COLECCIÓN CONOCIMIENTO CONTEMPORÁNEO

Nuevas investigaciones y perspectivas sobre literatura, cultura y pensamiento

Coords.
Salud Adelaida Flores Borjabad
Inmaculada Respaldiza Salas
Romina Grana

Dykinson, S.L.

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"WHAT THE SON WISHES TO FORGET, THE GRANDSON WISHES TO REMEMBER": INTERGENERATIONAL ISSUES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*[*]

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1. INTRODUCTION

The influx of people from India is among the least-known immigration movement in the United States. The first recorded arrival of an Indian citizen to the U.S. dates from 1790. Taking this event as the starting point of an Indian presence in America, Mukesh Bagoria establishes four phases in the history of this specific migratory flow (2009-2010, p. 895). The most recent of these, which occurred after the enactment of the 1965 Immigration laws abolishing the quota system for arrivals from specific nations, was the most influential in helping to shape the current composition of Asian-Americans on American soil.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the Asian Indian population was 3.2 millions, a considerable number of those concentrated in large urban areas such as Chicago and New York (Pavri, 2014, p. 165). Since the 1960s, many of these immigrants joined graduate programs in American universities and colleges. Years before, in 1951, India's first prime minister Jawarhalal Nehru (1889-1964) had established, in Kharagpur, the first of seven Indian Institutes of Technology. Due to the enormous surplus of engineers that ensued, thousands of graduate students applied to

[*] The research of this paper was supported by the project CEI Patrimonio, University of Almería.

doctorate programs in American universities, most notably in California and Massachusetts. In this regard, Thomas Friedman notes that:

> If you were smart, educated Indian, the only way you could fulfill your potential was by leaving the country and, ideally, going to America, where some twenty-five thousand graduates of India's top engineering schools have settled since 1953, greatly enriching America's knowledge pool thanks to their education, which was subsidized by Indian taxpayers (2006, p. 127).

Those highly-educated Indians, English speaking and overwhelmingly urban, entered the U.S. on exchange visitors' visas, and many brought their spouses with them. "It was as if someone installed a brain drain that filled up in New Delhi and emptied in Palo Alto," observes Friedman (2006, p. 128).

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, in 2012 India ranked second in terms of graduate students sent to the U.S., with many of these finding work in the information technology industries (Pavri, 2014, p. 165). In the following years, these highly-skilled Indians tended to be hired as university teachers or found promising jobs in American corporations. Nowadays, the Asian Indian community is considered to be one of the most affluent and educated minorities in the U.S.

Jhumpa Lahiri is the daughter of one of those Indian immigrant families arriving in the US in the late 1960s. Her family left Britain when Lahiri's father found a job as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island. She grew up and studied in the U.S., and began publishing short story collections and novels. Among other topics, her fiction explores the travails that Indian Americans suffer in adapting to their host country. Indeed, like many of those highly-skilled immigrants, Ashoke Ganguli, the father of the main character of her first novel, *The Namesake*, had traveled to Massachusetts to study fiber optics at MIT (Lahiri, 2004, p. 9).

2. GOALS

The aim of this chapter is to explore the intergenerational conflicts that affect the Gangulis, an Indian family which migrated from India to the U.S. in Lahiri's *The Namesake*. In my approach, I will adopt Marcus L.

Hansen's three-generation paradigm. In the novel, Ashoke Ganguli and his wife Ashima clearly represent first-generation immigrants, while the character of their son, Gogol Ganguli, reflects traits which correspond, interchangeably, to members of the second generation and third generation. I will offer a brief introduction to the author, a realist Indian-American writer cited by *The New Yorker* in 2000 as one of the twenty most important young American authors of the new century. I will address the critical response to the novel, before offering an interpretation of the complex existence of its main protagonist, Gogol Ganguli, in his struggle for assimilation, a struggle which leads him to inhabit the borderlands of American society, before returning to the culture of his ancestors following the sudden death of his father. I will also consider Mira Nair's 2006 film adaptation of the novel, focusing on a number of scenes and ideas which are explored in both the novel and on screen.

