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# Immigration and Identity Translation: Characters in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* as Translators and Translated Beings

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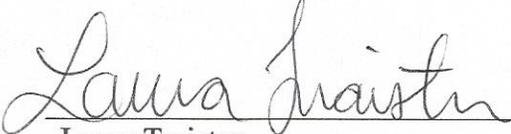
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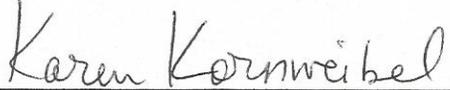
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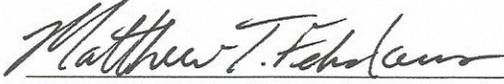
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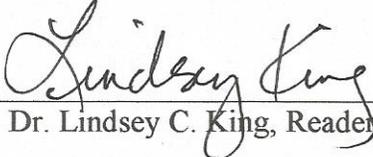
Laura Traister

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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Immigration and Identity Translation:  
Characters in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and  
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April 11, 2016

“Almost all of my characters are translators, insofar as they must make sense of the foreign to survive.”

-Jhumpa Lahiri

Interactions between multiple cultures and languages can transform the identities of both entire cultures and the individuals within those cultures. In the context of an increasingly globalized world, these interactions are not only ubiquitous, but inevitable. One reason is immigration. As of 2013, about 13% of the population of the United States was made up of people born in a foreign country. Adding the U.S.-born children of immigrants to this figure means that about 25% of the population is either first- or second-generation immigrants (Zong and Batalova). Although it is easy to talk about the mass movements of people, the experiences of individual immigrants must not be overlooked. These individuals, regardless of the route by which they left their home country, must negotiate foreign spaces and grapple with hybridized identities in order to survive in the new culture.

Immigrant writers have often turned to the creation of literature to express their experiences in a new place, stimulated by the confusion and conflict caused by the meeting of two or more cultures. As Indian-born writer Bharati Mukherjee has affirmed, “Immigrant literature and immigrant lives are inseparable” (Mukherjee 684). In their fiction, Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, another Indian-American writer, often describe the struggles of immigrant characters or their children. Two particular novels feature immigrant protagonists, whose narratives offer insight to identity transformation. Mukherjee’s 1989 novel *Jasmine* tells the story of Jasmine, a first-generation immigrant who arrives in the United States illegally, while Lahiri’s 2003 novel *The Namesake* traces the struggles of second-generation immigrant Gogol Ganguli as he negotiates the burdensome expectations of his Indian parents and his American surroundings. By examining each novel through the lens of cultural translation, I will

demonstrate how Jasmine and Gogol move through a series of identity crises and transformations as a result of their interactions with foreign and hybrid spaces.

As Alessandra Rizzo has said, an immigrant text “becomes a hybrid site,” which can be “a space where multi-faceted identities co-habit in a process of deconstructing and reconstructing their own sense of emplacement in non-native places” (Rizzo 264). Immigration signifies a wrenching away, a separation from one’s home or place of birth, and has a profound impact on the way an individual relates to him or herself, to the homeland, and to the new host country and culture. In fact, the impact of this physical and cultural uprooting can reach beyond the lives of first-generation immigrants to affect their children, who may feel torn between two sets of cultural values and expectations. Upon arrival in a foreign country, immigrants seem to be faced with two options: to try to completely assimilate into the host culture by forsaking their native language and way of life, or to cling to their culture of origin at the risk of stagnation. Neither of these options is particularly practical or helpful. Instead, immigrants must enter the hybrid space where native and foreign cultures meet and move past this false dichotomy to enter the process of identity translation and negotiation.

In this hybrid space, “identities become both identities-in-translation and translated identities” (Rizzo 264). Translation is usually thought of as the process of transforming a source text from one language into the equivalent meaning in another language. However, translation as a concept and a process has been applied to other situations besides a linguistic or literary act. Lahiri affirms that, based on her observation of the immigrant struggle, “Translation is not only a finite linguistic act but an ongoing cultural one” (Lahiri 120). Several scholars, Homi Bhabha chief among them, have discussed the theory of cultural translation, which can be thought of as

“the process and condition of human migrancy” (Kung 124). Michael Cronin, a specialist in translation studies, also compares the migrant condition to translation when he writes, “the condition of the migrant is the condition of the translated being. He or she moves from a source language and culture to a target language and culture” (Cronin 45). Anne Malena also affirms that “migrants are translated beings in countless ways” (Malena 9); in addition to having to engage with a new language, “their individual and collective identities will experience a series of transformations as they adjust to the loss of their place of birth and attempt to turn it into a gain” (Malena 9). Cultural and social factors, as well as the traumatic and even violent experience of displacement, undoubtedly shape these transformations of identity. In this sense, immigrants become like a translated text as they are acted upon by these forces, and the tension between the original culture (source text) and the new culture (target text) often results in some sort of loss of meaning or significance. For an immigrant, the loss of family, traditional clothing, native language(s), religious communities, cultural traditions and holidays, or any number of other things can contribute to a transformation of identity. Likewise, in the lives of Jasmine and Gogol, this loss is manifested in identity crises and transformations.

Immigrants can also act as translators of their foreign surroundings and of their own identities. While first-generation immigrants often become literal translators as they learn a new language, they also navigate the hybrid space as figurative translators in order to confront the burden of engaging with both their culture of origin and the new host culture. Second-generation immigrants take on this role a bit differently, as they might serve as linguistic and cultural translators between their parents and the host language/culture. They also translate their own identities to navigate the duality of their participation in both their parents’ culture of origin and

the host culture into which they are born. In this ongoing act of self-translation, an immigrant is both active agent and acted upon, both the changer and the changed. Enacting their agency in the role of self-translator allows immigrants some control over to what extent and in what ways they are transformed by their cross-cultural experiences.

Of course, like any translation, figurative self-translation “is always an encounter with the resistance of the untranslatable” (Kung 125). This is why immigrant subjects like Jasmine and Gogol often struggle to negotiate their identities in the meeting place of two different cultures. Postcolonial literary critic Homi Bhabha envisions the concept of untranslatability as “the residual cultural unassimilability of the migrant” (Kung 125). This resistance to assimilation might stem from a host culture’s inability or unwillingness to understand the immigrant’s culture and language of origin. The tension of untranslatability can certainly result in “a haunting sense of irresoluteness” (Kung 125) that characterizes Jasmine’s and Gogol’s identity struggles. The untranslatable aspect of a translation is not only this “negation of complete integration,” but also “a will to survival found in the subjectivity of the migrant” (Pym 140). So while this tension is uncomfortable, it actually presents a unique opportunity for gain because it “presents a way out of the binary dilemmas” (Pym 140). The struggle of self-translation can allow an immigrant to bypass the limitations of the foreigner/native binary and enter a space of negotiation and growth in which they both enact and undergo translations of identity.

While having profoundly different life stories, Jasmine and Gogol both undergo identity transformations as they are forced to face the interaction between Indian culture and American culture. Both immigrant narratives focus on interpersonal relationships, highlighting the importance of naming and the power that other people and their expectations can have on an

individual's identity. It is often through these relational interactions that cultural expectations are communicated to, and interpreted by, Jasmine and Gogol. While both protagonists serve as active participants, or translators, in their identity transformations, Jasmine's and Gogol's generational differences and gendered experiences result in differing degrees of agency. Both Jasmine and Gogol endure loss and conflict, but out of their struggles they each gain a greater understanding not only of who they are, but of who they can become. I trace this identity translation process through my study of the following areas: familial relationships and naming, gendered violence and loss of agency in *Jasmine*, assimilation and Americanization, and the ending of each novel.

