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The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri: The Accident of Inheritance

"Our inheritance was inscribed in no testament"
René Char

In *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri narrates the tortuous route from childhood to early adulthood of Gogol Ganguli, a U.S.-born descendant of Indian immigrants whose name bears the stigmas of a Bengali practice of nomenclature overridden by American law. Through Gogol's predicament, Lahiri points to the paradoxes of identity construction for those among second-generation "desis" who have confused filial and affiliative bonds with their present and their past. By approaching *The Namesake* along the general axis of filiation and affiliation developped by Said, I wish to show how Lahiri uses Gogol's derailed af/filiations to investigate the stock theme of cultural hybridity while proposing a new understanding of the circuitous logic of inheritance and the obliqueness of identity.

The Namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel, was much awaited by her readership after her collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001. Lahiri is emblematic of a new flourishing generation of Indian American writers which seems to be taking over from pioneering figures such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni or Bharati Mukherjee and broadening the experience of migration to that of the second-generation members of the "desi" community, who are caught between their Indian descent and their American birth.

The Namesake traces the tortuous route from childhood to early adulthood of Gogol Ganguli, an American of Indian descent who is condemned to suffer the ridicule of a "pet name" turned "good name" in a place where such distinctions do not exist. Gogol's desperate attempt to cope with a name that signals him to everybody's attention in the United States echoes his struggle to come to terms with an awkward sense of identity and a multi-faceted inheritance. Through Gogol's quest for self, Lahiri investigates not so much the generational divide between first and second-generation members of migrant communities as the difficulties faced by "desis" eager to forge a coherent sense of self while struggling with divided loyalties and conflicting identifications. To the American-born descendants of Indian immigrants, cultural inheritances are indeed composite; lineage and genealogy have been ruptured or rerouted. Broken filiations have been partly replaced with compensatory affiliative relationships in which the filiative force-field of the ancestral culture is still immense, which creates a profound sense of guilt and self-fragmentation for the U.S.-born children unable to hang on to a "pure" ancestral culture.

Therefore, as opposed to what happens in books written by Indian immigrants such as Salman Rushdie or Bharati Mukherjee, in *The Namesake* the cultural mongrelisation of the United States is a reality that begs for no celebration but seems instead to require a new understanding of the circuitousness of identity. In this context, the critical concept of the relation between filiation and affiliation developed by Edward Said in "Secular Criticism," his introduction to *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, will be key to my analysis. By approaching *The Namesake* along the general axis of filiation and affiliation, this study aims to show how Lahiri investigates the stock theme of cultural hybridity while using Gogol's derailed af/filiations to discuss the circuitous logic of inheritance and the obliqueness of identity. But first of all, it will be useful to turn to Said's distinction between filiation and affiliation.

In "Secular Criticism," Edward Said refers to the literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to distinguish between filiation and affiliation. The critic points out that this literature is fraught with "childless couples, orphaned children, aborted childbirths and unregenerately celibate men and women," which he sees as the indication of a "failure of the generative impulse" (Said 16). This failure of the natural order of authority, or rather this crisis in the filial order, accounts for the emergence of a new kind of compensatory order, that, "whether it is a party, an institution, a culture, a set of beliefs or even a world-vision, provides men and women with a new form of relationship" – what Said calls affiliation but which, he insists, is also a new system of belonging.

It is worth dwelling on this point a little. To the critic, the shift from filiation to affiliation does not necessarily imply that the filial order is challenged, or even questioned. By using the crisis of filiation in European high modern culture as his example, Said reveals that the new affiliative orders of that era seek instead to "reinstate vestiges of the kind of authority associated in the past with filiative order" (19). In brief, Said asserts that affiliation can mask new genealogies of authority. In his own words, "affiliation sometimes reproduces filiation, sometimes makes its own forms" (24).