Born in London in 1967, Jhumpa Lahiri is the daughter of Bengali immigrants who, having lived for a time in the U.K., moved to the U.S. when she was only three years old. She chose not to use her real name, Nilanjana Sudeshna, as an author, taking instead the penname Jhumpa Lahiri. Raised in Rhode Island, she gained a total of four graduate degrees, including a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies from Boston University. Her literary debut was *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), a short story collection that was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, while her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), earned both public and critical recognition. Three years later, in 2006, this novel was made into a film, based on a script written by Lahiri herself and adapted by Indian filmmaker Mira Nair.

Regarded as a fine example of the Indian diaspora, Lahiri's novel is largely based on her own experience as a foreigner in the U.S., having moved with her family from Britain to Rhode Island when she was three. The novel exploits the binaries of home and host, as well as tropes of ethnicity, while also addressing cultural clichés such as those of naming a child following Hindu traditions, arranged marriages, Indian food, and religious practices. However, as Natalie Friedman has noted (2008, p. 112), Lahiri's depiction of her main characters moves beyond the clichés of the "American Dream".

Some critics have seen *The Namesake* as a postcolonial novel, and David H. Lynn considers that it recalls "those twentieth-century novels of earlier American immigrants" (2004, p. 163). In this regard, Tamara Bhalla has argued that discussions of the novel have led to debates on issues relating specifically to South Asian American communities in the U.S., namely, "class privilege, assimilation, the maintenance of traditional gender roles, inter- and intra-racial dating, and immigration versus second-generation experiences" (2012, p. 109). And whereas this has generally been accepted, other critics have voiced their disappointment at the way *The Namesake* represents "attractive depictions of consumerism" as well as displaying the "fetishization of South Asian culture for white audiences" (Bhalla, 2016, p. 105). Furthermore, the novel has been criticized for the representation of a number of tropes that are common in Indian-American families. Indeed, Tamara Bhalla notes that Lahiri's work was openly called into question "for focusing on an affluent, Hindu, heterosexual Indian-American experience to the exclusion of other ethnic, linguistic, and minority populations within the South Asian American community" (2012, p. 109); despite such criticism, however, she does admit that Lahiri successfully manages to offer "a recognizable narrative of immigration and assimilation," (109) one which stems primarily from such stereotypes as gender and ethnicity

The Namesake chronicles the life of the Indian Ganguli family in the U.S., depicting their daily struggles with adaptation and assimilation from the late 1960s to the beginning of the new millennium. After an arranged marriage in India, Ashima Ganguli must follow her husband Ashoke to Boston as he is pursuing his doctorate studies. In America, the couple has to try to maintain their traditions in light of the new impositions of the host country. When their first child is born, a son, they initially call him Gogol, a pet name which Ashoke chooses after his favorite Russian author, while they await a letter from Ashima's mother. The letter never arrives, and the couple therefore give their son an alternative ("good") name, Nikhil, yet when the boy enters kindergarten he will not accept it. Indeed, this re-naming will lead to identity problems

for the young Gogol, who never responds to Nikhil, and thus his pet name becomes his good name.[243]

While in college, Gogol decides to change his name to Nikhil after he discovers that his father's favorite writer was an extravagant and paranoid man. This second change of name not only marks the beginning of his assimilation into American culture, but also indicates his distancing from his own Indian heritage, and he now begins to behave like most other American kids of his age. However, his father's unexpected death will prompt him to make a dramatic change in his life. He will end his relationship with an American girl and, following his mother's suggestion, will date Moushumi, the daughter of a Bengali family. The young couple falls in love and their marriage turns out to be the arranged marriage that Ashima has always dreamed of for her son. But Moushumi, an attractive and sophisticated Bengali-American woman with a glamorous French education, ends up having an affair which Nikhil eventually discovers.

The novel ends coincides with Nikhil's divorce, his sister Sonia getting engaged to Ben, a half-Jewish, half-Chinese American, and his mother, after becoming a widow, announcing that she plans to sell the family home and live half the year in America and the other half in India. Nikhil goes up to his room and comes across a volume of short stories by Nikolai Gogol, the book his father had given him as a present for his fourteenth birthday and that he had entirely forgotten about. When he opens the book, he finds the inscription his father wrote to him: "The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 288).

243 Lahiri explains in her novel the difference between good names and pet names: "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. […] Good names tend to represent dignified and englightened qualities. […]. Pet names are never recorded officially, only uttered and remembered. Unlike good names, pet names are frequently meaningless, deliberately silly, ironic, even onomatopoetic" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 26).

