

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

reflective paper by Jonathan Freilich

Bengali émigré parents leave a Cambridge hospital with their American baby and a certificate declaring "Gogol Ganguli" the "Full Name of Child." Hardly. "Gogol" was a "pet name," often not acquired for months, used exclusively by "friends, family and other intimates," and known to few outside that circle. By contrast, envelopes, diplomas, passports, name plates on professors' office doors demanded a "good name," this baby's expected in a letter from the new mother's maternal grandmother in Calcutta, but not actually required before school enrollment. Conflicting Bengali and American naming practices baffle the hospital official and bewilder the parents.

Differing cultural practices, transitions, and the characters' comfort or discomfort permeate Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake*, which is at least as much about the parents, especially Ashima, as its ostensible subject. The novel opens with Ashima's going into labor, then skips back in time to relate some of Ashima's and Ashoke's earlier life including the expeditious period between their introduction (Ashima, 19 and college student, Ashoke, 26, and a doctoral candidate) and their wedding, and the eighteen months before Gogol's birth.

As the parents learn more about Gogol and the cultural expectations of their new *milieu*, the reader learns about the Gangulis. Later, we meet the teenage Gogol, whose several rungs up the high school social ladder than many adolescent protagonists. He has friends (though no girlfriend), and is athletic, tall, good-looking and academically successful.

Yet, nothing immunizes him from adolescent self-consciousness, or prevents him from misattributing its cause to his name, Gogol: His parents' incomprehensible choice which, in a fatal error as kindergartener, he'd clung to rather than accept his recently bestowed, and so much cooler, "good" name, "Nikhil." Gogol was "both absurd and obscure," "neither Indian, nor American but of all things Russian!" He hates *being asked* [emphasis added] if Gogol means something in "Indian." (Note: it's the unwanted attention that's so painful.) His name was why no one took him seriously. (In a rare, and transitory, flash of self-awareness, he realizes this was nonsense. His classmates' limited interest in his name was exhausted years before.) As Gogol's high school English teacher relates Nikolai Gogol's frustrated life and agonizing suicide by starvation, some classmates steal glances at a girl thought to have anorexia; none look at Gogol Ganguli. Yet, the namesake's anguish is hardly less acute than that of the Russian author "commonly believed [to have] died a virgin."

The novel follows Gogol, now officially Nikhil, to college at Yale, where he barely remembers losing his virginity, and eventually has a significant girlfriend, Ruth. At his mother's instigation, Nikhil attends a panel discussion to greet one of the panelists, Amit, a distant cousin, whom Nikhil has never met. The topic: Indian novels written in English. (Should we shout, "Metafiction!" and down a cup of tea?) The panelists talk about ABCDs, American-born conflicted (or confused) *deshis*, and refer frequently to "marginality," Gogol thinks, as though it

were a medical condition. “Gogol is bored... [and] sketches portraits of the panelists, who sit hunched over their papers along a rectangular table.” Surely much of this boredom stems from his discomfort with the appearance of the speakers (one, his cousin!), a topic far too close to home, and the audience, heavily lit majors (Ruth’s crowd) and his ethnic peers (whom he avoids). Sketching the speakers distances himself from them.

Just after Ashoke tells Gogol the train collision origin of his name, the novel skips ahead five years, passing over grad school and rejoining Gogol, whose colleague has persuaded him to attend a party. There’s a vivacious young woman he can neither take his eyes off, nor bring himself to address. She tries to draw him into a conversation. This fails, so later, she approaches him directly when he’s standing alone. Success. He can have a conversation, and they share some interests. The next morning, she calls him, saying she’d found his number in the phone book, and invites him to dinner, mentioning she lives with her parents. He doesn’t even remember telling her his last name. Meet Maxine, Gogol’s first significant romantic relationship since Ruth. Her parents offer no impediments to his sliding into her family’s life. Within three months of their meeting Maxine has invited Nikhil to move in. Living with Maxine in her parent’s home; he returns to his apartment weekly to pick up mail and check phone messages – eventually returning his mother’s calls.

Yet, he only mentions Maxine to his mother when, after reluctantly acceding to his mother’s request to see his father before Ashoke leaves for an academic year in Ohio, the young couple makes a detour on the way to New Hampshire:

“[Maxine] still cannot believe that she is to be the first girlfriend he’s ever brought home. He feels no excitement over this prospect, wants simply to be done with it. Once they get off at his parents’ exit, he senses that the landscape is foreign to her: the shopping plazas, the sprawling brick-faced public high school... the shingled houses, uncomfortably close to one another on their grassy quarter-acre plots. The sign that says CHILDREN AT PLAY. He *knows* [emphasis added] that this sort of life, one which is such a proud accomplishment for his own parents, is of no relevance, no interest, to her, that she loves him in spite of it.”

Would quarter-acre plots strike a life-long Manhattanite as “uncomfortably close together?” Gogol is projecting.

Gogol regards his father’s advice to move the rental car from where a baseball had broken Ashoke’s car window, as disaster mongering. But Gogol expects Maxine’s visit to be a disaster he must endure, doing nothing to prepare either his parents or Maxine. To the extent that Maxine makes a good impression, it’s entirely due to her social graces and genuine interest. Gogol had led her astray by introducing his parents to her by their first names. We learn later that Maxine’s addressing them as “Ashima” and “Ashoke” had “startled” Ashima. Gogol could have predicted this. But at 26, after being instantly on a first name basis with Maxine’s parents,

he is still too self-conscious to explain, still unaware that Maxine is likely to be far less discomposd by his parents than he is.

Gogol's relationship with Maxine is under some strain even before Ashoke dies (near Cleveland). The death shifts more responsibility to Gogol, who rejects Maxine's attempts to be a part of this aspect of his life. Gogol, increasingly emotionally distant from her, explains little. Their relationship succumbing not long after.

Gogol's marriage to professionally accomplished, but personally self-defeating, Moushumi, born in England but otherwise a true ABCD, ends not long after their first anniversary.

The novel ends, as it had begun, with a time inversion, this one allowing readers to see Gogol Ganguli finally opening the book his father had given him 18 years before, seeing the inscription his father had written, and starting to read "The Overcoat." But most of the last chapter, which takes place on Christmas Eve and Day 2000, concerns Ashima, again in transition, widowed, preparing for and hosting the last party in her house, already sold and nearly emptied, soon to start dividing the year between Calcutta and New England. She thinks about Gogol, separated a year before, and since divorced, and about Gogol's younger sister, Sonia, now about the age Gogol had been when Maxine had met their parents. Since her father's death, Sonia has moved back from California, is happily learning to prepare the Bengali dishes she'd spurned as a child, and has become engaged to Ben, a Newton-born editor of the *Boston Globe*, described as "half-Jewish and half-Chinese." (He's likely to have been asked, "No, where are you *from*?) The wedding will take place in Calcutta on an "auspicious date in January" 2002. Gogol has a new job but is otherwise unsettled. Ashima's statement that the important thing is for [Gogol] to move on with his life seems apt.