

## Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* : No Running From Death

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**Abstract.** Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), a Pulitzer winning novel is now a major motion movie. Lahiri won this prize for her collection of ghost stories *Interpreter of Maladies*. *The Namesake* is her first novel and a successful one. The story of the novel is, indeed larger, covering two generations, and at once simple : Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli leave Calcutta to settle in Cambridge. But we miss the point, the reason for their leaving. It all began accidentally, one day, in the early hours of October 20, 1961. Ashoke was twenty-two, a student at B.E. College. What Lahiri keeps reminding is that there is no running from death. Ashoke and Ashima, like us, do not only live in space, but also in time. Like Kant, Heidegger thinks that time is an *a priori* condition for being in the world. Ashoke and Ashima continue to receive bad news of deaths of their relatives back home, but these do not interpenetrate their subjectivity. Within a decade abroad both got orphaned. They do cry, however, they are consoled by their parents' memory. After their return from Calcutta, they get to become part of the American life.

**Keywords :** Rootlessness; nostalgia; existential phenomenon; loneliness; indelible transitoriness.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), a Pulitzer winning novel is now a major motion movie. Lahiri won this prize for her collection of ghost stories *Interpreter of Maladies*. *The Namesake* is her first novel and a successful one. Generally read as a novel exploring the concepts of cultural identity, as Julie Myerson writes her review of it in the *Guardian*, of rootlessness of tradition and familiar expectations, the reviewer praises Lahiri for not succumbing to cliches, those themselves so often entail. Instead, Myerson adds, Lahiri turns it something both larger and simpler : the story of a man and his family, of this life and hopes, loves and sorrows. Lahiri tells us in an interview, "the original spark of the book was the fact that a friend of my cousins in India had the pet name Gogol. I wanted to write about the pet name, good name distinction for a long time..." It is almost too perfect a metaphor for the experience of growing up as child of immigrants having a divided identity, divided loyalties (Interview : Hindustan online.)

The story of the novel is, indeed larger, covering two generations, and at once simple. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli leave Calcutta to settle in Cambridge. But we miss the point, the reason for their leaving. It all began accidentally, one day in the early hours of October 20, 1961. Ashoke was twenty-two, a student at B.E. College. He was travelling on the 83 UP Howrah-Ranchi Express to visit his

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grandfather for the holidays. His grandfather had a good collection of Russian fiction of which Ashoke was equally fond of. Even travelling presently he was reading stories by Nikolas Gogol in hardbound his grandfather had earlier gifted to Ashoke. It was the volume *The Overcoat*. Ashoke had read these stories many times.

As it happened, the train met with an accident. Before the accident, an elderly co-traveller, Ghosh by name, advised Ashoke to pack as soon as he could and go to the west where everything was regulated, including trains. Ghosh got buried in the debris. Since Ashoke remained waking and reading, he could be pulled from wreckage. He was badly injured, but he survived the accident. He thought the hardbound volume of *The Overcoat* saved him. On recovering, he thought of nothing else except to follow Ghosh's advice ... "Pack a pillow and a blanket." Thus, Ashoke started working on the advice, despite his parents' opposition. He was that terrified. Death, of course, is absurd, for it ends all possibilities of life, as Jean-Paul Sartre would say. However, there is another existential perspective of Martin Heidegger, that death, though it comes, does not end all human possibilities, of course, limits them. One simply cannot run away from it. Anxiety, Ashoke experiences after the train accident, reveals to him his finitude. The accident also discloses his indelible transitoriness - his being unto death. But unheeding this disclosure he tries to pack and envisions another sort of future. The following year he graduates and without telling his parents, applies for engineering studies abroad. Only after receiving a fellowship and visa, does Ashoke tell his parents about his final decision, to join MIT, leaving his parents praying and siblings crying.