The double nature of affiliation as well as the porosity of the (untenable?) distinction between filiation and affiliation will be crucial here, for indeed if *The Namesake* suggests that affiliation represents a potential for being, it also implies that some affiliations can increase alienation and hinder self-integration. To those born in the New World and yet still claimed by the Old World, filiation is always partial. In her book, I will contend, Lahiri further problematizes Said's approach to the relation between filiation and affiliation by showing that not only does Gogol's quest for "total" affiliations hardly ever heal the wound of partial filiation, but, in a paradoxical way, it also prevents him from claiming the most life-enhancing part of his legacy.

Born under the auspices of a Bengali tradition overridden by American law, Gogol bears a name that approximates the requirements of both cultures while connecting him to none. Significantly, the conditions of Gogol's birth and

naming suggest that his identity originates as much in the accidental as in the conflicting "double space" of America and India, for indeed "Gogol" is a name by default, the name his father comes up with owing to a string of accidents. The central accident occurs when the letter sent from India by Ashima's grandmother and containing the "good name" of Ashoke's and Ashima's son gets lost in the post, causing them to postpone the "real" naming of their son. Compelled by the American legislation to fill in a birth certificate with his son's name to release him from hospital, and yet determined as he is to wait for the precious letter so as to conform to Bengali tradition, Ashoke compromises by naming his son after his favourite author. Little does he then realize that the name he merely intends to be a "pet name" for his son will in fact be recorded as his "good name" in the context of the U.S. bureaucracy.

As the narrator explains in the first chapter of *The Namesake*, the granting of both a "pet name" and a "good name" is a Bengali tradition which serves as a reminder that "one is not all things to all people." As opposed to good names the use of which is strictly restricted to the outside world, "pet names" are a "persistent remnant of childhood," used only by family or intimates. The "good name" Ashoke and Ashima decide on, Nikhil, means "he who is entire, encompassing all" (Lahiri 56). Yet, the synthesis and transcendence heralded by "Nikhil" rouses in Gogol a feeling of distress and of profound repulsion, to the point of somatisation. His bouts of vomiting testify to Gogol's visceral refusal to appropriate a name that might induce a change of identity:

To Gogol's parents, the Bengali practice is above all a sign of cultural belonging, a ritual which accompanies the passage from infancy to childhood. Yet, while this tradition stresses the plurality of one's identity in a context of "pure Indian culture" or in a migrant situation in which cultures may be juxtaposed but mutually exclusive, here Gogol's visceral reaction signals his inability to retain such local practice. Gogol's refusal to be Nikhil, "someone he doesn't know, who doesn't know him," (57) evokes a self-imposed defence against an inevitable upheaval in his life. Besides, his vomiting at the thought of being split into a private "Gogol" and a public "Nikhil" suggests that he resents the emergence of a discrete public self whose af/filiation with the American culture would rupture an exclusivist concept of his filiation and open an unbridgeable gap between his parent's cultural identity and his own.

Ironically, Lahiri counterpoises Gogol's intricate relation to his name with his younger sister's comparative ease of identity. Because they are unwilling to repeat the errors of the past, Ashoke and Ashima decide to give their youngest child only one name, Sonali, that both combines pet name and good name, "as many of their Bengali friends have already done." The translation of a Bengali practice of nomenclature into an American context probably implies that Ashoke and Ashima, along with their migrant community, have evolved since Gogol's birth a new set of values to live by in the New World. Their growing cultural fluidity is apparent in the plasticity of their daughter's name which, in

the domestic sphere, progressively changes into Sonu, Sona and then Sonia: "Sonia makes her a citizen of the world. It's a Russian link to her brother, it's European, South American. Eventually it will be the name of the Indian prime minister's Italian wife" (62). Thus, although Ashoke and Ashima have finally resigned themselves to altering the Bengali practice of nomenclature, the mutation of Gogol's sister "good name" into an array of "pet names" shows that the Gangulis have nonetheless retained a sense of their own cultural particularity.

