

Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*: Reviewing the Russian Connection

Sanjukta Dasgupta
Calcutta University

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel *The Namesake* negotiates the interstitial space between two locations, cultures and two generations. The novel tries to identify the sameness and differences that define the self, identity and the drift towards a transcultural, transnational re-definition of the self. In this respect this paper tries to address the complex issues that arise out of using a Russian name for a second generation Bengali boy who is born in the USA. The Russian connection, the use of a Russian name and the problems of naming, un-naming and re-naming are fascinating aspects of this diasporic novel. In fact, historical evidences prove the close association between Russia and Bengal from the eighteenth century onwards on levels of trade, commerce, ideology, literature and culture. A Bengali boy with a Russian name would not have been very unusual in both colonial and post-colonial Bengal and would not have produced any culture shock either. This cultural contact between Russia and Bengal could have been addressed in some more detail by Jhumpa Lahiri, suggesting that cultural globalization began in Bengal with the advent of the European traders in the eighteenth century or even earlier. Fiction is the most unobtrusive mode of cultural cross-fertilization and such culture specific inputs would have been significantly informative for global readers. Through the innocuous choice of a name Jhumpa Lahiri's novel however powerfully highlights the trials, tensions, hybridity and the gradual accommodation leading to fluid identities that define diasporic dilemma and transnationalism.

[**Keywords:** Namesake, Russian, Diasporic narrative; Bengali, middleclass, Gogol, Europhilism, postcolonial]

...his parents chose the weirdest namesake (The Namesake 96)

"But it's not even a Bengali name" (99)

...they should be glad that his official name would be Bengali, not Russian" (100)

"there's no such thing as a perfect name. I think human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen...until then, pronouns (245)

What's in a name?

I agree that a lot has already been written about Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and the dichotomy of good name, bad name, *bhalo nam*, *dak nam*, pet name, nick name and the tradition of naming the baby in Bengali families. The Russian surname or last name Gogol

becomes a pet name, courtesy the Bengali American writer of Bengali origin Jhumpa Lahiri. Very soon in English medium nursery schools in the city of Calcutta/Kolkata, we may well find numerous little Bengali speaking Gogols. But readers will also recall that though Ashoke Ganguly and his wife Ashima's are the parents of Gogol/Nikhil and Sonali/Sonia, both are American citizens and as a result both children could be described as falling into the category of the PIO- people of Indian origin. Their parents, Ashoke and Ashima of course would be known as non-resident Indians or NRIs. Gogol's sister had an ethnic name on her birth certificate "Sonali". Jhumpa Lahiri does not make an issue about the transformation that Sonali's name undergoes. Instead we find that the Bengali name Sonali seamlessly transforms itself without much ado to the Italian or say European first name Sonia. This renaming gives Sonia (Sonali) confidence and quick adaptability to the new space. Her hybrid space is not ruptural but dialogic. To Sonia of course Gogol is 'Goggles', an inspired transition from literary to material culture, from the name of a Russian author to trendy eyewear, registering unmistakably the changing times and the resultant generational response.

The Russian connection, the use of a Russian name and the problems of naming, un-naming and re-naming are fascinating aspects of this diasporic novel. In fact, historical evidences prove the close association between Russia and Bengal from the eighteenth century onwards on levels of trade, commerce, ideology, literature and culture. A Bengali boy with a Russian name would not have been very unusual in both colonial and post-colonial Bengal and would not have produced any culture shock either. This cultural contact between Russia and Bengal could have been addressed in some more detail by Jhumpa Lahiri, suggesting that cultural globalization began in Bengal with the advent of the European traders in the eighteenth century or even earlier. Fiction is the most unobtrusive mode of cultural cross-fertilization and such culture specific inputs would have been significantly informative for global readers.

A Russian last name as first name for a migrant Bengali- American

Therefore, I want to introduce and review the politics and problematics of this phonetically rather sweet Russian surname or last name Gogol that becomes the pet name and then first name, of a Bengali boy born in the USA. Later however as a young adult, Gogol prefers Nikhil as his first name, which is another interesting transition, as if the conscious choice of the ethnic name Nikhil is a symbolic gesture towards re-linking with one's place of origin and roots.