He comes back to Calcutta to marry Ashima, but that he nearly has died haunts him. On planes he requests bulkhead seat. At times the wailing of children fills him with deepest dread. He often checks his ribs to know whether he has survived. He thanks Gogol who he thinks saved him. He even names her son after the Russian writer. The dread of death, Lahiri shows, is human temporality. In existential terms, being itself is temporal. Heidegger's treatise is suggestively titled *Being and Time*. Ashoke is so much terrified by his being unto death that he believes not so much in God as much in Gogol. Gogol is the only name Ashoke is obsessed with that when he is asked to register the name of the child, he has none in his mind except "Gogol". When Gogol is five, Ashima is pregnant again, this time a female child is born. She is named Sonali, or Sonu, then Sona and finally Sonia. By this time Ashoke's family swells and so does his and Ashima's Bengali connections, friends. However, intermittently, they wake up by the news of deaths in the middle of night, of friends and members of their family. Their parents die from one disease or the other.

What Lahiri keeps reminding in the novel is that there is no running from death. Ashoke and Ashima, like us, do not only live in space, but also in time,

Being in time is not the historical time that happens in a particular period, says Mrinal Kanti Bhadra, commenting on the philosophy of Heidegger in his book *Phenomenology and Existentialism*. Dasein, a neologism for man, according to Heidegger, projects or constitutes temporality. Time is primordially with Dasein. Like Kant, Heidegger thinks that time is an *a priori* condition for being in the world. Time has no existence apart from the consciousness of Dasein. Ashoke and Ashima continue to receive bad news of deaths of their relatives back home, but these do not interpenetrate their subjectivity. Within a decade abroad both got orphaned. They do cry, however, they are consoled by their parents' memory. After their return from Calcutta, they get to become part of the American life.

Apart from their name Gangulis on the mailbox, nothing is different from other Americans. They go in for the garage equipment—shovels, pruning shears and a sled. They purchase a barbecue for tandoori. Each purchase is for inviting Bengali friends whom they invite and get invited in return. Birthdays of Gogol and Sonia are celebrated. Other functions like Durga Pooja too are celebrated. On such occasions Ashima wears nothing but saris and sandals from Bata. In short, Gangulies, like other Bengalis are invited on these occasions and they create a little Bengal.

The purpose of these details by Lahiri is not to build an atmosphere of nostalgia among the diaspora, she has no such sentiment. She is an existentialist, believes as she does, that man is a creature of involvement. Man emerges in the world of going concerns. He is communal by nature. Very early Ashoke and Ashima discover other Bengalis around and form associations. Since man is indelible communal, the world he lives in is shared with others. The communality of human beings is, Heidegger would say, a 'Pervasive Phenomenon'. It shows itself without much ado. It shows itself in man's experience of aloneness as assuredly as his experience with others. Aloneness itself is a deficient mode of being with others. Aloneness is a privation of an original relatedness. Wherever two people meet, they begin talking as Ghosh with Ashoke, giving the latter an unsought advice. In society or aloneness, we share a communal character. However, in the most part man exists in the inauthentic communal mode. Thus, ours, as of Ashoke and Ashima, being in the world is a source of evasion. Besides living an average life which Ashoke lives, another debilitating experience, he suffers of being in the world is that of anxiety. Ashoke's anxiety is on account of the years passby, more so his that son hates having constantly to explain the genesis of name. He is now fourteen. There is a crisis in the family over the question of Gogol's name. The mother supports the proposal against Ashoke who believes in Gogol, the novelist, more than God. Ashima reprimands her husband that he is an old man, reminding him of his advancing age. Anxiety, indeed, is the basic mood which discloses the threatening character of the world by confronting Ashoke with his irremovable finitude. Two things put Ashoke off, first Gogol's decision to change his name, whom he believes

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to be his saviour and second Ashima's saying that he has grown old. Heidegger would say that anxiety should not be confused with fear. Fear has a definite object. The source of anxiety remains indefinite or indeterminate.