### **Naming and Family**

At the heart of *Jasmine* and *The Namesake* are reflections about how Jasmine and Gogol journey through a hybrid cultural space, searching for their identity in the midst of conflicting expectations placed upon them by two different cultures. While these expectations are cultural in nature, they are often communicated by individuals who are close to the protagonists; in one case, these ideas are communicated by the names bestowed upon them early in their lives. Early in Jasmine's and Gogol's journeys, these expectations come from their cultures of origin and are voiced mainly by their family members, and in Jasmine's case, by her first husband as well. Later in their lives, the expectations of American culture tend to be conveyed by romantic/sexual interactions with Americans. Beginning by examining each character's family relationships will bring insight into the expectations they inherit upon their birth.

Although Jasmine's first-person voice remains constant throughout her account of her journey from India to various parts of the United States, she is known by several names: Jyoti,

Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, and Jane.<sup>1</sup> The narrative is told retrospectively from the perspective of Jane, a twenty-four-year-old Indian immigrant who lives in Iowa and carries the child of her American partner. Throughout the novel, Jane's voice depicts her unfolding future, as well as memories of her past, which include her identity transformations as she marries and leaves the small village of her birth and then migrates illegally to the United States; upon arrival, she experiences violence and culture shock in Florida, works as a live-in nanny in New York, and finally settles in Iowa, taking on a different persona for each of these experiences. Each of Jasmine's names carries with it different expectations of identity and is given to her from someone outside of herself, starting with her birth name, which was chosen by her grandmother.

She is born as Jyoti in Hasnapur, a rural village in the Punjab region in northern India. As a daughter, she is considered a curse (Mukherjee 39). This view is due to the cultural tradition that requires a woman to be under the care and protection either of her family or a husband. To secure a decent husband, a woman's family must usually provide a dowry, which could impoverish families for generations (Mukherjee 39). Jyoti's mother knows that because Jyoti is the fifth daughter in the family, there will be no dowry money left to ensure a good marriage for her (Mukherjee 39-40). This knowledge leads Jyoti's mother to try to choke her at birth in order "to spare [her] the pain of a dowryless bride" (Mukherjee 40). This expectation of a miserable existence for a dowryless bride is based on observation of other women's lives and deaths; Jasmine, looking back on her childhood, reports, "All over our district, bad luck dogged dowryless wives, rebellious wives, barren wives. They fell into wells, they got run over by trains, they burned to death heating milk on kerosene stoves" (Mukherjee 41). The culture of this

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, I will refer to this character as Jasmine because it is this name that serves as the title of the book.

particular region expects Jyoti to submit to the role of subordinated wife. Although her birth name means “light” (Mukherjee 40), Jyoti is born into the darkness of rural poverty and gender inequality and seems fated to die there.

As a child, Jyoti refutes these dismal expectations by proving herself to be a successful student. Although her family thinks that intelligence is wasted on a girl (Mukherjee 40), she is allowed to stay in school longer than her sisters (Mukherjee 45). She does marry when she is fourteen years old, but due to her father’s recent death, she is able to choose the man who will be her husband (Mukherjee 59). Prakash Vih, an engineering student and repairman, is “a modern man, a city man” (Mukherjee 76). While Prakash is not a biological family member, with him Jasmine finds a new life and hope for starting her own family someday. Their marriage is one of love and respect, not just economic and cultural obligation. Jyoti’s first name change and identity transformation occurs at this point, when she marries and enters a hybrid space by moving from the village to a city called Jullundhar. Although a hybrid space is more visible when cultures from two separate and distant nations meet, this space is formed here, too, in the collision of village and city values,<sup>2</sup> and Jyoti feels “suspended between worlds” (Mukherjee 76). As a modern city man, Prakash dreams of building a life abroad. Part of that dream is having a modern, educated wife. This expectation is manifested in Prakash’s act of renaming Jyoti as Jasmine. Prakash is one of three male characters who rename Jasmine; in doing so, he attempts to “remake her in the shape of [his] own fantasies” (Carter-Sanborn 579). Jasmine later compares him to Professor Higgins in the play *Pygmalion*, explaining that

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<sup>2</sup> The differences in village and city life must also be considered in light of India’s history as a British colony from 1858-1947. Because colonialism tends to affect cities more than the countryside, the once-colonized city of Jullundhar would already be a hybrid space caused by the meeting of British and Indian culture. In contrast, Jasmine says that in her birth village, “British things . . . [had] never even arrived” (Mukherjee 106).

He wanted to break down the Jyoti I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine. He said, "You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume." (Mukherjee 77)

"Jasmine" is an English word that refers to a fragrant flowering plant that is commonly found in India. It is this flower, of course, that Prakash refers to when he tells his wife that she will "quicken the *whole world* with [her] perfume" (Mukherjee 77, emphasis added). Projecting his own desire to leave India onto her, he creates the expectation that Jasmine will move beyond the place of her birth to impact the whole world. While Prakash supplies the name translation and the accompanying expectations, Jasmine enacts her agency to translate her own identity. She chooses to fulfill the expectation of becoming a cosmopolitan because it aligns with her own preexisting desire for a better life. In fact, her main stipulation in searching for a marriage partner was a man who could speak English because "to want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want to want the world" (Mukherjee 68).<sup>3</sup> She postpones Jyoti's "feudal" (Mukherjee 77) desires to become a mother and instead takes Prakash's mold of Jasmine and embodies the new persona in her own way. Although Prakash does not want her making her own money, she does so secretly by selling detergent in her neighborhood (Mukherjee 79). She still clings to Jyoti's dreams of starting a family, but at the same time, she supports Prakash's plans to study in America and send for her to join him later. So, she does not bend completely to Prakash's vision of Jasmine and the expectations that entails, but instead enacts her agency to negotiate her own translation of his naming.

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<sup>3</sup> Again, India's history as a British colony is significant because it has given and continues to give many of its inhabitants an exposure to English. This makes Indian immigrants in Jasmine's position unique from those who immigrate to the United States from a country where English is not an official language.

When Prakash is violently killed by Sikh militants, Jasmine experiences a radical loss—not only of her life partner, but of her hope for the future. Violence is a recurring theme throughout her story and is the aspect that makes Jasmine’s experience most divergent from Gogol’s. While I have already discussed translation/transformation as a struggle which inevitably leads to loss, Mukherjee’s view of identity translation insists on the violence of transformation. Early in the novel, Jasmine-as-Jane says, “There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams” (Mukherjee 29). For Jasmine, identity translation is an act of murder and/or suicide and subsequent rebirth. While Prakash is still alive, Jasmine describes Jyoti as being “like a dream from another life” (Mukherjee 91), but immediately after Prakash’s death, Jasmine asserts that “Jyoti is dead” (Mukherjee 96). The violence of Prakash’s death “kills” Jyoti and cements Jasmine’s identity as Jasmine. Jasmine enacts her agency by choosing to keep embodying Jasmine. Instead of resigning herself to a Jyoti-like life of widowhood and likely early death back in Hasnapur, she reminds herself that “Prakash had taken Jyoti and created Jasmine, and Jasmine would complete the mission of Prakash” (Mukherjee 97). The mission is to do what Prakash is now incapable of doing: to go to Florida and see the campus of the university he planned to attend, and afterward to burn his belongings and then herself (Mukherjee 118).<sup>4</sup>

Jasmine’s decision to call herself Jasmine and to travel alone to the United States shows her agency and that her life as Jasmine is not dependent on Prakash’s existence or on a certain place; with Prakash dead and the city exchanged for the village, she still actively chooses to be Jasmine, a woman whose life will extend beyond India to the wider world. Ironically, the reason

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<sup>4</sup> Jasmine’s plan draws on an ancient Hindu ritual called *sati* or *suttee* in which a widow commits suicide, usually by immolating herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband.

she ends up leaving India is to complete a task that aligns with the “feudal” values that should have died along with Jyoti. This contradiction shows that although Jyoti is metaphorically dead, her ghost, like all of Jasmine’s past lives that will later accumulate, still remains (Mukherjee 21).

