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Source: *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 53, No. 3, After Postmodernism: Form and History in Contemporary American Fiction (Fall, 2007), pp. 345-370

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20479817>

Accessed: 02-04-2018 17:43 UTC

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The Children of 1965:
Allegory, Postmodernism, and
Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

Min Hyoung Song

Jhumpa Lahiri was already a celebrated author when her first novel appeared in print. Her short story "Interpreter of Maladies" was selected for the O. Henry Prize and for inclusion in *Best American Short Stories*. Her book of collected stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the Pulitzer Prize in literature. And in the following year, *The New Yorker* named her one of the 20 most important young American writers of the new century. It is not surprising, therefore, that *The Namesake* attracted widespread press coverage. Reviewers foregrounded the novel's mastery of form, focused on specific moments in the text when the author's skills were clearly in evidence, and compared her favorably to other contemporary authors who seemed, in contrast, overly self-indulgent (Kakutani, Kipen, Metcalf, Caldwell). If reviewers were in agreement about Lahiri's abilities as a writer, however, their enthusiasm about the originality of her storytelling was more muted. David Kipen observed:

Theme-wise, *The Namesake* marks no special advance over *Interpreter of Maladies*. It's a novel about an immigrant family's imperfect assimilation into America. . . . A certain sameness begins to creep in midway through the book—explicable, if not completely excusable, as its picaresque hero's compulsion to trace the same neurotic patterns over and over.

In many ways, the ordinary nature of *The Namesake*'s narrative distances it from other ethnic novels, which tend, as Mark McGurl has recently

argued, to combine “the routine operations of modernist autopoetics with a rhetorical performance of cultural group membership preeminently, though by no means exclusively, marked as ethnic” (117). By “autopoetics,” McGurl refers to the reflexivity found in the experimentation of highly esteemed contemporary fiction; this reflexivity is not so much a radical break from modernism as it is the “continuing interest of literary forms as objects of a certain kind of professional research” (111). The combination, then, of an intense focus on form with a preoccupation with ethnicity leads to a “high cultural pluralism” (117)—a phrase that describes an impressive array of authors from Jews like Philip Roth and Saul Bellow to Native Americans like N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louise Erdrich; Asian Americans like Maxine Hong Kingston and Chang-rae Lee; Chicanas like Sandra Cisneros; and African Americans like Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed, and Toni Morrison. More impressive still, authors who don’t have the same claim to the ethnic as these do nevertheless organize their work as if they were writing ethnic novels, minoritizing the lower middle class (Raymond Carver), Vietnam War veterans (Tim O’Brien), Southern culture (Flannery O’Conner), and even white techno-nerds (Neal Stephenson). Far from thinking of postmodern fiction and the ethnic novel as dividing the “postwar literary field” (120), a focus on high cultural pluralism suggests that the postmodern is intimately related to what the late Arthur Schlesinger Jr. famously denounced as a “cult of ethnicity” (41).¹ If so, what are we to make of a novel like *The Namesake*, which clearly combines an intense awareness of its own form (which reviewers quickly picked up in their celebration of the author’s craft) with a definite ethnic marking, but does so without the experimentation—nor the angst such experimentation routinely gives expression to—that we have come to recognize as indicative of serious postwar American fiction?

In response to this question, I wish to suggest that a generational shift in perspective has taken place. The cultural landscape that confronted an earlier cohort of pioneering high cultural postwar novelists required hard work to make imaginable the phenomena we have come to group under the capacious and aging sign of postmodernism; these are phenomena like the accelerated time/space compression of late capitalism, the feverish self-fashioning of individuality that is wholly consonant with the consumerism such capitalism relies on, the hypermobility of populations within and across borders of various kinds, and the dominance of biopolitics and

its intertwining with geopolitics.² The narrative of *The Namesake*, on the other hand, can assume the pressures such phenomena have placed on the concept of the nation and must furthermore contend with a mainstream that has fully mastered the rhetoric and formal innovations associated with postmodern fiction. This mainstreaming seeks, especially through a focus on reproduction and borders, to reverse or at least deny the existence of these same phenomena, with characters like the ones that arrest Lahiri's attention often employed as a solution.

In the first half of this essay I explore the anxious preoccupation with what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurism" (2) as a fantasmatic project of unification, an always deferrable and hence always potentially perfect moment of possibility represented by our vocal, if frequently empty, adoration of children. Such an investment in the allegorical meaning of childhood is meant to secure a common horizon against the crises of national identity that postmodernism helped articulate. In *The Namesake*, as I argue in the second half of this essay, Gogol finds himself struggling against the yoke of allegorical expectations as an embodiment of the Child: either choose assimilation into a cultural unity that desperately needs—in its ever more visible density as fantasy—to be shored up by such an affirmation or choose an allegiance to a pluralism that can be as suffocating as what it seeks to supersede. What this novel thus dramatizes is not the need to suture over the crises of national meaning in which it finds itself caught up, and thus somehow to move beyond the tired platitudes of postmodernism, nor to offer an alternative that may be another attempt at suturing. Rather, *The Namesake* dramatizes the difficulty of allowing its characters to be fully penetrated by a moment of multiple and converging crises that offer no magical routes toward resolution, a moment that may, in fact, present itself as not interested in resolutions of any kind.