Obviously, Gogol is not a Bengali name. Though the Bengali parents of Gogol, Ashima and Ashoke never feel as if they are at home in Boston, they have no problem suggesting Gogol as even a pet name for their first-born. Is this just about Ashoke finding himself a survivor of a horrifying train accident? Is it about his regaining consciousness among the wreckage of the accident, clutching a few pages of the English translation of Nikolai Gogol's book of short stories? He had been reading his favourite story "The Overcoat" when the accident had happened. Ashoke feels as if Gogol had saved his life.

He had been traumatized since the accident- claustrophobia and nightmares brought back haunting memories of that train accident throughout his life till his death in the USA. Ashoke died of a massive cardiac arrest when his son Gogol was in his twenties.

How natural it seems to Jhumpa to use a Russian name for the most important character of her diasporic debut novel, as if it could not be an issue at all. Is this suggestive of the Europhile, cosmopolitan, secular educated Bengali middle class culture and its colonial hangover? An expected option would have been to use a Bengali author's name, surname or pet name in order to stress the Bengali roots that the novel privileges. Interestingly, neither does Jhumpa Lahiri use an American author's name as namesake such as Twain, Whitman or Melville. Using an American author's name could have been more regarded as more appropriate as it could have directly addressed Gogol's cultural dilemma and bi-cultural stress, but this distancing of cultural implications by using a Russian author's name in capitalist USA further problematizes the text.

One must remember that Gogol, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Gorky among many others, wrote at a time when in Russia, a political transformation and ideological paradigm shift was in its rudimentary stages before Russian socialism impacted the whole political world, both in the North and South. Historical evidences prove that ideological proximity and cross-fertilization of their mutual freedom struggle, Russians resisting the Tsarist regime, Indians fighting the British regime in India, brought Indians and Russians in close contact. Maxim Gorky corresponded with Indian exiled Indian revolutionaries such as B.R. Cama and Shyamji Krishnavarma. Gandhi too paid homage to Gorky and wrote in 1905, the year when the partition of Bengal perpetrated by Lord Curzon was fiercely resisted and reversed by the irate Bengali people- "There is no other writer in Europe who is as great a champion of people's rights as Maxim Gorky." (Komarov 35)

Also while in South Africa Gandhi named his headquarters "Tolstoy Farm" as he regarded Tolstoy as his teacher. In 1908, Gandhi published Tolstoy's *Letter to a Hindoo*. In the preface to the English edition Gandhi wrote, "To me, as a humble follower of the great teacher whom I have long looked upon as one of my guides, it is a matter of honour to be connected with the publication of his letter..." (Prasad 11)

But then Gogol's father, Ashoke who though he never felt Boston was home for him, never seems to have been encouraged by his grandfather or father or for that matter other family members, or his school or friends to read Bengali literature. There is a curious detachment about the nationalist struggle, colonial rule and the independence of India in Lahiri's text. Ashoke in turn never does try to sensitize Gogol and Sonia about Bengali literature, arts and culture or the fact that India had been colonized by the British for about 190 years. Most cultured educated Bengali diasporans would have almost invariably have tried to tell their children about Rabindranath Tagore by exposing them to Tagore's translated writings, his songs and lyrical plays through readily available long playing records, a common techno commodity in the sixties and seventies. Also the family visits the Taj Mahal, it does not visit the internationally acclaimed Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan. After all, it is the only university in the world to have been founded by a poet and is regarded as a secular pilgrimage site for most educated Bengalis both resident

and non-resident. Gogol and Sonia remain unaware of Tagore or the popular Bengali folk tale “Thakurmar jhuli” among many other things, despite having to stay in Kolkata during Ashoke’s sabbatical leave.

As minors, Gogol and Sonia had no choice; wherever their parents went, they had to follow and the peculiar silence of their educated parents about very common Bengali cultural signifiers seems a bit odd. But again if read in the perspective, that the novel *The Namesake* is after all a text by a second generation Bengali American, the absence becomes not a flaw but a bullet point. The non-resident Bengali having receded far away from the place of original culture and would perhaps never be able to understand through rational questioning the iconic presence of Tagore or Bibhuti bushan Bandopadhyay in Bengali culture nor the enthusiasm for Karl Marx and Che Guevara, both intrinsically embedded in the cultural memory of the Bengali speaking people in South Asia.