3. METHODOLOGY

In what follows, I will consider Lahiri's *The Namesake* within the framework of Marcus Lee Hansen's model of third-generation return, a theory first proposed by this historiographer of immigration in 1938. In a paper entitled "The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant", Hansen, a descendant of Scandinavian immigrants, claimed that the waves of immigrants arriving in the US since the mid nineteenth-century were not themselves a singularly American phenomenon but rather part of a longer process of European immigration to the Americas that had begun in the sixteenth century (Spear, 1961, p. 262). He describes how a number of sentiments were aroused by the arrival of hordes of immigrants in the U.S. In his view, it was the first generations of immigrants who most willingly and completely sought to adapt to the new country.

These first waves of immigrants became a general problem for Americans, although this eased somewhat as the new arrivals began to move westward. Although the problems might have seemed to disappear across the prairies of the Midwest, they in fact persisted. When the children of immigrants grew up in their new homeland, they had to tolerate not only with the criticism of Native Americans, but also the criticism by their elders. The members of this second generation felt intimidated at school, often quitting early, but also had difficult lives at home; thus, whereas they were regarded as "too foreign" at school, their parents typically saw them as "too American." Homelife would entail their parents striving to maintain the culture, religion, language and customs of the land they had left behind, and wanted their children to acknowledge their cultural background. "When the son and the daughter refused to conform," Hansen observed, "their action was considered a rebellion of ungrateful children from whom so many advantages had been provided" (1938, p. 7). These children, then, had to inhabit two worlds at the same time while feeling at ease in neither (p. 7). The only solution was to forget all the bonds that linked them to their ancestors' culture and to embrace assimilation, this manifesting itself a self-denial of their own background. Hence they were eventually "Americanized," although in the eyes of the foreign-born they were seen as being guilty of cultural apostasy.

Hansen also anticipated that whereas the pessimistic view of the second generation, one that effectively sought to forget or overlook what their parents had achieved, this itself would be discarded with the emergence of the third generation. He foresaw the rise of a third generation which shared none of the feelings of inferiority and alienation experienced by their 'parents.' "They are American born. Their speech is the same as that of those with whom they associate. Their material wealth is the average possession of the typical citizen" (p. 10). This third generation looked at their 'grandparents' with respect, felt proud of their achievements, and aimed to recover those cultural traits which had been denied or sidelined by their 'parents.' Indeed, his view of the third generation drove Hansen to articulate a principle, based on what he believed to be a universal phenomenon applicable in all fields of historical study: "what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember" (p. 9).

There is a corollary to Hansen's dictum in terms of the three generations of immigrants. Those immigrants from similar cultural, ethnic or religious backgrounds usually live in geographical concentrations reflecting the effects of social and familial networks, thus allowing family members to stay in touch and effectively forming pockets of populations in which the same cultural elements are maintained. As Hansen argued, many immigrant communities turned out to be a "profoundly conservative element in the American life" in that they primarily sought economic freedom rather than religious or political liberty (Spear, 1961, p. 266). Indeed, those immigrants pursued the dream of success, but they usually exhibited a "tendency to old ways more tenaciously than those who stayed at home. It was not until the second generation reached adulthood that members of the immigrant community began turning to progressive movements" (p. 267). Thus, the members of the first generation aimed to adapt themselves to the new conditions, but tried to stimulate the old values in their children.

3. THE THREE GENERATION PARADIGM IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

3.1. First Generation, or The Duality of Maintaining Tradition and Adaptation to the New Environment

The Namesake follows the footsteps of Gogol Ganguli, from the moment of his birth to his adult life, lingering on his romantic life with Anglo-American women until he finally marries a second-generation Bengali girl, Moushumi Mazoomdar, a relationship that ends in a divorce. Similarly, the novel focuses on the identity problems experienced by Gogol, who alternates between accepting and rejecting his pet name, Gogol, and his good name, Nikhil.

