shaky Ground and New Territorialities in *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali and *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri” with the above sentence, emphasizing that the hardships that the characters in *The Namesake* undergo regarding their displacement are the result of their psychological struggle with their identity as first or second generation migrants. He argues that displacement is an in-between situation where the displaced belong nowhere. This journey of belonging starts from one place or culture and is substituted with the virtual other while the virtual former still has its impact and shadow. Trapped between

the two, the displaced want emancipation, searching everywhere for other alternatives which eventually end nowhere. Kral claims that *The Namesake* invites “us to envisage the long-term consequences of the virtual everywhere . . . which may well result in a tragic nowhere” (75).

The Namesake suggests bondage, started and symbolized in a name. The protagonist of the novel, Gogol Ganguli, is never really relieved of his name and namesake. According to Victor Brombert, “[b]y implication one is never totally free of an overcoat, there is no such thing as a pristine and authentic identity which might then be covered by a free choice of cultural, personal attire, habits, norms” (qtd. in Heinze 197-98).

Despite all the description of Gogol’s troubles with his true identity and displacement during his life, there is a hidden desire of freedom in him. His self suffers from its cultural captivity which is caused by his parents’ roots, and not finding solace in his American side is related to his instinctual desire for freedom and emancipation from the identity-related captivity. To be identified as a pure American subject does not save him from his psychological captivity, neither does his symbolic return to his supposed identity associated with his parents’ life- roots in India at the end of the novel. Seeing this matter from such an angle would reveal opposite aspects to the theme of displacement which is commonly regarded as abject. Just like the desire for a fixed identity in human beings, there is a parallel opposition in their nature to escape boundaries caused by fixed identities. A fixed identity is as much restrictive as the lack of it. All human phenomena have their own opposites just like the “self” and the “other”. For Gogol, the family represents India and outside is America but in fact it is the family that is outside for him.

Identities are made in, and by, cultures. Both these interrelated phenomena are changeable and not fixed. According to Charles Altieri, “the effort to construct identity gets transformed into a celebration of participating in multiple identities, and sophisticated theory provides a self-congratulatory alternative to the kind of cultural work that requires aligning the self with specific roles and fealties” (qtd. in Heinze 199). Accordingly, it is rather difficult and even impossible to draw the demographics of a fixed identity.

The displaced has more than one choice. Making one choice among many choices often leaves him/her ambiguous. The problem does not come from making the wrong choice-which is misplacement-but it is the realization of the multi-sidedness of his/her identity and benefiting from all the choices equally. Any limitation in one choice can be compensated for by the others. In this sense displacement could alternatively be called emancipation or freedom, and accordingly *The Namesake* can arouse as much sympathy as the joy of this feeling at the end.

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