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The ethnic bildungsroman, with its interest in children and borders, is a form that has long been a source of anxiety for Asian American literary studies. Many of the works canonized by this field seem to fit within the strictures of this form and simultaneously, as critics have sought to elucidate, to spill over these strictures. Lisa Lowe exemplifies this position when she points out how Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* "narrates the

protagonist's development from the uncertainty, locality, and impotence of 'youth' to the definition, mobility, and potency of 'maturity'" only to trouble "the closure and reconciliation of the bildungsroman form" in calling attention to the complexities of Philippine culture and demands for Anglo American conformity found in the prewar years (45). Similarly, in his more recent discussion of John Okada's *No-No Boy*, a novel widely read as resistant to orthodox accounts of Japanese American internment, Daniel Kim observes how its ending figures exactly the kind of reconciliation that Lowe mentions through the travails of its main character Ichiro Yamada, a former internee who was jailed for refusing to take a loyalty oath. About the ending's surprisingly optimistic endorsement of a "faint and elusive insinuation of promise" found in a "tiny bit of America" (Okada 251), Kim concludes:

The history of betrayal that has shaped Ichiro's consciousness endows him with an abiding capacity to see other potentially disloyal subjects of color as needing—as he has been—to be brought into the fold: to be integrated into the body of the nation or into the world capitalist system that the nation presides over. (80)

The anxiety over the ethnic bildungsroman exhibited by these two examples undoubtedly stems from the way this form might be read as narrating how Asian American characters learn to collaborate with nationalist projects of suppressing dissent at home and consolidating power abroad.

For Asian American authors in the late twentieth century, such a narrative expectation of reconciliation—between aggrieved minority and the nation-state that has so often been the source of racial grief—has meant that their characters could easily become a composite model for other minorities to emulate, a social ideal of suppressed anger and a constantly performed willingness to get along. As Inderpal Grewal argues, more than Kingston's *Woman Warrior* or Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, the postwar narrative that provides the ethnic bildungsroman's end-of-the-century "full expression" is Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*:

The first-person narrative of a Hindu girl living in Punjab, India, whose family has been displaced after the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the novel describes her struggles within India, how she reached the United States, and her life in the United States. (65–66)

This narrative also includes the murder of her husband by Sikh terrorists; her rape by white men she has paid to lead her illegally into the US; a love triangle between herself, a white man, and another white man who is a paraplegic living in Iowa; and the adoption of a boy from Vietnam. "Within this narrative," Grewal observes,

America becomes the locus for Jasmine's emergence as an individual with desires and "choices." Here we see the link between biopolitics and geopolitics in that security and care are believed to be impossible in Punjab because of the inherent violence attributed to its populations, but in America safety, security, and "ordinary" life are possible. (67).

A similar kind of division might be found in Lahiri's "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" (in *Interpreter of Maladies*), a story about a young Indian American girl named Lilia growing up in a tidy, safe suburban home in New England. In between attending middle school and going trick-or-treating on Halloween, she is bewitched by a family guest, the Mr. Pirzada of the title, who is conducting research in the US while his family remains behind in what will soon become Bangladesh. At the start of the story, Pakistan's civil war has just broken out:

In March, Dacca had been invaded, torched, and shelled by the Pakistani army. Teachers were dragged onto streets and shot, women dragged into barracks and raped. By the end of the summer, three hundred thousand people were said to have died. (23)

It would be easy to read this contrast between the placidity of Lilia's life and the violence of Pakistan's civil war as reinforcing the conventional division between America and the rest of the world found in *Jasmine*, but as Rajini Srikanth points out, if Lilia grows up to affirm this division it will partly be because her budding interest in that other part of the world "was swiftly and efficiently suppressed by a grade-school teacher focused on educating her students about the intricacies of the American Revolution" (51).³ What I wish to point out about this story is how subtly this self-reflexive point is made through the use of a scrupulous realism. Like this and the other stories in *The Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake* is also noteworthy for its lack of interest in the formal innovation associated with postmodern storytelling even as it maintains a strong interest in the narrative doubling of thought back onto itself, a postmodernlike reflexiv-

ity that excavates through such a return the different layers of meaning that beliefs of various kinds rest on.

The novel begins, for instance, with the mother who is giving birth to Gogol, and in doing so signals from the start the ways in which it will refuse to sensationalize what it nonetheless recognizes as a difficult struggle:

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. . . . Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (49–50)

To identify foreignness with pregnancy, as this passage suggests, is also to understand that such an identification entails a burden, at once revered as the deliverer of the future—someone who guarantees the perpetuation of life-making practices that connect through time, so that the future is in fact the selfsame repetition of an ancient past—and held up as an anthropological curiosity. A curiosity's privacy can be violated by anyone, as when strangers feel no taboo against touching the protruding bellies of pregnant women or the cheeks of newborn infants. Curiosity can also easily be confused with disdain, just as maternal burden can be confused with social burden, as when a mother with dependent children becomes the hated welfare mother.

The fact that Ashima is both pregnant and a foreigner enables her, according to the novel, 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. When her doctor assures her that all is “perfectly normal,” she thinks:

For the past eighteenth months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. . . . Throughout the experience, in spite of her growing discomfort, she'd been astonished by her body's ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother and all her great-grandmothers had done. That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare. (5–6)

In this passage, Ashima points to the narrative that pregnancy seems unquestioningly to encapsulate. Indeed, to call it a narrative is already to call attention to something that seems perfectly commonsensical. Pregnancy normally, and normatively, inspires thoughts of generational continuation, a stitch of life experience that connects one woman to all the women before who have endured the same pain of making life in their wombs. This is, as Lee Edelman writes, “a fantasmatic order of reality in which the subject’s alienation would vanish into the seamlessness of identity at the endpoint of the endless chain of signifiers lived as history” (8).

