

UNIVERZITA PALACKÉHO V OLOMOUCI
FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Bc. Aneta Fibingerová

The Journey Motif in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*: The Indian American Characters and Their Intricate Ways towards Universal Human Identity

Motiv cesty v románu Jhumpy Lahiriové *The Namesake*: Postavy Američanů indického původu a jejich spleť cesty k univerzální lidské identitě

Diplomová práce

Vedoucí práce: Prof. PhDr. Josef Jařab, CSc.

Olomouc 2015

Zadání diplomové práce

Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci
Filozofická fakulta
Akademický rok: 2013/2014

Studijní program: Filologie
Forma: Prezenční
Obor/komb.: Anglická filologie (ANGFN)

Podklad pro zadání DIPLOMOVÉ práce studenta

PŘEDKLÁDÁ:	ADRESA	OSOBNÍ ČÍSLO
Bc. FIBINGEROVÁ Aneta	Polská 9, Olomouc	F131111

TÉMA ČESKY:

Motiv cesty v románu Jhumpy Lahiri Jmenovec: Postavy Američanů indického původu a jejich spletité cesty k univerzální lidské identitě

NÁZEV ANGLICKY:

The Journey Motif in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake: The Indian-American Characters and Their Intricate Ways towards Universal Human Identity

VEDOUcí PRÁCE:

prof. PhDr. Josef Jařab, CSc. - KAA

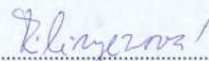
ZÁSADY PRO VYPRACOVÁNÍ:

Introduction
1. The Journeys of the IndianAmerican Characters
1.1 The Two kinds of Journey
- the actual (physical) journey and the metaphorical one
- the connection between them and their merger
1.2 Motivation
1.2.1 Digressions
2. The Places of Destination
2.1 The Connection between Names and Places
2.1 Naming Gogol
2.1.1 Gogol's Overcoat
Conclusion

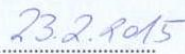
SEZNAM DOPORUČENÉ LITERATURY:

Dhingra, Lavina, and Cheung, Floyd. Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012.
Lahiri, Jhumpa. The Namesake. London: Fourth Estate, 2011.
Mead, George Herbert. The individual and the social self: unpublished work. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Podpis studenta:


.....

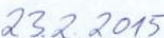
Datum:


.....

Podpis vedoucího práce:


.....

Datum:


.....

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci na téma „The Journey Motif in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake: The Indian American Characters and Their Intricate Ways towards Universal Human Identity*“ vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne:

Podpis.....

Poděkování

Děkuji vedoucímu této práce prof. PhDr. Josefu Jařabovi, CSc. za odbornou pomoc, cenné připomínky a trpělivost.

Content

Introduction.....	6
1. The Journeys of Indian American Characters	10
2. First generation.....	12
2.1 Ashoke Ganguli.....	14
2.2 Ashima Ganguli.....	18
3. Second generation	24
3.1 Gogol Ganguli	25
3.1.1 Naming Gogol	27
3.1.2 From Gogol to Nikhil	29
3.1.3 Nikhil, Gogol's Overcoat.....	35
3.1.4 You remind me of everything that followed.....	38
3.1.5 The Meaning of Gogol.....	40
3.1.51 Ruth	42
3.1.52 Maxine	44
3.1.53 Moushumi	47
3.1.6 Multiple Identity	53
3.2. Moushumi Mazoomdar.....	58
Conclusions.....	67
Resumé	71
Bibliography	77
Anotace	79
Annotation	80

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri (*1967), an English-born author of Indian origin who grew up in Rhode Island in the United States and currently lives in Rome, debuted in 1999 with a collection of short stories called *Interpreter of Maladies*. The collection, which concerns the lives of Indian immigrants in America, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. In her work following her debut short story collection she stayed faithful to characters of Indian origin who find themselves outside the country of their origin (predominantly in America), as in her second short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake* (2003), spanning from the 1960s to the new millennium, centers on the quest for identity of a son of Bengali immigrants growing up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and her latest novel, *The Lowland*, published in 2013, follows the story of two Bengali brothers who grew up together in 1960s Calcutta and whose life journeys take a different course when one of the brothers moves to America to pursue an academic career, while the other stays in India and joins the Naxalite movement.

In her fiction, Lahiri takes her characters on journeys which take place not only between India and America but also to other destinations, such as Paris. And of course, the characters' travels are not only physical, as we can see, for example, in the case of Ashoke Ganguli, one of the characters in *The Namesake*, who "travels" to Russia through reading his favorite author Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852). Naturally, the characters' encounters with different cultures, as well as the act of travel itself, shape their identity, so the metaphorical journey also encompasses the motif of life as a journey.

In *The Namesake*, the journey motif can be seen not only in the characters' travels between the two cultures that are clashing (i.e., the Indian and American cultures), but there is also a notion of a journey as one's way to identity. But it is not only cultural identity which is stressed in the novel; the destination of one's journey is an identity that transcends cultural identification. With one of the main motifs of the novel being the motif of naming, this identity that transcends culture is described by the literal meaning of the Indian-American characters' Bengali first names, so-called "good names," which are used for official purposes (as opposed to "pet names," which are supposed to be used exclusively within the family.) The novel is narrated in the third person, with the changing perspectives of four characters: Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, their son, and

the novel's main protagonist, mostly called by his "pet name" Gogol in the novel (whose "good name" is Nikhil) and his wife Moushumi Mazoomdar. These characters will be the center of the analysis below. As for the literal meaning of their names, Ashima means "she who is limitless, without borders," Ashoke is "he who is without sorrow," the protagonist's good name Nikhil means "he who is entire, encompassing all," and Moushumi's first name means "a damp southwesterly breeze." These names are emblems of one's cultural background in their form, because their origin points to a certain culture, but the meanings the names express are metaphorical characterizations of each character in the novel, or, in a metaphorical sense, the destination to which the development of each character's identity (which can be seen as a journey) leads in the course of the novel. The thesis will show how these meanings reflect the characters' identities (characterized by the literal meaning of their names), shaped via their travels, which are both literal and metaphorical, with cultural as well as universal experience contributing to these identities.

In the novel, the cultural clash is analogous with the generational one. This fact creates a universal dimension to the whole conflict, as it is family relationships that are the focus of the novel. In an interview for *The New Yorker*, Jhumpa Lahiri herself said, when reflecting on her work, which mainly centers on characters of Indian origin: "I've been going over and over similar terrain. But in the end the stories're becoming universal. *Are* universal." The author also said that it does not matter where the stories take place (even if it is Canada, New England, Ireland or India) because "there's something linking them, which is the human experience."¹ Such a universal dimension can be stressed in *The Namesake* as well. In spite of the fact that the conflict in *The Namesake* has its source in the clash of two very different cultures, the emphasis on family relationships in the novel means that the generational conflict seems to be emphasized more than the cultural one. But, of course, the cultural aspect cannot be excluded, as their identities are shaped via their experience of different cultures and the tensions between the cultures they encounter. However, the outcome is not mere cultural identification. Their cultural identification is certainly a part of their overall identity, but not the defining element.

Each character's journey is, of course, unique, but the importance of family relationships is what they all seem to share; the thesis will show how the characters'

¹ Sky Dylan-Robbins, "Video: Jhumpa Lahiri at Work," 5:02, September 25, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/video-jhumpa-lahiri-at-work>.

bonds to the two places (American and India) are created via family relationships. This is especially apparent in the development of Ashima Ganguli's identity. As for her husband Ashoke, his life journey is characterized by turning points that serve as a force in the development of his identity, such as motivation to leave behind his life in India and move to America. In the case of the novel's main protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, the importance of understanding the notion of identity will be discussed. The source of his struggle in his quest for identity that the novel depicts seems to lie in his inability to define himself, because, unlike his father Ashoke, he is rather passive in his approach to identity and is not aware of identity as being multiple, misinterpreting the meaning of his name, which his father gave him in honor of his favorite author. The last of the characters to be analyzed, Gogol's wife Moushumi Mazoomdar, seems to be aware of the fact that one should define oneself rather than passively accepting ready-made identities, as she defined herself in Paris. But her journey to defining herself is not straightforward and her marriage with Gogol is rather a digression for her than a final destination.

As already stated, both of the main locations in question, i.e., America and India, are underlined by family relationships in *The Namesake*. These interpersonal relationships, which define the characters' attitudes towards the two places and their respective cultures, establish a universal dimension to the cultural conflict. The multi-generational conflict is thus inseparable from the cultural one. Therefore, the main goal of the thesis is to trace the journeys (characterized by their travels and encounters with clashing cultures) through which the Indian American characters, in both the first and the second generation, develop in terms of their identity, with each character's destination being an identity characterized by the literal meaning of his or her Bengali name.

As for the notion of identity used in the discussion, it is not the aim to define the characters in terms of their cultural identity, but rather in terms of an identity of which one's cultural identity is one of the components, but not a defining label. To make the distinction clear, the cultural identity will be defined in relation to personal identity, because the latter encompasses rather universal aspects of one's identity. The interface of personal identity and cultural identity was described in the essay *Broadening the Study of the Self: Integrating the study of Personal Identity and Cultural Identity* by Seth J. Schwartz, Byron L. Zamboanga and Robert S. Weisskirch, with personal identity, drawing on Erik Erikson's theory, focusing on "the set of goals, values, and

beliefs that an individual has developed and/or internalized” and therefore representing “the answer to the question ‘Who am I?’,” while cultural identity stands for the values “internalized from cultural groups to which the person belongs (Jensen, 2003) and therefore represents an answer to the question ‘who I am as a member of my group in relation to other groups?’”, both of them highlighting the importance of values.² It is also pointed out in the essay that both the cultural values “internalized from groups” and the personal values “that guide one’s life choices” are necessarily related in some way, as they are part of “the nomological network of the self.”³ What it is also important to mention is the fact proposed by several authors (such as Reid and Deaux) that “cultural identity represents a *component* of the larger construct of personal identity.”⁴ To be more specific, “cultural identity is, by definition, both an aspect of self and a referent for a group to which one belongs (Dien, 2000),” and it may be seen as “midway between personal identity (which refers almost exclusively to the self) and collective identity (which refers largely to groups in which one is a member; Ashmore, Deaux & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004).”⁵

Both of the questions proposed as denoting individual identity (‘Who am I?’) and cultural identity (‘Who am I as a member of my group in relation to other groups?’) are important for the Indian American characters in *The Namesake*. Being a component of personal identity, the suggestion of cultural identity supports the idea presented in the thesis which views cultural identity as a contributory but not exclusively defining element of one’s identity.

The cultures in conflict rather serve as emblems standing for universal human relationships, which are stressed in *The Namesake*. Before the detailed discussion of the individual characters’ journeys which shape their identities, their experience and relationships with the two cultures in question will be discussed.

² Seth J. Schwartz, Byron L. Zamboanga and Robert S. Weisskirch, "Broadening the Study of the Self: Integrating the study of Personal Identity and Cultural Identity, " *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no. 2 (2008): 636, accessed January 14, 2015, doi: 10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00077.x.

³ Schwartz, Zamboanga and Weisskirch, "Broadening the Study of the Self, " 636.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 637.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 637.

1. The Journeys of Indian American Characters

The Indian American characters in the novel comprise both the first and the second generation. When talking about the characters' journeys, it is important to define what the locations between which the characters' journeys occur are. Movement occurs on more than one level in *The Namesake*; in a larger context, the locations are obvious: the movement occurs between India and America, or America and other locations (such as France, in Moushumi's case). The movement also occurs in the much smaller context of the Ganguli family, which means moving between the Gangulis' home on Pemberton Road in Cambridge, Massachusetts (or wherever their home at a given time is) and public locations, i.e., as Himadri Lahiri puts it, "the larger social space, outside the limited, 'sanctified' family space."⁶

In spite of the emphasis on the universality of human experience in the novel, the clashing cultural influences (in this case the American one and the Indian one) cannot be excluded. In the novel, they are portrayed as conflicting qualities, representing conflicting sets of values. This can be seen especially in the character of Gogol Ganguli: India is emblematic of the family, while America stands for everything outside the Ganguli family space, the public space. Thus, geographical spaces and social spaces are connected in this way, especially from the protagonist's perspective. The differences between generations can also be seen in the Gangulis' journeys to India; while for the first generation, Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, the trip to India is a "homecoming," for their children, Gogol and his sister Sonia, "it is an ordeal."⁷ For the children, the journey in the reverse direction only (i.e., movement from India back to America) can be called a "homecoming." (Sonia Ganguli will not be included in the discussion because of a lack of evidence in the text; as a character she is rather marginal.)

Thus, America and India both mean different things for the first and the second generation of Indian immigrants. For Ashima and Ashoke, India as a geographical place with its specific culture is the place to which they are connected emotionally, because it stands for their childhood and their parents, whom they miss dearly when they live in America. Thus, they want to preserve Indian traditions in their new American home.

⁶ Himadri Lahiri, "Individual-Family Interface in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*," *Americana: E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary* 4, no. 2 (2008), no pag., accessed February 13, 2015. <http://americanajournal.hu/vol4no2/lahiri>.

⁷ Venkatesh Puttaiah, "Paradoxes of Generational Breaks and Continuity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*" *Asiatic* 6, no. 1 (2012), 86, accessed January 13, 2015.

Preserving Indian traditions, encompassing Ashima's serving traditional Bengali dishes or throwing parties for other Bengali expatriates in America, is what her son Gogol does not appreciate as a kid growing up in America in the 1970s and the early 1980s, because he (as a person who identifies himself as American) is unable to reconcile that with his everyday American experience "outside" the home, and eventually he feels embarrassed by his background. Because of this, he seeks to distance himself from his family as soon as he is admitted to college. The private social space as associated with the family comes into conflict with the public space via the protagonist, which makes the journey "home" essential in the protagonist's storyline. However, while Ashima and Ashoke seek to provide contact with their native culture for the children, they do not seem to force them to do anything which would aggressively affect the lives of their American-born children (such as an arranged marriage, etc.). Apart from the traditional dishes served daily by Ashima and the parties with other Bengali expatriates in America, there does not seem to be anything from the side of the parents which would be too limiting for their children. But this is different for Moushumi Mazoomdar, who becomes, for less than a year and a half, Gogol's wife. Because of the fact that she is a woman, there is more pressure put on her by her parents and relatives, especially as far as the matter of an arranged marriage is concerned. Having been subjected to such pressure from an early age, her escape seems more understandable. But unlike Gogol, by her escape, she does not try only to escape, but also actively to define herself by moving to a place of her own choice, which is Paris. However, for both Gogol and Moushumi, it is essential part of their journey that they accept the culture of their background, which they seem to demonstrate in their marriage, as the idea of marrying a person from the same culture was totally unacceptable to both of them when they were younger.

In the following sections, the American-Indian interface will be discussed in more detail with regard to the individual characters of the Ganguli family.

2. First generation

Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, in spite of both being representatives of the first generation of immigrants in *The Namesake* and above all a couple, differ as far as the circumstances of their moving to the U.S. are concerned: it was Ashoke's decision and Ashima just followed him, which is a fact that is important for the discussion of their individual journeys. Additionally, it is important to make it clear that their motivation to move there is not based on any external causes, as Natalie Friedman points out: "Ashima and Ashoke do not come to America to escape penury or persecution, as do so many immigrant protagonists from the early period; their journey to America is enabled by Ashoke's middle-class upbringing in Calcutta."⁸ Ashoke's decision to move to America was motivated by personal concerns, and material struggle is certainly not the case, and "the idea of a fixed, poor, disenfranchised Indian who comes to America to better his life through the discovery of some ineffable "dream" does not apply to Lahiri's characters."⁹

In spite of the fact that there are remarkable differences in how the first and the second generations view America and India, each generation seeing their "home" in the different direction of the journey between them, the first generation's connection to their country of adoption is created via their children, who are American-born. Even though it is hard for them (especially for Ashima) to live in a country with a culture so different from that in their home country, as Puttaiah states, Ashima and Ashoke do not, and do not want to, resist assimilation:

The family makes an effort to create a home away from home as its members speak Bengali at home and among fellow Bengalis; it also makes an attempt to absorb aspects of the prevalent culture as it learns to celebrate occasions like Christmas. The husband and the wife come to accept America as their country of adoption, a country where their children will live.¹⁰

America is not only the homeland of their children, but also the place where Ashima and Ashoke shared their life together. Thus, America is significant for them (or rather becomes significant over time) because of family relationships which are

⁸ Natalie Friedman, "From Hybrids to Tourists: Children Of Immigrants In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*," *CRITIQUE: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 50, no. 1 (2008): 119, accessed January 13, 2015, doi: 10.3200/CRIT.50.1.111-128.

⁹ Natalie Friedman, "From Hybrids to Tourists," 119.

¹⁰ Puttaiah, "Paraxodes of Generational Breaks," 88.

connected to the land, just as their homeland is associated with their parental families and their childhoods.

2.1 Ashoke Ganguli

Ashoke Ganguli was the one who made the decision to move to America, a decision that affected the lives of his future family. It was triggered by a life-changing experience, a train accident in India, in 1961, in which he nearly lost his life at twenty-two, when he was on his way to visit his grandparents; only thanks to his dropping of a single page of Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" (he had been reading it at the time of the accident) was he noticed by the rescuers and consequently pulled from the wreckage. However, it was probably not only the accident itself and its consequences that led Ashoke, still a university student at that time, to change the direction of his life's journey. There was an important conversation he had with a fellow-passenger in the train. Ashoke was described as being known as a bookworm in his life prior to the train accident, reading books even while walking along the street, and his mother was convinced that he "would be hit by a bus or a tram"¹¹ while reading a book, preferably by one of his favorite Russian authors. His immersion in literature, rather than an interest in, say, "seeing the world," is apparent in his conversation with a middle-aged Bengali businessman named Ghosh, who had recently returned to India "after spending two years in England on a job voucher" and who was traveling in the same compartment as Ashoke at the time of the accident. Ghosh asked whether Ashoke had seen "much of this world,"¹² meaning England or America. Ashoke did not seem ever to have considered such an option, to which Ghosh reacted:

"Do yourself a favor. Before it's too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late."