Ashoke has no fear of imminent death; what threatens him cannot be localised. The source of his anxiety is nothingness, that in a few years he may not be. His children have grown; Gogol is Nikhil in his changed *avatar*. He is studying architecture. He cannot imagine coming from such parents as Ashoke and Ashima, even such a background. When he describes his own upbringing it seems bland by comparison with that of Ruth, who tells him her parents' experience of their visit to an ashram in India. They continue talking, gossiping while travelling. It is the same kind of indulgence as Ashoke gets into with Ghosh. Man is communal, we cannot help idle talk, but it is an inauthentic and at times dangerous too, as it involves us in inconceivable situations and consequences.

Ruth's beauty, Lahiri tells, is direct and unassuming. It was not compelling, but it still makes Gogol ask whether she is going to Boston. In reply she tells that she is going to Maine where her dad lives. Such talks are, at the same time beguiling, biding time. As Gogol and Ruth talk, Gogol is unaware of passing of the passage and Ruth's throat is so parched that she asks for a pack of potato chips and a cup of tea. Lahiri seems to suggest that she thus in loneliness (which is privation of community) and togetherness, the whole life is spent unaware in gossip till death knocks equally unawares as it does Ashoke, giving him no time to face his finitude.

Gogol experiences a similar sense of finitude as Ruth suddenly parts before he could ask for her number. However, he finds her out and endless talk ensues – an inauthentic modification of speech, Heidegger would say. Once begun, going becomes part of life, not to say anything new, but to repeat everyday happening at home, Sonia occupied the kitchen at Pemberton Road for a day, stuffing a turkey and rolling out dough for pies, things his mother did not particularly like and such stuff. Thus, they walk and talk and have coffee afterwards. Their conversation make them so much part of each other that while departing, Ruth would linger, look back and smile at him.

Gogol now meets her after her classes to study together at the library. He gets to know, though vaguely, about Ruth. Eventually, not able to meet under pressure, they avoid each other. In May, 1994, Gogol graduated in architecture at Columbia. His parents are distressed by how little money he makes. Occasionally they send him to support him. In New York where Gogol lives, he meets a girl Maxine, who is frank to the extreme, kisses him on the cheeks and directly introduces him to her mother Lydia. Then she takes him five flights upstairs in her attempt to show her house. She has the top floor to herself. He tells her that the house is too spectacular to suffer distraction. She feels impressed by his knowledge. Gogol

dines with the family that night. As Jhumpa Lahiri tells, very soon, quickly and simultaneously, Gogol and Maxine fall in love, and he likes the house and her parents, particularly their manner of living, especially her ways of living. Gogol, as Lahiri shows, is drifting away from his parents, his family and Bengali manners of living. Thus, Gogol sets off on his own path in search of his identity more than changing his name. With Gerald and Lydia "gone to their house in New Hampshire as part of their ritual, Maxine and Gogol feel too free to wander naked from room to room, cook or not to cook, love as they do, on salad. While enjoying this freedom without responsibility, Gogol finds an excuse not to go home, that he has a job, that he is busy. It is only much later in the novel when his own father is dead that Gogol realises that he keeps coming back to the parental home in New England only for the sake of his father's picture hanging on the wall, "the closest thing to a grave his father will have." But right now :

Gogol knows that his relatives will stand there until the plane has drifted away, until the flashing lights are no longer visible to the sky. He knows that his mother will sit silently; staring at the clouds as they journey back to Boston, but for Gogol relief quickly replaces any lingering sadness. With relief he peels back the foil covering his breakfast, extracts the silverware from its sealed plastic packaging, asks the British Airways stewardess for a glass of orange juice. With relief he puts on his headset to watch *The Big Chill* and listen to the top forty songs all the way home. (Lahiri 2009 : 86-87)

His father, meanwhile, is asked to direct research in a smaller university on a grant. But Gogol refused to come home. He somehow has to tell about Maxine. Maxine meets Ashima. Meanwhile, Ashoke suddenly dies, making Gogol to come back to his family. He has to perform rituals. This and other responsibilities entail his withdrawal from Maxine. Gogol is told that she has a proposal of a girl by the name Moushumi. She is the daughter of a friend of his parents. She is one year younger than he is. They meet at a bar. The girl addresses him by his changed name Nikhil. After a brief conversation, she asks him for a blind date. This follows a series of meetings, more intimate than the previous ones.