Just as Sonia's fluidity of identity is represented by the high flexibility of her name, Gogol's rigidity of identity is characterized by a name that is "short and catchy, [*which*] resists mutation" (76). Likewise, while Sonia's name and its earlier mutations suggest her affiliation to both the New World and the Old, Gogol's turning to the source of his own name, the famous 19th-century Russian writer, only increases his feeling of isolation: "The writer he is named after – Gogol isn't his first name. […] Not only does Gogol Ganguli have a pet name turned good name, but a last name turned first name. […] No one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name" (78). Here, Gogol's distress at not sharing his name with anybody hints at his inability to position himself in the world. Unable as he is to locate himself in a community or in any collective myth of origin, Gogol evolves from a sense of profound disconnectedness towards a growing rejection of his name, which "manages […] to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear" (76). Paradoxically, if Gogol as a child had desperately wanted to maintain an exclusivist notion of his identity by viscerally clinging to one and only one name, Gogol as a teenager rejects his "identity-as-Gogol" and forcefully renames himself as Nikhil, as an attempt to eradicate a former self by way of law. Significantly, the turn from "Gogol" to "Nikhil" is legitimated by an American institution. Indeed, Lahiri's character now resorts to his "Nikhil" identity as a way of negotiating the passage from childhood to adulthood and of indulging more freely in "all American" teenage pastimes and pleasures.

Unsurprisingly, Gogol as a young adult is a character on the run, who seeks belonging away from his broken filiation and thus gradually loses all sense of identity. By focusing on Gogol's unfruitful attempts at affiliating with others, the following part of this essay aims to illustrate how affiliation can surreptitiously sustain the quest for a sense of "total" identity and, more specifically, how an exclusivist approach to culture can indeed reroute affiliation to the extent of deferring or even undermining one's potential for self-reinvention and newness. I will firstly show how Gogol's infatuation with Maxine, an all-American "golden girl" still living with her parents typifies how affiliative relationships can boil down to mere "second level" filiations. Through Maxine, not only does Gogol fall in love with a particular person, but he also affiliates himself with her family, their surroundings and, most of all, their way of living. Significantly, Gogol's decision to flee his own family by settling in New York culminates in his frequent

visits to Maxine's family, to the point of wholesale immersion. By sharing the life of the Ratliffs, a European-American upper-middle-class family, Gogol gets acquainted with a world that represents the polar opposite of his own.

The much privileged universe of the Ratliffs is indeed a world combining whiteness, ownership, rootedness and guiltless consumerism with cultural awareness and hospitality. In a way, the Ratliffs embody the promises of an upgraded version of the American Dream, sprinkled with a measure of ethnic chic. They are "vociferous at the table," where they indulge in food ranging from polenta through bouillabaisse to French chocolate and Italian wine. They "are opinionated about things [*Gogol's*] parents are indifferent to: movies, exhibits at museums, good restaurants, the design of everyday things" (133) while being sufficiently tuned in to Asian cultures to be able to speak at length about Hindu fundamentalism, Indian carpets and miniatures as well as Buddhist stupas. Both "satisfied" and "intrigued" by Gogol's background and his so-called "Mediterranean" looks, the Ratliffs' interest in their exotic guest seems dubious enough to evoke the commodification of ethnicity that bell hooks denounces in her book *Black Looks*: "Within commodity culture," she states, "ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (Hooks 21).

Though amazed by "how much Maxine emulates her parents, how much she respects their tastes and their ways" (138), Gogol's failure to define his own points of reference suggests nevertheless that he partakes in his girlfriend's passive obedience to her family. Lured by a world in which all sense of duty and responsibility seems superfluous, "in willing exile from his own life," Gogol fleetingly and half-wittingly realizes that the luxurious smoothness of the Ratliffs' lifestyle conceals a hierarchical order whose authority is as impalpable as it is inescapable:

> For some reason it is dependence, not adulthood, he feels. […] He is responsible for nothing in the house; in spite of their absence, Gerald and Lydia continue to lord, however blindly, over their days. It is their books he reads, their music he listens to. Their front door he unlocks when he gets back from work. Their telephone messages he takes down (142).