Following the arranged marriage established by their parents in India, Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli move to the U.S., their new host country. The novel opens on a cold winter day in Boston, when Gogol's mother Ashima is making "a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 1). Lacking the Indian proper ingredients, she pours Rice Krispies onto the spicy recipe, resulting in a hybrid, surrogate concoction that will satisfy her cravings of pregnancy. Ashima cannot avoid missing her homeland, although she denies her frustration by following Indian culinary practices as a means of keeping her cultural background afloat. Indeed, despite knowing that she will have to remain in the U.S. for the rest of her life, she holds onto Indian traditions, inadvertently creating misrepresentations of India in an American context. Throughout the novel, both Ashima and Ashoke will strive to bridge the gap between homeland and the host country they inhabit by keeping customs, religious, and culinary practices alive, which in turn help them to reproduce surrogate representations of an India in America. In the words of Madhurima Chakraborty, "these new rituals are fundamentally different acts of a migrant rooted in a new place" (2014, p. 619). As one of the main characters in the first part of the novel, Ashima experiences the different stages on the road to her adaptation—homesickness, estrangement from a new culture, preservation of traditions—all in order to survive in the host country. As Natalie

Friedman (2008, p. 114) has noted, for the immigrant generation, India comes to represent the place to which they yearn to return.

While Ashoke goes to college, Ashima remains at home recalling moments of joy in Calcutta with her family and in her own culture, although she assiduously conceals her feelings when giving an account of the wonderful possibilities that Americans enjoy—"the powerful cooking gas that flares up at any time of day or night" (p. 30) —and that she transmits in the letters she sends to Calcutta. At other times she ponders the issues of raising a child in a country "where she is related to no one, where she knows so little" (p. 6). When she goes out shopping, she can neither understand the absence of sidewalks, streetlights, public transportation nor the way Americans look at her as she strolls down the street, a "combination of pity and respect" (p. 50). At this stage of adaptation, Ashima cannot avoid comparing things in her host city of Boston to Calcutta, the city where she was born. Thus, when the Gangulis buy a house, they also decide to follow the American tradition of acquiring lots of things from garage sales, although the thought of buying second-hand goods which have belonged to strangers makes her ashamed (p. 52).

In Indian families, women are typically seen as the keepers of the culture and remain faithful to religious traditions. Madhurima Chakravorty (2014, p. 615) observes that Ashima takes great pains to maintain her family's ethnic Bengali identity. Such behavior also affects the clothes she wears. While Ashoke wears polo shirts and suits when he goes to university, Ashima continues to wear saris. At home, she cooks Indian recipes from scratch, and after the arrival of her first-born child, she teaches him "to eat on his own fingers, not to let the food stain the skin of his palm" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 55). Ashima will also teach her son Bengali, as well as certain Indian religious traditions: "She teaches him to memorize a four-line children's poem by Tagore, and the names of the deities adorning the ten-handed goddess Durga during pujo" (p. 54).

Tradition wrestles with modernity in *The Namesake*. Its plot is built around the concept of identity, this intimately linked to the process of naming a child. When their first child is born, Ashoke and Ashima decide to continue the Indian child-naming tradition, and hence they wait

for a letter from Ashima's grandmother in which she will reveal the name she has chosen for the baby. The letter is delayed in the mail, and due to American regulations—a child cannot be released from hospital if his/her name has not been registered—his parents are asked to register a pet name, Gogol, which will be changed into a good name when the letter finally arrives. Ashoke chooses the name Gogol for his son as a tribute to his favorite Russian writer. The letter sent by Ashima's grandmother is eventually lost in the mail and, as Ruediger Heinze notes, Gogol is "lost in *transit*" (qtd. in Liebregts, 2013, p. 237), an event that foreshadows his future life in America. The Gangulis will then have to choose a 'good name' on their own, choosing Nikhil, which will confer on their son the troublesome identity he will endure for years.

A sign of adaptation to the new culture occurs when their second child, a daughter, is born. They know that they should give her a name soon, since "in America [school] will ignore parents' instructions and register a child under his pet name" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 61). They have concluded that the best thing is to get rid of the pet name, as many Bengali friends have already done, and register their new-born baby with a definite, good name. Again, they choose a Bengali one, Sonal, which means "she who is golden," yet through a process of Americanization her name will come to be Sonia (p. 62). Thus, adaptation to the new culture entails giving up certain traditions. Adaptation can also be seen in the way Ashima modifies Bengali recipes to give them an American flavor, or by giving American recipes a Bengali twist. For example, they use a barbecue as a makeshift tandoori, and they "learn to roast turkeys, albeit rubbed with garlic can cumin and cayenne, at Thanksgiving" (p. 64); they even celebrate the birth of Christ, "for the sake of Gogol and Sonia" (p. 64).