"My grandfather always says, that's what books are for," Ashoke said, using the opportunity to open the volume in his hands. "To travel without moving an inch."

"To each his own," Ghosh said.¹³

Afterwards, Ghosh handed Ashoke his name and address written on a page ripped from his diary, encouraging him to contact him if he changed his mind and needed contacts. Unfortunately, Ghosh did not survive the accident. No details of Ashoke's change of mind or his thoughts following the accident are ever revealed to us. It might have been the consequences of the accident, when, for the next year of his life, "he lay flat on his back, ordered to keep as still as possible as the bones of his body healed,"

¹¹ Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011), 13.

¹² Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 16.

threatened by “a risk that his right leg might be permanently paralyzed,”¹⁴ which caused him to make the decision that changed the course of his life journey radically, and such a decision seems the only possible answer to the threat of permanent paralysis (and thus being limited):

Each day, to bolster his spirits, his family reminded him of the future, the day he would stand unassisted, walk across the room. It was for this, each day, that his father and mother prayed. (...) But as the months passed, Ashoke began to envision another sort of future. He imagined not only walking, but walking away, as far as he could from the place in which he was born and which he had nearly died. The following year, with the aid of a cane, he returned to college and graduated, and without telling his parents he applied to continue his engineering studies abroad.¹⁵

For Ashoke, moving to America means another rebirth (for he was already reborn via the accident): “He was born twice in India, and then a third time, in America. Three lives by thirty.”¹⁶ Tamara Bhalla, in *Being (and Feeling) Gogol: Reading and Recognition in Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake*, comments on it: “Ashoke’s reinvention in America is a redemptive experience; his narrative arc is defined by rebirth in America after his near-death experience in India”¹⁷ However, the second turning point or rebirth in Ashoke’s life is different, in spite of the fact that they are connected in that the consequences of the first one (the threat of staying partially paralyzed for life) motivated him to move to America. But this turning point in his life was not a matter of fate, like the train accident, but his very own decision.

It seems that the main change in Ashoke’s approach to life which the traumatic experience caused was that he turned from passivity to active participation in creating his identity; it motivated him to take responsibility and make decisions about significant changes in his life for himself. This is connected to his favorite author, Nikolai Gogol, after whom he names his son. Judith Caesar, in her paper *Gogol’s Namesake: Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Namesake*, describes what the name Gogol, with its association with the accident, means to Ashoke:

It is a rebirth of himself in a different form, as a person who wants to leave India and travel to other places, to form an identity for himself different from the one created by his life in India. And so, in a way, is the birth of his son.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid., 18-19.

¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹⁷ Tamara Bhalla, "Being (and Feeling) Gogol: Reading and Recognition in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*," *MELUS* 37, no. 1 (2012): 120, accessed February 27, 2014, doi: 10.1353/mel.2012.0013.

¹⁸ Judith Caesar, "Gogol's Namesake: Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*," *Atenea* 27, no. 1 (2007): 109, accessed April 4, 2014.

The name Gogol bears significance because it marks two of the turning points of his life. Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" (1842) had had a certain appeal to Ashoke, though it is never said explicitly in the text what precisely it was. Another meaning created through the accident is even more personal and also somewhat irrational. While it is true that it was a page of Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" that he dropped and the rescuers noticed him in consequence, simply because he was reading the book at the time of the accident, it could have been any other book as well. By taking this detail into consideration, Ashoke himself creates an association between his personal experience and the author. As we can see in the quotation from Caesar above, the birth of his son is another rebirth for him, so perhaps Ashoke instinctively marks it with the name Gogol as well. However, this kind of rebirth, which marks the start of another part of his life, i.e., being a parent, changes his perception of the accident, because the moment he names his son Gogol, "for the first time he thinks of that moment not with terror, but with gratitude."¹⁹ This might be the moment when he lives up to the meaning of his name, reaches the destination of his journey and becomes "he who is without sorrow." Min Hyung Song refers to Ashoke's name as "fitting" because "he, more than any other character in the novel and certainly more than Gogol, seems most at ease with himself, at peace with the decisions he has made and the life he has chosen. He is also luckier than the other characters because he was able to choose the course of his own life rather than having to follow the path that was laid out for him, (...)" and in spite of the trauma of the experience "he is without sorrow because the trauma freed him from the life that he would otherwise, unthinkingly, have assumed as his own. He is wounded but not attached to his wound."²⁰ Judith Caesar describes Ashoke's life as accidental but also formed by his conscious decisions (which he started to make after the accident):

He seemed to have inner resources his son lacks, including an acceptance of the irrational and of the fluidity of his own identity. Perhaps by understanding more about his father and what a writer like Nikolai Gogol meant to his father, Gogol could understand something of his own passivity as well and the inadequacy of the ways in which he had sought to define himself.²¹

¹⁹ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 28.

²⁰ Min Hyung Song, "The Children of 1965: Allegory, Postmodernism, and *The Namesake*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 53, no. 3 (2007): 362-363, accessed April 7, 2014.

²¹ Caesar, "Gogol's Namesake," 118.

The above quote also suggests the importance of Ashoke's example for his son Gogol. This topic will be discussed in detail in Section 3.1.

The interesting thing is that both the first and the last time when the story is narrated through Ashoke's perspective is the moment when Ashoke was sitting in a waiting room in the American hospital, encompassing his awaiting the birth of his first child, when we also learned about the accident via retrospection. As discussed above, the birth of his son, indisputably one of the turning points of his life, and naming his son Gogol, as the moment when he lived up to his name, "he who is without sorrow," implies completion of his journey toward the destination which is the identity that he bears in his name.

2.2 Ashima Ganguli

For Ashima, Ashoke's wife, and the first of the characters from whose perspective the novel is narrated, the circumstances under which she moves to America are different. In fact, the only reason why Ashima found herself in America was her marriage to Ashoke, partially arranged by their parents.

In America, Ashima is dependent on her husband and as "a mother and wife, Ashima represents familiar, stereotypical modes of traditional South Asian femininity."²² In terms of responsibilities and roles in the family, her life would not be too different if they had stayed in India. She stays at home, wears a sari, cooks traditional Bengali dishes and preserves Bengali traditions at home (and even for the Bengali people "outside" her family, as she often throws parties for other Bengali expatriates living in the same area). In the beginning, she does not seem to be too fond of living in America; in comparison to Ashoke, she seems to be more sensitive toward the discontinuities between India and America. As Venkatesh Puttaiah puts it: "What is apparent here is that the anxiety of living in a foreign land is different for men and women. It is especially true for the first generation Indian immigrants, as the men invariably went to work and women stayed at home."²³ It is important to point out that Ashima's moving to America marks a significant change in her life, which is not only the moving itself, but also her turning from a young woman dependent on her parents to a married woman with responsibilities.

Ashima finds herself in Boston, Massachusetts, without any desire or motivation of her own to go there, while Ashoke made a conscious decision to move there. But her attitude towards her country of adoption changes. Despite both being Bengalis, it was only America where Ashima spent her life as Ashoke's wife, where it is home for her children, and where her husband died. This shows that Ashima's attachment to America is developed through family bonds.

As far as the idea of Ashima's relationship to her adopted country being created through family bonds is concerned, it is important to discuss the moment in the novel which was addressed by many critics: the comparison of being a foreigner and pregnancy:

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a

²² Bhalla, "Being (and Feeling) Gogol," 120.

²³ Puttaiah, "Paradoxes of Generational Breaks," 88.

parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect.²⁴

According to Min Hyoung Song, Ashima is, because of being both pregnant and a foreigner, able to “see the paradox of her situation more clearly than others, to imagine at once the range of meanings her particular pregnancy can represent and what it cannot ultimately guarantee.”²⁵ Tamara Bhalla provides another interesting view on the metaphor:

By equating pregnancy with the alienation of immigration, the narrator describes a gendered spectacle of what it means to be a foreigner. The “pity and respect” that foreignness elicits is likened to a perpetual pregnancy, implying that the condition of being foreign should have a transformative resolution. This metaphorical rendering of difference as a stage of pregnant longing and expectation suggests that the transition from immigration to assimilation at once partakes of public recognition and is also an insular, private, and internal process that carries with it the promise of resolution.²⁶

The suggestion in the quote above seems true for Ashima; all the years she spent in America certainly transformed her and shaped her identity as she accepted that both America and India stood for parts of her life. It was a process that took some time, spanning the period from her arrival there to the final moments before she left for India again at the end of the novel. But the moment Ashima’s first baby is born is an instant change in her relationship to America. Her child is born as an American citizen. The moment she becomes the mother of a child who is an American citizen, her attachment to the country is created instantly, simply because of the fact that America is the home of her child. This is, of course, also true for Ashoke. The fact that America is the homeland of their children invariably strengthens their ties to the land. Thus, in addition to the birth of a child being a formative experience in itself, it also influences both Ashima’s and Ashoke’s attachment to their country of adoption.

Another turning point in Ashima’s life is a traumatizing experience – Ashoke’s death. In terms of Ashima’s life journey, it is just as unexpected and digressing as Ashoke’s train accident. The scene before her hearing the bad news shows Ashima, forty-eight years old, sitting at the kitchen table at her home on Pemberton Road addressing Christmas cards. At that time, her children are already adults, living their own lives. She is alone in the house, as Ashoke left for a job he got in Cleveland, Ohio,

²⁴ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 49-50.

²⁵ Song, "The Children of 1965," 350.

²⁶ Bhalla, 120.

where he was supposed to spend nine months, coming home every three weekends, on which Ashima commented after his death as “he was teaching me how to live alone.”²⁷

Thus, it does not seem accidental that at this moment, shortly before Ashima finds out that her husband died, we get an account summing up her life in America “up to now,” because her life is about to change again. The narrator tells us about her saving her late parents’ letters and the custom whereby, once a year, she “devotes an entire day to her parents’ words, allowing herself a good cry”:

She revisits their affection and concern, conveyed weekly, faithfully, across continents – all the bits of news that had had nothing to do with her life in Cambridge but which had sustained her in those years nevertheless.²⁸

As her grandmother predicted upon Ashima’s leaving for America, she did not change in that she remained loyal to her origins, as if continuing to live her life in her home country, via the agency of the letters from her family.

In the scene with Ashima addressing the Christmas cards, the readers also learn about her obsession with address books, where she keeps all the names and addresses of all the Bengali people she and Ashoke became acquainted with in America. During her years spent in America, she had already filled three separate address books, which, as the narrator says,

makes her current task a bit complicated. But Ashima does not believe in crossing out the names, or consolidating them into a single book. She prides herself on each entry in each volume, for they form a record of all the Bengalis she and Ashoke have known over the years, all the people she has had the fortune to share rice with in a foreign land.²⁹

The address books not only record the places where certain people live, but also document the Ganguli family’s journeys between Calcutta and Boston:

On the endpapers of all these books are phone numbers corresponding to no one, and the 800 numbers of all the airlines they’ve flown back and forth to Calcutta, and reservation numbers, and her ballpoint doodles as she was kept on hold.³⁰

On the topic of address books, the narrator concludes: “That had been her world.”³¹ The address books are significant for two reasons: first, they tend to symbolize what Ashima’s life had been about up to this point in the story – she was the preserver of traditions not only in her own family, but also outside of her close family; it was she

²⁷ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 183.

²⁸ Ibid., 160-161.

²⁹ Ibid., 159-160.

³⁰ Ibid., 159.

³¹ Ibid., 160.

who threw parties for the other Bengalis and metaphorically kept together the Bengali community in New England – in her address books.

In this scene, we are also informed that despite still being dependent on her husband, who “does the things she still doesn’t know how to do”³² (such as paying all the bills, putting gas from the self-service station into her car, etc.), she got her “first job in America, the first since before she was married.”³³ Her part-time job at the public library helps her to “pass the time” now that she is alone.

Such an account of her American life at the moment seems to mark another radical change in her life, but this time a traumatizing one. She will, once again, be forced to adapt to new circumstances; the circumstances of living alone.

Just as Ashoke’s accident caused his temporary paralysis (with the threat of a permanent one), Ashima was also paralyzed after Ashoke’s death; she stopped throwing parties for her Bengali friends, and “for the first time in her life, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta, not now. She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died.”³⁴ This is different from how she was before; she used to wish to go back to India. After her husband’s death she seems to have realized that America is part of her. Just as India stands for her childhood, America stands for the subsequent part of her life. Not only is America the place her children call home, this country is also where she spent her life with Ashoke: “Though his ashes have been scattered into the Ganges, it is here, in this house and in this town, that he will continue to dwell in her mind.”³⁵

Just as Ashoke, after his convalescence following the train accident, decided to make a huge change in his life, Ashima, after having “convalesced,” makes a decision on her own: to divide her time between India and America: “Ashima has decided to spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States.”³⁶

The last chapter of the novel, just like the first, opens with Ashima cooking in the kitchen. Christmas is approaching and she is hosting the last party in the house on Pemberton Road in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which she has recently sold. This party is at the same time the first since her husband’s funeral, more than a year ago. We can

³² Ibid., 163.

³³ Ibid., 162.

³⁴ Ibid., 183.

³⁵ Ibid., 279.

³⁶ Ibid., 275.

see that she has truly changed since the last time the story was narrated through her perspective:

For a few final hours she is alone in the house. Sonia has gone with Ben to pick up Gogol at the train station. It occurs to Ashima that the next time she will be by herself, she will be travelling, sitting on the plane. For the first time since her flight to meet her husband in Cambridge, in the winter of 1967, she will make the journey entirely on her own. The prospect no longer terrifies her. She has learned to do things on her own, and though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta. She will return to India with an American passport. In her wallet will remain her Massachusetts driver's license, her social security card.³⁷

She gained the courage to make a decision by herself – she started to participate in creating her own life. Her identity is no longer only a result of influences that she passively accepted, but a mixture of these and her active participation in creating her life. Her decision to spend a year in both places is an act of acceptance of both countries as “her own,” each standing for a certain part of her life, each standing for certain important relationships. Just like India, America too is significant for her in a personal sense – it stands for her adult life, for the home of her children, for her relationship with her husband, as Puttaiah describes:

(...) the arrangement that Ashima will divide her time between India and America is quite symbolic in the sense that she is connected to both the countries: India is where her roots exist and America is where her children live. In a larger perspective, a young woman who accompanied her husband to a big country without any specific plan for herself, is leaving after having lived a happy life with her husband and raising her two children in that country. She is going to leave now but only with a clear plan of returning.³⁸

In her decision to go back to Calcutta, but also not to leave Cambridge for good, she establishes herself as belonging to both places – and this is made possible, as already stated, through the personal significance that is associated with each place – her childhood in India and her adult life in America. She feels emotional upon leaving her American home:

She feels overwhelmed by the thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now its own way foreign. She feels both impatience and indifference for all the days she still must live, for something tells her that she will not go quickly as her husband did. For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss the job at the library, the women with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties. She will miss living with her daughter, the surprising companionship they have formed, going into Cambridge together to see old movies at the Brattle, teaching her to cook the food Sonia had complained of eating as a child. She will miss the opportunity to drive, as she sometimes does on her way home from the library, to the university, past the engineering building where her husband once worked. She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid., 276.

³⁸ Puttaiah, 88.

³⁹ Lahiri, 278-279.

What was once foreign to Ashima shifted to the familiar. In her mind, America is also important to her, just as India is. Apart from her decision to spend the following year in both countries, there is also another important decision she made: to sell her house on Pemberton Road. There will be no material evidence that the family ever lived there, and yet America will remain a part of her. With these two decisions she reached the destination of her journey because, “True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ibid., 276.

3. Second generation

The difference between the journeys of the first and the second generation does not lie only in the fact that the act of “homecoming” takes place in the opposite direction during their family trips to India. The specific nature of the second generation of Indian Americans in *The Namesake*, especially in the main protagonist Gogol, lies in how they perceive the tension between the social spaces. As was suggested above, India and America are emblematic of private and public social spaces, respectively. Just as America and India are in tension, so are these two social spaces. And the characters representing the second generation of immigrants, i.e., Gogol Ganguli, the protagonist of the novel, his sister Sonali (nicknamed Sonia) and his wife Moushumi Mazoomdar, “move fluidly between the private sphere of their Indian home life and the public sphere of their American experience.”⁴¹ This kind of movement bears significance especially for Gogol, as it is his parental home on Pemberton Road where his story line culminates.

The “private sphere” represented by the home of the Ganguli family on Pemberton Road serves as a place that unifies the two generations, where the Indian and the American merge, so when we speak about the Indian being representative of the private space, it can be defined as such only in comparison with the American of the public space, which is in its pure form, as Friedman explains:

For the children (namely, Gogol, his sister, and his wife), it is not India to which they turn for comfort or to reinforce any nascent nationalist impulse; for them, the return must be to their parental home in America, a place where India is re-created, albeit in a diluted form. These children do not see India as their country of origin or as a putative homeland, and they can only define home as the place where their two cultures merge – the literal and metaphysical location is in their parents’ house.⁴²

The private space also stands as such for the family. But it is also true that the cultural background of the family seems to make the private sphere less permeable for certain “outside,” i.e., American, influences. This is mainly felt by the main protagonist of *The Namesake*, Gogol Ganguli.

In Moushumi’s case, there is also the notion of another place, which is neither India, nor America; her experience of reinvention in Paris draws parallels to the first generation.

⁴¹ Natalie Friedman, "From Hybrids To Tourists," 115.

