

Ganga, Ganguli, Gogol:
Jhumpa Lahiri's Onomastic Narrative

Here is a commonplace: to be in a culture and develop a cultural identity is to be part of a dialogue, to call on others and be called on; to name and be named. “The close connection between identity and interlocution,” Charles Taylor argues in his book *Sources of the Self*, “emerges” through “*names* . . . My name is what I am ‘called’. A human being *has* to have a name, because he or she has to be *called*, i.e., addressed. Being called into conversation is a precondition of developing a human identity, and so my name is (usually) given me by my earliest interlocutors.” In what follows, I take up the twofold interlocution of naming, that is, name-giving as linguistic *and* cultural or, better still, intercultural act. In this case, I am not only addressed, and acknowledged, as a “human being.” There lies, nested in the calling itself, a broader conversation with, or calling out to, an other whose name those calling on me must use. My humanness is projected through *this* dialogue with an other, with whom those talking to me implicitly talk and whom they name as they speak to me. And there is no other way, for I bear his or her name. So this other, my “namesake” not here with me, or here but so unlike me, indirectly participates in this dialogue, and it is through the larger, cultural dialogism associated with this presence that my own persona is socially recognized in the here-and-now of my culture. In a very fundamental way, then, as Levinas suggests in *Proper Names*, the name of the ethnic, racial, religious, in brief, “cultural other,” helps us speak to one another no matter where we are insofar as the most trivial chitchat turns on our ability to identify, to name our interlocutor. A decisive mediation of the dialogue must and does arise as a precondition of the dialogue itself. In other words, what I mean is this: I manage to get across, to speak to you, via an other—again, in

his or her name. Originally his or hers, my name, much like my overall language, testifies to this very locutory indebtedness, to the fact that I am—for I am “identified”—in and through his or her name. We often establish ourselves, step on the social stage in an act of deceptive autonomy. We “make a name” for ourselves, and that self-making points toward us, the presumed source of the name, of the well-known noun. Yet “when a name” truly “comes,” Derrida meditates in *On the Name*, “it immediately says more than the name: the other of the name and quite simply the other.” The other arrives in his or her name first, in *my* name, that is. A dispatcher of otherness, my name is sign for something or somebody not yet fully present, is a deferral of presence and a cultural *approximation* thereof simultaneously. He or she is not here, but his or her name teaches me about him or her. The name tells a story that makes up for an absence while in turn that story calls forth other presences by re-storying their stories and renaming their names.

This onomastic intertextuality operates within particular traditions and, more and more forcefully these days, across them. But the other’s name is not solely a repository of otherness. In saying or listening to it, in “reading” and assuming it, I learn not just things about others. “In the other’s name” I also learn about myself. Indian-American writer Jhumpa Lahiri’s tellingly titled 2003 novel *The Namesake* is a case in point. A Bengali-American saga chronicling the Ganguli family’s resettlement to North America, shuttling back and forth between worlds, cultures, and people simultaneously wounded and nurtured by dislocation and relocation, the book revolves around the foundational name of the other. It would be inexact, though, to view this name and, along with it, the other’s nominal presence, as an adulteration of an original, unalloyed makeup. This presence is there from day one. And it is not there to disrupt the collective presence, the sustaining co-presence the Gangulis extend to each other, but to give it meaning; not to interrupt family rites but to help families survive the trials of displacement and diasporic readjustment.

What Dostoevsky said about Nikolai Gogol—“We all came out of Gogol’s overcoat”—also applies to the Gangulis. Ashoke, the father, quotes Dostoevsky to his son to comment not on what Russian writers owe to Gogol but on what the Gangulis do. He is not implying that his family has Russian origins either. Or, if you will, he is suggesting that origin, tradition, and ancestry more largely be reframed away from the localist-nativist paradigm of blood, place, and sedentary roots, and tied more closely into a culturalist, indeed cross-culturalist one, which grants others unprecedented, *originating* centrality. Thus it can be argued that the Gangulis “came out of”—were “fathered” by—Gogol. Concomitantly, Gogol is not an “original” tradition but a *tradition adopted*, and *adopted father*. For Gogol, too, had been “taken in” by the Bengalis a long time ago. A devotee of Russian literature, Ashoke’s grandfather had urged his nephew to “read all the Russians.” “They will never fail you,” he assured him, and Gogol proved him right one October day in 1961 when his “Overcoat,” the story, saved his life: Ashoke was reading Akaky Akakievich’s story when the train on which he was traveling derailed, and it was a page of the Gogol text he was clutching in his hand that caught the eye of the rescuing crew who rushed to pull him from the wreckage. Gogol authored then, one might say, not only his work but his reader, too, or his readers, rather, an entire line of fathers and grandfathers related to each other not just by blood but also by their passion for Gogol’s work. They passed this passion on from grandfather to nephew and from nephew to his son, forming a Gogolian chain of readerly devotion that comes to define the Gangulis, “explain” them to each other, and bring them together under the aegis of an other’s word and name. They bond as they introduce and read Gogol to each other, and the numerous Gogolian scenes strewn throughout the novel cobble together a whole patrilineal tradition inching steadily along, generation after generation, “in the margins” of another’s stories. No doubt, the Ganguli family is certainly more than a gloss to