In keeping with Indian traditions, both parents use pet names with each other, an affectionate way of referring to each other in the intimacy of their private lives. However, mutual affection never goes beyond the confines of the secret inner circle of the family, and they never display it in public, as Americans do. In Mira Nair's film adaptation of the novel, Ashima asks her husband, when they are in private, "Do you want me

to say 'I love you,' like Americans?" and Ashoke simply responds with a nod and a meaningful 'yes' (*Namesake*, 45'01'').

3.2. Second Generation, or the Longing for Ethnic, Social, and Racial Assimilation

The Gogol-Nikhil dichotomy serves to explore the relationship between the child and the culture he aims to embrace. Chakravorty attributes to Gogol the ability "to operate and be successful in the gaps between what is usually understood as American and Indian cultures" (2014, p. 611). I cannot but disagree with this view, in that Gogol does not move between these cultural gaps, as Chakravorty asserts; rather, he seeks to draw meaning from the liminal situation in which he finds himself embedded. Unlike his parents, he does not see India as his country of origin. America is the country in which he was born, yet he also has to struggle with a double identity which since childhood he has tried to escape. At six months of age, family and friends gather around the baby at *Annaprasan*, the rice ceremony in which the child determines his future path in life. It is an allegorical ritual in which Gogol "is offered a plate holding a clump of cold Cambridge soil dug up from the backyard, a ballpoint pen, and a dollar bill, to see if he will be a landowner, scholar or businessman" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 40). Unlike most Indian children, Gogol shows no interest any of these. It is a scene that, in the words of Peter Liebregts, "emphasizes the whole uncertainty of his identity or even his unconscious rejection of Bengali customs" (2013, p. 238).

From his early childhood, then, his Bengali-American roots will always be present. When Ashoke takes him to elementary school, he is reminded that he will be called Nikhil, his good name. However, although Ashoke assures him that he will be always Gogol for them, he will have to answer to his new good name at school (Lahiri, 2004, p. 56). At this time, Gogol does not accept this name, since he is too young to understand that it is a part of his parents' culture. Nonetheless, this is the first symptom of the rejection of his Indian background. "'Why do I have to have a new name?' he asks his parents, tears springing to his eyes" (2004, p. 57). Ashima and Ashoke want their son to understand that Bengali friends have two names, a situation that makes him feel doubly

alienated, because he would rather have just one name, like his American classmates. Another sign of cultural rejection can also be seen when he watches the TV and eats frozen waffles for breakfast, "wishing his parents would turn off the [Bengali] music so that he could hear the cartoons he is watching" (p. 61). As a young Bengali-American, his parents take him to Bengali classes in which he is exposed to his ancestors' culture and language, classes that he hates, wishing he could be in drawing classes instead (p. 66).

The situation, though, will change dramatically when his high school teacher, Mr. Lawson, introduces the writer Nikolai Gogol to his students. Gogol Ganguli will feel ashamed of his own name when he learns that the great Russian author "was reputed to be a hypochondriac and a deeply paranoid, frustrated man" who "never married [and] fathered no children" (p. 91). As a result, Gogol refuses to read "The Overcoat," Nikolai Gogol's most famous short story, because by doing so would imply "paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow" (p. 93). This situation drives him to legally change his name to Nikhil while, at the same time, it triggers the slow self-distancing process from the culture of his parents. Once he has become embedded into the new culture, Nikhil pursues an Ivy-League education, goes out with American-born Caucasian American girls, and refuses to date Indian-American ones, a transgressive act which can only be interpreted as a way of reaffirming his process of assimilation into the American culture.

However, although Nikhil longs for assimilation, he is not fully integrated into the culture he wishes to embrace. His liminal existence between different cultures accentuates his feelings of alienation. Robin E. Field has claimed that members of the second generation exist "in a liminal space of cultural borderlands" while at the same time they are "constantly negotiating their understanding of themselves, striving to balance, if not also integrate, their cultural roots and their American lifestyles" (2004, p. 166). Lahiri herself noted in an interview that "the problem for the children of immigrants… is that they feel neither one thing nor the other" (Lahiri, 2003).