Such a “politics of the Symbolic,” Edelman goes on to elaborate, using Lacanian language, “allegorizes or elaborates sequentially, precisely as desire, those overdeterminations of libidinal positions and inconsistencies of psychic defenses occasioned by what disarticulates the narrativity of desire” (9; Edelman’s italics). Each act thus becomes a ritual of repetition, a guarantor of meaning as it is passed down biologically from one generation to the next, from great-grandmothers to grandmothers to mothers to daughters who will someday become mothers. Each sensation, each pain, each urge of the pregnant body is experienced as one more iteration of the same, nothing happening to Ashima that hasn’t already happened to the women in the family before her, rendering each experience a return to experience felt intuitively at some almost primordial species level. There is something miraculous about this apparent timeless “chain of signifiers,” to be sure, the sameness that connects across time through an experience of regular rejuvenation, of fertile wonder, of a biological initiation into an identity of motherhood that never changes—even as such a narrative excludes as “what disarticulates” other women who may not have, or want, access to such an experience. It is enticing to consider this allegory as no allegory whatsoever.

But as Ashima helplessly acknowledges, the meaning of motherhood changes and alters over time, calling attention to a narrativity that seeks to hide behind the guise of something more primordial. The fact that Ashima is giving birth to Gogol in a foreign land calls to the surface the “tentative and spare,” the fragility of a belief that some things never change. The strangeness of the surroundings for Ashima, the realization that she is for the first time in her life alone when she is in the maternity ward, highlights the fiction of the narrative of pregnancy, the ways in which rituals vary from place to place (and across time) and the experience is never the same for one woman as it is imagined for another. The

“nothing . . . normal” of Ashima’s stay at the maternity ward calls into question the “perfectly normal.” For Ashima, whose name means limitless, professional normalization fails to reassure. The meaning of her name is apt because she engages so deeply with the seamless continuity promised by the narrative of pregnancy and also—tripping a too-Bunyanesque approach to allegory—inappropriate because she calls attention to this narrative’s transience and vulnerability despite her best efforts to the contrary.

In this way, the opening moment of the novel conjures a thorny theoretical dilemma that centers on what Edelman calls “reproductive futurism” (3). This is, Edelman explains, “the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics” because the Child, which is its object of veneration, is

the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention. Even proponents of abortion rights, while promoting the freedom of women to control their own bodies through reproductive choice, recurrently frame their political struggle, mirroring their anti-abortion foes, as a “fight for the children.” (3)

Against this horizon, and against those who wish to draw gays and lesbians somewhere safely within its boundaries, Edelman wishes to define the queer as a negation of such a future orientation, a refusal that is also a courageous ethical move:

By denying . . . our disidentification from the promise of futurity, those of us inhabiting the place of the queer may be able to cast off that queerness and enter the properly political sphere, but only by shifting the figural burden of queerness to someone else. The *structural position* of queerness, after all, and the need to fill it remain. (27)

By accepting one’s role as the villain of reproductive futurism, a foil it must have to make visible the future it wishes to secure, the queer willfully occupies a position that another would otherwise have to occupy. In addition to the pleasure of altruism such an act might afford, there is also for Edelman the pleasure of refusing a coercive morality founded on the well-being of the Child, an unimaginable kind of freedom to imagine a politics not predicated on the reproduction of the present into the future. And finally, such a willful acceptance of an intolerable position would

preserve for queers something other than complete abnegation endorsed by both foe and ally: “for the right wing the nothingness always at war with the positivity of civil society; for the left, nothing more than a sexual practice in need of demystification” (28).⁴

This argument, in its attempt to avoid what might be thought of as the resistance paradigm, enables an interesting perspective from which to explore the cultural meanings that the children of 1965 have begun to assume. By “children of 1965” I mean something historically quite specific (which might also suggest how my perspective drifts from Edelman’s). Much has, of course, been written about the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and its impact on the rapidly changing demographic picture of the United States, especially the way it favored the immigration of professionals from a capaciously defined Asia. While these adult arrivals have attracted, and continue to attract, considerable attention, their children have also been the object of great interest. For years we have heard rumblings about them, from media hype about Asian whiz kids in the 1980s to anti-Affirmative Action arguments in the 1990s that pointed to their disproportionate numbers in colleges and universities.⁵ And now, at the start of the new century, large numbers of these children are becoming full-fledged adults and occupying professional positions of their own. Some of the earliest popular first-person attempts to make sense of what their coming of age might mean have favored an accommodating stance. For instance, in his memoir *The Accidental Asian*, the former speech writer for the Clinton administration and graduate of Harvard Law School Eric Liu repeats what has already been said about the most visible of his generation: they are uniformly privileged and well educated; little makes them different from their professional white peers; race is only a residual concern for them (not having felt the sharp pain of *de jure* discrimination nor in some cases *de facto* prejudice); being perceived as Americans is more important than whatever attenuated ties they might have to the Asian countries from which their forebears may have departed; and their experiences are merely the most contemporary, albeit accelerated, iteration of the immigrant narrative as told by successive waves of ethnic Europeans.