Gogol, just as tradition, theirs included, goes beyond reading, let alone reading only the Russian realist for that matter. But Gogol becomes something of a rite of passage no less than a way of passing the torch, so much so that Gogol's presence in the family cannot be separated from the family history. In fact, this presence shapes this history, makes it by making itself part of it, part of the Ganguli heritage. Gogol writes himself into the family story, into their patrimony while they insert themselves into his world, "immers[e] in the . . . plight of Akaky Akakyevich," see themselves and those close to them in a Gogolian, strange yet "oddly inspiring" light.

This interface of the patrilineal, the patrimonial, and the patronymic is truly arresting. On the one hand, as Ashoke himself implies, Gogol authors, "makes" his Bengali fans, a readership lineage inside the Ganguli family, and by the same token shapes the family narrative. On the other hand, the Bengalis appropriate him, include the unfamiliar and unfamiliar other in the family patrimony, somebody whom they make theirs and then make over *to* those coming after them. Thus they establish and transfer a legacy as much as they pass Gogol's name along as, and in, their own. Grandfathers, then fathers, hand the other's text down, and sons and nephews come of age as they come into this inheritance of otherness, once they are finally able to read—and read themselves into, see themselves through—the Russian's work. So Gogol comes both before *and* in the aftermath of this genealogy of readers, concomitantly from the outside and inside, makes, and is made by, his Bengali aficionados. In a way, he is already there, awaiting to be "introduced" to the young; in another, he cannot but come after the young has "assumed" him and, in so doing, has crossed into adulthood while awakening into a new sense of duty and belonging. The Gangulis' sense of identity springs from their relation to *the only one among them who is not one of them*, from a relation of a different kind because not grounded in a commonality of ethnicity and blood, but in commerce with Gogol. Some of most defining in-

group protocols—individual self-identification, other selves’ recognition in the family, or the preservation of family customs across generations and continents—play out under the other’s name, through and in “Gogol,” with such an intensity that, from a point on, that other so crucial to these psycho-cultural rites cannot bear another name. Nor can the Gangulis.

The novel itself conveys this inevitability from the outset. That is a symbolic beginning—and the “right call,” in an other’s voice. To get started, Lahiri calls out to the unlikely ancestor, Gogol. And Gogol answers with an excerpt from “The Overcoat,” which Lahiri uses as an epigraph where she sets off her book’s tenor. “The reader,” Gogol says in this fragment, “should realize himself that it could not have happened otherwise, and that to give him any other name was quite out of the question.” The passage alludes to “The Overcoat”’s protagonist but also to *The Namesake*’s, Ashoke’s son, Gogol. Ashoke gives his first American-born child the name of his favorite author, and this is how the Russian writer becomes Ashoke’s son namesake. Naturally, this occurs after Ashoke takes up Gogol and decides to name his son after him. But we also know that Gogol has been part of the family already, and family members have been close to each other “in his name” before this presence becomes manifest in the name given to Ashoke’s first born. Moreover, this patrilineal passion for the other’s text that brings him into the family and institutes him as patrimony has a patronymic flipside hinting that Gogol has been a Ganguli, already there in *their* name this time around, before they “adopted” him. In Calcutta, Ashoke’s son discovers whole pages of Gangulis in the local phone book and remembers that his father had told him that “Ganguli is a legacy of the British,” an “anglicized way of pronouncing his real surname, Gangopadhyay.”

Ganguli is a colonial anagram, a British disfiguration of the original name. Resulting from this abuse of the name is, however, a revealing paronomasia. In the Ancient Greek,

paronomázein means to name someone or something by using a slightly altered name. What happens to the initial Bengali patronym is an onomastic metonymy for the larger process of colonial cooptation, metamorphosis, and survival through which entire Bengali culture went under the British. Mangled and rendered “official” in the “anglicized” form, Ganguli still recalls its origin—notably enough, the name calls up origin itself, Ganga, the river goddess, and with it the land (Bengali or, Bangla) it gave life to. But the name’s colonial disfiguration figures, *projects* (throws forward, shoots up) *another* root, another origin altogether. Ganguli and Gogol are so close euphonically (if not culturally) that the Russian name can be said to figure into the Bengali already as a symbolic if not actual etymon. Misappropriated by the British as “Ganguli,” the Ganguli reappropriate themselves as they take possession of that which their name hints that they have a right to: Gogol. Giving his American-born son the latter’s name, Ashoke sanctions this heteronomous narrative of naming, misnaming, and renaming, acknowledging the apocryphal etymology of the patronym, reinscribing the Russian name “officially” into the Ganguli as a way of suggesting that the writer’s name has been there along.