They marry within a year. Besides performing other ceremonies, she wears a saree, as they show themselves as the newly-wedded to their people uncles and aunts. Though married, Moushumi will not like to be called by the surname Ganguli. Though a Bengali girl, she turns out too sharp, involved in her friends, had one engagement and then a serious affair must survive with Dimitri. Gogol comes to know of it. She frankly confesses. His early affairs with Ruth and the then Maxine do not shake him as does Moushumi's disclosure. By this time he has become

aware of his advancing age. Occasionally though not infrequently, the news of someone dying or dead comes up. A girl falls suddenly by the mailbox, Alice by name. She was in her thirties and unmarried. Moushumi feels sick at the thought of her dying. She is reminded of the way Nikhil's father died instantly, without warning.

Lahiri seems to tell Moushumi that death coming suddenly or otherwise is an, as Heidegger says, ownmost, non-relational, certain and, as such, indefinite and insuperable possibility of human beings. We are always toward death. It is not yet, an extreme possibility. It is a different matter that most of us die inauthentically as Alice or Ashoke, i.e. without making difference in life. Moushumi herself indulges in an inauthentic life, though she is married. Dimitri by now (she met him when she was seventeen) is a middle-aged man. Gogol's father's death has been of the anonymous one. An authentic being lives in awareness of death as a unique possibility which he and he alone must undergo. Gogol must realise this that of all other possibilities it is not transferable and cannot be carried by proxy.

And yet it is an event one feels sick at, as does Moushumi at the sudden fall of Alice, a woman she says, so marginal. She tries to contact Nikhil, but not him searchable, she feels glad that he is beyond context – she is reminded of Nikhil's father's death instantly as of Alice, she is simply put off. She wants to run away from the Campus, but she had a class to teach in half an hour. She tries to bide this time, goes to copier room, searches for a stapler, but dreads finding it in Alice's drawer.

Lahiri thus shows how death shakes one's being. She just wants to forget Alice's demise. She searches the mailbox. Besides collecting her own mail, she continues the task Alice has undone. The mindlessness soothes her nerves. She takes the stapler and the rest of her things so that she has not to come to Alice's room. Among these things, she spots a business-size envelope, addressed to a professor of Comparative Literature who teaches German as well as French. She remembers the name of the sender on opening the letter, Dimitri D'ejardins who is enough to seduce her. Dimitri is presently jobless, searching for a job. Moreover, she had met him years ago in her final months of high school. They were then friends. One day, while travelling in a bus, she was prepared to be touched and kissed by him. Afterwards, on returning to the university, he was with a date. They often met; she often goes to his apartment. In fact, she is avoiding Nikhil and the family because of his father's death. Her attraction for Dimitri, after years, can be explained in resolution to her dread of Nikhil's father's death.

While sitting in Dimitri's apartment when the latter goes to buy a stick of butter, she looks at him from the window as an unemployed, middle-aged man who is enabling her to wreck her marriage, she asks herself. She wonders if she is the only woman in her family even to have betrayed her husband, to have been unfaithful.

After the death of her husband, Ashima is prepared to go back to Calcutta. Sonia and Ben will be married and Nikhil, who does mind to be called Gogol will stay on with the knowledge of his betrayal. Gogol is at home. Ashima has thrown a parting party. Nothing, Ashima realises, is to signify the years the family has lived, no evidence of effort, the achievement it has made. This is the final reckoning. It is left to Gogol to pass a judgement on that family. Gogol is concerned with it, that they lived here all these years like strangers and there will be no trace that they will ever there, an uncanny thought, no house to enter, no name in the telephone directory. It is then he refers to existential nothingness more pointedly that the family did not achieve anything significant.