Diasporic narrative and the place of origin

After all, *The Namesake* is another diasporic novel about cultural negotiations, an excavation of roots, rootlessness, uprooting, re-rootings, tracking roots and routes to discover oneself at home in many homes in the world, despite a single or dual citizenship, a passport of a particular colour, a skin colour that cannot be changed easily like that of a chameleon. As Roger Bromley observed,

“The transcultural and transnational narratives, texts of cultural translation, do not so much restore geography and the arbitrary, but, rather, open up again their conditions of possibility, a release, especially through women’s writing, from the ‘locked within boundaries’ of patriarchal hegemony- not by simple reversals, but through emergence texts of the third scenario: the indeterminacy of diasporic identities, the production of difference as the political and social definition of the historical present, the contemporary”.(Bromley 73)

But Lahiri’s book could have been a brilliant device, introducing Bengalis and their culture to the world through the citing of a few timeless classics and grand narratives of Bengali culture. Strangely, Jhumpa does not mention a single Bengali author or for that matter a single Indian author in *The Namesake*. If Ashoke had read to his children a Bengali book as a bedtime book of tales or had even read translated sections of Niharranjan Ray’s pathbreaking book of Bengali social history-*Bangalir Itihas Adi Parva (History of the Bengali people ancient period)*, then Gogol and Sonali-Sonia would have been able to bridge the two cultures at least intellectually, if not emotionally.

The Bengali-speaking People

Niharranjan Ray’s impassioned lines in the Preface of his history of the Bengali people tracing his links with the land of his origin perhaps can sensitize the second generation immigrant about the ties that bind one to the place of one’s origin. The historian’s

passion makes the scholarly narrative, not just a social document of Bengal but also a cultural manifesto of early Bengal-

“when I began writing this book, Bengal was undivided and was a part of an unpartitioned India; now, when that writing is finished, the political leaders have subtly realized the partition of Bengal along with the severing of India’s most ancient bloodlinks...Nevertheless, whatever the wishes of the politicians, Bengal and the Bengali people are, historically, one and undivided...” (Ray xv)

Further Ray adds,

“My Bengal and its people are not to be found in the pages of ancient manuscripts; rather, they are inscribed on my heart. To me the ancient past is as alive and real as the immediate past. I have tried to represent in this book that real and living past and not some corpse.” (Ray xv)

Ray’s use of the possessive pronoun ‘My’ registers the emotional deep rootedness of the culture of one’s place of origin. This sense of proud possession is obviously absent in the psychic terrain of the children of first generation migrants. The place of origin for the second-generation immigrants is the engagement of aware tourists- intellectual engagement, emotional detachment.

In his foreword to Ray’s seminal book, the eminent historian Jadunath Sarkar observed, “there would have been much personal advantage for Niharranjan had he written this work in English; his book would have had a wide circulation and his fame and reputation would have been far reaching. However, his choice not to write in English is evidence of his profound reverence and affection for Bengali language and literature” (Ray x)

In 1993, John W Hood, a Professor in the University of Melbourne undertook the translation of Ray’s text and thereby introduced Bengali regional history, society and culture to the world. Interestingly, Hood’s PhD dissertation was on the works of Ray, a prolific scholar who had written many books on Indian history, arts, fine arts and culture. This perhaps indicates the robust two-way flow of cross-cultural knowledge production and distribution.

In another relatively recent historical study of Bengal titled, *History of the Bengali Speaking People* (2001) Nitish Sengupta makes some interesting observations about the naming of the area that we know as Bengal. The observations also tell us that international encounters, cosmopolitanism, globalization and the politics of naming and unnamings had happened many centuries ago in the Indian sub-continent:

“Thus in the light of the available historical evidence, it is easily established that the original name of Vanga referred only to East Bengal and not to the entire land loosely called Bengal. The western part of Bengal was called Gaur before the turko-Afghan invaders came in the 13th century. The words ‘Gaur’ and ‘Vanga’ were at times used together, a practice that continued up to the 19th century. The name ‘Bengal’ came out of the expression ‘Bangala’ or ‘Vangla’ used for the country

widely by chroniclers in Arabic and Persian from the 13th century onwards and gradually came to denote the entire province that stood between Bihar on the one hand and Kamrup on the other. It was this name which was adopted by the Portuguese as 'bangala' and subsequently by other European traders and led to the name 'Bengal' and which gave its name to the Bay of Bengal to its South." (Sengupta 8)

Interestingly again, the city of Calcutta was officially renamed 'Kolkata' from January 1, 2001. Protests by Anglophiles were as rampant as when Bombay was renamed Mumbai. Sukanta Chaudhuri commented on the renaming of Calcutta in his piece "On Naming Cities":

"I do not see that the heavens will fall if the city is called Kolkata. The name does not itself, imply any good or bad effect on our human, cultural or economic life. It carries no message of doom, any more than of elation." (Chaudhuri 227).

