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VIRTUES OF AMBITION

Review

The Namesake. By Jhumpa Lahiri. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003. 290 pp. $24.00.

Ashoke Ganguli rides a train from Calcutta to visit his grandfather, a retired professor of European literature. "'Read all the Russians, and then reread them,' his grandfather had said. 'They will never fail you.'" (12). Since early boyhood Ashoke has taken this admonition to heart, reading while his siblings play, reading even while walking, and late at night on the train he sits up with Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat," a story he knows intimately.

> [Ashoke's] mouth watered at the cold veal and cream pastries and champagne Akaky consumed the night his precious coat was stolen, in spite of the fact that Ashoke had never tasted these things himself. Ashoke was always devastated when Akaky was robbed in "a square that looked to him like a dreadful desert," leaving him cold and vulnerable, and Akaky's death, some pages later, never failed to bring tears to his eyes. (14)

By describing this achievement of imaginative sympathy so fulsomely, as well as with some mocking humor, Jhumpa Lahiri is also implicitly setting the bar for her own achievement in this novel. To what extent do we as readers come to care about Ashoke and his son? How real does this landscape become in our imaginations and how moved are we by it?

Ultimately, however, what Lahiri aspires to is considerably grander than whether readers become emotionally engaged with her characters. Her ambition is to play in the literary big leagues, with the Gogols and the Tolstoys—the Russians so prized by the Indian professor. This is extraordinarily refreshing, whether or not she fully succeeds, or fully succeeds as yet.

For her first book, *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of stories, Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize. As with even the best first collections, it is uneven. Some of the stories are quite extraordinary. Others are less extra. Still, such early honors, no matter how thrilling, must also be something of a burden for a young writer. How striking, then, to find her undaunted, her ambitions unblunted, in this first novel.

Notice that these ambitions aren't to be fashionable or trendy. She seems to have no interest in emerging as the next Ann Beattie or Raymond Carver or Don DeLillo. Nor is *The Namesake* a proto-screenplay, a deal for big bucks waiting to be negotiated. This isn't going to make her big bucks. Not enough happens. Hardly anything happens.

Instead, the ambition on display here is old-fashioned and *literary*. There aren't enough other writers with this in mind, or enough other good writers, to suggest that this ambition itself establishes the latest fashion. But neither is Lahiri entirely alone. Claire Messud, for example, also seems more interested in her recent set of novellas, *The Hunters*, in hearkening to Flaubert or Turgenev than to chasing best-seller status. More power to them. What makes it all the more encouraging is the notion that these young writers, and presumably others as well, are reading literature from ancient periods before, say, 1980.

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Gogol's "The Overcoat" plays a recurring role throughout *The Namesake*, even beyond staking out Lahiri's literary ambition. From first to last, literally, it serves as a structural element, and at times that feels a bit forced. The epigraph, for example, concerns the naming of Akaky Akakyevitch, the Russian story's central figure:

> The reader should realize himself that it could not have happened otherwise, and that to give him any other name was quite out of the question.

Obviously this resonates with the happenstance naming of

Ashoke's son, Gogol Ganguli. The issue of naming, its arbitrariness and its fatedness, its significance and its quality as empty cipher runs through the novel. But before Gogol can be named he must be born, and as if this were a work from the nineteenth century, we readers bear witness even in the anticipation of his birth.

His mother, Ashima, recently arrived from India, is enduring both Boston's harsh winter and cultural isolation. The one thing she craves, we learn in the opening sentences, is a mix of "Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion" to which she adds "salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper," a "humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks" (1). Thus, from the start, the universal cravings of pregnancy are imprinted as well with issues of identity—our tastes, our yearnings, define us. Ashima is satisfying her longing for India with this strange hybrid of American cereal and chilies. Ashima and Ashoke will spend the rest of their lives making these kinds of accommodations. They will always be strangers in a strange, if welcoming, land. Their son will be thoroughly American, all the more so in that he struggles with the burden of another culture carried by his parents.

But if the novel opens with Gogol's birth, it soon moves backward to the story of Ashoke's boyhood, his love of reading, and of course the rapture of "The Overcoat" on the late-night train from Calcutta to Jamshedpur. That trip, however, is never completed. Instead, the train derails, killing many, Ashoke nearly among them.

> But the lantern's light lingered, just long enough for Ashoke to raise his hand, a gesture that he believed would consume the small fragment of life left in him. He was still clutching a single page of "The Overcoat," crumpled tightly in his fist, and when he raised his hand the wad of paper dropped from his fingers. "Wait!" he heard a voice cry out. "The fellow by that book. I saw him move." (18)

This is the single most dramatic event of the narrative, and certainly its defining one as well. Ashoke's rebellious response to his recovery is to flee his assigned identity for America. It also leads, by apparent chance, to the naming of his son, and will provide rare moments of intimacy between them, including one well after Ashoke's death.

The honor of naming the son is given to Ashima's grandmother back in Calcutta. But the all-important letter is late to arrive, and the Gangulis discover that they cannot take their new baby home from the

hospital without at least a provisional name. They are befuddled.

> 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 he thinks of that moment not with terror, but with gratitude.
> "Hello, Gogol," he whispers. . . . (28)

So Gogol Ganguli appears to the world, his name a concoction about as odd as Rice Krispies and chili.