Rather than reject these claims outright as an uncritical retelling of the ethnic bildungsroman, which they surely are, I want to linger for a moment over the consequences of accepting these descriptions at face value. In doing so, I build on the works of critics like Tomo Hattori, Viet

Thanh Nguyen, Kandice Chuh, James Kyung-Jin Lee, and Rey Chow, all of whom have been pushing hard against the fascination with resistance that has been a mainstay of many minority discourses for more than two decades now. If we were, then, to accept what Liu says as accurate of at least some individual experiences, one conclusion we might reach is that members of this elite group are remarkable exactly because they fit so neatly—perhaps too neatly—into the ideal of mainstream American life. At a time when everyone seems to consider themselves aggrieved, even Christians who worry that Christmas is being taken away from them (Rich), a number of the children of Asian immigrants who arrived in the United States during the last third of the twentieth century seem effortlessly to claim the mantle of a national ideal. “I don’t mean,” Liu writes, “that my parents told me to act like an American. That’s partly the point: they didn’t tell me to do anything except be a good boy” (37). As Wendy Brown has observed (faintly echoing Schlesinger’s denouncement of “the cult of ethnicity”), without the ideal that Liu and his cohort seem willingly to embody, “politicized identities would forfeit a good deal of their claims to injury and exclusion” (61). Such identities are therefore “wounded attachments” to the extent that they allow one to be defined as—for lack of a better term—victimized because cast outside the glow of an ideal and deprived of the material rewards that such a glow entails. So focused are these attachments on their sense of dwelling in the malignant shadow of this ideal, Brown asserts, that they become dependent on it for their very self-definition. If so, what does it mean to have an identity defined as an embodiment of what wounds? What does it mean for a member of a racial minority to be a “good boy”? Or as Vijay Prashad asks more bluntly, “How does it feel to be a solution?” (6)

This is the question that Ashima is literally giving birth to at the start of *The Namesake*. Although her son Gogol is not white, he might as well be. Although he is not sexist or homophobic, his gender and sexual identity never puts him at risk of feeling their punch. Although he does not look down on his fellow South Asian Americans and other minorities who cannot share in his professional middle-class largess, he cannot claim any special knowledge about what it means to be, say, a Bangladeshi taxi driver in New York City:

The driver of the cab is a Bangladeshi; the name on the registration card pasted to the plexiglass behind the front seat says

Mustafa Sayeed. . . . If his parents were in the cab they would have struck up a conversation with the driver, asking what part of Bangladesh he was from, how long he'd been in this country, whether his wife or children lived here or there. Gogol sits silently, as if he were any other passenger, lost in his own thoughts.
(199)

Gogol is *not* a member of a model minority, the fulfillment of the ethnic bildungsroman, if by this we are referring to the ways in which Asian Americans as a race are esteemed as self-sufficient, hard-working, culture-bound, and family-oriented in order to berate other racial minorities in the United States who supposedly do not exhibit these traits. Rather, he is an exemplary representative of the Asian children of post-1965 immigrants of professional background who have been lovingly and anxiously fantasized into existence over the past several decades. Against the ideal Gogol embodies, all groups, including whites and other Asian Americans, are starting to feel berated. If queers are, according to Edelman, reproductive futurism's negation, then the children of 1965 are its objects of veneration, the Child on whose behalf contemporary politics is mobilized even as others feel the sharp pinch of never being fully capable of living up to the potentiality the Child embodies or, worse, targeted in the name of preserving this potentiality—as, ironically, many South Asian Americans have been since September 11, whether they are like the driver in the quotation above or professionals like Gogol and his family.

There is, to be sure, absolutely nothing queer about Gogol, especially if by queer we mean a “negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (Edelman 9), and yet it might be said that there is at least something strange in the vigor with which he is expected to get along, to fit in, and to excel at whatever he is doing. Therefore, before we celebrate the privileges afforded in being an object of veneration, we should pause to consider how Gogol's example hints at how occupying the position of the Child might simply be as much of an imposition as being cast into the roll of the villain. Neither villain nor Child is allowed to live, both being always oriented toward “a future that's unattainable because always still to come” (Edelman 83) and therefore never anything more than a placeholder for what is missing in the present, a magical solution to the multiple crises afflicting a strong sense of nationhood. Gogol hardly ever seems like a child because he is laden so completely by the allegorical

expectation that he will achieve the future that he supposedly already embodies, while simultaneously always appearing childlike in the way others treat him.⁶

From birth, Gogol is thrust into the position of the Child, and even as he grows into young adulthood he finds he cannot quite shake off the childlike demeanor of his allegorical social position. He continues therefore to struggle with the not always pleasant feeling of being a marionette whose lifelikeness distracts from the strings pulled by a puppeteer. Allegory as a critical term is attractive in making sense of the experiences Gogol encounters, because it captures this feeling of dependence and its larger implications—what Paul de Man characterizes as “the illusion of a continuity that it knows to be illusionary” (qtd. in Edelman 96).⁷ At six months of age, family and friends gather around the baby Gogol to predict his future in a ritual that is meant to be allegorical in this way, an illusion that invites enjoyment as such. Before him are placed several items, each representative of the person he might become: “Most children will grab at one of them, sometimes all of them, but Gogol touches nothing. . . . Gogol frowns, and his lower lip trembles. Only then, forced at six months to confront his destiny, does he begin to cry” (40).