This is again reminiscent of Said who underlines the multi-faceted nature of affiliation, which can be either coercive or life-enhancing or sometimes both. By stressing that some affiliative relations "surreptitiously duplicate the closed and tightly-knit family structure that secures hierarchical relationships to one another" (Said 21), the critic contends that the filiative force-field of affiliation can mask new genealogies of power. Through the study of the ways in which culture builds an affiliative network that conveniently falls out of view only to be replaced by seemingly "natural" or "self-evident" creeds and associations, Said demonstrates how dominant cultures affiliate and shows that modern authority appears entirely "self-evident" because it naturalizes and rationalizes its own affiliations through culture.

In *The Namesake*, Gogol's affiliated filial relation to the Ratliffs illustrates Said's point concerning the surreptitious way in which a dominant culture affiliates one for the entire benefit of the bearers of cultural authority. But nowhere is the Ratliffs' authority more impalpable and insidious than in their relation to their second home in New Hampshire, a lake house which comes to symbolize their own place of origins. Significantly, the Ratliffs' property is a heaven on earth, "utterly disconnected from the world," consisting of a main house to accommodate Maxine's parents and an unheated cabin, "no bigger than a cell" (152), to accommodate Gogol and Maxine. While the division of space blatantly reflects the hierarchical order of the family, the cell-like cabin of the Ratliffs' daughter hints at a carceral environment. What is more, Lydia's and Gerald's property is a resting place in more ways than one. A small private graveyard is indeed situated within the confines of the estate "where all the members of the Ratliff family lie buried […] where Maxine will be buried one day" (153), which gruesomely spells out what it may mean to be rooted in one place.

Yet, in this paradise of origins, permanence is coupled with immobility and belonging with submission. Feeling free in this "cloistered wilderness" and fascinated as he is by a world of "full" filiations and of "direct" inheritances, Gogol fails to see that the freedom he experiences is indeed a mock liberty. In this context, the absence of physical barriers encircling the Ratliffs' place of origins is only a lure which naturalizes the absoluteness of their supremacy:

> The family seems to possess every piece of the landscape, not only the house itself but every tree and blade of grass. Nothing is locked, not the main house, or the cabin that he and Maxine sleep in. Anyone could walk in. He thinks of the alarm system now installed in his parents' house, wonders why they cannot relax about their physical surroundings in the same way. The Ratliffs own the moon that floats over the lake, and the sun and the clouds (154-155).

In this passage, the abrupt switch to free indirect speech provides an access to Gogol's thoughts while putting them at an ironic distance and passing silent judgement on them – a narrative device which aptly emphasizes the extent of Gogol's self-deception. For Gogol's over-readiness to find fault with his parents' fear of intrusion only matches his reluctance to realize that the Ratliffs' thorough possession of the grounds spares them the trouble of feeling anxious about their physical surroundings. Through this narrative technique, Lahiri suggests that the absolute and invisible control which the Ratliffs have of their land – and, more metaphorically, the grasp they have on their own uninterrupted myth of origins – is not restricted to territory alone. It also filters into Gogol's psyche, driving him to rationalize the absoluteness of the Ratliffs' authority, as if he was unconsciously carrying out the wishes of the dominant group.

If affiliated filial authority comes down to a form of colonial authority, as Said contends, then clearly Gogol's "second level filiation" to the Ratliffs both