Another negation haunts, besides that of Moushumi's having an affair at his back the whole year how could his parents, one dead and the other going back to India, leave them alone ? He is no longer in the world, as he earlier has been first with Ruth and Maxine, and then with Moushumi. Though living in New York, his family has never been far away. What Lahiri wishes to do is to bring out of his factuality to existentiality as in Heidegger. The second structural element points to man's disclosure of himself as a project and a possibility. Man is that he has been, his "thrownness" in the world, in a family, in a relationship, without his choice, but in existentiality, he makes a choice. The onus on him is that he should not merely be but become in freedom and responsibility in transforming himself Gogol's meditations at the end of the novel to his existentiality pointed to his future. Its factuality is rooted in the past, existentiality is projected to the future, provided he does not fall to live in the present.

After his failure in his brief marriage, he wants nothing of it, nor perhaps another involvement or even marriage. A year later, the shock wears off, but a sense of failure and shame persists, perhaps a necessary part of waking from inauthenticity to authenticity. His marriage has not been a shared companionship. On the other hand, they sought comfort in each other. The reference to death comes up as we learn from Gogol that their shared world was perhaps for the sake of novelty, a distraction or more importantly for the fear of slowly dying. That he has reached thirty-two makes him wonder that he is already married and divorced.

The givers and keepers of Gogol's name are far from him, one dead and the other, his mother, a widow on the verge of a different sort of departure. He vaguely refers to, to dwell, as his father does, of course, in a separate world. While she is alive, she will ring him off and on, but then how long she lives, and indeed how long he himself lives. Gogol Ganguli will one day vanish from the lips of beloved ones and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace at all. It rather leaves a sombre effect on him, further reinforced as he reads the chronology of Nikolai Gogol on the facing page:

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Born, March 20, 1809, the death of his father, 1825.  
 Publishes his first short story, 1830 and dies in 1852,  
 one month before his forty-third birthday. (90-91)

Gogol ruminates that in another ten years, Gogol will be of that age. He speculates that in case he marries, will he ever have a child to name? The sobering effect slightly wears, as he resolves that in a month hence, he will have a new job at a smaller architectural practice, producing his own design. This is, in existential terms, to authenticate oneself.

The loss of Gogol, symbolic of death, signifies his meanness. In Heidegger, death is an existential phenomenon. Death, as Gogol says towards the end, that would persist in a few years time. But Lahiri seems to suggest that perishing can be distinguished from the end of life. It does not coincide with dying in a medical sense physiologically or biologically. What Gogol means is that life is perishing. We daily hear of people dying. Death is outstanding like a debt has to pay. In the second sense, it is coming to an end what is not yet. Thirdly, the death cannot imply by the death of someone else. One must grow and ripen like a fruit, thus fulfilling oneself, rather than fall without reaching ripeness, as Gogol's father's death. He too might have died without ripening.

With Moushumi, he could not have thought of fulfilling himself. Now that she is gone, he will concentrate on his professional life. He would not be part of her crowd, leading an evasive existence, all gossip and curiosity. We shortly learn how Mousumi is terribly shaken by Alice's death and that of Gogol's father that she even betrays Gogol. Gogol too shrugs off his father's death fleeing away from the fact of existence. Lahiri does show nowhere Gogol feeling his father's death in his subjectivity, he rather shows untroubled indifference, dismissing it that though it certainly comes, but right away, it is indefinite. It is only when he is alone and reads the chronology of Nikolai Gogol that he died before reaching his middle age, that he hears the call of conscience, that he should produce new designs in his own name. Time at his disposal is short. What conscience summons, Heidegger would say, is one's own self, not everyday self, to one's potentialities, one's possibilities. These summons are Gogol's own, calling for his authentic-self-fulfilling oneself a while before death overtakes. Ripeness is all, as Shakespeare put it.

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