⁴² Friedman, 114-115.

3.1 Gogol Ganguli

Gogol Ganguli, *The Namesake*'s main protagonist, is, in terms of his journey toward identity denoted by his good name Nikhil, "he who is entire, encompassing all," the most complex character to discuss. Ironically, as far as his journeys are concerned, his travels take place in a much smaller geographical context than the other characters' journeys. As Natalie Friedman notes, he "spends most of his life travelling away from his Cambridge home, either to India with his parents or to less 'exotic' locations such as New Haven and New York."⁴³ Gogol is, for a long time, struggling to come home – both physically and spiritually. For the greatest part of his life captured in the novel his motivation to travel is rather to escape than to travel to a particular destination.

Similarly to his parents, turning points which change the general direction of his life can also be found in Gogol's narrative, such as the official change of his name from Gogol to Nikhil, his father's premature death, and his marriage to Moushumi. These formative experiences influence the most important journey of his narrative – his leaving and returning to his home on Pemberton Road.

If America is emblematic of the public social space and India of the private social space of the Gangulis' home, then Gogol, who tries to avoid coming back to his parental home as soon as he starts to attend college, might appear to be trying to avoid his Indian origins. During his early years, it is for sure that the family's journeys to visit their relatives in India are not as important for him as they are for his parents, and Ashima's parties for his parents' Bengali friends in America are not much fun for him either. But, on the other hand, he does not mind adopting an Indian name, Nikhil, and his career choice also pays tribute to his relatives in India (his grandfather whom he never met, Ashima's father, was an artist): Gogol (even though he is officially Nikhil by that time, he continues to be addressed as Gogol by the narrator throughout the whole novel) shows an interest in art, which eventually leads him to pursue a career as an architect.

Before we discuss this in more detail, it is important to make it clear what Gogol Ganguli's relationship to his cultural origin really is. The reader can learn about that in the scene when he is still a college student:

One day he attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English. He feels obligated to attend; one of the presenters on the panel, Amit, is a distant cousin who lives in Bombay, whom Gogol has never met. His mother has asked him to greet Amit on her behalf. Gogol is bored by the panelists, who keep referring to something called "marginality," as if it were some sort of medical

⁴³ Ibid., 115.

condition. For most of the hour, he sketches portraits of the panelists, who sit hunched over their papers along a rectangular table.⁴⁴

This sums up his “up to now” direct experience of Indian culture, which to him meant nothing more than an obligation, just like the parties of his parents or vacations spent in India.

The interesting part comes when there is a discussion about so-called ABCDs:

Teleologically speaking, ABCDs are unable to answer the question ‘Where are you from?’” the sociologist on the panel declares. Gogol has never heard the term *ABCD*. He eventually gathers that it stands for “American-born confused deshi.” In other words, him. He learns that the *C* could also stand for “conflicted.” He knows that *deshi*, a generic word for “countryman,” means “Indian,” knows that his parents and all their friends always refer to India simply as *desh*. But Gogol never thinks of India as *desh*. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India.⁴⁵

From the quotation above we can derive that he certainly knows who he is culturally – he is American. Gogol “does not feel dislocated, because he is at home in America.”⁴⁶ Rather, he needs to find out how to find his way to his family. Of course, we cannot separate his parents from the culture in which they grew up, but the Indian culture, which he cannot reconcile with his American experience, does not seem to be the only reason for his struggle. His inability to accept his family as they are is more important, and it actually takes him longer to accept his family than his background culture. But before we get to this, it is important to explain the circumstances of Gogol’s naming, because, in fact, his rejection of the name Gogol seems to equal rejection of his family.

⁴⁴ Lahiri, 118.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 118.

⁴⁶ Friedman, 114.

3.1.1 Naming Gogol

The circumstances of Gogol's naming are influenced by Bengali naming rituals. When given to the protagonist, the name Gogol was meant as a "pet name," i.e., a name used by the family in the Indian tradition, as opposed to a "good name," the official name. In accordance with the name-giving rituals in India, each person has two names that are used in different social contexts in Bengali tradition. In *The Namesake*, we learn about this tradition when the main protagonist was just born; we are informed that it is Ashinma's grandmother's privilege to name her great-grandchildren. She had sent a letter with two names, one for a boy, and one for a girl; the letter had been sent a month before the baby's birth but it did not arrive yet. This fact does not bother Ashima and Ashoke, because they have agreed "to put off the decision of what to name the baby until a letter comes, ignoring the forms from the hospital about filing for a birth certificate:"

After all, they both know, an infant doesn't really need a name. He needs to be fed and blessed, to be given some gold and silver, to be patted on the back after feedings and held carefully behind the neck. Names can wait. In India parents take their time. It wasn't unusual for years to pass before the right name, the best possible name, was determined. Ashima and Ashoke can both cite examples of cousins who were not officially named until they were registered, at six or seven, in school.⁴⁷

Before the letter with the name arrives, the parents rely on the so-called pet name:

(...) there are always pet names to tide one over: a practice of Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person, two names. In Bengali, the word for pet name is *daknam*, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments. Pet names are persistent remnants of childhood, a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated. They are a reminder, too, that one is not all things to people.⁴⁸

The second one, a good name, serves different purposes:

Every pet name is paired with a good name, a *bhalonam*, for identification in the outside world. Consequently, good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories, and in all other public places.⁴⁹

Besides, with their literal meaning good names "tend to represent dignified and enlightened qualities."⁵⁰ In comparison with good names, pet names are "never recorded

⁴⁷ Lahiri, 25.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 25-26.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 26.

officially, only uttered and remembered. Unlike good names, pet names are frequently meaningless, deliberately silly, ironic, even onomatopoeic.”⁵¹

These two names one possesses are representative of the two social spaces already discussed; pet names are used exclusively within the family, i.e., the private sphere, while good names are those by which one is identified outside the private social space. So, when Gogol rejects his pet name, he also rejects the social space where such a name is supposed to be used.

⁵¹ Ibid., 26.

3.1.2 From Gogol to Nikhil

The name Gogol, initially intended as a pet name, eventually turned into a good name and retained this status for the rest of Gogol's youth. The letter with the name from Ashima's grandmother did not arrive in time (at that time they had no idea that the letter would never arrive, "forever hovering somewhere between India and America,")⁵² which meant that the parents had to pick a name themselves. Respecting the traditions and, naively, not being aware of the fact that in the U.S. a baby cannot leave the hospital without a birth certificate, they had not expected such a situation to occur, and thus they had no other name in reserve. In the hospital, Mr. Wilcox, compiler of hospital birth certificates, suggests naming their son after his ancestors, which Ashima and Ashoke immediately decline because there is no such tradition for Bengalis: "This sign of respect in America and Europe, this symbol of heritage and lineage would be ridiculed in India. Within Bengali families, individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared."⁵³

The name Gogol comes to Ashoke's mind after Mr. Wilcox proposed, before exiting the room, another suggestion: to name the baby after someone they greatly admire:

The door shuts, which is when, with a slight quiver of recognition, as if he'd known it all along, the perfect pet name for his son occurs to Ashoke. He remembers the page crumpled tightly in his fingers, the sudden shock of the lantern's glare in his eyes. But for the first time in his life he thinks of that moment not with terror, but with gratitude.⁵⁴

The name Gogol seems to mean way more than a pet name is supposed to mean in itself. It is definitely not meaningless, deliberately silly, ironic or onomatopoeic as a pet name should be. It bears a very personal meaning for Ashoke. It is not only that he is a fan of the author; Ashoke himself considers that Nikolai Gogol saved his life.

Gogol's pet name has also been in fact a good name from the very beginning, given the fact that it was written on a "public" document, which a birth certificate is; this name was not only "uttered and remembered." The American way and the Indian way are put into contrast here; they were forced to decide "on the spot," which opposes the Indian tradition, in which both a pet name and a good name need time to be settled on (as the quotations from the novel explaining good names and good names implied). The

⁵² Ibid., 56.

⁵³ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 28.

moment when both Gogol's pet name and good name were supposed to become a pet name only was on his first day in kindergarten, but the parents failed, again, to take the American law into consideration and did not change the name officially. For Gogol's good name, they chose the name Nikhil. The young boy is, however, confused by the idea of being called something other than what he is called at home:

His parents have told him that at school, instead of being called Gogol, he will be called by a new name, a good name, which his parents have finally decided on, just in time for him to begin his formal education. 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.⁵⁵

The young boy refuses to respond to the new name. Eventually, his parents give up. Mrs. Lapidus, the principal, does not understand Bengali name-giving practices of having two names and moreover, it is the name Gogol, not Nikhil, which is written on his birth certificate, and thus is his legal name. So, after Gogol's first school day, "he is sent home with a letter to his parents from Mrs. Lapidus, folded and stapled to a string around his neck, explaining that due to their son's preference he will be known as Gogol at school."⁵⁶ If that had not happened and the name Gogol had turned from being both a good name and a pet name to being a pet name only, as it was supposed to, the whole struggle which the name Gogol later caused its possessor might not have occurred.

At the age of eleven, Gogol becomes aware of the "peculiarity of his name."⁵⁷ (At that time, he does not know the whole history of his name; he does not know about his father's accident, so he does not know what the name truly means for his father.) Gogol is "on a school field trip of some historical event."⁵⁸ The last stop on the trip, after visiting the home of a poet, is "a graveyard where the writer lies buried."⁵⁹ It is the first time Gogol has been in such a place. The teachers give the children sheets of newsprint and crayons, and explain their task: to rub the surfaces of the gravestones with their engraved names. "Gogol is old enough to know that there is no Ganguli here. He is old enough to know that he himself will be burned, not buried, that his body will occupy no plot of earth, that no stone in this country will bear his name beyond life."⁶⁰ He is aware

⁵⁵ Ibid., 56.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 69.

that he is disconnected from America in this way. It does not seem to bother him; he just accepts it as a fact. He accepts that because of the funeral practices in Indian culture, there could not be any Bengali names on the gravestones. But, slightly further, an important realization comes to his mind: with the old-fashioned names that no one bears any more appearing on the rubbings of the old gravestones, he realizes that “he has never met another Gogol.”⁶¹ When Gogol comes back home, Ashima is horrified by the fact that the teachers took their pupils to such a place “in the name of art,” telling her son that in Calcutta “the burning ghats are the most forbidden of places.”⁶² She refuses to display the rubbings next to Gogol’s other pieces of art. But Gogol feels differently:

For reasons he cannot explain or necessarily understand, these ancient Puritan spirits, these very first immigrants to America, these bearers of unthinkable, obsolete names, have spoken to him, so much so that in spite of his mother’s disgust he refuses to throw the rubbings away.⁶³

Having an unusual name makes him feel related to those people who lived in that land many years ago, and now are forever part of the American soil; in spite of the fact that he will never be buried in America himself, he feels tied to the American land and its history through the peculiarity of his name.

It is on his fourteenth birthday when it occurs to Gogol that “no one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name. Not even the source of his namesake.”⁶⁴ Because “Gogol” is not even a first name. It is after the birthday party when Ashoke comes to his son’s bedroom and gives him a special gift – a collection of Nikolai Gogol’s short stories. But this moment is more special to Ashoke, because Gogol, at his age, is not able to fully appreciate it; just like his name. Gogol Ganguli, looking at a pencil drawing of Nikolai Gogol in the book, “is relieved to see no resemblance.”⁶⁵

For by now, he’s come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates having to tell people that it doesn’t mean anything “in Indian.” He hates having to wear a nametag on his sweater at Model United Nations Day at school. He even hates signing his name at the bottom of his drawings in art class. He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American but of all things Russian. He hates having to live with it, with a pet name turned good name, day after day, second after second. He hates seeing it on the brown paper sleeve of the *National Geographic* subscription his parents got him for his birthday the year before and perpetually listed in the honor roll printed in

⁶¹ Ibid., 70.

⁶² Ibid., 70.

⁶³ Ibid., 71.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 75.

the town's newspaper. At times his name, an entity shapeless and weightless, manages nevertheless to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear. At times he wishes he could disguise it, shorten it somehow, the way the other Indian boy in his school, Jayadev, had gotten people to call him Jay. But Gogol, already short and catchy, resists mutation. Other boys his age have begun to court girls already, asking them to go to the movies or the pizza parlor, but he cannot imagine saying, "Hi, it's Gogol" under potentially romantic circumstances. He cannot imagine this at all.⁶⁶

We can derive from the description that "Gogol" is, for fourteen-year-old Gogol Ganguli, what a pet name should be: meaningless. And, if used in other circumstances than those in his family space, embarrassing. It seems natural that it is uncomfortable for him when it is on display; it is something personal, not to be shown to other people than those who are close to him. Additionally, Gogol might feel excluded from the family, because he is the only one who has a "meaningless" name. He has no name that would stand for "dignified and enlightened qualities," as good names do. Gogol's younger sister is luckier in this matter, for the parents give her only one name: "They've learned that schools in America will ignore parents' instructions and register a child under his pet name. The only way to avoid such confusion, they have concluded, is to do away with the pet name altogether, as many of their Bengali friends have already done."⁶⁷ They give her the name Sonali, meaning "she who is golden;"⁶⁸ it is both her pet name and good name; at home they call her Sonu, Sona, Sonia. "Sonia makes her a citizen of the world. It's a Russian link to her brother, it's European, South American."⁶⁹

Therefore, there might be two reasons why the name Gogol embarrasses its bearer: first, it does not have meaning, as the names of other members of his family do (and this fact "excludes" him from the family), and second, he feels that it does not define him. However, his name bears meaning, but not the literal one, referring to the personal history of his father years before Gogol Ganguli's birth.

At the time of his fourteenth birthday, Gogol does not know that this name bears an important personal meaning for his father. On the occasion of Gogol's fourteenth birthday it appears that Ashoke will finally tell his son about his accident when he was "reborn," but he changes his mind. However, at that moment we learn that the birth of

⁶⁶ Ibid., 75-76.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 61-62.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 62.

his son was another turning point that changed his perception of the accident. It made Ashoke live up to his name, “without sorrow:”

Ever since that day, the day he became a father, the memory of his accident has receded, diminishing over the years. Though he will never forget that night, it no longer lurks persistently in his mind, stalking him in the same way. It no longer looms over his life, darkening it without warning as it used to do. Instead, it is affixed firmly to a distant time, to a place far from Pemberton Road. Today, his son’s birthday, is a day to honor life, not brushes with death. And so, for now, Ashoke decides to keep the explanation of his son’s name for himself.⁷⁰

Another encounter with Gogol the author occurs during Gogol Ganguli’s junior year in high school – in his English class. In the scene we learn more about his struggle to accept his name. He is well aware that the name Gogol is totally unique and that there is no other Gogol but Nikolai Gogol, which is an association he does not understand, because he does not know the role his name plays in his father’s history. Because of this, he does not feel proud of it; it only embarrasses him. People keep asking questions about the name, which only makes it worse. And in the English class already mentioned, it only adds insult to injury when the English teacher’s lecture on Nikolai Gogol’s biography reveals details of the author’s life, such as his life in a nutshell being a “steady decline into madness,” and that he gained a reputation as “a hypochondriac and a deeply paranoid, frustrated man.” The teacher described his character as “morbidly melancholic, given to fits of severe depression, ” and having trouble making friends. Finally, the teacher adds that he never married and had no children, and that “It’s commonly believed he died a virgin.”⁷¹

Naturally, Gogol Ganguli’s classmates respond to the details of Nikolai Gogol’s life (such as his attempt to commit suicide by starvation) with disgust. But none of them seem to associate the author with their classmate Gogol Ganguli when they discuss the story among themselves: “They complain about the story, saying that it’s too long. They complain that it was hard to get through. There is talk of the difficulty of Russian names, students confessing merely skimming them.”⁷² Gogol Ganguli himself refused to read the short story for the class, because “To read the story, he believes, would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow.”⁷³ In fact, the first time he opens the book of Nikolai Gogol’s short stories that his father gave him is when he is thirty-two, at the very end of the novel. But many years before that moment, “listening to his

⁷⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁷¹ Ibid., 91.

⁷² Ibid., 92.

⁷³ Ibid., 92.

classmates complain, he feels perversely responsible, as if his own work were being attacked.”⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Ibid., 92.

3.1.3 Nikhil, Gogol's Overcoat

Just as his parents' maturity was marked by their shared life in America, Gogol Ganguli marks his by a legal change of name, so that his pet name turned good name remains his pet name exclusively. Weeks before moving away from Pemberton Road to start to attend Yale, he makes the decision.

When he informs his parents about the move he wants to make, they are, naturally, not happy about it. But Gogol insists: "How could you guys name me after someone so strange? No one takes me seriously."⁷⁵ But this is not true; as was discussed above, not even his classmates, adolescents at that time, in English class made any remarks toward Gogol Ganguli. Apart from the fact that people often notice that it is an unusual name and ask questions about it, they do not make any derogatory remarks about it; only Gogol does:

(...) the only person who didn't take Gogol seriously, the only person who tormented him, the only person chronically aware of and afflicted by the embarrassment of his name, the only person who constantly questioned it and wished it were otherwise, was Gogol.⁷⁶

His embarrassment is understandable, because in the name Gogol he sees his childhood, which, naturally, he wants to distance himself from, as he has just turned eighteen at this point in the narrative. (Unfortunately, he does not grow out of this attitude even later in his adulthood.) Although his parents are not happy with his plans to change his name, they do not protest vehemently. Eventually, his father tells him: "In America anything is possible. Do as you wish."⁷⁷

Interestingly, when he is asked to fill in a change-of-name form, he is not able to express the reason why he wants to change his name: "in approximately three lines, he was asked to provide a reason for seeking the change. For nearly an hour he'd sat there, wondering what to write. He'd left it blank in the end."⁷⁸ Afterwards, when he is asked by the judge, he has "no idea what to say," but eventually states that he always hated it.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Ibid., 100.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 100.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 101.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 102.

