

Living in Voluntary Exile: Jhumpa Lahiri's Search for Imperfection in *The Namesake*

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Introduction

Language serves as an essential vehicle to convey what a writer wants to express. While most writers use their native languages, some writers do not; for example, Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin, settled in Paris in the late 1930s and wrote in French. In particular, English has worked as a language for diaspora writers such as Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov. They wrote notable works in English, which was their non-native language.

In English-language contemporary literature, American writer Jhumpa Lahiri (1967–) has shown her struggle between her identity and languages. Born to Bengali parents in London, she moved to the United States in 1970 and grew up in Rhode Island. However, being categorized as “Indian-American” has made her feel deracinated. Recalling her childhood, Lahiri articulates her distress on her identity as Indian-American: “According to my parents I was not American, nor would I ever be no matter how hard I tried. . . . One plus one did not equal two but zero, my conflicting selves always canceling each other out” (Lahiri [2008]). She felt as if her hyphenated identity as Indian-American left her suspended between the United States and India.

Lahiri's anguish over her Indian-American identity, which inspired her as a writer, led her to give up writing in English. Since she made her debut in 1999 with her first story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, she has built up her literary career. The inclusion of her short story “Sexy” (1999) in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* suggests that she is regarded as one of the most important contemporary American authors.¹ Nonetheless, after publishing her second novel, *The Lowland* (2013), she left the United States and moved to Italy to live in Rome. Since then, despite her high reputation as an American writer, she has not written in English but in Italian.

¹ Lahiri appeared as the latest author in the seventh edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (2007) for the first time. In the ninth edition published in 2016, Junot Díaz (1968–) and Tracy K. Smith (1972–) follow her.

At first, she started to write short journals in Italian even though the language is not her native one; yet, as her Italian gradually improved, she attempted writing short stories. A collection of her writings in Italian, *In Altre Parole*, was published in 2015 and was subsequently translated into English and published as *In Other Words* the next year.

English gave Lahiri authority as a writer; however, by giving it up, she shook up her writing, which had been a way to express her distress as a hyphenated immigrant. Her decision to write in Italian leads to the assumption that even though she had used it as a writer, English does not serve as the language she belongs to. Lahiri associates her identity as an immigrant with a language: “Because of my divided identity, or perhaps by disposition, I consider myself an incomplete person, in some way deficient. Maybe there is a linguistic reason—the lack of a language to identify with” (Lahiri [2016a]: 111). Lahiri’s mother tongue is Bengali, which her parents spoke at home even after they moved to the United States. However, her mother tongue makes her deracinated in the United States, as she insists: “When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement” (19). Neither the Bengali that she spoke in her childhood, nor English, which she later learned, can be a language that satisfies Lahiri’s uprooted identity; therefore, she feels “suspended rather than rooted” (111). For Lahiri, who has embraced the sense of lack, Italian emerged as a language that opened a new horizon.

Lahiri’s interest in Italian is not new-found; rather, it can be traced back to her student days. While studying how Renaissance architecture influenced English playwrights of the seventeenth century as a doctoral student at Boston University, she visited Florence for the first time in 1994 (13, 21). Her encounter with Italian, as she describes it, was “love at first sight” (15). In addition, her works hint at her interest in Italian culture. For example, in her short story “The Third and Final Continent” (1999), the protagonist moves from India to England by an Italian cargo vessel named *SS Roma* (Lahiri [1999]: 173). She connects Italy with the image of crossing oceans.

Lahiri’s first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), illustrates her interest in Italian culture. Her references in this work, such as to Italian popular culture and cuisine, indicate the sparks that eventually lead her to Rome. Also noteworthy is that Lahiri adopts Russian writer Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat” (1842) as the motif of *The Namesake* in that Gogol wrote this novella while he stayed in Italy. Analyzing Lahiri’s influence from Italian culture as depicted in *The Namesake* allows an exploration of how she is

searching for a homeland by writing in Italian.