Chaudhuri's pieces on the city of Calcutta were republished in a collection titled *View From Calcutta* and published in 2002, a year after the city was re-named Kolkata. After all, the Bengali language has used Kolkata as the name of the city in all its publications, and the occasional use of anglicized *Calcutta* instead of *Kolkata* in Bengali literary writing was inevitably to highlight anglophilism often with a satiric slant.

Naming and Namesake

If that is about the political and historical origins of the naming of the place and city of Gogol's origin, then Gogol's rather dismissive and radical prescription about choosing one's own personal name in the concluding section of the novel is significant:

"there's no such thing as a perfect name. I think human beings should be allowed to name themselves when they turn eighteen...until then, pronouns (245)

Cultural anthropologists have studied the basic human urges in all cultures about naming of children and have identified this urge as a cultural universal:

"Research has failed to reveal a single society which does not bestow personal names upon its members. Apparently, names and the process through which names are given are considered to be important to humankind." (Bengal Studies 88).

Consequently, first names, pet names and last names are the DNA of the social organism called community. Just a strand of letters carries an incredible amount of vital information in terms of a person's social heredity; from a single word, it is often possible to determine a person's gender, education level, social and economic status, language, religious preference, sense of aesthetics and values, political inclinations, nationality, age (in terms of historic period), and sometimes even birth sequence. Like DNA, "names not only reflect the inheritance of the past, but in a general sense, they map out expectations and possibilities of the future" (Bengal Studies 90).

A. Muni observed in his interesting and very relevant book in this context *The Namakarana: Naming of the child* (1999) that parents should select names that were easy to pronounce, sound good, and which have a good meaning. He also disapproves giving Hindu children “foreign names” (Bengal Studies 97). Klostermaier referred the Rig Veda which stated clearly that a child of either sex should be given four names-

1. The Nakshatra name: This name is based on the constellation under which the child is born. It is often a secret name given during jatakarma.
2. The name of the deity of the month in which the child is born. This name is the second name.
3. The name of the deity. This name is given to protect the child from evil.
4. The popular name: This is the name that the child is known by. Some texts state that there are five requisites to naming a child (1) the same should be easy to pronounce and sound pleasant, (2) it should contain a specified number of syllables and vowels, (3) it should indicate the sex of the child, (4) it should signify fame, wealth, or power and, (5) it should be suggestive of the caste” (Bengal Studies 97)

Gogol as pet name/namesake used in Bengali children's fiction in the nineteen-sixties

In fact, Gogol as the extraordinary namesake is after all not so unique for readers of Bengali fiction. The very eminent Bengali fictionist and children's detective fiction writer Samaresh Bose had used the name Gogol for his young adolescent investigator of thrilling suspense plots. Samaresh Bose wrote a series of these children's suspense thrillers and as a result the *Bengalization* of the Russian Gogol happened in Bengal in the 1960's. Jhumpa Lahiri stated in an interview that the name struck her when she found a cousin's friend's pet name was Gogol. In fact, there are many resident Bengali middle class boys and young men who have Gogol as their pet name.

The Bengali American Gogol writhed desperately from a sense of cultural confusion, while the Bengali fiction writer Samaresh Bose's resident Bengali Gogol did not seem to be bothered by his name of Russian origin at all. After all European culture cast its powerful shadow on colonized Bengal for about 250 years. Partha Chatterjee's observation is crucial in this context. Chatterjee wrote,

“Of all the dominant regional cultures in twentieth-century India, the culture of the Bengali middle-class is arguably the most bourgeois in the classical European sense” (Chatterjee 24).

Since Raja Rammohan Roy, Anglophilism, the Bengali middle-class had persistently and proudly internalized European culture as progressive modernism and this obsessive infatuation has lingered even sixty years after independence. In terms of the historical context however, the Russian revolution in October 1917 inspired the Bengali cultured intelligentsia overwhelmingly. The rest of educated and cultured India

too responded with enthusiasm to this experiment with a socialist world order. Along with Gogol therefore Russian names such as Lenin, Stalin, and Natasha are not uncommon among middle class Indian names even in the 21st century. These Russian names and surnames are used as *bhalo nam*, first names and not just pet names throughout India, most significantly in West Bengal and Kerala, even today. But that preference is about political ideology and socialist ideals that are integral to the two regional cultures and not germane to the purpose of this essay.