It is apparent that he sees something awkward in this name; he feels uncomfortable exposing it. It stands for something personal, something he would prefer to hide from the world. For his parents he will be Gogol for ever, which is understandable:

He is aware that his parents, and their friends, and the children of their friends, and all his own friends from high school, will never call him anything but Gogol. He will remain Gogol during holidays in the summer, Gogol will revisit him on each of his birthdays. Everyone who comes on his going-away-to-college party writes “Good Luck, Gogol” on the cards.⁸⁰

In other words, the name Gogol became his pet name, as was intended.

As he is an adult now, he needs a good name (which would serve as his “overcoat” to hide what makes him feel embarrassed – his pet name), a name which bears dignified qualities like the names of his parents and his sister – Nikhil, “he who is entire, encompassing all”. However, as long as his family lives, there will be people to call him and think about him as Gogol. But this fact will, since the moment he changed his name legally, be hidden under his overcoat, the name Nikhil. For *The Namesake*’s main protagonist, the name Nikhil and the name Gogol stand for opposing qualities. Gogol stands for his childhood, a past which equals the family’s social space whose emblem is India. On the other hand, Nikhil is adulthood, his new self not indicating any ties to the previous one, used in the public social space.

Leaving the court wearing this new overcoat, which nobody but him knows about, he feels like a different person: “He wonders if this is how it feels for an obese person to become thin, for a prisoner to walk free.”⁸¹ He is no longer embarrassed by his name; he does not feel horrified at the thought that he would introduce himself as Gogol when approaching women. But it is not until the first day in New Haven that he begins to introduce himself as Nikhil.⁸² With the name Gogol no longer exposed outside the family circle, he can live his life as an adult. However, “now that he’s Nikhil it’s easier to ignore his parents, to tune out their concerns and pleas;”⁸³ this proves the connection between the family’s social space and the name Gogol, a pet name. And this is why he has a hard time coming back to his parental home on Pemberton Road, where he will be Gogol as long as the family lives there.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 103.

⁸¹ Ibid., 102.

⁸² Ibid., 102-103.

⁸³ Ibid., 105.

Surprisingly, given how much he hated being Gogol, his transformation from Gogol to Nikhil was not that straightforward after the name change:

There is only one complication: he doesn't feel like Nikhil. Not yet. Part of the problem is that the people who now know him as Nikhil have no idea that he used to be Gogol. They know him only in the present, not at all in the past. But after eighteen years of Gogol, two months of Nikhil feel scant, inconsequential. At times he feels as if he's cast himself in a play, acting the part of the twins, indistinguishable to the naked eye yet fundamentally different. At times he still feels his old name, painfully and without warning, the way his front tooth had unbearably throbbed in recent weeks after a filling, threatening for an instant to sever from his gums when he drank coffee, or iced water, and once when he was riding in an elevator. He fears being discovered, having the whole charade somehow unravel, and in nightmares his files are exposed, his original name printed on the front page of the *Yale Daily News*. Once, he signs his old name by mistake on a credit card slip at the college bookstore. Occasionally he has to hear Nikhil three times before he answers.⁸⁴

It suggests that he perhaps realizes that “Gogol” is an inseparable part of his identity, his childhood, a link to his family, but he seems too young to be able to accept it. At this point of the narrative, when he became Nikhil, he is, ironically, the furthest he can be from his destination – the literal meaning of his new name, “he who is entire, encompassing all,” because he simply cannot be “entire” if he rejects something that creates an essential part of him – which the name Gogol, with all it stands for, certainly is.

With Gogol's decision to change his name he marks his first journey outside the family's social space, with the destination being his college campus, where he will live on his own for the first time. By changing his name he made an outside change, a manifestation that he is an adult now. But inside he still keeps up this adolescent struggle in which he is still embarrassed by the way his parents live, which is hard to reconcile with his adult life, located outside the family social space. On the other hand, his adopting a name of Bengali origin, Nikhil, is one of the steps on his way towards acceptance of his Indian origins, which culminates in his marriage with Moushumi, who is also a second-generation Indian American.

His approach to identity is different from his father's, as was proposed above. Instead of taking an opportunity to create an identity of his own under his new name, he remains passive, adopting the identities of others rather than creating his own.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 105-106.

3.1.4 You remind me of everything that followed

We can only speculate whether Gogol Ganguli would have changed his name when he was eighteen had he known what the name Gogol meant to his father, except that he was a fan. Ashoke tells his son about the train accident that changed his life after Gogol's witnessing another train accident. In his junior year in college, Gogol travels by train to spend the weekend at home (spending weekends at home is something he is not very fond of, as we already know) alone with his father, because Ashima and Sonia are in India attending a cousin's wedding. The train is delayed because a person committed suicide by jumping in front of it. Of course, Ashoke, who was waiting on the platform for Gogol's arrival, is very worried. That night, while they are finally driving home from the station, Ashoke decides to reveal to his son what the name Gogol means to him. At that time "he is called Gogol so seldom that the sound of it no longer upsets him as it used to. After three years of being Nikhil the vast majority of the time, he no longer minds."⁸⁵

Ashoke's accident, which happened seven years prior to his son's birth, was an experience that strongly influenced who he is now; the accident caused Ashoke's transformation from somebody relatively passive into somebody who is "on the move." If it had not been for the accident, he would not have gone to America, and maybe he and Ashima would never have married and Gogol would never have been born. Unfortunately, Gogol does not seem to understand. He feels even more distanced from his father:

Gogol listens, stunned, his eyes fixed on his father's profile. Though there are only inches between them, for an instant his father is a stranger, a man who has kept a secret, has survived a tragedy, a man whose past he does not fully know. A man who is vulnerable, who has suffered in an inconceivable way. He imagines his father, in his twenties as Gogol is now, sitting on a train as Gogol had just been, reading a story, and then suddenly nearly killed. He struggles to picture the West Bengal countryside he has seen on only a few occasions, his father's mangled body, among hundreds of dead ones, being carried on a stretcher, past a twisted length of maroon compartments. Against instinct he tries to imagine life without his father, a world in which his father does not exist.⁸⁶

In a world where his father does not exist, Gogol does not exist either. But on the other hand, as already stated, it is possible that Gogol would not have been born even if the accident had not happened. So, not only Ashoke but also Gogol Ganguli owes Nikolai Gogol his life. Perhaps because Gogol is not able to realize this at the moment, he feels

⁸⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 123.

the distance from his father, as the above quote suggests. He is not able to associate the catastrophe with his father as he has always known him, overlooking the fact that it made him the kind of person he is.

Of course, once Gogol knows about the accident, the perception of his pet name changes: “And suddenly the sound of his pet name, uttered by his father as he has been accustomed to hearing it all his life, means something completely different, bound up with a catastrophe he has unwittingly embodied for years.”⁸⁷ Unfortunately, Gogol binds up his name with a catastrophe, which means that he misinterprets his father’s motivation for naming him Gogol. He asks his father whether he reminds him of the night of the accident; his father’s answer “You remind me of everything that followed”⁸⁸ sums up what was already said – that the birth of his first child caused a change in his outlook on life, as well as his recollection of the catastrophe. That was the moment when Ashoke truly became “he who is without sorrow.”

⁸⁷ Ibid., 124.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 124.

3.1.5 The Meaning of Gogol

The name Gogol marks two of the turning points in Ashoke's life: his rebirth in India and the birth of his son. To get a more complex picture of what the name Gogol means to Ashoke, we also need to discuss what Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" (the short story he had been reading at the time of the accident and whose page fell from Ashoke's hand, which caught the attention of the rescuers) means for Ashoke, apart from the meaning it gained through the association with the accident.

Situated in St. Petersburg, "The Overcoat" tells the story of a government clerk, Akakii Akakievich Bashmachkin, who is a person immersed in his job. "It would be difficult to find another man who lived so entirely for his duties,"⁸⁹ which mainly consisted of copying documents composed by somebody else. It is stressed in the story that he is not able to compose any document himself:

One director being a kindly man, and desirous of rewarding him for his long service, ordered him to be given something more important than mere copying; namely, he was ordered to make a report of an already concluded affair, to another court: the matter consisted simply in changing the heading, and altering a few words from the first to the third person. This caused him so much toil that he was all in a perspiration, rubbed his forehead, and finally said, "No, give me rather something to copy." After that they let him copy on forever.⁹⁰

In his job and everywhere else, he is not taken seriously at all; when somebody pays attention to him, it is when they want to mock him or even bully him. But Akakii cannot stand up for himself. It all changes after his getting a new overcoat, which he initially tries to avoid, but the old one is so worn out that it cannot be repaired. For some time he lives even more modestly to save enough for a new coat. Wearing the new one, he seems to gain a new identity in which he becomes uncharacteristically extroverted and even popular. When his overcoat is stolen, he loses his new personality. Without the overcoat to protect him from the cold, he catches a fever and eventually dies. A corpse who is by resemblance Akakii himself (or rather his ghost) haunts the street where he was robbed, stealing the overcoats of passers-by until he finally steals the overcoat of a person who mistreated him when he was helpless without his missing overcoat. The ghost has not been heard of since.

Judith Caesar, in *Gogol's Namesake: Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake*, presents her reading of the novel with the significance of Nikolai

⁸⁹ Nikolai Gogol, "The Overcoat," in *The Overcoat and Other Short Stories*, trans. Isabel F. Hapgood, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2013), 81.

⁹⁰ Gogol, "The Overcoat," 81-82.

Gogol's "The Overcoat." In terms of identity, she describes the character of Akakii, saying that "His very lack of identity is the source of his happiness."⁹¹ And when he buys a new overcoat, he becomes another person, "Or rather, he becomes his overcoat."⁹² She sees this in the fact that his job, the copying, is "bliss" for him: "As a text, he isn't anyone; he is simply copies of what is written by others."⁹³ This seems true, given the fact that he is characterized by his job: "Outside this copying, it appeared that nothing existed for him."⁹⁴ His life is his job. And as his job is copying, so is his life. So, by buying a new overcoat, he finally gets an identity of his own. To be able to buy a new overcoat, he makes an effort to be able to afford it. He gains this identity, which is his overcoat, by his own endeavor, in this particular case accustoming himself to certain deprivations:

Akakii Akakievitch thought and thought, and decided that it would be necessary to curtail his ordinary expenses, for the space of one year at least – to dispense with tea in the evening; to burn no candles, and, if there was anything which he must do, to go into his landlady's room, and work by her light; when he went into the street, he must walk as lightly as possible, and as cautiously, upon the stones and flagging, almost upon tiptoe, in order not to wear out his heels in too short a time; he must give the laundress as little to wash as possible; and, in order not to wear out his clothes, he must take them off as soon as he got home, and wear only his cotton dressing-gown, which had been long and carefully saved.⁹⁵

However, what Caesar calls lack of identity in Akakii (represented by the copying of documents and not being able to write any by himself) can, in a sense, be an identity in itself – it is a sort of passively accepted identity – he is his job (the copying), which means that he is what others wrote. In contrast to this, there is an actively created identity, which can be depicted by an ability to write his own document (which Akakii is incapable of). Nevertheless, Akakii proves that he is actually able to achieve something with his own effort; in the story it is embodied by Akakii's new overcoat, which he is able to get after putting effort into obtaining it.

These two ways in which one can gain one's identity seem to be reflected in *The Namesake* as well, as was already explained in relation to Ashoke's conscious decision to move to America. Gogol Ganguli seems to be a person who accepts identity rather passively, unlike Ashoke, who is active in creating his identity. The identity denoted by his pet name-turned-good name (and then turned pet name again) is the identity with

⁹¹ Caesar, "Gogol's Namesake," 104.

⁹² Caesar, 104.

⁹³ Ibid., 104.

⁹⁴ Gogol, "The Overcoat," 82.

⁹⁵ Gogol, 88-89.

which he started, the very first one he had in his life, and it seems only natural that he must grow out of it one day. Then, to mark his adulthood, he changes his name to Nikhil, which is his adult identity for him. So, with the name Nikhil, the most important thing for him is that he is an adult, because it is the opposite quality to the name Gogol, which stands for childhood, with all its awkwardness and uncertainty. Changing his name seems like a chance for him to create an identity of his own, to decide for himself who he is (just as Ashoke did), but Gogol does not seem to make use of this chance. Even when he is Nikhil, he seems more concerned about what he does not want to be (i.e., Gogol) than anything he can *become* by his effort. Because his family's house on Pemberton Road is the place where everyone thinks of him as Gogol, he tries to avoid it. It is his father's death that makes him come home voluntarily. But before this breaking point in his life, he only passively adapts to identities which can guarantee that he will be far enough from the previous one, the one he managed (or at least he thinks so) to cover with the name Nikhil. However, the identities that he passively takes on, as Judith Caesar states, are "a source of pain" for Gogol.⁹⁶ What is important to mention is that they are often "conjoined to a relationship with a woman."⁹⁷

3.1.51 Ruth

In his sophomore year of college, he has his first serious relationship, with a white girl named Ruth. Her background is totally different from his: "She tells him she was raised on a commune in Vermont, the child of hippies, educated at home until the seventh grade. Her parents are divorced now. Her father lives with her stepmother, raising llamas on a farm. Her mother, an anthropologist, is doing fieldwork on midwives in Thailand."⁹⁸

What is important to note is that the identity he passively adapts to via this relationship is, above all, one of an adult (because it is his "first" identity after he refused to be "Gogol," which is his "childhood" identity) and of a person who is very different from his parents. Ruth, whose surname is not revealed in the book, is the first person who is close to him who knows him as Nikhil. The fact that "He cannot imagine coming from such parents, such a background, and when he describes his own

⁹⁶ Caesar, "Gogol's Namesake," 106.

⁹⁷ Caesar, 106.

⁹⁸ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 110.

upbringing it feels bland by comparison”⁹⁹ seems to attract him because it enables him to take on an identity which is everything his parents are not. This identity is discontinuous with the one he had when he was still Gogol, and, however superficial it is, it seems satisfying for Gogol now. Of course, he cannot imagine bringing his girlfriend to introduce her to his parents:

He wishes he could simply borrow his parents’ car and drive up to Maine to see Ruth after Christmas, or that she could visit him. He was perfectly welcome, she’d assured him, her father and stepmother wouldn’t mind. (...) But such a trip would require telling his parents about Ruth, something he has no desire to do. He has no patience for their surprise, their nervousness, their quiet disappointment, their questions about what Ruth’s parents did and whether or not the relationship was serious. As much as he longs to see her, he cannot picture her at the kitchen table on Pemberton Road, in her jeans and her bulky sweater, politely eating his mother’s food. He cannot imagine being with her in the house where he is still Gogol.¹⁰⁰

He simply cannot imagine being Gogol and Nikhil at the same time. At his age, it is understandable, because for the major part of his life up to this point he was a child or an adolescent. There is not much distance between the “past,” which is denoted by the name Gogol, and the “present” – the name Nikhil.

However, an encounter of his past with the present seems to be something he needs in order to claim his present adult self. Such a thing would require him to do what, as the quote above says, he cannot imagine, i.e., being with Ruth in the house where he is still Gogol. But indirectly, such an encounter of past and present occurs. On their trip to Boston, Gogol shows Ruth the house in which he lived with his parents before they bought their own home on Pemberton Road, a time which, ironically, he barely remembers, before Sonia was born:

Looking at the house now, with Ruth at his side, her mittened hand in his, he feels strangely helpless. Though he was only an infant at the time, he feels nevertheless betrayed by his inability to know then that one day, years later, he would return to the house under such different circumstances, and that he would be so happy.¹⁰¹

As an adult who is in his first relationship, the moment when he is facing the house in which he spent his early childhood (when he was called Gogol and the identity of “being Gogol” was the first he ever had), serves as a proof for him that he is no longer Gogol.

⁹⁹ Lahiri, 111.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 115.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 116.

3.1.52 Maxine

When he is not a student any more and is building his career as an architect in New York City, his visits to Pemberton Road become rare. After college, he gradually receded from home both physically and mentally, with the main focus being not to become what his parents would wish him to become:

They had been disappointed that he'd gone to Columbia. They'd hoped he would choose MIT, the other architecture program to which he'd been accepted. But after four years in New Haven he didn't want to move back to Massachusetts, to the one city in America his parents know. He didn't want to attend his father's alma mater, and live in an apartment in Central Square as his parents once had, and revisit the streets about which his parents speak nostalgically. He didn't want to go home on the weekends, to go with them to pujos and Bengali parties, to remain unquestionably in their world.¹⁰²

After grad school, he decides to stay in New York City, “a place which his parents are not fond of at all, do not know well, whose beauty they are blind to, which they fear.”¹⁰³ At that time he meets Maxine Ratliff, a young white woman from a wealthy family, who, after having lived with a boyfriend in Boston for some time, moved back to her parents' house in New York City, where she grew up. Soon after she and Gogol started dating, Maxine invites Gogol to live with her in the home of her parents.