produces and consolidates authority by colonial means – that is, through mental alienation. In this respect, Maxine's lack of longing for any other life, any another past or any other identity than her own indicates less a "gift for accepting her life" (138), as Gogol takes it to be, than a total submission to her parents' ways and a complete suppression of her own aspirations. Maxine's unacknowledged alienation represents the flip side to the bliss of "total" identity, an identity in which one feels so rooted in one's filiation, so "fixed" by one's origins, that the self fossilizes and maintains its own reification in the conformity to pre-existing models. In a world in which there is no room for individuality or for "identity-as-difference," it is significant that Gogol and Maxine's relation takes on incestuous undertones. By making love "on the pearl gray sheets of Gerald and Lydia's bed" (142), they seem to ritualistically enact their own frozen identification with the bearers of authority and, consequently, their own disappearance as subjects. Through Gogol's affiliation to the Ratliffs, Lahiri pictures "America" as a normative, vampiric force – a world of power gone mad but only in a surreptitious way. Of Gogol's and Maxine's bonds with this version of "America," one picture emerges: that of Gogol striving to shield himself from mosquitoes "engorged with his blood," "always too high up to kill," while Maxine, "unbothered and unbitten, begs him to get back to sleep" (143).

In many respects, the sudden death of Gogol's father marks a turning point in the narrative. In fact, Ashoke's death shatters Gogol's sense of identity to such an extent that it brings about a complete renegotiation of his previous identifications. Indeed it prompts the protagonist's determination to disaffiliate himself from Maxine as he travels on his own to Cleveland in order to identify his father's body at the morgue and to empty Ashoke's apartment. Through his refusal to take Maxine's compelling advice and check into a hotel, not only does Gogol pay a tribute to his father's memory, but he also metaphorically reasserts his filiation by occupying his father's territory: "He does not want to inhabit an anonymous room. As long as he is here, he doesn't want to leave his father's apartment empty" (177).

Although the death of his father causes Lahiri's character to claim a filiation that he half-rejected until that point, his belated commitment to his own lineage remains fraught with ambiguity. For one thing, Ashoke's death revives familial and communal expectations of what Gogol's life should be. Though reluctant to let his mother interfere with his personal life, Gogol proves for instance unable to oppose Ashima's determination to set him up with a woman she deems suitable. Torn between conflicting feelings, Gogol starts dating Moushumi, a second-generation Asian American who is a family acquaintance of the Gangulis. Even if Gogol's attraction to Moushumi seems genuine, his courtship is marked by a sense of uncertainty and purposelessness. Significantly, although Gogol and Moushumi meet up on a seemingly independent basis, their relation clearly develops along the lines of an arranged marriage. Recurrent jokes about

making their parents happy only constitute for Gogol and Moushumi an illusory means of gaining mastery over a relation whose outcome seems almost operated by remote control. In this respect, the wedding ceremony proves emblematic of a marriage that is predominantly designed to fulfil their parents' expectations:

> It's not the type of wedding either of them really wants. They would have preferred the sort of venues their American friends choose, the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens or the Metropolitan Club or the Boat House in Central Park. […] But their parents insist on inviting close to three hundred people, and serving Indian food, and providing easy parking for all the guests. […] It's what they deserve, they joke, for having listened to their mothers, and for getting together in the first place, and the fact that they are united in their resignation makes the consequences somewhat bearable (219).

This excerpt shows that Gogol and Moushumi have internalized familial and communal pressures to such an extent that they resign themselves to observing all the customs and artefacts of a typical Indian wedding in spite of their hybrid cultural heritage. In this respect, the pyre which is essential to an authentic Indian wedding but that cannot be ignited here because of the hotel's regulations represents an ironical reminder that this more-Indian-than-Indian celebration takes place, after all, in the United States. According to Hindu tradition, the groom and his bride must walk around the pyre seven times with their dresses knotted together while proclaiming their seven promises of love to each other. The fire symbolizes the ultimate witness that seals their union as husband and wife. In Lahiri's book though, Gogol and Moushumi are forced to walk round an unlit pyre which comes therefore to signify the futility of their union.