In fact, by naming her protagonist Gogol Jhumpa Lahiri had created an opportunity for herself to introduce Bengal's long association with Russian literature, culture and political ideology. This could have been traced back to the fascinating participation and pioneering role of the Russian linguist Gerasim Lebedev (1749-1817) in Bengali life and culture. Lebedev founded the first Bengali theatre hall (1795) in late eighteenth century Calcutta and translated plays into Bengali for stage performances. Expectedly, their popularity invited the wrath of the British officials who finally expelled him from India. After returning to Moscow Lebedev set up a Devanagari and Bengali language press, the first of its kind in Europe, among other intellectual engagements involving the Bengali language and culture.

If Ashoke had narrated these cultural connections between Russia and Bengal, Gogol may not have wanted to change *back* his name to Nikhil, though Nikhil does carry the resonance of Nikolai but can even be Americanized to the snappy Nick. Ashoke could have informed the young adult Gogol that the first Bengali to have studied in Russia was Nishikanto Chattopadhyay. He had lived in St Petersburg in 1879-81 and contributed significantly to Russo-Indian cultural relations. He wrote articles on Russia when he returned to Dhaka, then a part of undivided Bengal. Also, interestingly, co-operation between Indian and Russian scholars started around the end of the nineteenth century. Peter M. Shastitko recorded,

“N. Klingen, the agronomist, led the first comprehensive agricultural expedition to India in 1895-96. The direct results of the expedition included the successful acclimatization of tea in the Western Trans-Caucasus and the cultivation of bamboo for industrial use.” (Roy ed. xx)

Also Gogol's father Ashoke could have mentioned that the first translator of Russian folktales into Bengali was Madhusudan Chattopadhyay, who translated extensively the fables and folklores of Russia into Bengali. In fact the Russian scholar Kesab Chakravarti recorded in his well-researched book Bengal's engagement with Russian literature and culture from the mid-eighteenth century onwards (Chakrabarti 167)

Lahiri's novel registers that a first name can be a cross or a halo for the bearer of the name, depending on the person's ideological affiliations. So Gogol prefers Nikhil as a more appropriate name, phonetically close to Nikolai, culturally more rooted to his origins and yet meaning a state of boundlessness- “the name Nikhil is artfully connected to the old. Not only is it a perfectly respectable Bengali good name, meaning he who is entire, encompassing all”, but it also bears a satisfying resemblance to Nikolai, the first

name of the Russian Gogol". (*The Namesake* 56). It is noticeable here that when Gogol wants to erase the Russian connection that the famous surname labels him with, he does not think of an entirely different name unconnected to his parents's dreams and hopes for their son. The name-change is really about reverting back to the name that his parents had given him as his good name, *bhalonam* and which he had initially rejected as his school name. So as Gogol was the name his father had given him, so was Nikhil, a name sent from his family in Calcutta. So the re-naming into Nikhil from Gogol is not an act of rupture or rebellion, but a re-birth of a young man who rejects a Russian name that does not seem to individuate and identify him at all. He prefers a Bengali name while his sister Sonali eases herself into a local re-naming as Sonia without the perils of identity confusion that her brother experiences. If the siblings were temperamentally alike Gogol perhaps would have preferred Gregory as his first name rather than the unmistakable exotic ethnicity of Nikhil despite the possibility of the American abbreviation to Nick.

As a matter of fact Sonia seems to be far better integrated into the culture of her birth as she also juggles quite easily with the cultural priorities of her parents. The agenda of inclusiveness that multiculturalism signifies is what both Gogol and Sonia's life experiences trace out. As Amartya Sen warns that cultural freedom and multiculturalism is not to remain die hard Bengalis in America but to participate in a two way flow of the local and the global: "In contrast, having two styles or traditions coexisting side by side, without the twain meeting, must really be seen as "plural monoculturalism". (Sen. 157)

In the context of the diaspora however, the name of the diasporic subject can be not just a signifier for what is signified goes beyond naming to the more problematic ruptural space of un-naming. As Bill Ashcroft had observed,

Nikhil's name is predicated on an un-naming and in this sense the name itself can be seen to embody the continual potentiality for un-naming. Names are those signs which identity in an apparently absolute fixity. The name is not just the subject, but also the subject's fixity in family, nation and ethnicity. The Name stands for the illusion of an irreducible identity that locates *this particular* subject, *this particular* subjectivity and no other. But when the name is imbricated with un-naming, when the sign is both the name and the un-naming, it invests the subject with an absolute potentiality that is *the potentiality of subjectivity itself*. This potentiality is paradoxically represented in the choice of the name that has been chosen. It is the transformation of the past into the future as an absolute potentiality. (Sen & Chakravarti, 21)