Again, the place and the ways in which the Ratliffs live are inconsistent with the life of Gogol's parents. What is also important is Maxine's relationship with her parents; Gogol cannot fathom having such a friendly relationship with Ashima and Ashoke. Gogol is “continually amazed by how much Maxine emulates her parents, how much she respects their tastes and their ways. At the dinner table she argues with them about books and paintings and people they know in common the way one might argue with a friend. There is none of the exasperation he feels with his own parents. No sense of obligation. Unlike his parents, they pressure her to do nothing, and yet she lives faithfully, happily, at their side.”¹⁰⁴ Unlike Gogol, who avoids visiting his parents at the house on Pemberton Road as much as he can, Maxine states about her parents' home “I love this house. There's really nowhere else I'd rather live.”¹⁰⁵ They also differ in the reflection of their own lives, which Gogol considers to be the biggest difference between them, for Maxine “has the gift of accepting her life; as he comes to know her, he realizes that she has never wished she were anyone other than herself, raised in any

¹⁰² Ibid., 126.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 126.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 138.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 132.

other place, in any other way.”¹⁰⁶ And yet, as Judith Caesar comments, “he never actively tries to create another identity for himself, as his parents have done, or to make sense of the one he has by trying to understand more about the permanent relationships in his life, those with his family.”¹⁰⁷

By living with the Ratliffs and immersing himself in their lifestyle, which is so different from Ashima and Ashoke’s, he reaches an even greater distance from his parents than ever before. It is easier for him to adapt himself to the lifestyle of the Ratliff family than to that of his own parents: “From the very beginning he feels effortlessly incorporated into their lives.”¹⁰⁸ He is himself aware of how this created an even bigger barrier between him and his parents, because “he is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine’s family is a betrayal of his own.”¹⁰⁹ Another thing which makes the Ratliff family remarkably different from his own, and thus appealing to Gogol, is the fact that “though the Ratliffs are generous, they are people who do not go out of their way to accommodate others.”¹¹⁰ His own parents do not seem like that. He sees it in the fact that they choose other Bengalis as their friends for no other reason than that they are Bengalis, of which he is very critical, especially during his college years: “He has no ABCD friends at college. He avoids them, for they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so much because they like them, but because of a past they happen to share.”¹¹¹ However, Gogol seems to base his choice of the people whom he befriends on opposite reasons (i.e., because they do not share the same origins), as is also reflected in his relationships with Ruth and then Maxine, who are both white. Also, concerning the family trips to Calcutta, “Gogol was aware of an obligation being fulfilled; that it was, above all, a sense of duty that drew his parents back.”¹¹² Towards the end of the novel, upon his own mother’s leaving for Calcutta, he begins to realize that this was not the case.

Gogol Ganguli’s estrangement from his parents reaches its apogee when he is on vacation with Maxine and her parents in New Hampshire in the Ratliffs’ summer house, only to be drawn back to his family in a short time. At that time the Ganguli family is

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 138.

¹⁰⁷ Caesar, "Gogol's Namesake," 111.

¹⁰⁸ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 136.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 141.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 136.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 119.

¹¹² Ibid., 141-142.

apart – Sonia is in San Francisco, Ashoke in Cleveland and Ashima at Pemberton Road in Cambridge. On their way to New Hampshire, Gogol and Maxine stop off at Pemberton Road, where Gogol sees his father for the last time before his departure for Cleveland, where he is to spend nine months in a new job. It was the last time he ever saw him. The occasion was the first time that he introduced a girlfriend to his parents. When they leave the place, it is mentioned that for Gogol it is a relief to be back in Maxine’s world.¹¹³ The above-mentioned moment of estrangement from his family occurs when he realizes, when already in New Hampshire, that “his parents cannot possibly reach him: he has not given them the number, and the Ratliffs are unlisted. That here at Maxine’s side, in this cloistered wilderness, he is free.”¹¹⁴

A few months afterwards, Ashoke’s unexpected death from cardiac arrest, while he was still in Cleveland, draws the remaining family together again. It is the very first time we can see Gogol Ganguli coming back to his family. Although he has perceived his retreat into Maxine’s world as a betrayal of his own family before, he realizes its extent now, when it is already too late. But it is not yet a return to his family as such, but rather first a return to the culture of his background; he realized that Indian culture is part of him, at least for the sake of the people who are close to him, if not for his own sake. Through being absorbed by Maxine’s world he betrayed not only his family but also himself, which was reflected in the fact that Maxine, as well as other people from her world, ignored essential facts about him. For example, when he tells Maxine, who knows him only as Nikhil, about his other name, her reaction was “That’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard” but then she never mentioned it again, which is proof that “this essential fact” slipped from her mind “as so many others did.”¹¹⁵ Ignoring these details was also one of the things that attracted him to Maxine and her community, because these were details which he would prefer not to exist.

His father’s death initiates his return home. However, the first stage of his return seems to be “only” a cultural one. This is to say that in spite of the fact that his visits to Pemberton Road are more frequent, he still does not accept his family in the universal sense of the word, his father’s legacy lying in Nikolai Gogol’s short story. The Indian culture is a huge contrast to the Ratliffs’ lifestyle and it was the Ratliffs with whom he “betrayed” his family, so now Indian equals “family” for Gogol. After his father’s

¹¹³ Ibid., 150.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 158.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 156.

death, he seeks Indian traditions because they are associated with his family and now that one of those closest to him is gone, his attitudes toward Indian traditions, which he found annoying as a young boy, change in that they start to make sense to him, being marked by the intense universal experience of the loss of a loved one. For example, the family's eating a mourner's diet, forgoing meat and fish: "Now, sitting together at the kitchen table at six-thirty every evening, the hour feeling more like midnight through the window, his father's chair empty, this meatless meal is the only thing to make sense."¹¹⁶ It appears that he realized that it is impossible now to be so immersed in Maxine's world again, so when she urges him to come back, saying that he needs to get away "from all this," he responds "I don't want to get away."¹¹⁷

His desire to get close to the familiar culminates with his relationship with Moushumi Mazoomdar, who will eventually become his wife.

3.1.53 Moushumi

Gogol Ganguli's other serious relationship, the last one portrayed in the novel, is with an Indian American woman, Moushumi Mazoomdar. She is a year younger than he is; her parents originally moved from India to England, where she was born, and moved to Massachusetts when she was still a child, and then moved to New Jersey. At the moment they begin dating, she is a graduate student, pursuing an academic career in French literature, and lives, like Gogol, in New York City.

As was stated before, this relationship is a consequence of his return to Indian culture. It is his mother Ashima who initiates their first meeting, and in spite of Gogol's initial refusal they go on a date. In fact, neither of them was too excited to meet up through their parents' arrangement, perhaps because it is reminiscent of their parents' custom of making friends on the basis of being of the same origin, which was what they both always wanted to avoid. (It was Ashima who urged Gogol to go on a date with Moushumi.)

They are not complete strangers to each other. Their parents were friends and the two met many times at the Bengali parties organized by his mother or her parents or their mutual friends. But they have only vague memories of each other from those days.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 180.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 182.

However, it is the familiarity which attracts them to each other, much to their surprise. They share the same past. Moushumi knew him as Gogol (though she always addresses him as Nikhil): “This is the first time he’s been out with a woman who’d once known him by that other name;”¹¹⁸ they share an experience of frequent family trips to Calcutta and “being plucked out of their American lives for months at a time.”¹¹⁹ Besides, both grew up in America and always insisted on the fact they were Americans, and they suddenly enjoy the alliance and exclusivity that their shared bicultural background provides: “they sometimes slip Bengali phrases into their conversation in order to comment with impunity on another diner’s unfortunate hair or shoes.”¹²⁰

As Natalie Friedman notes, “the romance is a “return” for both Gogol and Moushumi.”¹²¹ Just as Gogol sought retreat after his father’s death, so did Moushumi after her breakup with her fiancé, Graham, who left her after all the arrangements for the wedding had been made. Given the fact that neither of them has dated a person of Bengali background before, it might symbolize approval of their heritage for both of them. Metaphorically, their relationship resembles Gogol’s relationship to Indian culture. After their first date, Gogol realizes the absurdity of the whole situation:

It strikes him that there is no term for what they once were to each other. Their parents were friends, not they. She is a family acquaintance but she is not family. Their contact until tonight has been artificial, imposed, something like his relationship to his cousins in India but lacking even the justification of blood ties. Until they’d met tonight, he had never seen her outside the context of her family, or she his. He decides that it is her very familiarity that makes him curious about her (...).¹²²

They have known each other all these years, without really being interested in each other, just as Indian culture embodied in the traditions held in the Ganguli household did not interest Gogol – he had found them boring, sometimes even annoying. Also, just as Gogol’s and Moushumi’s parents were responsible for their initial acquaintance in their childhood, the link between American-born children of Bengali immigrants and Indian culture is also provided by their parents. They do not feel a direct tie to their relatives in India; it feels impersonal for them. Now that they have met outside their families as adults, they start their voluntary return to Indian culture. However, it was

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 193.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 212.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 211.

¹²¹ Friedman, "From Hybrids to Tourists," 121.

¹²² Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 199.

still their parents who initiated their first meeting. But they did not refuse as firmly as they probably would have when they were younger.

Much to their surprise, this return went quite smoothly. Therefore, it seemed only natural that they would stay together: “(...) from the very beginning it was safely assumed by their families, and soon enough by themselves, that as long as they liked each other their courtship would not lag and they would surely wed.”¹²³

Through their wedding, which is, of course, held in accordance with Bengali traditions, Gogol realizes an important thing: “He thinks of his parents, strangers until this moment, two people who had not spoken until after they were actually wed. Suddenly, sitting next to Moushumi, he realizes what it means, and he is astonished by his parents’ courage, the obedience that must have been involved in doing such a thing.”¹²⁴

With his gradual acceptance of Indian culture, he starts to be more empathetic towards his parents, whom he formerly only criticized for their ways; also, he is starting to realize how much of a burden being a foreigner is.

In spite of the fact that Gogol and Moushumi share the same past, in which they were continually passing each other, with the only link between them being their Indian background, the bond it creates between them is not sufficient. Unlike Gogol, who only accepted his identity passively in the course of his life, Moushumi created one for herself, by immersing herself in another culture of her own choice, and she reinvented herself in Paris (which is in accordance with the motif of travel being important in shaping one’s identity). Her experience is, thus, similar to that of their Bengali parents. Gogol lacks such experience of reinvention. It seems it was necessary for both of them to accept their Indian heritage at some point. But it was just a part of a bigger overarching journey to identity.

To support the idea just explained, there is an important moment in *The Namesake* when Gogol searches for Moushumi’s photograph from one of the Bengali parties held by his mother, looking in the photo albums his mother “has assembled over the years:” Gogol “tries to peel the image from the sticky yellow backing, to show her the next time he sees her, but it clings stubbornly, refusing to detach cleanly from the past.”¹²⁵ This scene might be symbolic; a warning that their shared past is perhaps the only thing they

¹²³ Lahiri, 225-226.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 222.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 207.

share. And it should stay in the past, though reviving it might teach them both about acceptance of their background. Their shared heritage, which they learned to accept via their relationship, it is not enough to make them stay together.

As for Gogol's passive acceptance of the identity of his partners, it also appears to occur in his marriage with Moushumi. She has created her own identity, as was already stated above, through her journey to Paris. When they visit Paris together, she says at one point: "I guess a little part of me wishes I'd never left Paris, you know?"¹²⁶ Gogol notes that then they would never have met. And she adds that maybe they will move to Paris some day. To this Gogol only nods, saying "maybe." It is not implied in the text what he thinks about it. He has never had any intentions to move from America, and never planned to do so. He has a career as an architect in New York City; one would expect that he would raise objections, at least in his mind.

Thus, the fact is that despite having the same origins, and similar experience of the India-America interface in their childhood homes, their worlds are different. The identity that Moushumi created for herself is connected to Paris. Her crowd in America is also different from that of Gogol (but actually, there are no long-time friends mentioned in Gogol's storyline). Moushumi's friends Astrid and Donald are important to her, which Gogol realizes: "He knows that personal approval of these people means something to her, though what exactly he isn't sure."¹²⁷

Donald and Astrid are a languidly confident couple, a model, Gogol guesses, for how Moushumi would like their own lives to be. They reach out to people, hosting dinner parties, bequeathing little bits of themselves to their friends. They are passionate spokespeople for their brand of life, giving Gogol and Moushumi a steady, unquestionable stream of advice about quotidian things.¹²⁸

They are an essential part of her world, which Gogol enters. It is also important to note that Moushumi met Graham, her former fiancé, through their agency. It almost seems as if she and her friends live by a scheme, with Gogol being just a part of this scheme for them, not his own person: "Though Astrid and Donald have welcomed Gogol heartily into their lives, sometimes he has the feeling that they still think she's with Graham. Once Astrid even called him Graham by mistake. No one had noticed except Gogol."¹²⁹ Thus, it seems that he just passively takes on an identity, in this case the identity of Moushumi's partner, and not any other for himself. Judith Caesar notes that Astrid's

¹²⁶ Ibid., 234.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 238.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 235-236.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 239.

calling him Graham suggests “that perhaps Gogol is simply a substitute for Graham in Moushumi’s mind as well.”¹³⁰

Months after their first anniversary and a week after Thanksgiving, we can see another change appearing in Gogol. At the time, Moushumi is having an affair with Dimitri Desjardins, an old acquaintance from her high school years with whom she recently became reunited. Telling Gogol that she is attending another conference concerning her academic career, she left New York City for Palm Beach to spend the weekend with her lover. Although Gogol did not find out yet, he already has doubts whether she is happy with him, because “more and more he sensed her distance, her dissatisfaction, her distraction.”¹³¹ While Moushumi is out of the city, with Christmas approaching, he goes shopping for a Christmas present for his wife. In a bookstore, he goes through a travel guide to Italy with the illustrations of the architecture he “had studied so carefully as a student, has admired only in photographs, has always meant to see.”¹³² And at this particular moment, reflected in the motif of a journey, or traveling, we can see the change. The fact that he did not make any journeys to a place he would like to, as Moushumi went to Paris after graduating as a French major, angers him. “What was stopping him? A trip together, to a place neither of them has been – maybe that’s what he and Moushumi need. He could plan it all himself, select the cities they would visit, the hotels.”¹³³

It seems that he turns slowly from passivity to an active approach towards his identity, if we take into consideration the fact that the motif of journeys and travel are connected to the approach to one’s identity in *The Namesake*. His parents and Moushumi travelled to reinvent themselves (although in Ashima’s case it was slightly different as she followed her husband), but Gogol never made any journey for himself except those that were intended to avoid his home on Pemberton Road. The fact is that Gogol’s and Moushumi’s worlds are too different, in spite of all their shared experience as children of Indian immigrants, which was what eventually attracted them to each other after years of rejecting anything connected to Indian culture. Moushumi has already found her place, and it seemed to be Paris, but, like Gogol, she needed to accept her Indian origins first in order to move on with her life – to come back to Paris, where

¹³⁰ Ibid., 115.

¹³¹ Ibid., 271.

¹³² Ibid., 272.

¹³³ Ibid., 272.

she belongs. After their break-up, Gogol makes his first journey on his own. He makes the trip to Italy which he initially planned for both of them. As the journey motif is connected to the development of one's identity in *The Namesake*, it might be symbolic of his realization of the possibility of actively creating his identity instead of accepting it passively.

The collapse of their marriage might be symbolic in the sense that, for both Gogol and Moushumi, accepting their origins is just part of their quest for identity as denoted by their Bengali names, but not the final destination of their individual journeys. In Gogol's case, the acceptance of the culture he tried to avoid for so long is not his final destination, but it definitely gets him closer to it. He cannot become "entire" until he accepts his family as they are, which he can do by accepting that he is "Gogol."

3.1.6 Multiple Identity

In addition to the contrast between creating one's identity and passively "putting it on," there is another important issue concerning identity in Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat," the idea of viewing one's identity as multiple. Judith Caesar describes how "The Overcoat" implies this issue in relation to *The Namesake*:

"The Overcoat" is a meditation on identity and loss, but exactly what it is "saying" about these abstractions is ambiguous, because the story is clothed in language and structured to evoke meanings and evade them at the same time. The meaning of the story is not just in the plot; in fact, Vladimir Nabokov suggests that to the extent that the story has a meaning, the style, not the plot, conveys it. The story combines voices and tones and levels of reality. Nabokov says, "Gogol's art discloses that parallel lines not only meet, but they can wiggle and get most extravagantly entangled, just as two pillars reflected in water in the most wobbly contortions if the necessary ripple is there (58). Multiple, contradictory realities and identities exist at once. Like a Zen paradox, the story does not have a fixed meaning, but serves rather to create a space in which the reader can experience his own private epiphany."¹³⁴

Caesar states that this is what draws Ashoke to the story the most. And it seems to make sense because it says a lot about his identity, as she continues:

But perhaps one thing that Ashoke responds to in the story is the sense that both reality and identity are multiple, existing on many planes at the same time. Life is not simple, rational, sequential experience. Ashoke gains some unarticulated knowledge from the story that enables him to be many people at once and accept the contradictions of his life. He himself is both the dutiful son who returns to India every year to see his extended family and the man who left this hurt and bewildered family behind to begin a life in another country, both a Bengali and the father of two Americans, both the respected Professor Ganguli and the patronized foreigner, both Ashoke, his good name, and Mithu, his pet name. 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. A person is many people, just as Akaky is all of the documents he copies and no one in himself.¹³⁵

This notion of identity seems to be different from Gogol's. For example, he hates the name Gogol because it does not define him. As he grows up, the identity the name denotes, i.e., the one that fitted him during his childhood, is not enough as he becomes an adult. Thus, it is true that the name Gogol does not define him all the way.

Nevertheless, it is a part of him. For his parents, he will be Gogol for ever. And he will be Gogol at least as long as they live. It is inseparable part of his identity, but not satisfying enough to define him wholly, as long as he is not a child dependent on his parents any more. Therefore, he adapts the name Nikhil, which was initially meant as his good name, but to which he refused to respond when he was a young boy. A good name, in terms of its meaning, can be viewed metaphorically as an "overcoat." It is

¹³⁴ Caesar, "Gogol's Namesake, " 105-106.

¹³⁵ Caesar, 106.

used “outside” the family context, and it serves as protection. A pet name is worn underneath this overcoat, along with the other identities one possesses. Thus, when Gogol Ganguli changes his name to Nikhil, he feels more comfortable among people outside his parental home. He does not feel exposed, as he did with his name Gogol as an official name.