Walter Benjamin’s understanding of translation is helpful here; he writes that “translation is like a tangent, which touches the circle (i.e. the original) in one point only to follow thereafter its own way” (78, quoted in Kung 124). Kung further analyzes this observation, noting that, “what is remarkable in this image is that the translation draws on the power of the original to orient itself through territory as yet uncircumscribed” (Kung 124). If we apply this idea to identity transformation and cultural translation, it is clear that in her continual negotiation of identity, Jasmine draws on Jyoti’s experiences and values in order to orient herself in navigating her new identity as Jasmine the widow. Jasmine’s life is like a palimpsest,<sup>5</sup> with each new self being a new translation written over the last, while the previous ones are still dimly visible. The radical loss of her family leaves a terrible mark, but also a void and blankness that all future translations will grapple with.

In *The Namesake*, for Gogol, family is not a loss to be mourned, but rather a burden, an inescapable and often unwanted presence. As a second-generation immigrant, Gogol indirectly inherits his immigrant parents’ sense of loss as well as the weight of their fumbling attempts to survive in a foreign culture. This simultaneous loss and burden is manifested in an extended identity crisis as he experiences life through the role of a translator trying to negotiate between two cultures and sets of expectations. As he grows up, he tries to distance himself from his family and their Indian identity, resenting their lifestyle and socializing only with privileged

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<sup>5</sup> This term is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a very old document on which the original writing has been erased and replaced with new writing” or “something that has changed over time and shows evidence of that change.”

white Americans. As an adult, the death of his father causes him to try to reconnect with his parents' culture, primarily by marrying another second-generation Indian. Not surprisingly, Gogol's attempts to fit into either side of a binary existence are a failure, suggesting the need for a more nuanced approach of negotiation and translation of identity.

Like Jasmine, Gogol is the recipient of someone else's action of naming. His first naming, upon his birth, is the work of his parents, Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, a young married couple who have moved from Calcutta<sup>6</sup> in West Bengal, India, to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the United States. Even the seemingly simple task of naming a child is severely complicated in the United States. In recognition of their culture's respect for seniority and authority, Ashima and Ashoke had chosen to give Gogol's great-grandmother the honor of naming the child (Lahiri 25). Their plan was to leave their new son nameless until the arrival of the grandmother's letter, which would bear his chosen name. When the hospital where Gogol is born insists on the baby being named before the family leaves the hospital, the Bengali naming traditions are revealed to be incomprehensible in the context of American culture.

Interestingly, traditional Bengali nomenclature features a built-in dual identity. There are two names chosen for a person: a *bhalonam*, which is a "good name" used "for identification in the outside world" (Lahiri 26), and a *daknam*, "the name by which one is called by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments" (Lahiri 26). This pet name is "a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated . . . that one is not all things to all people" (Lahiri 26). Since Gogol is chosen as a pet name, it is already apparent that Gogol's name has enormous significance beyond his individual life: the very

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<sup>6</sup> In 2001, the anglicized form of Calcutta was changed to Kolkata to match the Bengali pronunciation.

existence of the intimate pet name shows that his family has a profound claim upon him, a claim that cannot be matched by anyone from outside of the family.

This double naming can function as a tool that is useful for translating the self, depending on one's context and social setting. Ashima and Ashoke, for example, are known by their respective pet names Monu and Mithu, "and even as adults, these are the names by which they are known in their respective families, the names by which they are adored and scolded and missed and loved" (Lahiri 26). In their culture of origin, these two names signify private versus public sides to the self. In a cross-cultural context, however, the double names can signify the self that adheres to traditional Bengali culture versus the modified self that is birthed after years of living in American culture. Perhaps another way of thinking of this phenomenon could be the homeland self versus the exiled self. Later, as a teenager, Gogol will note that when his parents return to Calcutta for family visits, they each have "an alternative identity, a B-side to the self" (Lahiri 76). Upon landing at the airport in Calcutta and being greeted by their Indian relatives, Gogol and his younger sister Sonia observe their parents' transformation with a mixture of bafflement and awe:

Ashima, now Monu, weeps with relief, and Ashoke, now Mithu, kisses his brothers on both cheeks . . . Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road. (Lahiri 81-82)

Clearly, their shifts into their pet names indicate a deeper shift into different versions of themselves based on the presence of their family and culture of origin. This healthy duality can

be used to translate oneself depending on the context. Unfortunately, Gogol does not have this luxury because he never receives a good name as a young child. Ashima and Ashoke attempt to hand this cultural tradition down to Gogol, but in the context of the United States, “a place where such distinctions [between a pet name and a good name] do not exist” (Lahiri 118), something is lost in translation along the way. With the grandmother’s letter delayed and time running out to stay at the hospital, Ashima and Ashoke decide to just choose a pet name for the time being. But because even the American idea of nicknames is not a cultural equivalent to the Bengali system, Gogol’s name only creates confusion for his family, his American friends, and most of all for him. He has received a fragmented version of his parents’ tradition, and instead of being able to use a dual identity to navigate the cultural expectations of his Bengali family and his American peers, he initially struggles to negotiate or translate his identity at all.

While Gogol’s struggles stem from a state of liminality between his parents’ heritage and his American surroundings, the surface symptom is his hatred of his name. It is worth examining the origin of his name and the weight that accompanies it. Under pressure to choose a name for his son, Ashoke realizes the “perfect pet name” (Lahiri 28): Gogol, after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol, someone whom Ashoke greatly admires. The story behind this name’s significance is a harrowing one. At age twenty-two, before he met Ashima, Ashoke was in a train wreck. At the time of the crash in the early hours of the morning, he was reading his grandfather’s copy of the collected stories of Gogol, a gift that had become very precious to Ashoke as he read and reread the stories, his favorite being “The Overcoat.” While lying injured, waiting for rescuers to extract him from the wreckage, Ashoke raised his hand, “still clutching a single page of “The Overcoat,” crumpled tightly in his fist” (Lahiri 18). This action caused a

rescuer to see him, ultimately saving his life. The author Gogol and his stories, already of personal worth to him, take on a spiritual, redemptive significance (Lahiri 21). When Ashoke decides upon Gogol as the pet name for his son, “Ashima approves, aware that the name stands not only for her son’s life, but for her husband’s” (Lahiri 28). Therefore, it is clear that from the beginning, Gogol’s name is a weighty thing that carries meaning not only from his father, but also from all of his family’s past.