Euromilism of the cultured middle class Bengalis

Ashoke is so besotted by European literature and culture and of course his talisman Nikoloi Gogol that understandably the closest he can get to his own culture is through nostalgia, memory trips and sense of loss and a compensatory sense of fulfillment too. So Ashoke remembered his grandfather's advice, "Read all the Russians, and then re-read them. They will never fail you". (*The Namesake* 12) One must remember

that as a young student Ashoke was an avid reader but the books and titles mentioned as being part of his reading does not include a single Bengali title or reference to a single Bengali author. Instead readers are informed that Ashoke had read Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Anna Karenina*, *Fathers and Sons* and that his paternal grandfather was a professor of European literature at Calcutta University. Calcutta University does not have a European literature department till date, but European literature could have been taught in the English department of Calcutta University. One wonders whether this is a factual error much like Dan Brown's hero being a Professor of the non-existent Dept of Symbology at the Harvard University. A case of authorial license that does not merit too much attention, one must admit. But Ashoke's Europhilism however can be read in context as Fanon did:

"the native intellectual will try to make European culture his own. He will not be content to get to know Rabelais, Diderot, Shakespeare and Edgar Allen Poe; he will bind them to his intelligence as closely as possible." [Fanon: 176)

Lahiri reiterates in her novel, the cultured, educated middle-class Bengali's deep reverence and fascination for European literature and culture. This fascination is so deep seated that intellectuals from other states of India find this Europhilism rather amusing. The internationally acclaimed dramatist Girish Karnad had remarked,

"What distinguishes Bombay or Calcutta from Delhi, Mysore, Nagpur or Hyderabad is that in public life you have to pretend to be an Englishman (laughs). In private life you may not be. You had to believe in meritocracy, you didn't accept caste; you had to believe that individualism was the right thing, and caste and family loyalties were supposed to be secondary. So these cities bring an entirely new thinking to culture itself, and you had to accept the British definition of culture' (Kabir 119)

This cultural colonization perhaps is the reason why Gogol does not ask questions about the location of the Black Hole of Calcutta unlike the great humanist American writer Mark Twain who visited Calcutta in 1896, about seventy years before Gogol did. Mark Twain commented with his characteristic intentional irony that a citizen from abroad would invariably make it his purpose to visit the Black Hole of Calcutta, so well publicized by the occupying British as the most ghastly evidence of native savagery:

"The Black Hole was not preserved; it is gone, long, long, ago...It was the first brick, the Foundation Stone, upon which was reared a mighty Empire-the Indian Empire of Great Britain...And yet within the time of men who still live, The Black Hole was torn down and thrown away as carelessly as if its bricks were common clay, not ingots of historic gold. There is no accounting for human beings." (Winchester 287)

Calcutta and the Western Gaze

In this context I will name the texts of just two cultural travellers and eminent litterateurs who continue re-visiting Calcutta even now. Both have enshrined their very candid impressions of the city, revealing thereby their serious and sincere engagement with a city that has often been described in a classic oxymoron- charming chaos. The two writers are both Europeans. Gunter Grass wrote about the enigma and misery of Calcutta in both *Flounder* and *Show Your Tongue* and Dominique Lapierre in his book *The City of Joy* also prioritized the disadvantaged Calcuttans as the wretched of the earth. *The Namesake* steers clear of any such descriptions of culture shock. It is undoubtedly a good strategy but at the same time a case of missed opportunity. Gogol and Sonia could have informed readers in greater detail all that contributed to a feeling of being an exile and experiencing a sense of reverse homelessness when they were forced to stay for eight months in their grandparents home in Calcutta. An ethnic name reverberates with the history, myth and oral narratives of the place of its origins, just a translation of the names Nikhil and Ashima, as signifying the borderless universe, seems far too superficial.

The other factual error is the following phrase: “he’d graduated from class twelve.” (NS 13). In 1961, when Ashoke was said to have passed his school leaving examination, schools in West Bengal had yet to introduce the plus 2 course, that is classes eleven and twelve. In 1961 the senior most class in the local school education system was class eleven. Also, Indian students graduate with a Bachelor’s degree certificate, after studying at the university for three or four years. School leaving examinations do not terminate in a graduation ceremony in India. The author’s lack of familiarity with the local education system and her consciousness about her target readers are obvious from this inaccuracy. For a school leaving “graduation” is obviously easily comprehensible to the target readers, who reside outside India and presumably in the global north.