The trouble is that Nikhil Ganguli rejects his pet name and along with it also everything it denotes. As soon as he starts attending college, already as Nikhil, he does not enjoy going back to Pemberton Road in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is the only place where he is called Gogol at that time. His visits become rare, reflecting the fact that his rejection is growing. Unlike Ashoke, who accepts all the parts of his overall identity, which means he is at peace with his life, Nikhil Ganguli cannot become “he who is entire” until he accepts all the parts of his identity.

As long as Nikhil Ganguli avoids the place where he is called Gogol, he manifests his refusal to accept it. This place is not only physical, the home on Pemberton Road. It is mainly his family that the name Gogol points to. So, above all, it is his family to whom he must come back. Of course, the Ganguli family is tied to their Pemberton Road home, as well as to the merging of the two cultures, but it seems to be the family above all other things that is important. After Ashoke’s death, when Gogol comes back home, he is, of course, closer to acceptance of his “being Gogol.” But he still does not seem to reach the essence. His subsequent marriage to an Indian American woman can be interpreted as acceptance of his native culture, but the fact that the marriage ends up unhappily might serve as proof of the fact that coming back to Indian culture is not enough. Of course, his parents are native Bengalis, but for Gogol they are, above all, his parents.

As Caesar points out, the name Gogol “means very different things to Gogol and Ashoke.”¹³⁶ What it means for Ashoke was already discussed above. Apart from being a symbol of his rebirth, for Ashoke, the author Gogol is also, as Caesar notices, “a connection to his own family, to his grandfather who told him to read the Russian realists, and whom he is going to see at the time of the train wreck.”¹³⁷ Most importantly, it is indicative of a culture not being a defining element of one’s identity, though inseparable from it, as Caesar explains: “There is an identity here that transcends

¹³⁶ Ibid., 109.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 109.

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."¹³⁸

It is possible that what Ashoke wanted was to pass this knowledge to his son, but we are never told; but it seems certain that the name Gogol creates a bond between the father and his son, the bond which Gogol accepts at the very end of the story by reading Nikolai Gogol's stories for the first time in his life. Gogol's pet name is unique not only in that it is originally a surname, but it is not meaningless and random in itself as other pet names are. It is the name of a Russian author, pointing to a place which neither Ashoke, nor any other of the Gangulis, as far as we know, ever visited. As opposed to India and America, Russia is a place which has nothing to do with any of them directly. And yet Ashoke is connected to it via the author Nikolai Gogol, whom he admires. It seems to suggest an identity, as Caesar's suggestion shows, that transcends culture.

The family space, embodied by their home on Pemberton Road, is where Gogol Ganguli needs to go to in order to reach the destination of his journey – an identity which is expressed by his good name “he who is entire, encompassing all.” It is not until the final chapter of *The Namesake* that he symbolically accepts his name (and everything it stands for, though we do not exactly know what it is) by reading the volume of Nikolai Gogol's short stories, a gift from his father for his fourteenth birthday. However, since his father's death we can see a gradual return to his family; first, there is a return to his culture via his marriage to Moushumi, and later, with his mother's decision to live both in America and India, he seems to understand what it was like for his parents and finally, to feel admiration towards them:

It's hard to believe that his mother is really going, that for months she will be so far. 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. All those trips to Calcutta he'd once resented – how could they have been enough? They were not enough. Gogol knows that his parents had lived their lives in America in spite of what was missing, with a stamina he fears he does not possess himself. He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins; his parents, in bridging that distance as best as they could. And yet, for all his aloofness towards his family in the past, his years at college and then in New York, he has always hovered close to this quiet, ordinary town that had remained, for his mother and father, stubbornly exotic.¹³⁹

This realization or empathy he feels toward his parents finally connects him with them. At this moment, with his mother being the only remaining parent, and the unifying member providing stability in their home on Pemberton Road, he is about to experience

¹³⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹³⁹ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 281.

the same as his parents did when they were leaving India. This is even strengthened by the fact that his mother sold their home on Pemberton Road; there would be no place for him to call home, just as his parents had nothing to remind them of their childhood after they moved to America except the traditions they preserved.

At the moment when we see Gogol after his divorce from Moushumi, when he comes to his home on Pemberton Road for the final Christmas party he holds, Judith Caesar points out that he realizes the mistake he made by adapting the identity of someone else (of his partners), instead of creating an identity for himself and the mistake of having one identity at a time, instead of a multiple identity: "He seems to be becoming aware that the discontinuity of his life is one of the sources of his pain. He has other insights into the complexity of his identity as well, as he begins to understand that he is not defined by one relationship, but by all the things that have happened to him and by the ways in which he has tried to understand these experiences."¹⁴⁰

In *Individual-Family Interface in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake*, Himadri Lahiri describes Gogol's journey to the final moment of the story, when he starts to read:

He has to encounter the larger social space in the U.S., and so he initially feels that the norms of the family space are a stumbling block. Later he also realizes that he cannot, after all, resist the pull of the family. Despite his hate for his name and despite his adoption of a new name, he fails to "reinvent himself fully, to break from that mismatched name" (Lahiri 287). That is why he finds himself opening the pages of a book authored by Gogol, a book that his father had once gifted him and that remained unread so long.¹⁴¹

Similarly, as it is not precisely revealed in the novel what "The Overcoat" as a story means to Ashoke, we are never told what it means for Gogol Ganguli either; the story ends the moment he starts reading.

But it does not seem that important. What seems to be stressed as more important in *The Namesake* is the act of acceptance embodied by reading his namesake's stories for the first time in his life, because it was something he tried to avoid for many years in an attempt to distance himself from his pet name. It also makes his journey home complete. This final journey to Pemberton Road before it is handed over to the new owners is the most important journey he makes in the story, not only because it is a place where his family dwelled and where he was called Gogol, but also because it was in his room where the copy of Nikolai Gogol's short stories is found. He accepts his pet name as a part of his overall identity, among other identities he possesses at this point of

¹⁴⁰ Caesar, "Gogol's Namesake," 118-119.

¹⁴¹ Himadri Lahiri, "Individual-Family Interface."

his life. By doing so, his overcoat, the name Nikhil, starts to make sense as well; he finally becomes “he who is entire, encompassing all.”

3.2. Moushumi Mazoomdar

The last of the four characters via whose perspective *The Namesake* is narrated is Moushumi Mazoomdar, an Indian American woman who briefly represented part of the Ganguli family via her marriage with Gogol. Although they both belong to the second generation of Indian immigrants in America and share early experience of growing up in similar households, Gogol's and Moushumi's journeys are rather different. While for Gogol, the journey that is of the highest importance is that to his family's social space (as a symbol of his acceptance of his family), Moushumi's travels are more complicated, and geographically more extensive. These correlate with the development of her identity, which is also different from Gogol (as was implied above).

Moushumi was born in England to Bengali parents; when she was around thirteen, the family moved to Massachusetts and later to New Jersey. Her bicultural upbringing, although it shared its overall shape with Gogol's, differed in some way because she is a woman. She saw the family's pressuring her to think about marriage since she was young as a threat to her personal integrity, and Gogol seems to see it too:

She had always been admonished not to marry an American, as had he, but he gathers that in her case these warnings had been relentless, and had therefore plagued her far more than they had him. When she was only five years old, she was asked by her relatives if she planned to get married in red sari or white gown. (...) From the onset of adolescence she's been subjected to a series of unsuccessful schemes; every so often a small group of unmarried Bengali men materialized in the house, young colleagues of her father's. (...) During summer visits to Calcutta, strange men mysteriously appeared in the sitting room of her grandparents' flat. Once on a train to Durgapur to visit an uncle, a couple had been bold enough to ask her parents if she was engaged; they had a son doing his surgical residency in Michigan. (...) "Aren't you going to arrange a wedding for her?" relatives would ask her parents. Their inquiries had filled her with a cold dread. 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.¹⁴²

In comparison, Gogol's early years, although he found obeying his parents' wishes limiting, do not seem to be marked by such intense intervention into his life. Ashima and Ashoke eventually gave up when he did not want to be called Nikhil in kindergarten, and in spite of their initial objections, they let him have his way when he wanted to change his name to Nikhil legally. Although it was not easy for them, they respected his son's relationship with Maxine. But Moushumi's parents did not stay too strict for long either. Later in Moushumi's life, before she got together with Gogol, when she brought her former fiancé Graham home to New Jersey, she "prepared herself

¹⁴² Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 213.

for battle, but in fact, to her enormous surprise, her parents were relieved. By then she was old enough so that it didn't matter to them that he was an American."¹⁴³

Her adolescent struggle is similar to Gogol's, but its source is different; while Gogol is mainly bothered by the presumed awkwardness of his name, the restrictions imposed on her life by her parents resulted in her loneliness, when she had been "forbidden to date as a teenager,"¹⁴⁴ developing crushes on men and boys she had "silently, faithfully, absurdly, desired," and "toward the end of college as graduation loomed, she was convinced in her bones that there would be no one at all."¹⁴⁵ Looking back at her youth, she "regrets her obedience" and "mortifying lack of confidence."¹⁴⁶

As Gogol manages to "cover up" his insecurity with his new official name Nikhil, she chooses to go against her parents by following her own path, or rather looking for another identity to build for herself. Her way of dealing with her insecurity is not as instant as Gogol's. She starts off by "academic" rebellion by secretly pursuing a double major; along with chemistry, which her parents favored in order for her to "follow in her father's footsteps," she chose French: "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."¹⁴⁷ For her, French was "a way of escape into a neutral third space."¹⁴⁸ She felt no sense of obligation, no sense of responsibility apart from the one she owed to herself. "It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever."¹⁴⁹ Thus, as soon as she finished college, she left for Paris.

Although this approach appears to be similar to that taken by Ashoke, the essence of whose life he found in a work by Nikolai Gogol, a Russian author, she lacks Ashoke's acceptance of various identities at the same time. She does not seem to have come to terms with the Indian part of her identity at that point in her life. In her relationship with Graham, she finds out that accepting her background is a necessary step in her life.

She met Graham, who would later become her fiancé, in Paris when she began to socialize with other American expatriates. "He was an investment banker from New

¹⁴³ Lahiri, 216.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 213.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 214.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 214.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 214.

¹⁴⁸ Himadri Lahiri, "Individual-Family Interface."

¹⁴⁹ Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 214.

York, living in Paris for a year.”¹⁵⁰ To be with him in New York, she applied to NYU for doctoral studies. Also, “Graham had agreed to fly with her and her parents to Calcutta, to meet her extended family and ask for her grandparents’ blessing.”¹⁵¹ As already stated, the couple splits up shortly before the date set for the wedding. The circumstances of their breakup show that regardless of her initial desire to get as far as possible, her awareness of her Indian heritage as a part of herself is strong in her. During a night out with friends “getting happily drunk,”¹⁵² Moushumi heard Graham complaining about their trip to Calcutta, “commenting that he found it taxing, found the culture repressed:”

All they did was visit her relatives, he said. Though he thought the city was fascinating, the society, in his opinion, was somewhat provincial. People tended to stay at home most of the time. There was nothing to drink. “Imagine dealing with fifty in-laws without alcohol. I couldn’t even hold her hand on the street without attracting stares,” he had said.¹⁵³

Through the effect that Graham’s words had on her emotionally, feeling “partly sympathetic, partly horrified”, she realized the importance her cultural heritage had for her: “For it was one thing for her to reject her background, to be critical of her family’s heritage, another to hear it from him.”¹⁵⁴ After an emotional argument, she called off the engagement. She probably recognized that she was betraying her origins, and her marriage to Graham would have crowned the process. Here we can see the parallel to Gogol’s betraying both his family and culture (via his immersion in Maxine’s world), which he stopped doing with his father’s sudden death.

After the split, Moushumi was devastated and attempted to commit suicide. Caesar comments on the end of Moushumi’s relationship with Graham: she was totally devastated because “she had invested so much of herself in it. The relationship defined her, and thus its ending was a kind of death of the self.”¹⁵⁵ As we learn further in the story, through a conversation between Gogol (who is already her husband at that point) and Donald, one of Moushumi’s friends, it was at Donald and Astrid’s place where she stayed after her split with Graham, experiencing what we can also call “paralysis.” Both because of a nervous breakdown and her lack of financial means she was not able to go back to Paris, which she thought of first after the breakup. So instead of moving further

¹⁵⁰ Lahiri, 215.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁵⁵ Caesar, “Gogol’s Namesake,” 115.

(to Paris, where she belonged), she continued with her return to Indian culture, just as Gogol did, via their shared marriage.

There is also another parallel to Ashoke's journey – the train accident which almost killed him and paralyzed him for a year was a formative experience, one of his rebirths, as was described above; if the breakup was “death of the self” (as Judith Caesar calls it) for Moushumi, we can also speak about her rebirth. She was reborn with an ability to appreciate her Indian origins. However, the process of acceptance of her background, culminating in her marrying Gogol, was just one of the steps she needed to take to go further with the process of acceptance of her identity in all its multiplicity; perhaps because of this the marriage could not be expected to last.

The idea explained above might be why, around their first anniversary, Moushumi finds herself approaching a state of paralysis again, aware that it is not Gogol's fault: “And yet the familiarity that had once drawn her to him has begun to keep her at bay. Though she knows it is not his fault, she cannot help but associate him, at times, with a sense of resignation, with the very life she had resisted, had struggled so mightily to leave behind.”¹⁵⁶ There seems to be one thing in particular associated with Indian culture which paralyzed her the most since her childhood: the role of a wife, being a role which she views in association with the Indian tradition, given the early experience when her parents who tried to arrange a marriage for her (unsuccessfully, to her relief). More than a role, she associates it with an identity she has never wanted to adapt to, seeing an example of such an identity in her mother. Although, in her marriage with Gogol, Moushumi is by no means limited (let alone when compared to her mother), the identity of a wife, or rather her idea of this identity that she modeled on her mother's example, still threatens her and she needs to remind herself that she does not want to be as dependent as her mother:

(...) along with the Sanskrit vows she'd repeated at her wedding, she'd privately vowed that she'd never grow fully dependent on her husband, as her mother has. For even after thirty-two years abroad, in England and now in America, her mother does not know how to drive, does not have a job, does not know the difference between a checking and saving account. And yet she is a perfectly intelligent woman, was an honors student in philology at Presidency College before she was married off at twenty-two.¹⁵⁷

The notion of identity as being multiple does not seem to work in this case; the identity of a wife appears to be a threat to her personal integrity for Moushumi, not allowing her

¹⁵⁶ Lahiri, *The Namesake*, 250.

¹⁵⁷ Lahiri, 247.

to be other things along with being a wife. Additionally, it rather seems like an adopted identity, and Moushumi wants to have an identity of her own in the first place (this might also be reflected in the fact that she did not adopt Gogol's surname). This shows that she is aware of what Gogol Ganguli is not: that identity can be actively created, as opposed to one that is passively accepted, with the latter being a source of pain.

But what she shares with Gogol in her approach to identity is that she wants to define herself in a similar way, with much more attention being paid to what she does not want to be rather than focusing on who she does want to be. This claim can be based on the fact that she chooses a lifestyle that is extremely different from her mother's, as can be seen from her life in Paris, where "after years of being convinced she would never have a lover she began to fall effortlessly into affairs. With no hesitation, she had allowed men to seduce her in cafés, in parks, while she gazed at paintings in museums. She gave herself openly, completely, not caring about the consequences."¹⁵⁸

So, when Dimitri Desjardins ("the name alone, when she'd first learned it, had been enough to seduce her")¹⁵⁹ reappears in her life, although materially or emotionally he is not offering anything better than Gogol, she starts an affair with him, as a result of which her return to Paris begins. But the process of coming back to Paris seemed to have started even before that, when, just out of curiosity, she applied for a research fellowship in France.

Her longing to come back to Paris also seems apparent in the scene when she visited Paris with Gogol (described above), and with her encounter with Dimitri the temptation is even more intense. Although she is well aware that, after the breakup with Graham, it was thanks to Gogol that she did not retreat "into her former self, before Paris – untouched, bookish, alone,"¹⁶⁰ she might be seeing herself falling into this state again; in spite of being a married woman, and thus definitely not the same person as "before Paris," she might be starting to realize that Paris was more than that: more than her former rebellion against the traditional idea of femininity in Indian culture, with the act of moving to Paris as a moment marking the dividing line between the awkwardness and insecurity which paralyzed her in her youth and her entrance into adulthood and independence. That might be what Paris was for her, superficially, back then – to mark

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 215.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 256.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 250.

her transformation into an adult woman, who defined herself. But now, when there is a distance from her early days, it is becoming more apparent that there is more to it. From the text itself, we cannot find out what it is that Paris means for her, as we do not know what precisely Nikolai Gogol's story means to Ashoke. In spite of the fact that these details are missing, the mere fact that there is a certain significance lying in some things (in Paris, or Nikolai Gogol's short story) is always hinted at in *The Namesake*. But it is apparent that Paris stands for Moushumi's identity that she created for herself.

Although she does not need to "escape" from the paralyzing feelings of insecurity she experienced in her youth, it seems as if she does not feel "like herself" – simply because she is not in Paris, where she belongs, where she defined herself. Her leaving Paris was a kind of betrayal of herself, which she did not realize then – she did it for a man whom she wanted to marry, since it is a fact that she came back to America because of Graham. Eventually, the man betrayed her, betrayed part of her – her background culture; but she also betrayed herself by leaving Paris for the wrong man. And her name seems to make sense when she *is* in Paris: she is "southwesterly breeze" only when she is there, because New York City, where she resides in America, is located south-west *from* Paris.