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Jhumpa Lahiri is herself an American born to Indian immigrant parents. Because of all the literature in English coming out of South Asia and the various sites of an Indian diaspora (London, the West Indies, Canada, New York, Africa) in recent years, some critics have immediately assigned Lahiri's work to the category of the postcolonial. But what differentiates postcolonial concerns about identity and naming from, say, the "immigrant" novels by Jews, Irish, and Germans of the mid-twentieth century, is the interplay between the individual character's struggle and the larger issues of national identity after imperial powers have withdrawn or been cast off.

There's nothing postcolonial about *The Namesake*. It's quaintly (and movingly) old-fashioned. Yes, there may be resonances with those twentieth-century novels of earlier American immigrants, but they too trace their defining narrative dynamic—of a character struggling with the norms of his parents and of society and toward the achievement of a self-defined moral identity—to the roots of nineteenth-century realism, of Balzac and Dickens.

Gogol Ganguli's name causes discomfort from the start. Intended as a pet name for use only by the family, it is to be superseded by the more appropriate and formal "Nikhil" when he first enrolls in school. But because the five-year-old Gogol doesn't respond to "Nikhil," the school authorities stymie his parents' intentions. So Gogol he remains.

A decade later, when Gogol has become very much a modestly rebellious teen, his father presents him with a copy of Nikolai Gogol's stories.

> "I feel a special kinship with Gogol," Ashoke says, "more than with any other writer. Do you know why?"
> "You like his stories."
> "Apart from that. He spent most of his adult life outside his homeland. Like me."
> Gogol nods. "Right."
> "And there is another reason." (77)

Ashoke intends to tell his son the story of the train wreck that changed his life, but the boy is fiddling with a Beatles' record and the father changes his mind. The book of stories is slipped onto a bookshelf where it will wait, like a gun on the mantel, to go off in act 3.

What do teenagers loathe more than anything else? Being different, standing out. It's not being *Indian* that's the problem. "Gogol" is a burden precisely because it's *not* Indian—it doesn't go with Ganguli. When he visits M.I.T. with some high school friends, he meets Kim.

> But he doesn't want to tell Kim his name. He doesn't want to endure her reaction, to watch her lovely blue eyes grow wide. . . . He remembers the other name that had once been chosen for him, the one that should have been.
> "I'm Nikhil," he says for the first time in his life. (96)

And earns his first kiss.

About to go off to college himself, Gogol soon announces to his parents that he intends to change his name legally to "Nikhil." The debate and then the legal event are simple, flat—easier than even Gogol had dreamed. Lahiri handles this beautifully. She knows when to go for drama, and when drama is better served in its abeyance.

> "Then change it," his father said simply, quietly, after a while.
> "Really?"
> "In America anything is possible. Do as you wish." (100)

As with life—realism is supposed to be realistic after all—Gogol's character continues to be refined by moving away from the private world of his family and into the public, social embrace of college, his profession, and a series of women. Ruth, the girl at Yale, who is transformed by a semester abroad. Maxine, the relaxed woman he meets while studying architecture. She lives with her casually sophisticated and ever-so-WASP parents in their town house, not to mention the idyllic

cottage in farthest New Hampshire.

Increasingly, he is Gogol only with family and—more tellingly—with the narrator. For all the world he has become Nikhil. The family he sees less and less until, with a stunning haphazardness, his father dies of a heart attack while out of town. It is Gogol who must fly out to Cleveland to identify Ashoke's body, its face "yellow and waxy, a thickened, oddly bloated image. . . . The only thing that feels familiar is the mustache . . ."(172).

Ashoke's death and the ceremony of mourning with the extended community of Indians in New England, bring his wife, Gogol, and Gogol's sister together into a renewed orientation. Going back to his life as it had been with Maxine, in which there is no room, no air for another culture or family, is predictably impossible. What is unpredictable is the trajectory of his relationship with Moushumi, whom he eventually agrees to see reluctantly, at the pleading of his mother. Moushumi is the girl his parents might have picked for an arranged marriage like their own. In a sense she represents everything that Gogol has fled. But what she offers is also everything that arranged marriages offer: the familiar, the comfortable, the support and understanding of family and community.

> He had not expected to enjoy himself, to be attracted to her in the least. 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. (199)

She is attractive and certainly sophisticated. And they understand each other intuitively in some ways; in others not at all. Moushumi and Gogol do continue to see each other and then marry in a faux-Indian extravaganza presided over by others.

Lahiri allows the instability, self-deception, and simple deception of this marriage to undermine what might have been a certain kind of happy ending. It turns out that this is not the fictional universe of Austen, but of the darker Balzac and Dickens. The ending is more mediated, more ironic: we don't have the marriage of the perfect twain, but an isolated individual who, through his experience of the world and some suffering, has achieved a moral identity. Gogol—educated, scarred, tested—is now ready to read. He has become a fully realized character, much like Rastignac shaking his fist at mighty Paris at the end of *Pere Goriot* or the wistful, ironic Pip of *Great Expectations*.

It's time for that pistol on the mantel to go off. Gogol's sister has married, and his mother, Ashima, is selling the house and returning to India. At a farewell party for the old Indian crowd—such ceremonies are another recurring element—Gogol slips away to his boyhood room and discovers the book of stories given him by his father. The moment has arrived to test what reading (and writing) can accomplish.

***David H. Lynn**'s most recent novel is* Wrestling with Gabriel.