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As much as this incident points to how much others wish him to conform to their expectations about what shape his life should take, we can also see in his refusal to choose an unwillingness to bend to the logic of enchantment that is at the core of allegory. His refusal is an expression of obstinate passivity. Gogol is a character who rejects what is offered to him, who turns away no matter how he is prompted from making a choice that is really no choice. In this ceremony, others are guiding his hand, demanding he become what others would like him to become, reflecting what the guider believes more than what Gogol himself might want. All the encouragements he receives to reach one way or another merely betray the prejudices and desires of the adults around him: “‘Put the money in his hands!’ someone in the group calls out. ‘An American boy must be rich!’ ‘No!’ his father protests. ‘The pen. Gogol, take the pen’” (40). At this moment, Gogol is nothing more than a kind of screen upon which others are projecting their social meanings. Gogol’s response, then, might be understood as a precocious refusal to reflect back to others what

they expect of him. In doing so, he models for the reader the difficulty of refusing the call of allegory, since any interpretation could seem to be an acquiescence to this call. Any movement Gogol makes at six months of age might be understood as portending the continuity of his present self with an avowedly illusionary future.

Like the objects placed before Gogol when he is an infant, romantic partners are also presented as full of allegorical meaning, because they are representative of the promise reproductive futurism makes through “the fantasy of heterosexual love, and the reproductive Couple it elevates” (Edelman 82). This promise gestures again to the Child, which the union between two people of the opposite sex will someday presumably conceive, and the future that such a Child is meant to secure for the present. Unlike the game his elders played with him when he was six months old, however, the romantic choices he makes are not illusions that give pleasure by being disclosed as such. Romance more resembles the experience of Ashima’s pregnancy, an allegory that wishes to disavow itself as allegory. His first girlfriend Ruth, for example, suggests a particular vision of American identity, one forged in the progressive countercultural formations of the 1960s, into which Gogol might merge:

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. (110)

According to this passage, Ruth is a product of utopian enthusiasts. The latter are seeking in a return to the land and in apparently simpler cultural formations, whether it be the commune or native life in faraway places, a refuge from a disappointing modernity signaled by the divorce of the parents. Such enthusiasts are clearly familiar to the history of American culture, an integral part of the myth of Protestant settlers in New England who left behind a corrupt Europe, exposed themselves to the wilderness, and sought to perfect a way of life for others to emulate. What is perhaps typical of this kind of utopianism is the need to move elsewhere, to search ceaselessly for what is lacking in one’s surroundings, to value a simplicity that seems to exist solely in the mind. True to such needs, Ruth eventually leaves Gogol in the quest of a more perfect life elsewhere.

His second girlfriend, more serious than the first if only because she

has taken full possession of Gogol as one might an adored object found at an out-of-the-way boutique, effortlessly and without doubt or resistance pulls him into the almost careless habits of her affluent, hypersophisticated lifestyle:

“It’s Maxine. From last night,” she says, not bothering to apologize for waking him. She tells him she’d found his number in the phone book, though he doesn’t remember telling her his last name. . . . Then, without awkwardness or pause, she invites him to dinner at her place. (129)

If Ruth represents utopian enthusiasm, Maxine, or Max as everyone calls her, represents the Anglo Protestant establishment. Contrary to self-contradictory claims made on behalf of this establishment, as recently articulated by Samuel Huntington for instance, it is, according to Lahiri, neither an indomitable rushing river into which all other cultural groups must learn to swim nor a beleaguered waterway on the verge of irreparable contamination. If Max’s family is any indication, the Anglo Protestant establishment exerts its influence on American culture from a distance, at once removed from its conflicts and simultaneously irrelevant to it. From such a safe distance, immigrants from nonwhite countries are less likely to be threatening and more likely to be prized for the color they add to the scenery.

For those who make up this scenery, it can be difficult to determine which is more insulting: being seen as a threat or a prize. When Max’s parents, a lawyer and a curator at the Metropolitan Museum, leave for the family summer seat in New Hampshire, Gogol stays behind with Max to inhabit an enormous brownstone in Chelsea, immersing himself in the benign neglect of an Anglo Protestant establishment. Despite the apparent freedom of this arrangement, Gogol can’t help but feel the ways in which he has become assimilated into a way of life—by no means the dominant American way of life—that willingly makes room for him but only at the cost of leaving him feeling perpetually childlike, in need of tutoring, grateful for the opportunities he has been given, and handling objects that do not belong to him. “Now that it is just the two of them it seems to him,” Lahiri writes, “more than ever, that they are living together. And yet for some reason it is dependence, not adulthood, he feels” (142). One can easily imagine how attractive and easy assimilation into such a life might be for Gogol, why he might find himself willing to turn his back,

not without a little embarrassment, from the substantial but modest and slightly tacky materialism of his family's immigrant life. When Gogol visits his parents with Max for the first and only time, he imagines he sees his upbringing through her eyes:

Once they get off at his parents' exit he senses that the landscape is foreign to her: the shopping plazas, the sprawling brick-faced public high school from which he and Sonia [his sister] graduated, the shingled houses, uncomfortably close to one another, on their grassy quarter-acre plots. The sign that says CHILDREN AT PLAY.⁸ (146)

The road sign is almost too perfectly allegorical from Gogol's perspective, for this is how Max might characterize his family.