Thus, when Dimitri reappears in her life, she might be reminded of the time when she did not feel like "herself," which means "before Paris;" the first time Moushumi and Dimitri met, it was in Moushumi's final months of high school:

It was a period in which she and two of her friends, in their eagerness to be college students, in desperation over the fact that no one their own age was interested in dating them, would drive to Princeton, loiter on the campus, browse in the college bookstore, do their homework in buildings they could enter without an ID.¹⁶¹

Back then, when she was seventeen and had no experience of men, Dimitri, a man ten years her senior (a former student of European history, at the moment taking a German course at Princeton, and still living with his parents) showed an interest in her. It was him with whom she had been on the first date of her life, but it was her naivety which eventually, rather luckily for seventeen-year-old Moushumi, caused this date to be their last.

In spite of the fact that at the time of their second encounter she is not her former self "before Paris" any more, she is the same in one thing: without Paris, she is "not herself", just as she was "before Paris."

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 257.

When she starts an affair with Dimitri, her return to Paris begins. Gradually, she starts moving away from her life in New York City (of which her husband is an inseparable part) but also from anything connected to her background, which she sees as an obstacle to her independence. They begin seeing each other on Mondays and Wednesdays, when “no one knows where she is:”

There are no Bengali fruit sellers to greet her on the walk from Dimitri’s subway stop, no neighbors to recognize her once she turns onto Dimitri’s block. It reminds her of living in Paris – for a few hours at Dimitri’s she is inaccessible, anonymous.¹⁶²

The reference to Bengali fruit sellers might be indicative of her still not being over the paralyzing dependence she associates with the Indian culture, which has its source in her childhood and her relatives’ preoccupation with marriage. The same can also be seen in her wondering whether she was the only woman in her family who ever cheated on her husband.¹⁶³

The details of how she feels about her husband at the time when she starts an affair are not revealed to the reader; all we know is that before her first encounter with Dimitri, around their first anniversary, she does not seem to have lost her feelings for him, but something seems wrong:

She believed that he would be incapable of hurting as Graham had. After years of clandestine relationships, it felt refreshing to court in a fishbowl, to have the support of her parents from the very start, the inevitability of an unquestioned future, of marriage, drawing them along. And yet the familiarity that had once drawn her to him has begun to keep her at bay. Though she knows it’s not his fault, she can’t help but associate him, at times, with a sense of resignation, with the very life she had resisted, had struggled so mightily to leave behind. He was not who she saw herself ending up with, he had never been that person. Perhaps for those very reasons, in those early months, being with him, falling in love with him, doing precisely what had been expected of her for her entire life, had felt forbidden, wildly transgressive, a breach of her own instinctive will.¹⁶⁴

She is aware that her relationship with Gogol is a temporary matter, a digression in her journey whose direction she wants to have under her own control exclusively, because fixedness and duty was what had threatened her since her youth. Obeying her parents’ wishes in terms of her love life was a necessary step towards approving of the Indian part of her identity. It was the prospect of an arranged marriage and a life under someone else’s control that threatened her and caused her to be so anxious with regard to being in charge of her life. Thus, it seems that her motivation for marrying Gogol was

¹⁶² Ibid., 264.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 266.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 250.

both her acceptance of her culture and her feeling of being accepted by her family after years spent in opposition.

As far as Dimitri is concerned, we already know that he might have reminded her of the years when she was somebody she did not want to be, her “former self, before Paris,” desperately wishing to change, so she realized that although she is not the same person she was “before Paris”, she is definitely not who she wants to be either. And Dimitri’s reappearance in her life might help her to realize that.

In the text, we are never told how she feels about Dimitri, but she does not seem to have any special feelings for him. It is the affair itself that seems to be important: “the affair causes her to feel strangely at peace, the complication of it calming her, structuring her day.”¹⁶⁵ The fact that she does not find Dimitri particularly special might be implied by this quote from *The Namesake*: “She watches him from the window, walking down the block, a small, balding, unemployed middle-aged man, who is enabling her to wreck her marriage.”¹⁶⁶ The way this sentence is put seems to imply that she does not truly care about him. What is interesting is the verb “enable.” The idea that he is *enabling* her to wreck her marriage might suggest that Dimitri is nothing but a person serving this particular purpose: to wreck her marriage so that she has no reason to stay in New York City and can go back to Paris. She does not see herself ending up with Gogol, and Dimitri serves as a reason to end the relationship. However, she does not do it until Gogol himself finds out.

Thus, it is her independence that she puts in first place. The relationships with Gogol and Dimitri (although we do not know how her relationship with Dimitri will eventually end up) each serve some purpose. In contrast to what her family wished her to be, what was supposed to be arranged and fixed by someone other than herself, she prefers to be free, like “a damp southwesterly breeze,” the literal meaning of her name, identifying her as a cosmopolitan (which she proved already when she decided to move to Paris after finishing her college degree), but also implying her volatility. And it is also Paris from where the south-western direction in her name makes sense, as it points to the northern east coast of the United States of America, particularly the city of New York, where she is from.

Nevertheless, it is possible that her betraying Gogol might mean a betrayal of Indian culture from her side as well. She keeps struggling to come to terms with the fact

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 266.

that her self-definition she created by leaving Paris finds it very hard to include the Indian part of her identity; the two seem to contradict each other, at least for Moushumi, who is caught in an either-or situation. This perhaps illustrates the difficulty that women of such a background face in their journey to reconcile the clashing Eastern and Western perceptions of femininity.

The scene that is symbolic of her connection to Paris might be the one where she is waiting for Dimitri in his apartment one Friday; after a month of seeing each other on Mondays and Wednesdays, they began to meet on Fridays too. While looking at the books in his library, the narrator claiming that his personal library is similar to hers, she opens up “an oversized volume of Paris, by Atget” and sits in an armchair looking at the pictures of “the streets and the landmarks she once knew:”

A large square of sunlight appears on the floor. The sun is directly behind her, and the shadow of her head spreads across the thick, silken pages, a few strands of her hair strangely magnified, quivering, as if viewed through a microscope.¹⁶⁷

It appears as if her shadow cast on the pages with photographs of “her” city symbolizes her connection to the place, both physical and spiritual – the shadow of her head becomes part of the picture, whose beauty is enhanced by the play of light and shadow. Although we are not told anything by the narrator, it seems to be an emotional moment for her. The reader is strictly an outside observer of this scene – nothing is revealed about what is going on in her mind. She closes her eyes and when she opens them again a moment later “the sun has slipped away, a lone sliver of it now diminishing into floorboards, like the gradual closing of a curtain, causing the stark white pages of the book to turn gray.”¹⁶⁸ Her becoming part of the picture for a limited time through the agency of her shadow might symbolize temporariness. With her shadow cast on the images of Paris, she might become part of them, but only as long as the sun shines behind her back. However, the “lone sliver” of the sun might also symbolize hope; in spite of the fact that the light is diminishing, the curtain gradually closing, there is still a chance for her to return to Paris.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 267.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 267.

Conclusions

The thesis discussed how the main four Indian American characters in *The Namesake*, through whose sensibilities the story is narrated, reach the metaphorical destinations in their life journeys. These destinations are described by the literal meanings of their Bengali “good names.” The journey motif appears in *The Namesake* in both a physical and a metaphorical sense.

Ashoke Ganguli becomes “he who is without sorrow” after the birth of his son, which marks the end of both his physical and spiritual journeys to this destination. His journey is characterized by “rebirths.” He was reborn for the first time after a train accident back in India, almost losing his life; this moment was significant not only because it made him change his life journey, transforming him from a person who was passive in his approach to his life into one who actively creates his life, as well as his identity, for himself, but also because it strengthened the significance of Ashoke’s favorite Nikolai Gogol, whose short story “The Overcoat” he was reading at the time of the accident and who “saved” his life thanks to Ashoke’s dropping of the page of the book, which attracted the attention of rescuers who would not have noticed him otherwise. His second rebirth occurs when he moves, after a year of being paralyzed as a consequence of the injuries sustained in the accident, to America. His final rebirth is marked by the birth of his son, which is also his living up to his name; when he names his son Gogol, it creates a bond between the traumatizing experience of the train accident and Ashoke’s becoming a father, resulting in a change in his perception of the accident, as it was the first time he looked back to that moment not with terror but with gratitude.

Ashima Ganguli could not become “she who is limitless, without borders” until she accepted both countries, i.e., India and America, as her own. It is especially apparent in her case that these two geographical places, a country of origin and a country of adoption, denote the universal dimension of the cultural experience – her relationship to the countries is underlined by interpersonal relationships. Even though she is extremely sensitive to the cultural clash and is a preserver of traditions in her country of adoption, America gradually becomes part of her identity. Just as India stands for her childhood and parental family, her relationship to America develops over time by her becoming a mother with her children born American citizens and by her life spent as Ashoke’s wife in America. For her, moving to America marked her turn from being a girl dependent on

her parents to a married woman; in other words, India stands for her childhood, America for her adulthood. With Ashoke's death being the first moment in her time spent in America when she did not desire to go back to India, she seemed to have finally realized the significance of her land of adoption, which stands, as does India, for a certain part of her life defined by universal human relationships. Her acceptance of the significance of both places is manifested in her decision to divide her time between both countries.

Gogol Ganguli struggles to become what his good name Nikhil means, i.e., "he who is entire, encompassing all," because of his inability to realize, first, the fact that instead of passively accepting the identity that is given to him, he should attempt to actively create an identity for himself, and second, the multiplicity of identity, which enables him to be more people at once, "encompassing all."

His passive approach to identity is reflected in his dissatisfaction with being Gogol, his pet name, because he did not feel that the name defined him, blaming it, and his parents and their native culture too, for the limitations it imposed on his life. Therefore, as soon as he reached eighteen he changed his name to Nikhil, the good name that, ironically, he refused to respond to as a child. By doing so, he rejected his old name, Gogol, which now became exclusively a "pet name" used by his family. In his attempt to get as far from being Gogol as possible, he refused to visit his parental home on Pemberton Road very often, because that was the private social space where he was called Gogol (as pet names are restricted in their use to this social space). As opposed to private space, Gogol Ganguli mainly occupies the public social space, where he is called Nikhil. He rather defines himself in opposition to his parents, instead of looking for an identity for himself. He adopts identities through his partners, whose worlds are as far as from his parents' lifestyle as possible, in attempt to *be* as far as possible from them, both spiritually and physically. It was also discussed in the thesis how Gogol Ganguli's father's favorite short story "The Overcoat" is of significance in identifying Nikhil's struggles with both the concept of identity as multiple (comprising cultural identity as well as one's identity in one's family, and one's identity as one defines oneself, etc.) and one's active approach to creating one's identity, rather than passively accepting it. However, it is not until his father's death that he gradually starts to realize that. Although he used to have a hard time accepting his background culture, after his father's death he seems more appreciative of it. The process of acceptance of his cultural background culminates in his marriage with Moushumi, a young Indian

American woman whose childhood was similar to his own as far as the struggle of growing up in a bicultural household is concerned. The marriage ending unhappily symbolically suggests that culture is one of many parts of Gogol's identity, but it does not fully define him. Gogol's final journey, with the destination where he becomes "entire," is the one he tried to avoid as much as he could in the course of his life: his journey home to Pemberton Road. In his parental home, the fact that he starts reading Nikolai Gogol's stories is a symbolic act of acceptance of his family and the legacy of his father (situated neither in his Indian heritage nor in American culture, but in the "neutral" third space of the literary world of Russia), which he had avoided discovering for so long.

Moushumi Mazoomdar's name means "a damp southwesterly breeze," which not only describes her metaphorically as being a cosmopolitan, but also implies her independence and volatility. The "southwest" may refer to the direction from Paris, the city which is very special to her, to the northern east coast of the United States, particularly the city of New York, where she resided at the time she and Gogol started to date. As soon as she finished her studies of French, Moushumi moved to Paris, where she defined herself in terms which were in opposition to her background (independence, sexual promiscuity, etc.). Such a lifestyle might have been her reaction to the fact that her background culture pressured her to think about her future marriage from an early age. The tradition of arranged marriage, discontinuous with her American experience, posed a threat to her personal integrity. Her marriage with Gogol is, as for him, an act of acceptance of her background culture. However, by moving from France back to America some time before the two met, she moved away from "herself." After a year of being married to Gogol, she starts to realize that. So, when an opportunity to "enable" her to wreck her marriage appears on the scene, embodied by her old acquaintance Dimitri Desjardins, she starts an affair with him and moves back to Paris, where she belongs.

These destinations (or identities) that the Bengali good names stand for do not impose cultural identification, and yet they do not resist it; they certainly encompass a cultural element, epitomized by their origin. However, they stand for "dignified and enlightened qualities" which seem to imply the universality of identity they stand for. The main focus of *The Namesake* is, thus, not to define its characters in terms of culture only but as human beings whose background culture is definitely an important part of their life but it is not enough to define them entirely. This, along with the novel's

emphasis on the universality of human experience with its focus on generational conflict, makes *The Namesake* universally relatable.

Resumé

Americká spisovatelka indického původu Jhumpa Lahiriiová (1967) se do povědomí veřejnosti zapsala hned svou literární prvotinou, sbírkou povídek *Interpreter of Maladies* (Tlumočnick nemocí, orig. 1999, č. 2009), jejíž hlavním tématem jsou převážně životní osudy indických imigrantů ve Spojených státech amerických. Za sbírku získala v roce 2000 prestižní Pulitzerovu cenu. I ve své následující tvorbě (jak můžeme vidět například v jejím druhém povídkovém souboru *Unaccustomed Earth* (Nezvyklá země, orig. 2008, č. 2010) zůstává autorka věrná světu, ve kterém se střetává západní a východní kultura – příběhům Indů, kteří se ocitají (převážně) v Americe. Střet dvou nesourodých kultur se odehrává nejen na bázi veřejného prostoru, ve školách a na pracovištích, kde se její postavy mnohdy setkávají s nepochopením, ale i za zavřenými dveřmi jejich domovů. Tam na sebe napětí mezi dvěma odlišnými světy bere podobu generačního konfliktu mezi první generací imigrantů a jejich dětmi, které se narodily v Americe a za Američany se také považují. Toto je jedním z hlavních témat prvním románem Lahiriiové *The Namesake* (*Jmenovec*, orig. 2004). V románu, který je střídavě vyprávěn z pohledu z první a druhé generace imigrantů z rodiny Ganguliových, je pro postavy příznačný pohyb mezi kulturami, který se však neodehrává pouze prostřednictvím cestování mezi světadíly. Zejména pro mladší generaci je mnohem důležitější cestování mezi americkým domovem jejich rodičů, kde jsou dodržovány tradice původní kultury (které však není zcela nepropustné, neboť Ganguliovi časem začnou slavit např. Vánoce), a veřejným americkým prostorem a jeho typickým životním stylem, který se diametrálně liší od života v domovské zemi Ganguliových. Cestování čtyř hlavních postav (Ashima a Ashoke Ganguliovi zastupují první generaci, zatímco Gogol Ganguli a Moushumi Mazoomdarová druhou) mezi kulturami, a cestování vůbec, je v románu důležitým motivem, který má výrazný vliv na vývoj identity těchto postav, a to nejen identity z hlediska kulturní příslušnosti, ale i z univerzálního hlediska – tedy kým Ashima, Ashoke, Gogol a Moushumi jsou jako lidské bytosti. Cíl cesty za vlastní identitou, na kterou se postavy románu vydávají, přesahuje kulturní zařazení. Lahiriiová se v románu spíše zaměřuje na hledání takové identity, jejíž nedílnou součástí kulturní identifikace samozřejmě je, ale není na ní nahlíženo jako na věc, která postavy definuje.

Motiv cesty se v románu *Jmenovec* vyskytuje nejen v rovině fyzické (např. cestování mezi Indií a Amerikou), ale i obrazné, kdy postavy cestují pouze “v duchu”

(jako např. Ashoke Ganguli při četbě svých oblíbených ruských autorů). Za cestu se dá považovat i vývoj postavy za dosažením výše zmíněné identity. Tuto možnost, jak chápat motiv cesty v románu *Jmenovec*, můžeme brát jako rámcovou, pod kterou spadají všechny ostatní cesty (ať už ve fyzickém nebo obrazném smyslu), které postavy v románu podniknou. Cílem této cesty (či vývoje) je identita, která se skrývá pod doslovným významem jmen čtyř hlavních postav.

Tato diplomová práce tedy popisuje, jak se k této identitě postavy postupně propracovávají – a to právě prostřednictvím motivu cesty. Významy jmen čtyř hlavních postav popisuje univerzální charakteristiky, ale jejich vnější podoba, tedy původ v sanskrtském jazyce, přiznává jejich kulturní původ. Je také důležité zmínit bengálské zvyklosti při pojmenovávání malých dětí: jména dostávají dvě. První jméno, které dítě dostane, je tzv. “pet name” neboli přízvisko, jméno, jež používá pouze nejbližší rodina a přátelé. Druhé jméno, které slouží pro oficiální účely (a jejichž doslovný význam je pro nás důležitý), tzv. “good name,” dítě dostane až když je potřeba k úřednímu styku, zpravidla tedy když nastoupí do školy. Toto oficiální jméno popisuje ušlechtilé kvality, zatímco “pet name” je bez významu (často je to pouze citoslovce).

Čtyři hlavní postavy patřící do rodiny Ganguliových (z jejichž perspektivy je román ve třetí osobě vyprávěn) jsou: Ashima, jejíž jméno v Sanskrtu znamená “ta, jež je bez hranic” (“she who is limitless, without borders”), její manžel Ashoke, “ten, jenž je bez smutku” (“he who is without sorrow”), jejich syn, protagonista románu, jehož oficiálním jménem se na čas stane jeho přízvisko Gogol (které dostane na počest otce oblíbeného autora) nese oficiální jméno Nikhil, “ten, jenž je celistvý, zahrnující vše” (“he who is entire, encompassing all”), a jeho manželka Moushumi Mazoomdarová, jejíž jméno znamená “vlahý jihozápadní vánek” (“damp southwesterly breeze”).