While this familial baggage can certainly exist for children in a monocultural upbringing, the bicultural experience complicates matters. The significance of the act of immigration for Gogol’s parents—the loss they feel—makes them cling more tightly to their culture of origin than they may have otherwise done. Because Gogol’s name is chosen and then kept as a result of accidental occurrences brought about by the collision of two cultures, it is highly unlikely that Gogol would have ever been called “Gogol” had he been born and raised in India. Although he was born in the United States, his name and his complicated identity still bear the weight of his parents’ immigration; due to the jarring experience of migration, “all of the first generation’s dreams and expectations are manifest in the naming of their offspring” (Kung 130). It is also worth noting that Gogol is neither a traditional Bengali nor American name, but a Russian one—a surname, and an obscure one at that. This name’s estrangement from the two cultures that have a claim on Gogol prefigures Gogol’s feelings of alienation from both Indian and American cultural identities.

These feelings of alienation give rise to an identity crisis on Gogol’s first day of kindergarten. By now, his parents have accepted that Ashima’s grandmother’s letter is lost forever, as is the chance of her remembering the chosen name because she has lost her memory.

Ashima and Ashoke have finally decided on a good name for Gogol to use at school: “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 Nikolai, the first name of the Russian Gogol” (Lahiri 56). Ironically, Gogol is uncomfortable trying to “encompass all” in his own life. He cannot bear the weight of the expectations of the two cultures he is caught between. Although the name Nikhil embodies the first generation’s attempts to remain connected to their culture of origin, it was also chosen with the host American culture in mind: “[Ashoke] pointed out that it was relatively easy to pronounce, though there was the danger that Americans, obsessed with abbreviation, would truncate it to Nick” (Lahiri 56). As first generation immigrants, Ashima and Ashoke are now aware of American ways and try to work within them to an extent, but they still see Americans as baffling and threatening. To their dismay, Gogol’s initial confusion and resistance to the good name leads the principal and teachers at his school to allow him to be called Gogol, according to his preference. The proposed Bengali system—a split identity in which Gogol would be known as Nikhil at school and as Gogol only at home—confuses and frightens Gogol. He “is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn’t know. Who doesn’t know him” (Lahiri 57). He does not understand this aspect of his parents’ culture or values, this “part of being a Bengali” (Lahiri 57). Although his naïve lack of understanding is due in part to his young age, it is also due to being raised in an environment where the majority of people—such as his principal, teachers, and classmates—do not understand that culture, either. His parents’ request could be called a demand for self-translation, and translation always results in some sort of loss. Young Gogol perceives this proposition as a threat of loss of self. His reluctant reaction makes this “his first attempt to reject a dual identity”

(Kung 131). His first opportunity to translate his identity ends in failure because he, like an original source text, resists translation.

Gogol continues to struggle with his name and identity as he ages, and ironically he ends up longing for the very dual identity that he rejected as a child. Although “the peculiarity of his name becomes apparent” (Lahiri 68) to Gogol when he is eleven years old, he does not mind the distinctiveness of his name. Not surprisingly, it is during the onset of adolescence that Gogol consciously acknowledges feelings of alienation, shame, and self-loathing, feelings that suggest another identity crisis. When his father gives him a copy of *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* for his fourteenth birthday, he acts politely indifferent. Inside, however, feelings of resentment come boiling to the surface:

For by now, he’s come to hate questions pertaining to his name, hates having constantly to explain. He hates having to tell people that it doesn’t mean anything “in Indian” . . . He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that *it has nothing to do with who he is, that it is neither Indian nor American* but of all things Russian. (Lahiri 76, emphasis added)

Gogol recognizes that “who he is” is both Indian and American, and although he may not know it at the time, perhaps he is frustrated by his name’s inability to reflect that dual identity, or even either half of it. His name embodies neither whatever part of him is Indian, nor whatever part of him is American. Americans expect his name to “mean” something, to have a translation that is a direct equivalent to a word in a foreign language.

Gogol seems to long for an Indian name that can be used, when convenient, as an American name, too: “At times he wishes he could disguise it, shorten it somehow, the way the

other Indian boy in his school, Jayadev, had gotten people to call him Jay. But Gogol, already short and catchy, resists mutation” (Lahiri 76). Already Gogol desires to translate his name—and at a deeper level, himself—to fit in with the culture around him, but he encounters the resistance that often accompanies attempts at translation. Of course, this tension applies not only to his name, but to his very identity. He reflects on how his life would be different if he had not rejected the name Nikhil as a child, thinking that “He could have been known, at school at least, as Nikhil...He could have been Gogol only fifty percent of the time. Like his parents when they went to Calcutta, he could have had an alternative identity, a B-side to the self” (Lahiri 76). Although Gogol is untranslatable, Nikhil *does* mean something, not “in Indian,” but in Bengali; as was previously mentioned, it means “he who is entire, encompassing all” (Lahiri 56). By now, Gogol has overcome his fear of having an alternative identity and has replaced it with desire. He wants this dual identity, a self that he can use in American settings and a self he can use in Indian settings. These conflicting parts of him, while still foreign to him in a sense, are relevant in a way that Russian culture and the name Gogol never will be. Here we see Gogol recognizing the value of Bengali nomenclature, a part of his parents’ culture that he has not understood before. He wants to be able to navigate the various facets of his complicated identity, and he realizes that the dual naming system can serve as a tool to translate himself depending on his surroundings. However, he is trying to define himself as either Indian *or* American, so even this useful tool will ultimately prove inadequate in coming to terms with his hybrid identity.

### **Gendered Violence as Impetus for Transformation**

At this point, it is necessary to temporarily digress from a side-by-side comparison between the two novels in order to examine an extremely important incident in *Jasmine* that has no equivalent in *The Namesake*. We already know that Jasmine's and Gogol's stories are very different, partly because Jasmine is a poor first-generation illegal immigrant, while Gogol is a second-generation immigrant born to educated parents. The contrast is also dramatic because their experiences are gendered, particularly in regard to the thread of violence woven throughout Jasmine's story that is completely absent from Gogol's. From the beginning of the novel, it is established that Jasmine's identity as a poor female is a curse that makes her life almost certainly destined for violence, or at least oppression. The reality of illegal immigration is also riddled with violence, particularly for poor women. In a discussion about *Jasmine* and "the violence of identity," Kristin Carter-Sanborn argues that "reinvention . . . is always violent and, it seems, imperative in the context of emigration, particularly for women" (580). She ties violence to a "displacement of agency," arguing that violence is opposed to agency and causes a person to go "from being the subject to being the object of transformation" (Carter-Sanborn 587). In Jasmine's journey, this violence is sometimes expressed in psychological trauma or in the metaphorical deaths and rebirths of multiple identity personas. Other times, however, the violence is physical, as first seen in Prakash's death. Jasmine's interactions with violence as both victim and perpetrator strip her of agency, but also definitively sever her connection to her past and open the way for radical transformation in the future.