I. Linguistic Exile: Search for Imperfection and Freedom

As mentioned earlier, Lahiri's anguish over her Indian-American heritage relates to her not having a language she can identify with. She depicts this state of belonging nowhere linguistically as a "linguistic exile" (Lahiri [2016a]: 19). Remembering her linguistic experience, Bengali, her mother tongue, was replaced by English, which she describes as her "stepmother" (147). Therefore, even though she speaks English as if it is her native language and writes stories in English, she has never been able to identify with her adopted language. Estranged by English, Lahiri's infatuation with Italian led her to become "a linguistic pilgrim to Rome" (35).

Although Lahiri portrays her encounter with Italian as "love at first sight," consideration must be given to the reason she chose this language. Her interest in Renaissance architecture provides a significant clue, because the linguistic history of Italian can be traced back to the Tuscan language spoken in Florence, which later became the center of the Renaissance. The Florentine language of the Middle Ages evolved from Latin, the language of the Roman Empire, in the first millennium A.D. (Maiden [1995]: 3). Lahiri recalls that she was attracted to Latin when reading Ovid's poems as a university student: "I had to devote myself to an ancient and demanding foreign language. And yet Ovid's writing won me over: I was enchanted by it" (Lahiri [2016a]: 163). Her infatuation with classical Latin invites the assumption that Lahiri was attracted to Italian because the language inherits the tradition of Latin. As Latin spread throughout Europe,² one of its dialects took root in Italy, as Lahiri writes, "Every language belongs to a specific place. . . . Italian belongs to mainly Italy. . ." (19). Contrary to her words, however, English does not belong to a specific place or culture; rather, as the *lingua franca*, it keeps spreading globally. In particular, the significance of British colonialism cannot be exaggerated because it educated Indian people by using English texts during their rule under the guise of liberalism.³ Also, the expansion of the

² According to Maiden, Romance languages, speech varieties related by spoken Latin, are spoken in large areas of the former Roman Empire: Iberia (modern Portugal and Spain), Gaul (modern France), Italy, Switzerland (the Cantons of Grisons and Ticino), and Romania; he points out that Romance languages were introduced to the Americas by European colonial expansion (Maiden [1995]: 3).

³ Gauri Viswanathan examines the English education resulting from British colonialism in India. According to her, English literary texts functioned as "a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect state" and "a mask

United States as an empire contributes to the spread of English. Meanwhile, unlike English, Italian, originally a “sister” of the other dialects in Italy (Maiden [1995]: 3), does not expand but reveals a trace of both the prosperity and fall of an empire. Thus, Lahiri’s decision to leave the United States indicates her search for a language connected to a specific place, which represents her attempt to find her linguistic homeland, standing aside from the influence of expanding power.

Still, even though Lahiri stopped writing in English, the language had given her the authority that enabled her to be an author. Her sense of imperfection as an Indian-American inspired her to write, and English, her linguistic stepmother, served as a vehicle to convey her conflict. However, her decision to write in Italian suggests that she voluntarily gave up the authority. She asks herself what her abandonment of English means: “When I give up English, I give up my authority. I’m shaky rather than secure. . . . Before I became a writer, I lacked a clear, precise identity. It was through writing that I was able to feel fulfilled. . . . What does it mean, for a writer, to write without her own authority? Can I call myself an author, if I don’t feel authoritative?” (Lahiri [2016a]: 83). Her remark here highlights that, without an authoritative language, a writer cannot be seen as an author; namely, writing in Italian, Lahiri can no longer be an author but is just a writer. She doubts if she can be regarded as an author because, when writing in Italian, she makes many grammatical mistakes and lacks the vocabulary. In short, Italian brings her more limitations than English.

However, what Lahiri writes about this limited freedom is worth mentioning. According to her, by writing in Italian, she acquires “the freedom to be imperfect” (83). As quoted earlier, her Indian-American identity makes her consider herself as “an incomplete person.” This sense of incompleteness had been imposed on her because she did not choose her life as an immigrant. Meanwhile, writing in Italian allows her to choose her linguistic imperfection. She cannot escape from imperfection even when writing in Italian; as Lahiri comments on her identity, “a sense of imperfection has marked [her] life” (111). However, writing in Italian lets her seek imperfection at will. It does not mean that she can be identified as Italian; rather, her suspended identity as an Indian-American remains. Still, at least, she succeeds in gaining imperfection by her own choice.

for economic exploitation” (Viswanathan [1989]: 20).