A feeling of displacement can be clearly seen when he is fourteen and travels with his family to India on the occasion of his father's sabbatical

from his job. The only moment in which Gogol feels ecstatic about his parents' culture is when they visit the Taj Mahal at Agra, in that no "other building he's seen has affected him so powerfully" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 85). The remaining time in India is spent with great discomfort; he and his sister complain about the heat, having to sleep under a mosquito net, and being forced to speak in broken Hindi. They even miss having American food, experiencing excruciating cravings for hamburgers, pizzas, or a cold glass of milk.

Back in America, Nikhil will soon start dating white American girls. A conspicuous example of his being uprooted from both cultures can be seen when he is invited by his new girlfriend, Maxine Ratliff, to meet her parents. The Ratliffs, an affluent, laid-back family from New York, enjoy a typical, upper-middle class life. Nikhil's longing for Maxine could be understood as "a longing for racial acceptance" (Bhalla, 2012, p. 114). The Ratliffs welcome Nikhil, and Maxine's father, Gerald, invites Nikhil to lay the table in order to integrate him into the family. However, when he picks up the cutlery, a sudden uneasiness arises as a result of his ethnic background. "Gerald gives him a bunch of cutlery and cloth napkins and ask him to set the table. Gogol does as he is told, aware that he is touching the everyday possessions of a family he barely knows" (Lahiri, 2004, pp. 132-133). Nikhil is unaccustomed, by his own Bengali upbringing, to touching another family's silverware, that is, except the ones for his own use as a guest. Furthermore, he cannot help but compare Maxine's family with his own, and as a member of the second generation this exacerbates his confusion and the sense that he does not truly feel at ease in either culture.[244] Indeed, when the food is served by Lydia, Maxine's mother, he is overcome with embarrassment on seeing the scan portions of food on offer—he mentally acknowledges that his own mother "would never have served so few dishes to a guest" (p. 133). Nikhil is keenly aware that, despite being invited to eat at the table of a wealthy family, such a frugality is a culture shock that he cannot easily

244 In a lecture that he attended, Nikhil is introduced to the term ABCD (American-born Confused Deshi), despite the fact he never recognized India as *deshi*, that is, his own home, because he thinks of it as Americans do, simply as *India* (Lahiri, 2004, p. 118).

understand. Whereas his own family do not enjoy such a high standard of living, they would never been so mean in their treatment of guests.

On travelling to New Hampshire, Nikhil takes Maxine to meet his own parents in Massachusetts. In Mira Nair's adaptation, the cultural transgression is even more evident than in the novel. Nikhil asks Maxine not to kiss his parents on the cheek and that she should exchange a handshake with them. But Maxine forgets the warnings and expresses her emotions to the Gangulis in a way that makes Nikhil feel uneasy. At the Ratfliffs' house, Nikhil had felt that the amount of food being served by Lydia to him as a guest was particularly lacking in quality. Subsequently, when Ashoke and Ashima invite the couple to lunch, Nikhil is aware that it is a meal that "has taken his mother over a day to prepare, and yet the amount of effort embarrasses him" (p. 148), an unequivocal example of Nikhil's inability to feel at ease in either world.

3.3. Third Generation, or the Return to the Ancestors' Tradition

Things take a sudden change in Nikhil's life with the death of his father. Prior to this event, which marks the climax of the novel, Ashoke reveals to Nikhil the reason why he chose Gogol as a pet name, telling him how he was rescued from a train derailment in India. When he was badly injured in the midst of the wreckage, he was able to attract the rescuers' attention by raising a hand and waving a page of Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" which remained "crumpled tightly in his fist" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 18). Through this revelation Nikhil becomes aware of the truth of his pet name, of how his father survived the train accident and eventually travelled to America in embark on a completely new life, and finally how he decided to name his son after the writer of the book that saved his life:

> 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 new, bound up with a catastrophe he has unwittingly embodied for years. "Is that what you think of when you think of me?" Gogol asks him. "Do I remind you of that night?"

> “Not at all,” his father says eventually, one hand going to his ribs, a habitual gesture that has baffled Gogol until now. “You remind me of everything that followed” (Lahiri, 2004, p. 124).