Jasmine experiences violent attacks against her own body during her illegal immigration, during which she "phantom[s] [her] way through three continents" (101) via planes and ships. Upon arriving at the gulf coast of Florida, she is given a ride to a motel by a man she calls Half-

Face, the American captain of a shrimper boat who suffered facial injuries in Vietnam and now “cargoes contraband” into the United States (103-4). In return for the ride, Half-Face demands sex. Immediately after he rapes her, Jasmine retreats to the bathroom and is poised to kill herself using a knife given to her earlier by another immigrant. What happens next is an unavoidable transformation that seems to be enacted by spiritual forces. When she looks in the mirror with the knife at her throat, she cannot “see [her]self in the steamed-up mirror—only a dark shadow in the center of the glass” (Mukherjee 117). This loss of sense of self, along with “a sudden sense of mission” (117), stops her, and she resolves to continue with her plan to burn Prakash’s suit on the college campus and then die. Her impulse to propagate violence is redirected toward her attacker. She slices her tongue using the knife and then, with a mouth full of blood, stabs Half-Face to death. The slicing of the tongue strongly suggests the image of Kali (Mukherjee 197), the Hindu goddess of death, whose protruding tongue is generally thought to represent either shame or power (Pattanaik).<sup>7</sup> Jasmine no longer defines herself as Jasmine, the widow who aims to immolate herself in memory of her husband; instead, she identifies herself as “walking death, death incarnate” (119). It is not Jyoti or Jasmine who murders Half-Face, but Kali, whose “presence overcomes and effaces Jasmine and the personal history which has brought her to this point” (Carter-Sanborn 589). Even in committing an *act* of violence, Jasmine’s agency is

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<sup>7</sup> The tongue as a symbol of shame comes from the following narrative: filled with bloodlust after drinking the blood of a demon she had killed, Kali began a random killing spree. In order to stop her, her consort Shiva, the god of destruction, “took the form of a handsome man and lay in Kali’s path.” When she stepped on him, “she was ashamed to learn that her bloodlust had prevented her from seeing and recognising her own husband,” and she bit her tongue in embarrassment. The tongue as a symbol of power comes from a story about a battle between a demon and the goddess Durga and her warriors. Desperate for help, Durga summons Kali to lick up and swallow the blood of the demon, so “Kali unfurls her tongue in her role as the ultimate deliverer called upon to salvage a situation that seems hopelessly out of control” (Pattanaik). The Kali persona plays a similar role in Jasmine’s story when she takes possession of Jasmine and delivers her from killing herself. Jasmine also experiences feelings of shame and defilement as a result of the rape. Although these are two separate accounts, in Jasmine’s Kali the two meanings meet. Through Kali’s act of murder, shame is translated into power.

displaced, and her very identity becomes the object of transformation as it changes from Jasmine to Kali. As painful as this translation and loss of agency is, it is because of this transformation into Kali that Jasmine can survive. Jasmine would have killed herself in shame, but being transformed into Kali allows her to perpetrate violence against the rapist instead. Allowing her identity to be completely overwritten by the persona of Kali is the only way to ensure that she will survive the ordeal and regain agency in the future.

Jasmine later reveals that she was raped many times along her journey from India, often in exchange for food or supplies (Mukherjee 121). As Jane, she reflects on the relationship between her past selves, and her inability to identify who she was when she encountered violence:

Jyoti of Hasnapur was not Jasmine . . . *that* Jasmine isn't *this* Jane Ripplemeyer . . . And which of us is the undetected murderer of a half-faced monster, which of us had held a dying husband, which of us was raped and raped and raped in boats and cars and motel rooms?" (Mukherjee 127).

Jane refers to her collective identity, the "us" or "we" comprised of all of her past identities—the palimpsest that keeps a record, however faint, of her previous names and selves. However, she has no name for who she was when she committed and suffered violence. Her inability to fully identify herself with these events supports Carter-Sanborn's claim that "violence does not secure agency . . . violence is an "act" of de-selfing, much like *sati* itself" (Carter-Sanborn 589).

Although pain is necessary for transformation and rebirth, it also causes one to be nameless and passive. At the same time, it is from this void that one can be reborn. Jasmine has died metaphorically instead of literally, as she had planned to through the *sati* ritual. Instead, she

burns the suitcase containing Prakash's suit, now defiled by Half-Face (121), in a metal trash bin outside the motel, and begins walking, nameless and alone.

### **Becoming Americans**

While the beginning of Jasmine's and Gogol's stories are fraught with the weight of the loss and burden of family, respectively, the most significant part of their identity struggles occur once they are outside of the family and are interacting with American culture. In Jasmine's case, this occurs once she arrives in the United States and tries to survive as an undocumented immigrant. Gogol's serious attempts to translate his identity happen as a result of his transition to adulthood in the context of college life and romantic relationships. Discussing each protagonist's subsequent name changes and significant relationships will reveal the expectations of what it means to be an American, and the ways in which Jasmine and Gogol try to translate their identities in order to be Americans.

While Gogol's position as a second-generation immigrant has forced him to grow up in the contact zone between Indian and American culture since birth, Jasmine does not truly enter this space until after her immigration. After leaving the motel and wandering in rural Florida for hours, she stumbles upon fruit fields, where she is taken in by an elderly Quaker woman named Lillian Gordon. During the week that Jasmine lives here, among migrant workers and other illegal immigrants, Lillian teaches her how to behave like an American, telling to get rid of her "Third World heels" and to "walk American" (Mukherjee 132). After a change of clothes, Jasmine is "shocked at the transformation," noting that she looks "jazzy in a T-shirt, tight cords,<sup>8</sup> and running shoes" (133). As in the motel room, when she looks in the mirror, she cannot see

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<sup>8</sup> Corduroy pants (British English).

herself. This time, however, what she can see is a new version of herself. Her new clothes serve as a costume she can wear to pass as a native, but they are also an image of the person she can become. Jasmine says of this moment, “I couldn’t tell if with the Hasnapuri sidle I’d also abandoned my Hasnapuri modesty” (133). Her statement suggests that an act as simple as changing one’s walk or donning different clothes can create a more substantial change of personality or values. Lillian calls this new person “Jazzy” (Mukherjee 133). Although it would make sense to assume that Lillian is abbreviating the name “Jasmine,” the text suggests that Lillian never asks for Jasmine’s name because she assumes that “it’s probably a fake” (Mukherjee 130). Instead, she chooses Jasmine’s new name based on her “jazzy,” or flashy, new embodiment of American ways, describing Jasmine’s transformation as well as encouraging her to inhabit the role of a confident American woman. Carter-Sanborn argues that Lillian acts as a kind of midwife to Jasmine’s rebirth (589), which helps explain Lillian’s significant but subordinate role in her transformation. Although Lillian provides the mold of what it means to pass as an American (in the form of clothing and coaching), it is Jasmine who embodies these expectations convincingly, causing Lillian to identify her as a “very special case” (Mukherjee 135). What makes her special is her long-standing knowledge of the English language, which gives her a notable advantage over the other immigrants that Lillian takes in; unlike them, Jasmine is capable of being more than “a picker or a domestic” (Mukherjee 134). She is capable of translating her own self, even in a cross-cultural context.

Jasmine’s next name change occurs after she relocates to Manhattan. Here she becomes a nanny for the daughter of an American couple and enters into a relationship with the husband, who becomes the second man to rename her. During the almost two years that Jasmine lives with

a professional, sophisticated couple named Taylor and Wylie Hayes, she views them as a substitute for the family that she lost; it is with them that she “[becomes] an American in an apartment on Claremont Avenue” (Mukherjee 165). Taylor and Wylie become “[her] parents, [her] teachers, [her] family,” and their daughter, Duff, becomes her “child” (Mukherjee 165). She falls in love with Taylor, the goofy and charming husband, not just for his personality, but also for how he epitomizes her ideals about the American character. Jasmine later recalls, “I fell in love with what he represented to me, a professor who served biscuits to a servant, smiled at her . . . It seemed entirely American” (Mukherjee 167). She is enamored with “his world, its ease, its careless confidence and graceful self-absorption” (Mukherjee 171). Through her relationships with Taylor and Wylie, Jasmine has access to their privileged, American existence. She longs to participate in their reality, “to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful” (Mukherjee 169). Her relationship with Taylor provides her with tools she can use to translate her identity in the context of America. The primary tool is the new name he gives her: Jase. Jasmine likes the name and defines this persona by saying, “Jase was a woman who bought herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants” (Mukherjee 176). Jasmine’s shift in perspective to talk about herself in third person here reinforces the idea that Jase is a persona she takes on. As with her identity as Jazzy, clothes serve as a costume that outlines the role of this persona and differentiates the new person from her previous selves. Taylor’s Jase is the perfect escape from her past; she is a liberated American woman who “live[s] for today” rather than dwelling in the past as Jyoti did or living for the future as Jasmine did (Mukherjee 176).