In Gogol’s name, tradition and innovation, inside and outside, self and other, bloodlines and text lines feed off each other. By custom, Gogol’s grandparents were charged with picking a first name for him, but the Calcutta letter carrying their name choice never made it to Boston, so Ashoke gave his son the provisional “pet name” of Gogol himself. An unofficial appellative, this *daknam* is used by family and close friends and only later “paired” with a “good name,” a *bhalonam* fit for the official bureaucracy. A reminder of an earlier, less formal world of childhood, pet names are often “meaningless, deliberately silly, ironic, even onomatopoeic.” Not so Gogol’s: the pet name already *means* something. “Temporary” as it may be, it has long been marking that other’s presence in the heart of the Bengali family, for Gogol is the name of what

they have been reading, the name of the other and concurrently theirs—what they could read into their own. Gogol is the nickname, the cognominal surrogate, the “other name” and the other’s name all in one. But it also designates a longstanding, defining, hence identifying knot of traditions *in* the family: on one side, the Ganga/Bangla/Ganguli onomastic complex, which Gogol recalls; on the other side, the preoccupations evoked by the writer’s proper name. For this reason, Gogol is the name proper, and indeed, in his words, “to give [Gogol] any other name was quite out of the question.”

But onomastic identification does not stop here. The pet name is soon followed by the “good name.” Yet in Gogol’s case, the pet name’s “other” is not another name but the other’s “other name” and possibly an even more appropriate name since at issue here is not the family name, the “Ganguli” in which the Russian author’s lives on, but the first name. And the new first name is even closer to Gogol than Gogol itself not only because it is the Bengali version of Nikolai Gogol’s given name but because it is simultaneously Russian and Bengali. The name, “Nikhil, is artfully connected to the old. Not only is it a perfectly respectable Bengali good name, meaning ‘he who is entire encompassing all,’ but it also bears a satisfying resemblance to . . . the first name of the Russian Gogol.” Uncovering the name’s cultural texture, the double-barreled etymology of the new name is quite striking. But the name does not signify just the Russian-Bengali co-presence and survival in that which, on American soil, might become “Nick.” “Nikhil” names, *in Bengali*, Nikhil’s native language—the language of family and heritage—a “horizontal” transcendence that embraces all and derives a sense of wholeness from its propinquity of “en-compassing” everything and everybody. The name takes Bengali tradition with it as it takes the whole world in, because, once again, *in the other’s name*, on which his father decided while staring at Gogol’s books in a Boston library, Nikhil connects back to his

Bengali parents, to who they are and what they mean to him—what they name—in *their own names*: “Ashoke” signifies “he who transcends grief,” and “Ashima,” his mother’s name, “she who is limitless, without borders,” and here, on the *other* onomastic ground, the patrilineal and the matrilineal meet to correct an older imbalance, all family roots are acknowledged and push deeper. They will continue to do so for Nikhil’s sister, Sonia. “Though Sonali is,” Lahiri writes, “the name on her birth certificate, . . . at home they . . . call her Sonu, then Sona, and finally Sonia. Sonia makes her a *citizen of the world*. It’s a Russian link to her brother, it’s European, South American. Eventually it will be the name of the Indian prime minister’s Italian wife.” “Sonali,” “she who is golden,” according to her Bengali “good name,” implies perfection, roundness, an all-embracing propensity.

What the name represents in the world; the name as a cultural allegory of the name bearer; the name as destiny and individual agency; the name’s pre-scription in Gogol’s writings and names but also in the grandmother’s lost letter, and the name as choice, as voluntary and individualistic inscription—all these reveal themselves fully later in life as Ashoke’s children come to understand and honor their names. At first, Gogol is unhappy with his name and does not understand Ashoke when his father says that he “feel[s] a special kinship with Gogol.” The “kinship” with the other, one more time redefined culturally outside the blood line, does not mean much to Gogol when Ashoke gives him a Gogol book as a birthday present. Like Ashima, who becomes “true to the meaning of her name, . . . without borders, a resident everywhere and nowhere” only after her husband’s untimely passing away, Gogol/Nikhil overcomes his onomastic “burden” in his father’s absence, realizing that the Russian’s text should not be an embarrassment, as he felt in his high school English class when he was assigned “The Overcoat,” but an vital opportunity, a window into himself and the world.