The third girlfriend hardly counts as one, since Bridget is merely a fling, a married woman with whom Gogol commits adultery out of idleness and boredom, his relationship with Max having fallen apart in the wake of his father's sudden death. What Bridget stands for, then, is "the spare and transient" quality of many relationships in the US that Gogol's mother so succinctly observed in the maternity ward while waiting to deliver him. This quality entails a constant mobility that does not allow for any kind of cultural formation to emerge: "They do not have each other's phone numbers. He does not know exactly where she lives. She always goes with him to his apartment. She never spends the night" (191). Bridget thus figures what both Ruth and Max cannot, a mainstream that operates as an absence, a lack of social connectedness and unique particularity that, as McGurl points out, quoting O'Conner, is the very kind of "anywhere or nowhere" that high cultural pluralism is meant to resist (120). If right, Bridget's brief presence in the novel is indicative of how difficult it is to assimilate into something that is impersonal and not meant to last.

In contrast to the unsatisfactory choices these three romantic partners embody, Gogol's fourth girlfriend and eventual wife signifies the ethnic alternative. Moushumi is, at least in Gogol's mind and certainly in the minds of his Bengali elders, the figure of allegiance to one's ethnos, the daughter of an old family friend with the right kind of background and an uncomplicated familiarity. But even as Gogol turns to her as if he were turning himself over to one of his own kind, an allegory of ethnic maintenance, he finds himself making a choice that is not a choice, a fulfillment of an expectation that is all too reminiscent of being a six-month-old

infant made to face his destiny in the form of symbol-laden objects. "Still," he thinks when his mother makes all the plans for the wedding,

it feels a little strange to be so uninvolved in his own wedding, and he is reminded of the many other celebrations in his life, all the birthdays and graduation parties his parents had thrown when he was growing up, in his honor, attended by his parents' friends, occasions from which he had always felt at a slight remove. (220)

No matter how adult his response, Gogol finds himself losing control. If what is left of the assimilation narrative has made him feel like a dependent, so has ethnic allegiance, an alternative that feels increasingly like no alternative whatsoever.

Moushumi is the first of the two to realize that one cannot remain fully satisfied inhabiting such a position, a safe resolution to a problem that is probably better not thought of as a problem, since resolution suggests completion, an end to struggle, a willful surrender of hard-won personal agencies. These qualities are the opposite of what Moushumi desires. She wants a feeling of release from expectation, a kind of liberation that post-war critical theorists have repeatedly found in the unraveling of the sign and in the embrace of a hard anti-identity position, a rebellion against meaning that sometimes seems the same as a rebellion against oppression. The turning away from expectation and from the demands of a futurity based on the necessity of perpetuating the past leads Moushumi repeatedly to the decision she made as a younger woman, an escape from being represented in a certain way and an embrace of a liberation that has become almost synonymous with sexual license:

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. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever. . . . Suddenly it was easy, and 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. (214–15)

Her willingness to be seduced, driven by the same impulse that led her to France, is viewed in this passage, and later when she falls into an adulterous affair with an old lover, as the opposite of allegory, a willful denial of social arrangements meant to reproduce the future as a copy of the present that is also a rejection of identity. When she plunges into bodily pleasures, she comes as close to a feeling of freedom as any she has ever known.

There are many, of course, who would be the first to cast stones at her for the sexual choices she makes, and in particular her choice to violate the conventions of marriage. It may be, as Laura Kipnis argues, that adultery feels like such a radical break for freedom exactly because there are so many who, at least publicly, demand allegiance to monogamy. Against the “welter of ideological, social, and juridical commandments” (321) that might bring down shame, recrimination, and moral condemnation on Moushumi for the sexual risks she takes, we should hold fast to the feeling of liberation she finds in the identity-abnegating arms of her lovers, appreciating it as a freedom—no matter how “momentary” (322)—that is elsewhere so cheaply sold as an expression of an empty political piety. This freedom, as Kipnis points out, might also be the affective germ of new social relations, “as-yet-unknown forms of gratification and fulfillment” (322). But as Gogol’s own affair with a married woman helps recall, such countervaluations need to reckon with the fact that even this kind of freedom also has its limitations, not least because it can feel so much like a celebration of neoliberal individualism that would substantiate yet again the fantasmatic division between the openness of the West and the suffocating traditionalism of the Third World.

With this last pitfall in mind, I wish to make the point that the symbolism of the romantic choices Gogol and, eventually, Moushumi encounter reflects the simplifications of allegory, the reduction of experience to magic and enchantment that is attractive because it is not subtle and because it transforms the messiness, the uncertainty, the heart-pounding risks, the numerous disappointments, the painful lows, and the just-as-painful highs that are an abiding part of these characters’ experiences into something safe. The power of allegory is thus found in its being able to bring an escaping meaning under a symbolic control in the same way that magical thinking fulfills a wish for power in the face of powerlessness. If I reach the door before I can count to ten, I will get the job I want. In the same way, if I marry a woman named Ruth, she will be faithful to me.