The death of Ashoke from a heart attack shatters Nikhil’s world. He feels guilty of having maintained so great a distance from his own family. His eagerness for assimilation has made him forget his own culture, and he now regrets not having been there when his father passed away. In Mira Nair’s film, Nikhil shaves his head as a sign of bereavement (*Namesake*, 78’20’’), although there is no mention in Lahiri’s novel of this act of tonsure practiced by him. His bereavement could be understood as the ceremonial moment in which Nikhil moves from a second to a third generation. It is of note that in American society there is a tendency to admit the existence of generational categories and that these may be closely connected to issues of identity. Regarding the idea of an intergenerational exchange in American culture, Werner Sollors observes that “it is possible for one man to be both second and third generation. He may be numerically second generation, though third generation ‘in spirit’... but act second generation–until a life crisis brings out his true third-generation character formation and destiny” (1986, p. 219). For Nikhil, such an existential crisis is brought about by the loss of his father, an epiphanic moment which dramatically splits his life into two. From now on, he will look back on India and his Indian community in Massachusetts in a completely new light. He feels that his “return” to his cultural heritage should be an act of paying tribute to his dead father. He will long for what his forefathers did, their traditions, their religious and their cultural practices.

His relationship with Maxine ends because she feels excluded from the Gangulis’ plans to travel to India in order to scatter Ashoke’s ashes in one of the rivers of Calcutta (p. 188). The end of this relationship is visually retold in Mira Nair’s film. At Ashoke’s funeral ceremony, Maxine feels displaced as she appears dressed in black to a funeral where the other mourners are in white, and she shows her bare arms, in contrast to the shawls that cover the other mourners’ shoulders. According to Madhurima Chrakravorty, “the film clarifies that Maxine cannot be a part of Gogol’s family since… she stands in visual, symbolic, and cultural opposition to Gogol” (2014, pp. 616-617).

Nikhil begins now to display conspicuous attitudes shared by third-generation members. He starts contemplating the possibility of "returning" to his ancestors' traditions, and even welcomes the idea of an arranged marriage with Moushumi Mazoomdar, the daughter of a Bengali family. As Rashna Wadia Richards has pointed out, Indian arranged marriages do not celebrate the triumph of romantic love, but that of the dutiful wife who must serve her godlike husband. However, in America, the land of freedom and happiness, a loveless marriage is regarded as antithetical to American identity (2017, p. 65-66). Nikhil and Moushoumi's arranged marriage becomes a hybrid version of the Indian marriage institution, in that they initially meet at the request of their families, but then fall in love with each other in the most traditional manner of an America love match.

Like Nikhil himself, his new partner Moushoumi represents the "returned" member of the third generation. As with most second-generation immigrants, she was eager to be assimilated by American culture and had soon become engaged to an American man who eventually decided to back out "of the engagement well after the hotel had been booked, the invitations [and] the gift registry selected" (Lahiri, 2004, p. 192). This strengthens an idea shared by many Bengali families, a trope which Lahiri has frequently explored in her fiction: mixed marriages are a doomed enterprise which should always be avoided. The traditional solution of an arranged marriage is also the best illustration of the return of the third generation.

4. CONCLUSION

The novel comes to an end as the couple finally gets divorced after Moushoumi broke the sacred rule of marriage and is unfaithful to her husband with a former lover. Moushoumi, a sophisticated Bengali-American woman with a cosmopolitan life, realizes that she is not willing to give up the kind of American life she had imagined for herself (Friedman, 2008, p. 122). Without a doubt, she is the most transgressive character in the novel, in that her intergenerational move, from third back to second generation, challenges Hansen's dictum. Unhappy with

the marital voyage she has taken back to her family roots, she sets out to embrace an expatriate life in Europe, a move which indeed foreshadows Lahiri's own voluntary exile to Rome in 2014.

Ashima now feels guilty at having acted as a matchmaker for her son. In a multicultural country, Nikhil's foray into the ancestral tradition of his parents turned out to be fruitless. His sudden change, which began as an epiphany, out of a sense of guilt and remorse, drove him to take a definitive step that he was not ready for: that of leaving behind the assimilated version of an Americanized Gogol in order to embrace the hybridized version of what his parents sought for him. In the end, *The Namesake* celebrates the triumph of mixed marriages in multicultural America as well as calling into question the idea of the implied cultural inbreeding of sacred marriage between members from the same common immigrant background.

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