For all his passivity and obedience to the ways of his ancestry, Gogol nonetheless realizes that his marriage to Moushumi constitutes less an occasion for his migrant community to celebrate the bonding of a man and a woman than a means to perpetuate a communal fantasy of unadulterated Bengaliness: "He is aware that together he and Moushmi are fulfilling a collective, deep-seated desire – because they're both Bengali, everyone can let his hair down a bit" (224). In such a context where communal and filial authority feed off each other, little room is left for the second generation to evolve new cultural identities without buckling under profound feelings of powerlessness, inadequacy and guilt. Caught as he is in confused filial and affiliated bonds to his ancestry, Gogol belittles himself by comparison with his parentage and feels at the same time imprisoned in his heritage. More specifically, his uneasiness at wearing Ashoke's suit indicates that he feels both undeserving and overshadowed by the memory of his father. Significantly, Gogol's feelings of inadequacy culminate in fantasies of self-extinction in which he disconnects from the present of the ceremony and pictures himself passively attending Moushumi's marriage to Graham, the man she nearly married two years before.

By disparaging himself in contrast to his dead father and to his absent rival, Gogol invokes imposing phantoms of the past against which he regresses to the

roles of spectator and substitute. If his fixation on Ashoke and Graham emphasizes Gogol's inability to detach himself from the past, it also betrays a curious inclination on his part to indulge in fictions constructing him as inferior and powerless. Here, Gogol very much resembles a person who gives up the struggle for self-definition and decides to get inside the whale's belly, to borrow one of Salman Rushdie's famous metaphors. Indeed, what underlies Gogol's self-deprecatory fantasies looks like a tactic of retreat, as if succumbing in his imagination to phantasmal figures of maleness constituted a strategy to withdraw from the present, shirk all responsibility for his marriage and defer marshalling the resources for self-invention. What Rushdie says in his article "Outside the Whale" is that "however much we may wish to return to the womb, we cannot be unborn" (Rushdie 99). Yet, in *The Namesake*, Gogol's marriage to Moushumi seems to compel him to a dead, still-born identity even as it aggravates his reluctance to outgrow his cocoon. Likewise, Moushumi's refusal to *adopt* Gogol's name, "not even with a hyphen" (Lahiri 143), betrays her unwillingness to evolve a new set of identities through an affiliation with her husband. Gogol's and Moushumi's union is then synonymous with personal stasis, maybe because their relation depends so much on an anatomy of identity predominantly grounded in the archaeology of a shared ancestry. As their relation develops, not only does their marriage come to constitute a precarious retreat from a "whaleless" world, so to speak, but it also becomes gradually associated with a sense of surrender and resignation that soon provokes its downfall. Unsurprisingly, their marriage falls apart soon after its first anniversary, leaving Gogol to ponder on the inevitability of his divorce: "They had both acted on the same impulse, that was their mistake. They had both sought comfort in each other, and in their shared world, perhaps for the sake of novelty, or out of the fear that that world was slowly dying" (284).

Of Gogol's predicament, Lahiri's book offers an open-ended resolution. If in Mira Nair's cinematographic adaptation of the book the sense of liberation Gogol claims to feel suggests that he has managed to extricate himself from his desperate and sterile search for origin, the novel conveys no such clear sense of relief on his part. Gogol's life indeed seems to come full circle by the close of Lahiri's book, though his divorce enables him to put his parents' achievement into proper perspective and causes him to marvel at their ability to raise two children in the U.S. while affiliating themselves with an alien culture "in spite of what was missing, with a stamina he fears he does not possess himself" (281).

As Ashima decides to sell the Gangulis' family house before setting up to live part-time in India, Gogol travels one last time to Pemberton Road and reassesses his bond to his family through the recollection of the many train journeys which preceded this one: "There was nothing, apart from his family, to draw him home, to make this train journey, again and again" (282). Interestingly, while Gogol eventually constructs a place of origins through the memory of his journeys between New York and Pemberton Road, Ashima's recollection of her many

journeys between India and the U.S. leads her to realize that although "she still does not feel fully at home within these walls on Pemberton Road, she knows that this is home nevertheless – the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her, needing to be packed up, given away, thrown out bit by bit" (280). It may seem paradoxical that this redefinition of "home" across generations coincides here with its loss. Yet, it is through the simultaneous loss and definition of their place of origins, and more broadly, through their oscillations between "here" and "there," that Gogol and Ashima manage to map out an imaginary "geography of the self" which, in turn, enables them to re-territorialize themselves and to negotiate new subject positions.