Jasmine enacts her agency more in this identity translation than in any other. Although Taylor suggests the name, he does not place any expectations on her. She is the one who interprets the American character as “whimsical” (168) and “adventurous” (186) and tries to apply these qualities to Jase. Looking back on the two years she spent in Manhattan, she says, “I bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase” (Mukherjee 186). Her phrasing clearly reveals that she is an active agent. Her use of the word “bloom” here is interesting given the connection between Prakash’s choice of the name Jasmine and the jasmine flower. Unlike her marriage to Prakash, Jasmine’s relationship with Taylor shapes her but does not ultimately control her, as she explains when she says, “Taylor didn’t want to change me. He didn’t want to scour and sanitize my foreignness. My being different . . . didn’t scare him. *I changed because I wanted to*” (Mukherjee 185, emphasis added). Because Taylor accepts the duality of Jasmine’s identity, acknowledging her foreignness but not defining her solely by it, their relationship gives Jasmine the freedom to explore an American identity without having to forsake the part of her that still is, and always will be, Indian.

As a second-generation immigrant, Gogol is much more familiar with American culture than he is with his parents’ Bengali culture, but he still feels estranged from American culture in some ways, including the fact he does not date in high school (Lahiri 93). His first serious attempt to change his name and translate his identity results in freedom and a confidence that allows him to distance himself from his family and more fully participate in his American peers’ lifestyle, including entering relationships with women. The first time Gogol changes his name as an adult occurs when he attends a college party during high school and meets a female college student. He considers introducing himself using one of his American friends’ names, “[b]ut then

he realizes there's no need to lie. Not technically. He remembers the other name that had once been chosen for him, *the one that should have been.*" (Lahiri 96, emphasis added). For the first time in his life, he introduces himself as Nikhil and does not feel shackled by his name. This anonymity gives Gogol the courage to kiss a girl for the first time. Afterward, he is filled with wonder at his own actions and concludes that "it hadn't been Gogol who'd kissed Kim . . . Gogol had had nothing to do with it" (Lahiri 96). Calling himself Nikhil results in a translation of identity from being Gogol, an insecure teenage boy, to being Nikhil, a confident young man who is competent with women. This translation of the self becomes official when Gogol legally changes his name shortly before beginning his undergraduate career at Yale. It is important to note that Gogol is the acting agent here. His parents chose the name itself, but he chooses to embody it; it is he who goes alone before a judge to enact the change. Outside of the courtroom, his first interaction with a woman, a random cashier, makes him confident in a way he has never felt before; as he resists the urge to say that his name is Nikhil, "he thinks of how many more women he can now approach, for the rest of his life, with this same unobjectionable, uninteresting fact" (Lahiri 102-103). So this shift affects not only how Gogol sees himself, but how he will interact with other people, especially the opposite sex.

Strangely, although he has embraced a Bengali name and now has that B-side to the self, Gogol almost completely cuts ties with his Bengali heritage as a young adult. The only Bengalis he interacts with are his family members. Although there is a sizable population of Indian-Americans at Yale, Gogol does not befriend them and refuses to join the Indian association on campus because "he can think of no greater hypocrisy than joining an organization that willingly celebrates occasions his parents forced him, throughout his childhood and adolescence, to

attend” (Lahiri 119). While attending a panel about Indian literature, Gogol hears the term *ABCD* for the first time (Lahiri 118). This term stands for “American-born confused [or conflicted] deshi,” with *deshi* being “a generic word for ‘countryman,’ [meaning] ‘Indian’ ” (Lahiri 118). Gogol actively avoids ABCDs, “for they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live, befriending people not so much because they like them, but because of a past they happen to share” (Lahiri 119). Rather than using his new name and his time away from home to explore his heritage independently, Gogol tries to remove himself from his parents’ Indian culture altogether.

It is not surprising, then, that Gogol does not enter into romantic relationships with other Indian-Americans. His first two serious girlfriends are white American women. While riding the train home during sophomore year, Gogol meets a fellow Yale student named Ruth and is attracted by her genuine interest in him. As he tells her about his family’s visits to Calcutta, “her appreciation for these details flatters him; it occurs to him that he has never spoken of his experiences in India to any American friend” (Lahiri 112). Ruth is the first person who begins to truly know Gogol on a deeper level, sharing the American part of his identity while still being interested in his ties to India. However, she never knows him as Gogol, only as Nikhil. Gogol chooses to sequester this part of himself even from those closest to him. It is telling that Gogol meets Ruth while in transit to his home, on his way from being Nikhil back to Gogol. Physical transit from one point to another can symbolize translation. A point of origin or a source is lost, while a destination or target is gained. This tension of being in transit between two places characterizes their relationship. Gogol encounters the resistance of combining the place in which he is Nikhil and the place in which he is Gogol. He hides the relationship from his parents, who

will disapprove, and he does not let Ruth know much about his family; in fact, “he cannot imagine being with her in the house where he is still Gogol” (Lahiri 115). The two places and identities are in conflict and must be kept separate.

Gogol’s second serious romantic relationship is with a woman named Maxine Ratliff, whom he meets while working as an architect in New York City after graduating from Yale and then from Columbia. Gogol is “effortlessly incorporated” (Lahiri 136) into the lives of Maxine and her parents, Lydia and Gerald, from the start. He begins comparing Maxine’s family to his own and cherishes the lack of “exasperation” and “sense of obligation” (Lahiri 138) that he feels with his own parents. In the same way that the Hayes family becomes Jasmine’s substitute family, the Ratliffs become a sort of surrogate family to Gogol. As with Jasmine’s attraction to Taylor, Gogol is attracted to the ease of Maxine’s lifestyle, and “quickly, simultaneously, he falls in love with Maxine, the house, and Gerald and Lydia’s manner of living” (Lahiri 137). He feels “free” (Lahiri 158) only when he is in “the Ratliffs’ universe” (Lahiri 141), living according to their privileged lifestyle. Their way of life, like that of Taylor and Wylie Hayes, represents a decidedly white, upper-middle class model of American identity that is simply not the reality for many Americans. But it is upon this unrealistic model that Jasmine and Gogol both base their expectations of what an American identity should look like: “ease, . . .careless confidence and graceful self-absorption” (Mukherjee 171). For both Jasmine and Gogol, the ease of their lives with their surrogate families in New York is comforting for a while, but the fantasy ends when they realize their heterogeneous identities do not fit the mold.