Such forms of magical thinking recall Michel Foucault's comments on logophobia in his 1970 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, given at a moment in his career when he seemed to be looking ahead to his work on biopolitics:

There is undoubtedly in our society, and I would not be surprised to see it in others, though taking different forms and modes, a profound logophobia, a sort of dumb fear of these events, of this mass of spoken things, of everything that could possibly be violence, discontinuous, querulous, disordered even and perilous in it, of the incessant, disorderly buzzing of discourse. (*Archeology* 228–29)

These comments help us to see how the conflict *The Namesake* narrates might arise from the tension between the expectation, on the one hand, that one will accept constraints on discourse, and on the other, the desire to refuse such magical thinking in favor of a present defined by a more unpredictable future, to open oneself up, in other words, to “that which gives rise to the chance series” (*Archeology* 229) that has led us to where we are and to conceive of ourselves as who we are. How to occupy such a present, one self-reflexively aware of the accidental nature of the exteriority providing the conditions of our possibility, is, of course, a more difficult intellectual task than highlighting the operations of allegory when they are present, since—as *The Namesake*'s predecessors have abundantly demonstrated—any attempt to define such a present, to articulate it as a form of discourse, is itself already a form of allegory. At the same time, as the narrator of *The Namesake* reminds us, such a present cannot remain contained by allegory, for the “[t]hings that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end” (287).

§

The name of Gogol's father, Ashoke, means without sorrow. This seems 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.

On a return trip from Jamshedpur to Calcutta, the train he was riding on suddenly derailed, and he was thrown partly out of a window. Only by chance do rescuers find him, and later, in his family home recovering from his extensive injuries, he thinks about a conversation he had with another passenger, now dead, who advised him to “see as much of the world as you can” (16). He soon decides to do exactly this, to apply for a fellowship to study engineering abroad and in this way to choose “another sort of future” (21) than the one imagined for him by his parents. Even though something obviously sorrowful has happened to him, a traumatic event that leaves him prostrate for months and limping ever after, 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.

The same cannot be said about Gogol, whose name carries the trace of this trauma but not the freedom it afforded his father. The book Ashoke was reading on the train, the pages of which fluttered in the wind and caught the attention of rescue workers on the verge of giving up, was Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat.” When the formal name selected for his son by his mother is lost in the mail, never to be recovered, Ashoke decides to name his son after the author of the book that saved his life, giving him a formal name that was meant only to be a name used within the intimate circles of family and friends. This is a name Gogol dislikes because it makes him stand out too much, neither Anglo American nor Indian, and finally he chooses to change his name to Nikhil (a playful twist on his namesake’s first name). For most of his life, then, Gogol has tried to distance himself from the name he was given and the story that is attached to it, enacting through the play of his name the struggle against allegory dramatized by his romantic choices and alluded to by the title of the novel. At the end of *The Namesake*, after his father has died and his mother is getting ready to move out of the house where he grew up, Gogol finds himself reading the copy of “The Overcoat” that his father had given to him as a present long before. Obviously, we are meant to consider what the significance of this novella is to the story of Gogol’s life.

“The Overcoat” concerns one euphoniously named Akaky Akaki-evich, a clerk who wants nothing more than to make copies of official government documents by hand. Within his limited domain, he is the master of his reality, creating with his hands, word by word, the official

world that others who receive his copies will have no choice but to accept. It is a reality of laws, conventions, formality, and symbols. These are binding on the lives of the citizenry as the clothes they wear are defining of the physical reality of their bodily movements. This world of copies is upset when Akaky discovers that he must replace his threadbare coat. Carried away by a mercurial tailor met at a moment of drunken enthusiasm, Akaky is transported into an unpredictable exteriority of predatory social relations, criminal behavior, and bureaucratic power that negates any form of agency he may have possessed before. The world outside his own is scary, beyond his control, crushing in the obvious indifference with which it regards a nonpersonage like Akaky. The end suggests a supernatural turn as a necessary response to such irregularity, as Akaky haunts the "Person of Consequence" (560) whose behavior toward him in life has mortified him to death. In this way, Akaky extracts a small amount of vengeful justice from beyond the grave.

This work, which frames the narrative of *The Namesake* by setting it in motion and by providing its closing invocation, seems to capture the petty absurdity of the troubles that Gogol has with his name, the way in which he decides to have it changed legally to Nikhil only to find out, in a tearful exchange between father and son, why his father had originally given him the name he had. Like the tragedy of the lost overcoat, the miscommunication about his name seems enormous only to the individuals affected, just as the casual racism of an insignificant character like Pamela, met at a moment of forced socializing in New Hampshire, might seem painful to the one who must endure it:

"I mean, you must never get sick."

"Actually, that's not true," he says, slightly annoyed. . . .