In this context, it is fitting that Gogol's symbolization of "home" occurs during the last party his mother throws at Pemberton Road. By hosting the last "Ashima's Christmas Eve party" at the Gangulis' family house, Gogol's mother consecrates for the very last time the provisional centre of her own "geography of the self." Significantly, "Ashima's Christmas Eve party" is an invented celebration especially designed to introduce the "rules of Christmas" to the newcomers of her migrant community. Ironically, whilst U.S.-born Gogol regards Christmas as a merely adopted tradition, "an accident of circumstances, a celebration not really meant to be" (286), he comes nonetheless to witness the extent to which the Bengali community now relies on his mother to convert that American custom and to build a bridge of understanding between the New World and the Old. The memory that it was for his sake as a child that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning the "rules of Christmas" endows Ashima's achievement with greater significance even as it causes Gogol to reposition himself at the centre of his mother's self-reinvention. Indeed, if Ashima has managed to appropriate the alien customs of her host country for the sake of her children, Gogol realizes, she has also translated and transformed these customs on her own terms, reinventing herself as an "interpreter of cultures" for the sake of her community. This emergent facet of both his maternal and diasporic heritage seems to trigger off Gogol's new mobility of mind, for he is now able to revisit and reinterpret his own past in the light of his family's "accidental" history:

> In so many ways, his family's life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, one accident begetting another. […] And yet these events have formed Gogol, shaped him, determined who he is. They were things for which it was impossible to prepare but which one spent a lifetime looking back at, trying to accept, interpret, comprehend. Things that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end (282).

Faced with the loss of his place of origins and with the departure of his mother to the "separate world" of India, Lahiri's protagonist eventually manages to construct a sense of self by appropriating the chance elements of his familial and personal history, as if this "play" between loss, separation and recollection

constituted a mainspring of identity. Paradoxically, the impending loss of home thus represents a "gain" in terms of identity construction, maybe because this loss creates a vacancy that can only be filled by restaging this place of origins into the symbolic. In this respect, Gogol's turn to the "circumstantial" part of his identity signals a new ability on his part to transform a quest for origin into an examination of descent. As Michel Foucault remarks in his article "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History":

> To follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents. (Foucault, 146)

What underlies Gogol's belated acknowledgement of his "accidental" identity is that there is no such thing as an identity derived from some mysterious "essence" or myth of origins. History keeps shaping and rerouting the course of one's life to such an extent that it is "the exteriority of accidents," as Foucault contends, that stands for the true "core" of one's being. Although this may sound universal enough, Lahiri suggests in her book that the denial of the role of history in the forging of one's self can be even trickier in a migrant context, perhaps because to be a member of a diasporic community is, in a way, to be a product of history. Gogol's predicament illustrates how the dismissal of the rerouted elements of his familial and personal history confines him to borrowed selves and exclusivist fictions of "total" identity even as it severs him from the most dynamic and valuable part of his heritage.

Significantly, it is only through the reappraisal of the circumstantial part of his identity that Gogol manages to claim his legacy, which starts with the "string of accidents" deriving from the train accident that nearly caused his father's death yet also provoked his migration to the New World. By claiming a paternal legacy constituted of a near-death in the Old World and a rebirth in the New, Gogol reaffirms his bond to Ashoke, "the one that transcends grief," and reinvents himself as heir to a dynamic migrant community. In a metaphorical way, Gogol's reassertion of his filiation culminates in the salvaging of a collection of short stories the reading of which reading saved his father's life during the train crash. Because the author of this book, Gogol, is the man Lahiri's protagonist was named after, the chance retrieval of this gift signals too the healing of a broken sense of self. Gogol's life comes once more full circle as he starts reading his father's gift. Yet, the shift of tense in the last lines of the narrative suggests that it now conjugates itself in the future.

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