Gogol’s perceived freedom cannot last because part of his identity is lost in this setting. Maxine and her parents perform their own translation of Gogol, reducing the name Nikhil to the

more palatable “Nick” (Lahiri 157, 170, 177) and neglecting to engage with his Indian heritage in any meaningful way. After moving in with the Ratliffs, Gogol still does not tell his own parents about Maxine, but he is “conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine’s family is a betrayal of his own” (Lahiri 141). Although he tries to keep his family relationships and the rest of his relationships separate, they overlap eventually when his parents find out about the relationship and invite him and Maxine to have lunch at his family’s home. Gogol’s old feelings of shame resurface; he feels obligated to impose “restrictions” (Lahiri 146) on his and Maxine’s behavior and is irritated and embarrassed by his parents’ awkward ways (Lahiri 148). One might think that allowing Maxine a glimpse into his home and family would prompt Gogol to voluntarily tell Maxine about his pet name, but the contrary is true. It is only when his father “slip[s]” and calls Gogol his pet name instead of Nikhil that Gogol promises to “explain it later,” but he reassures Maxine that “it’s nothing” (Lahiri 150). When he does explain his pet name, Maxine simply says, “That’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard,” and then “never mention[s] it again, this essential fact about his life slipping from her mind as so many others did” (Lahiri 156). Gogol intentionally hides the complexity of his identity because he is embarrassed by his name and because he knows that it signals him as someone who is untranslatable, who does not fit neatly into the mold of American identity represented by the Ratliffs. Maxine’s privileged, monocultural upbringing makes her unable or unwilling to engage with his identity’s complexity. Unlike Taylor in *Jasmine*, Maxine does not engage with Gogol’s foreignness, but instead tries to reduce or ignore it. The Ratliffs represent the pressure that a host culture, in this case American, can place upon an immigrant to assimilate at the cost of renouncing their or their parents’ culture of origin.

Jasmine encounters this same kind of pressure when she moves from New York to a rural farming community in Baden, Iowa, after running into the Sikh radical who killed Prakash. In this setting, her identity changes from adventurous Jase to a more domestic American woman, a farmer's wife and expectant mother who goes by the name of Jane. The name change once again begins with a male presence in her life when she meets Bud Ripplemeyer, a banker. Jasmine meets Bud's mother, whom she calls "Mother Ripplemeyer," when she is begging for a job at a hospital in Iowa. Mother Ripplemeyer repeats the role of Lillian Gordon as she cares for Jasmine by taking her home for lunch and then to Bud's bank to see if she can get a position as a teller. It is unclear exactly how Jasmine's name morphs to Jane, but the text does suggest that this change was not Jasmine's own doing. Mother Ripplemeyer is not exactly hostile to Jasmine's foreignness, but she does feel uncomfortable thinking about Jasmine's past; Jasmine describes this discomfort by saying, "It's like looking at the name of my passport and seeing "Jyo—" at the beginning and deciding that her mouth was not destined to make those sounds" (Mukherjee 16). The new name seems to come from an unwillingness of other people to engage with Jasmine's past and her culture of origin. For her part, Jasmine accepts these names in order to escape any paralyzing nostalgia for a past life or past self that no longer fully exists.

During their first meeting at the bank, Bud is enchanted by Jasmine's beauty and places her as an exotic fixture. He runs out of the office, exclaiming, "'Mother! Who have you brought us, a maharani?'<sup>9</sup> I hope you haven't eaten, Your Highness, because I'm just headed out the door'" (Mukherjee 35). While it is hard to imagine that Bud is ignorant enough to think that

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<sup>9</sup> This term refers to a type of Indian princess, the wife or widow of a king or prince (maharaja, Sanskrit for "great king").

Jasmine is literally an Indian princess, his use of such flattery still betrays a more subtle ignorance that exoticizes and even fetishizes the foreign. With the vantage point of having lived with Bud and been known as Jane for about two years, Jasmine muses:

Bud calls me Jane. Me Bud, you Jane. I didn't get it at first. He kids. Calamity Jane. Jane as in Jane Russell, not Jane as in Plain Jane. But Plain Jane is all I want to be. Plain Jane is a role, like any other. My genuine foreignness frightens him. I don't hold that against him. It frightens me, too.

In Baden, I am Jane. Almost. (Mukherjee 26)

By now, Jasmine has clearly become adept in the English language and American culture. Although she admits she initially did not understand Bud's Tarzan reference, she comes to understand not only this reference but also references to American frontierswoman Calamity Jane, Hollywood sex symbol Jane Russell, and Plain Jane, the cultural archetype of a normal woman. Bud desires her exotic beauty and sensuality, her wild and untamed boldness, but he does not know her full story and is scared to embrace her full personhood. Like Prakash and *Pygmalion's* Professor Higgins, he aims to model her into a palatable form that he can control. Because of the pressure to fit into a binary existence, Jasmine, too, is scared of her own foreignness and yearns to counteract being seen as an exotic beauty by assimilating into the host culture so she will be seen as a normal woman, a Plain Jane. The concession of "almost" following Jasmine's assertion of her identity suggests, however, that as an immigrant, becoming Plain Jane is not fully possible. As a translator of her own identity, she encounters the problem of untranslatability, or her "residual cultural unassimilability" (Kung 125) as a migrant, an uncomfortable position that confounds and even frightens her.

Gogol finds himself in a similarly tense position when his newfound “freedom” from his parents’ Bengali heritage is interrupted when Ashoke unexpectedly dies from a heart attack. Only then does Gogol return home again to be with his mother and sister, Sonia. For the first time, he identifies with the Bengali traditions that he resented as a child. Eating a traditional mourner’s diet with his mother and sister is “the only thing that seems to make sense” (Lahiri 180) at this time. For once, he does not “want to get away” (Lahiri 182) from his family and the place where he is known only as Gogol. In this setting, Maxine is “useless” and “excluded” (Lahiri 182). A few months later, Gogol leaves Maxine and the Ratcliffs’ world, opting to live on his own again and to go home to Massachusetts every weekend to be with his own family. This decision is a step toward engaging with his hybrid identity rather than trying to translate himself into an unrealistic American ideal. However, he quickly resorts to trying to define himself in terms of the other side of the binary by living up to Bengali expectations.

Ashoke’s death profoundly molds Gogol’s identity by forcing him to engage with his own family and heritage and to reject the American-only persona, “Nick,” that he had embraced in recent years. His father’s passing has also made him more considerate of his family’s needs. He learns to listen to his mother’s concerns about his romantic involvements; “he is aware, without having to be told, that his father’s death has accelerated certain expectations, that by now his mother wants him settled” (Lahiri 191). And so, about a year after his father’s death, Gogol reconnects with a woman named Moushumi Mazoomdar per his mother’s request. Moushumi had attended Bengali gatherings at the Gangulis’ home as a child. Like Gogol, her parents are Bengali immigrants, and she too has struggled with her dual identity. Their vague sense of familiarity with each other and with a shared bicultural identity draws them together (Lahiri 199,

250). Their relationship quickly leads to a marriage that embraces the expectations of both of their Bengali families, and Gogol is aware that “together he and Moushumi are fulfilling a collective, deep-seated desire” (Lahiri 224) of an extended Bengali community.