Claiming Jhumpa Lahiri: the dilemma of Bengali cultural intelligentsia

Interestingly, when Jhumpa Lahiri’s Pulitzer prize winning book of short stories “The Interpreter of Maladies” was published, the ecstatic Editor’s note in the prestigious Bengali literary journal *Desh* about claiming the Bengaliness of Jhumpa is significant.

Not only did the editor categorically trace an evolutionary stream and tradition of Bengali short stories flowing through a century, from Rabindranath Tagore, Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay to Jhumpa Lahiri but expressed a desire of carrying a celebratory banner with the title- *From Shailajananda to Jhumpa*. Though acknowledging Arundhati Roy’s DNA links with Bengal, the editor gave exclusive credit to Jhumpa for writing Bengali stories in the English language—stories that had an unmistakable Bengali fragrance and rhythmic flow attuned to Bengali culture. However, Chanakya Sen’s article in the same issue of *Desh* retrieved the unbridled euphoria as it ended with Jhumpa’s own words stated in her interview: “...India is my parents homeland (desh)...yet I couldn’t regard America as my homeland either...” (*Desh* 41:2000)

Once again in 2007, *Desh* carried a review of the Bengali translation of Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel *The Namesake*. The reviewer was an award winning young Bengali woman fictionist. Though she expressed great appreciation about the free flowing translation of *The Namesake*, she was entirely unimpressed by Lahiri's subject matter:

"This book can be read on a train, bus or even during a flight. It can be read non-stop. After the reading is over however its impact does not linger even for half an hour... There is just no urge to carefully store it for the desire of re-reading the novel .I don't know whether this is good or bad, successful or unsuccessful." (Desh, 93: 2007)

The reviewer's response is that of the resident Indian reader, who probably is unable to envision the in-betweenness of the diasporic subject and the problematics of bi-cultural complexities and transnational identity formations. It is the interstitial space that the diasporic subject struggles to identify and understand in order to define the migrant's cultural journey and relocation. Defining the diaspora and the diasporans Avtar Brah observed,

"The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure." (Brah 193)

Regional, resident knowledge producers even in the English departments of Indian universities however are not always able to sense the vastness and dynamics of relocation and the politics of transcultural identities. A recent proposal for research in diasporic studies was vetoed in a departmental committee meeting at the English department of Calcutta University on the grounds that this area of study was "overused". Nevertheless, it seems that with the emergence of newer ethnic voices in the North as mediatory subjectivities and cross-cultural representatives, the experiences of the migrants in their new homes in an increasingly global and cosmopolitan cultural environment, will create more non-Caucasian Gogols, Chekovs, Twains and Shakespeares with black, brown or yellow skin colours, ethnic home languages, ethnic religions that will engage critical attention, possibly to even find out the reasons for compelling overuse.

Notes

¹ Bill Ashcroft observations in his essay "Transnation and Utopia" (Keynote address at Calcutta University 2007) about the naming in Lahiri's book is interesting:

At the same time this horizon presents itself as an ambivalence. This is beautifully demonstrated in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* (2003), which revolves its narrative of diasporic subjectivity around the question of names, which invoke the interpenetrating

issues of language, identity and representation. The story hinges on an Indian couples' naming of their son born in America. The Bengali tradition is to ask the grandmother to name the child, but the letter with her chosen name has gone astray, and before they can discover the name, she dies. While waiting for the real name to arrive, the father, Ashoke, gives the son the pet name Gogol, after a copy of Gogol's stories that had saved Ashoke's life in a train accident. One of Ashoke's favourite stories is "The Coat" which seems to reflect the function of names as themselves forms of clothing.

The problem of naming seems to sum up the ambivalence of identity. The absence of a name is the point of potentiality at which the diasporic subject can be either recognised as cut adrift, absent from the nation, or launched into the possibility of new life. Gogol is the name that invokes a past of great meaning to the father, one he refuses to or fails to share with his son. But it is a meaning that refuses to invoke a tradition, a culture, a shared identity. When the boy begins school the parents want his official name to be Nikhil, but Gogol knows himself a Gogol and that becomes his official given name. But the growing boy's dissatisfaction with the name he had preferred as a child, as he discovers the history of the name, leads to his renaming himself in a way that will announce his individuality, his belonging to the present of American culture. But the name he chooses is the traditional name originally given to him by his parents. The ambivalence of Nikhil's identity creates ambivalence in the book. Is it pessimistic? Is Nikhil confused? Is this the indication of homelessness and loss? The name he chooses as the signifier of his emergence into home is the very signifier that confirms his connection to the past. But it is a past he has reconstructed by choosing a name. The past thus becomes the medium of transformation, the medium of the future.