"But you're Indian," Pamela says, frowning. "I'd think the climate wouldn't affect you, given your heritage." (157)

And yet, as ordinary as the life is that Akaky has led before he is forced to buy a new overcoat, there is something about it that seems worth preserving, that deserves to be grieved when lost, and that requires justice against the personage who, enamored by his own importance, must inflate himself by demeaning another. In a similar way, it is difficult to dismiss the exchange between Gogol and Pamela too quickly. Pamela's casual racism reveals a deep-seated and all-too-often-met uncertainty over how the status of even the most privileged children of 1965 registers in

the social settings they are coming to occupy. No matter how much they might wish to belong, they are marked as outsiders, a shadow of doubt that brings into slightly sharper relief the contradiction Gogol embodies at such moments. This contradiction is the one between the immigrant as threat to national security, what Mayor Guiliani's police commissioner invoked when he uttered the phrase "taxi terrorists" even before the events of September 11 (Mathew 35), and the immigrant as founding myth of the nation, one shored up by successive legislative refinements that carefully give preference to the immigration of specific kinds of professionals. If the select children of 1965 have found material and professional success, it is because the state has given them a firm biopolitical push. One of the most graphic examples of the contradiction created by this Janus-faced attitude toward immigration can be found in the fact that more

people entered the United States as highly skilled workers in the fiscal year 2001 than in any year in American history, but more people also died that year in trying to enter the United States illegally than in any other year for which we have records.

(Park and Park 3)

Those on the former side of this social equation might feel a lingering sense of uncertainty comparable to the one evoked by *The Namesake* as it turns its last chapter toward the future. There is an intense attention to form as the verb tense begins in the present, lapses back and forth to the past and to the future, until, by the very end, the future dominates. There is one moment in particular among this shuttling of tenses that stands out:

The cool air is pleasant on his face after his hours on the train. He'd slept most of the journey to Boston, the conductor poking him awake once they'd reached South Station, and he was the only person left in the compartment, the last to get off. He had slept soundly, curled up on two seats, his book unread, using his overcoat as a blanket, pulled up to his chin. . . . He must help his mother pack her things, settle her accounts. They will drive her to Logan and see her off as far as airport security will allow. And then the house will be occupied by strangers, and there will be no trace that they were ever there, no house to enter, no name in the telephone directory. (281)

The image of Gogol stepping off a train, where he has been cocooned reassuringly in his overcoat, lulled by the back-and-forth motion of his compartment, only to face the chill of the tasks that lie before him, is breathtaking, not least because it recalls the moment when Gogol's father nearly died in a train accident. It quietly evokes the futility of Gogol's travels as he returns along permanent tracks that he has traveled back and forth in the course of his story, never once, unlike his father, having veered into bodily catastrophe, yet always feeling, again unlike his father, somehow unfulfilled as a person, out of place, dislocated, directionless. Rail travel has been safe and dependable, requiring nothing of Gogol, entailing no risks. It suggests a stasis in motion that succinctly captures his predicament at this moment in a largely uneventful life circumscribed by the allegory of reproductive futurism—the felt need to go off in a direction of his own choosing, to imagine “another sort of future” without any clear idea of how he should do this. This is a predicament, it seems to me, that remains very much with us at a moment that cannot yet be said to have outgrown the crises, both of nation and ethnos, named by an earlier generation of postmodern authors.

Notes

1. McGurl is also deeply concerned with the way MFA programs wed creative writing to the corporate structure of the university. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this essay to pursue this point further.

2. In addition to the standard works by David Harvey (*The Condition of Postmodernity*) and Fredric Jameson (*Postmodernism*), Bill Readings's more recent account of how universities no longer serve an explicitly national project has become essential to conversations about these phenomena in literary studies. Michel Foucault's work has also figured with renewed vigor in these discussions, especially after the translation of “*Society Must Be Defended*.”

3. These critiques of Mukherjee's fiction should be tempered by Srikanth's observation that

Whatever her shortcomings, there is no denying that Mukherjee's vision is vast, that she sees the interconnectedness between nations and follows the repercussions of actions in one sphere of globe upon peoples in another. (185)

4. This argument is not without controversy. See the forum on the antisocial thesis in queer theory published in Caserio et al., featuring pieces by Paul Caserio, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean. Muñoz's critique is especially sharp as he points out how Edelman's argument might squeeze out people of color from his definition of queerness, even if they themselves also identify as queer.

5. For an extended discussion of the model minority myth, see Palumbo-Liu (395–416). Regarding the 1965 Act and its impact on the changing demographics of the United States, see Reimers, Hing, Hollinger, Luibéid, Louie, and Park and Park. I wish to stress as well that even without the 1965 Act, large numbers of people from all over the world would probably still have migrated to the United States in the same ways that other industrialized countries have been forced to accept new arrivals. See Sassen 322.

6. I am not the first to highlight the importance of children in Lahiri's fiction. Michael Cox points out how in three of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*, children occupy center stage as "observers, untainted by the effects of prolonged enculturation" (120).

7. One might also think about allegory along the lines suggested by Frederic Jameson in the widely debated essay "Third-World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism." But while Jameson excludes the West from the kinds of national allegories he finds being written in the Third World, I am insisting in this essay that such national allegories are very much a fixture of the postmodern/ethnic turn in contemporary American literature. For a searing critique of Jameson's essay, see Ahmad. For a discussion about the controversy surrounding Jameson's essay, see Szeman.

8. This is the only time I note the fact that Gogol has a sister. In this I am following the novel's almost exclusive preoccupation with its male protagonist. If I had more space and proper occasion, I would have liked to break out of this preoccupation to note at greater length the ways in which Sonia marries a Chinese American man at the end of the novel, suggesting another possible allegorical position between nation and ethnos not considered here.

For reading drafts and providing me with invaluable suggestions I thank Kevin Ohi, Viet Thanh Nguyen, James Kyung-Jin Lee, Anita Mannur, and especially Andy Hoberek (without whom this essay would not exist).

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