Ashoke dosahuje naplnění významu svého jména po narození svého prvního syna (hned zpočátku románu, což je také poslední moment kdy je děj vyprávěn z jeho perspektivy). O jeho životě předtím se dozvíme retrospektivně, zatímco sedí v čekárně porodnice. Jeho cesta k tomu, aby se stal “tím, jenž je bez smutku,” je charakterizována “znovuzrozením,” a to nejedním. Poprvé se “znovu narodí” když ještě jako vysokoškolský student ve své rodné Indii cestuje za svými prarodiči a jako zázrakem vyvázne z vlakového neštěstí. Těžce raněn a neschopný pohybu pod troskami vlaku z posledních sil zvedne paži, ve které svírá jedinou stránku z knihy povídek Nikolaje Gogola (1809-1852), konkrétně “Plášť” (1842), kterou četl těsně před nehodou. Ashoke je zachráněn jen díky tomu, že pozornost záchranářů upoutá bílá

stránka padající z jeho zdvižené paže. Tímto pro něj jeho oblíbený autor nabude zvláštního významu: Ashoke jej začne považovat za někoho, komu vděčí za svůj život. Svě druhé “znovuzrození” Ashoke zažije, když se přestěhuje z Indie do Spojených států amerických, což je rozhodnutí, které bylo motivováno právě jeho traumatickým zážitkem z vlakového neštěstí i jeho následky. Ashoke byl následkem zranění rok neschopný pohybu, což ho vedlo k rozhodnutí radikálně změnit svůj život. Z mladého muže, který sází na jistotu a chová poměrně pasivní přístup ke svému osudu, se stane osobnost, která aktivně rozhoduje o směru svého života, což je symbolizováno právě rozhodnutím přesídlit do Ameriky. Posledním “znovuzrozením” je narození jeho prvního dítěte, což je také moment, kdy dostojí svému jménu; když pojmenuje svého syna Gogol, spojí tím dva zásadní momenty svého života: traumatizující zážitek, kdy málem zemřel ve troskách vlaku a radostný přelomový okamžik, kdy se stal otcem. Toto spojení změní jeho náhled na tragickou nehodu. Když pojmenuje svého syna po autorovi, jenž mu zachránil život, je to poprvé v životě, kdy na osudný okamžik vzpomíná nikoliv s hrůzou, ale s vděčností.

Ashokova manželka, Ashima Ganguliová se nestane „tou, jež je bez hranic,“ dokud nepřijme za své *obě* místa, kde prožila části svého života; tedy nejen Indii, zemi, kde se narodila a vyrůstala, ale i Ameriku, kam se přestěhovala za svým manželem. Ashima ve srovnání s Ashokem hůře snáší propastné rozdíly mezi kulturními zvyklostmi. Z počátku jí dělá velké problémy si ve své nové zemi zvyknout a po mnoho let se touží vrátit do Indie. Zvláště v jejím případě je patrné spojení zeměpisných míst, tedy její země rodné a Ameriky, s mezilidskými vztahy: Indie je zemí, kde prožila dětství a symbolizuje pro ni její nejbližší rodinu, její rodiče a sourozence, zatímco Amerika je pro ni místem, kde prožila život jako manželka a matka. Vztah k její nové zemi si tedy vytvoří až časem – její děti se narodí jako američtí občané a v Americe také prožije společný život se svým manželem. Přesídlení do Ameriky za svým novomanželem je v životě Ashimy přerodem z dívky závislé na rodičích ve vdanou ženu, tedy krokem z bezstarostného mládí do dospělosti. Když její manžel nečekaně zemře, je to vůbec poprvé za jejího pobytu na americké půdě, kdy netouží po návratu do Indie. Právě tehdy si začíná uvědomovat, že Amerika je pro ni stejně důležitá jako Indie, protože zde prožila společný život s manželem. Její rozhodnutí rozdělit svůj čas mezi obě země (první polovinu roku pobývat v Indii a druhou v Americe), které učiní šest let po manželově smrti, manifestuje, že si uvědomuje význam obou zemí a že Amerika v jejím životě zastává stejnou důležitost jako její rodná země.

Gogol Ganguli, příslušník druhé generace imigrantů (syn Ashimy a Ashoka) a hlavní postava románu, má značné potíže dosáhnout cíle své cesty, tedy stát se tím, jak jeho oficiální jméno Nikhil říká, “jenž je celistvý, všezahrnující.” Zejména mu v tom zabraňuje jeho přístup k vlastní identitě; neuvědomuje si, že si sám může vybrat, kým chce být a nemusí pasivně identitu přejímat (např. identitu svých rodičů a později svých partnerek). Dalším problémem, který je třeba překonat, aby mohl dostát svému jménu, je uvědomit si, že identita člověka se skládá z mnoha složek a že jedinec není definován pouze např. svým kulturním původem.

Gogolův pasivní přístup k vlastní identitě je patrný již v jeho mládí, kdy si postupně vytvoří značnou averzi ke svému jménu “Gogol.” Toto jméno mělo být původně jeho domácí přízvisko (“pet name”), ale díky tomu, že tuto tradici v Americe neznají, nakonec se stane i jeho oficiálním jménem a jméno, které mu rodiče původně vybrali jako oficiální, tedy jméno Nikhil, si osvojí až po vlastním rozhodnutí ihned po dosažení plnoletosti. Se svým původním jménem není spokojen, protože si myslí, že ho dostatečně nedefinuje. I poté, co oficiálně přestane být Gogolem, si je vědom, že pro své rodiče a nejbližší rodinu bude Gogol navždy - proto se po přestěhování z domova na vysokoškolské koleje snaží své návštěvy domů postupně co nejvíce omezovat. Pokud jde tedy o motiv cesty v případě Gogola Ganguliho, jde především o pohyb mezi dvěma místy: prostorem domácím (“private social space”), kde je nazýván Gogol, a veřejným prostorem (“public social space”), kde jej lidé neznají jinak než pod jménem Nikhil. Jméno Gogol pro něj značí čas dětství a s ní spojenou nejistotu, se kterou se již nechce identifikovat, a tudíž se snaží vyhybat domovu, kde je stále (a navždy bude) Gogol. Nemůže se však doopravdy stát Nikhilem, tedy “celistvým,” dokud nepřijme, že *je* zároveň i Gogol a že člověka zcela nedefinuje jen jedna jeho část.

Pokud jde o jeho pasivní přístup k vlastní identitě, Gogol se vždy snaží svou identitu postavit na opaku té identity, kterou přijal od svých rodičů (kterou ztělesňuje jméno Gogol) – snaží se tedy o životní styl, který je pravým opakem života, který žijí Ashima a Ashoke. Vybírá si partnerky, které vyrůstaly v rodinách vyznávající životní styl diametrálně jiný než svět tradičních hodnot rodiny Ganguliových. Tímto konáním se Gogol snaží vzdálit od své rodiny a s ní spojené identity.

Zlom nastane až po smrti Ashoka, kdy se Gogol začne pozvolna vracet “domů” i akceptovat tradiční kulturu svých rodičů. Jeho symbolický “návrat” k indické tradiční kultuře je završen sňatkem s mladou ženou, která pochází ze stejného prostředí jako Gogol – je dcerou imigrantů bengálského původu a kulturní tradice jejích rodičů pro ni

byly ještě více omezující než pro Gogola. Manželství však nemá dlouhého trvání, což může být symbolem toho, že i když pro Gogola bylo důležitým krokem začít akceptovat svůj původ, tak to není jediná věc, která jej definuje. (Mimo to, Gogol ve vztahu s Moushumi opět spíše pasivně akceptuje její životní styl, např. většina jejich společných přátel jsou vlastně původně přátelé Moushumi atd.)

Gogolova poslední cesta do domu, kde vyrůstal a kde “je Gogolem,” je cestou za jeho konečnou destinací, aby se stal “celistvým, zahrnující vše.” Nestačí pouze přijmout kulturní tradice své rodiny, ale i rodinu jako takovou – i přesto, že tyto dvě složky k sobě nerozlučně patří, tak důležitost rodinných vztahů jako takových se zdá být zdůrazněna právě tím, že přijmout pouze kulturní tradice nestačí. Jméno Gogol má s tradicemi, které jeho nositele tolik omezovaly, málo společného. Souvisí především s osobním zážitkem jeho otce. Osobní význam, který toto jméno pro Ashoka Ganguliho nese, však v románu prozrazen není. Gogolova cesta vrcholí v okamžiku, kdy se ve svém starém dětském pokoji (před tím, než bude dům předán novým majitelům, jelikož Ashima se před svým odjezdem na půlroční pobyt v rodné Indii rozhodla dům prodat) nachází sbírku povídek svého jmenovce Nikolaje Gogola (dar ke čtrnáctým narozeninám od otce), kterou, v manifestaci odporu ke svému jménu, nikdy neotevřel. Až v tento okamžik, ve svých dvaatřiceti letech sbírku povídek poprvé otevírá a začíná číst povídku “Plášť.” Nedozvíme se, jaký význam v této povídce nalezneme. Ale samotný akt čtení povídek Nikolaje Gogola, kterému se tak dlouho vyhýbal, symbolizuje přijetí dlouho nenáviděného jména a všeho, co za ním stojí – jeho rodinu jako takovou (pro kterou bude vždy Gogol) i osobní význam, který mělo dílo Nikolaje Gogola pro jeho otce. Konečně se tak stává “celistvý.”

Rodné jméno Moushumi Mazoomdarové (manželky Gogola Ganguliho), “vlahý jihozápadní vánek,” popisuje Moushumi jako kosmopolitní, ukazuje na její nezávislost, ale také nestálost. Slovo “jihozápadní” může odkazovat na severovýchodní pobřeží Spojených států (konkrétně město New York, kde bydlí, když se s Gogolem poprvé setkají), avšak pouze tehdy pokud se Moushumi nachází na pro ni důležitém místě – v Paříži. Stejně jako Gogol, i ona vnímala tradice svých rodičů jako silně omezující, v jejím případě to bylo však ještě patrnější, neboť život žen je ve východních kulturách v mnohém těžší. I ona si proto zvolila životní styl zcela opačný. Ihned po studiích na univerzitě se odstěhovala do Paříže, kde si vytvořila své nové já (jehož charakterizovala zejména nezávislost, do které patřila i sexuální promiskuita). Její nový životní styl byl, jak se zdá, reakcí na výchovu v souladu s tradicemi rodné kultury jejích rodičů, do

něhož patřilo i naléhání ohledně tradičního zvyku dohodnutého manželství, kterému byla vystavena již od útlého věku. Mimo to, že tato tradice pro ni byla neschůdná se způsobem života v Americe, brala nátlak ze strany rodiny jako hrozbu pro svou osobní integritu. Její pozdější sňatek s Gogolem je proto pro ni také symbolickým přijetím svého původu.

Ale jak se retrospektivně dozvídáme, její návrat z Francie do Spojených států byl vlastně odklon z cesty, jakási vsuvka, nutná k tomu, aby došla smíření s kulturou svých rodičů, od které se snažila utéct co nejdál (fyzicky i obrazně). Do Spojených států se z Paříže vrátila kvůli svému snoubenci, taktéž Američanovi, se kterým se seznámila ve Francii. Ze svatby však nakonec sešlo po hádce, kterou rozpoutaly nelichotivé poznámky jejího snoubence o jejich společné návštěvě Indie, což Moushumi urazí a ona si tak poprvé uvědomí, že její původ pro ni má větší význam, než si myslela.

Že Paříž je místo, kam patří, si začne uvědomovat zhruba po roce manželství s Gogolem. I přesto, že si svého manžela váží, její touha po nezávislosti se ukáže jako silnější, takže jakmile se naskytne “příležitost,” jak z manželství uniknout a vrátit se do Paříže, Moushumi jí využije. Tato příležitost se objeví na scéně ztělesněná v její staré známosti jménem Dimitri Desjardins, která se zcela náhodou po letech znovuobjeví v jejím životě. To jí oživí staré vzpomínky na dobu, kdy ještě jako studentka toužila po nezávislosti, stále ještě svázaná vlivem tradičních hodnot v naprostém nesouladu s životním stylem mladých lidí v západní společnosti přelomu osmdesátých a devadesátých let dvacátého století. Přestože s Gogolem žijí stejně jako většina mladých Amerických párů (a jejich životní styl se tudíž velmi liší od toho, který vyznávala první generace imigrantů), si Moushumi zřejmě uvědomí, že vlastně Paříž nikdy opustit nechtěla. Teď se již necítí svázaná tradicemi spadajícími do určité kultury, ale touží po návratu tam, kam cítí, že patří. Do Paříže se ale vrátí až poté, co se její manžel dozví o jejím poměru s Dimitrijem.

Autorka Jhumpa Lahiriiová v románu *The Namesake* popisuje individuální vývoj čtyř hlavních postav směřujících k identitě, která, ač je silně ovlivněna kulturou země jejich původu, postavy charakterizuje především z lidského hlediska. V tomto vývoji je kulturní aspekt považován za jednou z mnoha důležitých součástí identity postav (a jeho akceptace je důležitým krokem vývoje), avšak není částí, která postavy definuje.

Bibliography

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. London: Fourth Estate, 2011.

Gogol, Nikolai. "The Overcoat. " In *The Overcoat and Other Short Stories*.
Translated by Isabel F. Hapgood. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2013.

Bhalla, Tamara. "Being (and Feeling) Gogol: Reading and Recognition in
Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *MELUS* 37, no. 1 (2012): 105-129. Accessed
February 27, 2014. doi: 10.1353/mel.2012.0013.

Caesar, Judith. "Gogol's Namesake: Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa
Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *Atenea* 27, no. 1 (2007): 103-119. Accessed April 4, 2014.

Dylan-Robbins, Sky. "Video: Jhumpa Lahiri at Work." *The New Yorker* video, 5:02.
September 25, 2013. <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/video-jhumpa-lahiri-at-work>.

Friedman, Natalie. "From Hybrids to Tourists: Children Of Immigrants In
Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *CRITIQUE: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 50,
no. 1 (2008): 111-128. Accessed January 13, 2015. doi: 10.3200/CRIT.50.1.111-
128.

Lahiri, Himadri. "Individual-Family Interface in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The
Namesake*." *Americana: E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary* 4, no. 2 (2008).
Accessed February 13, 2015. <http://americanajournal.hu/vol4no2/lahiri>.

Puttaiah, Venkatesh. "Paradoxes of Generational Breaks and Continuity in
Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *Asiatic* 6, no. 1 (2012): 84-94. Accessed January
13, 2015.

Schwartz, Seth J., Byron L. Zamboanga, and Robert S. Weisskirch. "Broadening the Study of the Self: Integrating the Study of Personal Identity and Cultural Identity." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no. 2 (2008): 635-51. Accessed January 14, 2015. doi: 10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00077.x.

Song , Min Hyung. "The Children of 1965: Allegory, Postmodernism, and *The Namesake*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 53, no. 3 (2007): 345-370. Accessed April 7, 2014.

Anotace

Jméno: Aneta Fibingerová

Fakulta: Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Palackého

Katedra: Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Název práce: Motiv cesty v románu Jhumpy Lahiriové *The Namesake*: Postavy Američanů indického původu a jejich spletité cesty k univerzální lidské identitě

Vedoucí práce: Prof. PhDr. Josef Jařab, CSc.

Počet stran: 80

Klíčová slova: americká literatura, imigrantská literatura, Američané indického původu, vývojový román, identita, motiv cesty, Jhumpa Lahiri

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá motivem cesty v románu Jhumpy Lahiriové *The Namesake* a jeho rolí ve vývoji identit hlavních postav románu. Román je vyprávěn střídavě z perspektiv čtyř hlavních postav (Američanů indického původu), jimiž jsou manželé Ashima a Ashoke Gangulioví, jejich syn Gogol a jeho manželka Moushumi Mazoomdarová, pro které je příznačný pohyb a cestování mezi kulturami. Motiv cesty se v románu objevuje v několika rovinách, v konkrétní i obrazné podobě, přičemž cesta za vlastní identitou každé postavy se dá chápat jako rámcová, pod kterou spadají všechny ostatní cesty, na které se postavy vydávají. Cílem práce je popsat vývoj každé postavy k identitě, kterou charakterizuje význam jejího bengálského jména: Ashima, „ta, jež je bez hranic,“ Ashoke, „ten, jenž je beze smutku,“ Nikhil (přízviskem Gogol), „ten, jenž je celistvý, všezahrnující,“ a Moushumi, „vlahý jihozápadní vánek.“

Annotation

Name: Aneta Fibingerová

Faculty: Philosophical Faculty of Palacký University in Olomouc

Department: Department of English and American Studies

Title of the thesis: The Journey Motif in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*: The Indian American Characters and Their Intricate Ways towards Universal Human Identity

Supervisor: Prof. PhDr. Josef Jařab, CSc.

Number of pages: 80

Key words: American literature, immigrant literature, Indian Americans, growing-up novel, identity, journey motif, Jhumpa Lahiri

The thesis is concerned with the journey motif in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and its influence on the main characters' identities. The story is narrated through the points of view of the main characters: Ashima Ganguli and her husband Ashoke, their son Gogol and his wife Moushumi Mazoomdar. The characters are characterized by travel and movement between cultures. The journey motif appears at various levels in the novel, both as a physical journey and a metaphorical one. The notion of one's development towards his or her identity can be seen as a journey as well. The aim of the thesis is to describe each character's journey (or development) towards an identity which is characterized by the meaning of his or her Bengali name: Ashima, "she who is limitless, without borders," Ashoke, "he who is without sorrow," Nikhil (nicknamed Gogol), "he who is entire, encompassing all," and Moushumi, "a damp southwesterly breeze."