Nikhil's name is predicated on an unnamings and in this sense the name itself can be seen to embody the continual potentiality for unnamings. Names are those signs which identify in an apparently absolute fixity. The name is not just the subject, but also the subject's fixity in family, nation and ethnicity. The Name stands for the illusion of an irreducible identity that locates *this particular* subject, *this particular* subjectivity and no other. But when the name is imbricated with unnamings, when the sign is both the name and the unnamings, it invests the subject with an absolute potentiality that is *the potentiality of subjectivity itself*. This potentiality is paradoxically represented in the choice of the name that has been chosen. It is the transformation of the past into the future as an absolute potentiality.

The name in this narrative cannot help becoming a metaphor for subjectivity, but it does so by implicating the productive and signifying operation of memory. Memory is that medium in which utopia can either dissolve into nostalgia or become the mode of transformation. Memory is the smooth space that flows through and around the striated space of history, the space of the nation state and all structures of fixed identity. Ironically, memory, through the medium of literature, becomes the vehicle of potentiality rather than stasis. This is the potentiality of return, when the past adumbrates a future that transforms the present. This space of transformation, this space of literature, is the smooth space of the transnation (Sen & Chakravarti 20-22) (Published in *Narrating the (Trans) Nation: The Dialectic of Culture and Identity* ed, Sen and Chakravarti, Kolkata: Dasgupta & Co Pvt Ltd., 2008)

² In an article on Shakespeare and its relevance in modern times the critic reads Gogol's preferred first name Nikhil as an anagram of Nikolai, (obviously inspired by Nikolai Gogol) apart from the

fact that the intended anagram is to all purposes a flawed anagram and its positioning in the essay that deals with an entirely unrelated subject is irrelevant. See Sengupta, Samrat "Hauntology: Shakespeare and the Predicament of Modern man" in *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 141-149, No 4, Oct 2007

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1. Issue April 29, 2000
2. Issue January 17, 2007

Sanjukta Dasgupta, Professor and Former Head, Department of English and currently Dean, Faculty of Arts, Calcutta University, teaches English, American and Indian English literature. She is a poet, critic and translator, and her articles, poems, short stories and translations have been published in journals of distinction in India and abroad. Her published books are *The Novels of Huxley and Hemingway: A Study in Two Planes of Reality*, *Responses: Selected Essays, Snapshots* (poetry), *Dilemma* (poetry), *First Language* (poetry), *More Light* (poetry), *Her Stories* (translations), *Manimahesh* (translation), *The Indian Family in Transition* (co-edited). She is the Managing Editor of *FAMILIES: A Journal of Representations*. Her awards and grants include the British Council Charles Wallace Scholar grant, Fulbright postdoctoral research fellowship, Fulbright Alumni Initiative Award, Fulbright Scholar in Residence at Suny, Oswego, New York, Australia India Council Fellowship, Visiting fellow at the Centre for Women's Research and Gender studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Associate Fellow at Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, Visiting Fellow at the Women Studies and Development Centre, University of Delhi. She is Coordinator of the UGC DRS II (SAP) project, a member of the advisory committee of the Women's Studies Research Centre, Calcutta University, member of the West Bengal Central School Service Commission, member of the Calcutta University Senate (third term) and co-opted member of the Board of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Studies(ENGLISH) of Assam University, Silchar. Prof. Dasgupta is Assistant Editor of the *Journal of Women's Studies*, Calcutta University. She visited Nepal and Bangladesh as a member of the SAARC Writers Delegation. Prof. Dasgupta was invited by the Commonwealth Foundation, UK to serve as co-judge and thereafter as Chairperson for the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia region). She visited Melbourne and Malta to serve on the pan- Commonwealth jury panel. She is now an e-member of the advisory committee of the Commonwealth Writers Prize, UK. Prof. Dasgupta's areas of interest include Colonial and Postcolonial women's writing, Women and/in Indian Films, Migration and Diaspora studies, Translation studies, Creative Writing.