However, Gogol’s attempt to translate himself into someone who fulfills the expectations of whatever half of him is Bengali—culminating in his marriage to Moushumi—is just as fruitless as his other attempts. In a way, Moushumi understands his identity crisis better than any other character in the novel because she is herself an Indian-American, an *ABCD*. In another way, however, she tries to reduce Gogol’s complex identity into something that is palatable, just like the Americans that Gogol has known—and just like what Gogol has been doing to himself all these years. To Moushumi, Gogol is a Bengali man in whom she seeks comfort because he is familiar and yet novel, different from her many past lovers because he is the first Indian-American man she has ever been attracted to (Lahiri 248). Gogol, still reeling from his father’s death, is acting partly out of guilt for having changed his name (Lahiri 244) and ignoring his family for so long. Moushumi and Gogol have both attempted multiple translations of themselves, and in marrying one another, each character is trying to use the other as a tool in another attempt at translation. Their relationship is a combination of two people with profound, sustained identity crises. The shared defeat that would likely have happened eventually is accelerated by Moushumi’s affair shortly after her and Gogol’s first anniversary. After their divorce, Gogol offers the following reflection:

They had both acted on the same impulse, that was their mistake. They had both sought comfort in each other, and in their shared world, perhaps for the sake of novelty, or out of the fear that the world was slowly dying . . . His time with her

seems like a permanent part of him that no longer has any relevance, or currency.

As if that time were a name he'd ceased to use. (Lahiri 284)

This translation—this attempt to create a new name, a new identity that embraced his family's expectations—has failed. Like his other romantic relationships, Gogol's marriage fails because none of the women truly know him in all his complexity; they do not try to, but he also does not allow them to. He has tried to satisfy each side of the binary equation asking him to choose to be Indian *or* American. Both approaches have failed. By the end of the novel, Gogol is divorced and is just as unsure of his identity as he was as a teenager. His translations of himself have resulted in some losses and some gains, but they have ultimately proved ineffective in achieving lasting self-understanding or acceptance.

### **Endings/Beginnings and Future Translation(s)**

By now, it may seem that both texts offer little in the way of the significant gains made possible as a result of immigration and identity translation. Jasmine and Gogol have both been defined by and tried to define themselves by either side of an identity binary: foreigner or native, Indian or American. Jasmine has suffered violence and the loss of family. Gogol has resented the burden of his family and has experienced several relationship failures. The endings of both novels, however, suggest hope of future identity translations that will build on and improve the translations already experienced.

The end of the *Jasmine* suggests that future transformations are not only possible, but inevitable. Jasmine's decision to leave Bud and Iowa to move to California with Taylor and Duff is not a choice between men, but "between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness" (Mukherjee 240). In going to California with her new family, she "chooses the opportunity for

future transformation over permanent settlement that, to her, America epitomizes” (Wickramagamage 81). When Taylor arrives at her house in Iowa, he addresses her as Jase. Even before Jasmine leaves, she stops “thinking of [her]self as Jane” (Mukherjee 240). Before she runs out to Taylor’s car, she cries onto his shoulder: she has to “cry through all the lives [she has] given birth to, cry for all [her] dead” (Mukherjee 241). Jasmine’s mention of birth is a reminder that she will literally be giving birth soon. As surely as she holds physical human life inside her pregnant body, she also holds the seed of countless other selves. Because both original texts and translations “are constantly transformed in space and time” (Kung 124), future identity translations will continue to be written over the selves she has already given birth to. The last sentence of the novel depicts Jasmine running out to Taylor’s car, “greedy with wants and reckless from hope” (Mukherjee 241). Although immigration and the tension of untranslatability have caused “a haunting sense of irresoluteness” in her life, they also provide “the driving energy for future translation” (Kung 125). Jasmine has already gained survival as a result of immigration, and the hopeful tone of the end of the novel suggests that she stands to gain much more as the future unfolds.

The final question to consider is why, of all the names applied to the protagonist, is Jasmine given a privileged position, as we can assume given the book’s title? Jasmine is neither the name of the protagonist as she begins her life journey, nor the name she possesses as the narrative ends. Unlike *The Namesake*, where a third-person narrator consistently refers to the protagonist as Gogol despite his name changes, there is no such mediator in *Jasmine*. It is as if this name change, which is itself a translation from one language to another, is the most fundamental of Jasmine’s identity translations. It is the name and identity of a modern

cosmopolitan woman, and it serves as a precursor or prophecy to Jasmine's casting off of feudal ways and putting into action her innate desire to escape her fate and to want more than she was "given at birth, to want the world" (Mukherjee 68). In addition, examining a fleeting but formative moment early in the narrative provides another clue. While preparing for an outing to a movie theater with her two brothers, an outing which she suspects will introduce her to Prakash, Jasmine asserts her agency and intention to marry Prakash by carefully choosing how to appear physically. She simply states, "Effect must be calculated" (Mukherjee 70). After donning a silk sari and glamorous glasses, she adds something else: "At the last minute, I stuck a jasmine wreath in my hair" (Mukherjee 70). Perhaps this jasmine flower, Prakash's choice of the name Jasmine, and the privileged use of the name in the novel's title all point back to Jasmine's desire for greater things, and the calculated actions she takes to try to achieve a better life. By immigrating and undergoing/enacting identity translations, she has gained the opportunity to act out her "will to survival" (Pym 140) and her desire for more.

*The Namesake* ends about a year after Gogol's divorce, as he is returning to his childhood home for the last time. Ashima has sold the house, deciding to divide her time between staying with relatives in Calcutta and staying with her children and friends in the United States. As he sees Bengali acquaintances pouring in the door for Ashima's annual Christmas Eve party, Gogol reflects on the "string of accidents" (Lahiri 286) that have made up his family's life. He continues to see his name as an accident caused by the meeting of two cultures, but he concedes that although "he had tried to correct that randomness, that error . . . it had not been possible to reinvent himself fully, to break from that mismatched name" (Lahiri 287). While looking for something in his childhood room, he stumbles upon the volume that his father had given him on

his fourteenth birthday, *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*. For the first time, he examines the book and the inscription, which reads, “For Gogol Ganguli . . . The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name” (Lahiri 288). Gogol realizes that his name “was the first thing his father had given him” (Lahiri 289). It is a gift that cannot be returned and must be accepted. His name was never solely about him as an individual, but was bound up in his relationships with the people who named him and who called him Gogol countless times. For the first time, he considers his name, not with resentment or with guilt about changing it, but with an awareness of its value and fragility:

The givers and keepers of Gogol’s name are far from him now . . . Without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. (Lahiri 289)

As readers, we cannot know for sure why Gogol did not search for this volume or for any of Nikolai Gogol’s writings after learning the truth about his namesake earlier in his life. We can know, however, that this time as he sits down to read the book, he is finally willing to engage with Gogol the author, and to get to know his father’s and his family’s story free from expectations, in the profound way that he himself has longed to be known. This is why the name Gogol, like Jasmine, has been privileged throughout the novel. Gogol has learned that trying to exist outside of his family does not bring true freedom. All this time he has been trying to discover himself in isolation from his family and Bengali heritage, but only by understanding those can he understand himself along the way.

Lahiri's prose in these final pages shifts toward an awareness of the future. Gogol imagines the moment "in a few minutes" (Lahiri 290) when he will be called to return to the party downstairs to partake in the traditions and relationships he can now appreciate; he also wonders about his more distant future: his upcoming new job at a smaller architecture firm, the possibility of marrying again, of having his own "child to name" (Lahiri 289). In the midst of these thoughts, however, the final words of the novel—"For now, he starts to read" (Lahiri 291)—focus on the immediacy of the present moment. The book, like a bilingual dictionary, is a tool for translation and understanding, but it was useless for over a decade because Gogol refused to pick it up. The act of reading and the process of translating are crucial. As immigrants, Jasmine's and Gogol's identity transformations have been filled with struggle and loss, but the drive for future translation has given them a better understanding of who they are and hope for who they can become.

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