For Lahiri, who had been forced to be incomplete as an uprooted immigrant, acquiring freedom by her choice makes a huge difference. She describes this state as “voluntary exile” (37). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “exile” means a “prolonged absence from one’s native country or a place regarded as home, endured by force of circumstances or voluntarily undergone for some purpose.” This definition suggests a premise that a person in exile has a home to return to.⁴ In the meantime, Lahiri asserts from the beginning that she has no home: “Those who don’t belong to any specific place can’t, in fact, return to anywhere. The concepts of exile and return imply a point of origin, a homeland. Without a homeland and without a true mother tongue, I wander the world. . . . I am exiled even from the definition of exile” (133). Not being able to blend in with a group of exiles, she keeps on wandering. Meanwhile, “voluntary” indicates that she chooses to live in exile, that is, she refuses to be categorized into any particular group. She discloses her frustration that the categorization of “Indian-American” makes them treated as a single group of “other” in American society (Lahiri [2008]). Even after leaving the United States, she rejects any categorization that ignores individuality. Therefore, she stands outside the definition of exile; however, it should not be overlooked that she willingly chooses this “intense solitude” (Lahiri [2016a]: 191).

In *The Namesake*, the protagonist Gogol Ganguli represents Lahiri’s perpetual wandering as an exile. Gogol is born in Massachusetts, where his father, Ashoke, studies as a doctoral student. Although his great-grandmother in Calcutta is supposed to give him a name, the letter she sent with his name is lost on the way to Massachusetts. The name lost somewhere between India and the United States implies the protagonist’s suspended identity. Thus, Ashoke names his child Gogol as a pet name, which is commonly used like a nickname in India, after Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. Ashoke has an emotional attachment to this Ukraine-born writer: When he was a student in India, he was involved in a train crash. In the wreckage, rescuers found his hand grabbing a page of Gogol’s “The Overcoat,” which he was reading on the train. Ashoke names his son after the writer who saved his life.

However, Gogol Ganguli gradually feels discomfort with his name as he grows up. He feels as if this name does not belong anywhere: “This writer he [Gogol Ganguli] is

⁴ Edward W. Said also regards a home as the premise of being in exile: “[Exile] is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native land, between the self and its true home. . . .” (Said [2000]: 173).

named after—Gogol isn't his first name. His first name is Nikolai. Not only does Gogol Ganguli have a pet name turned good name, but a last name turned first name. And so it occurs to him that no one he knows in the world, in Russia or India or America or anywhere, shares his name. Not even the source of his namesake" (Lahiri [2004]: 78). He feels frustrated because his name does not suggest any particular country. In addition, Nikolai Gogol himself has a complex background because although he was from Ukraine, he wrote in Russian. Also, Gogol wandered in Europe and was strongly influenced by European cultures. In particular, the significance of Italy cannot be exaggerated: He wrote the final version of "The Overcoat" while he stayed in Italy from 1836 to 1848 (Partan [2005]: 551). He called Italy "the motherland of his soul" (Vogel [1967]: 146). In discussing Gogol's "The Overcoat," Nabokov points out that "Rome and Russia formed a combination of a deeper kind in Gogol's unreal world" (Nobokov [1980]: 44). Therefore, Gogol Ganguli's name is highly suggestive in that it keeps him suspended between the two cultures of the United States and India. Also, Gogol's uprooted state as a diaspora represents Lahiri's deracinated identity that makes her feel flawed, which eventually led her to live in exile.

II. Living in a Nowhere Land: A Reinvented Space by Immigrants

In *The Namesake*, Lahiri illustrates a place where Indian immigrants who are suspended between Indian and American cultures invent their own soil. The story begins with the scene in which Ashima Ganguli, wife of Ashoke, cooks in the kitchen of their apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Being pregnant, she recently moved to the United States in order to live with her husband. She cooks Indian snacks with American ingredients: "Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix. . . . As usual, there's something missing" (Lahiri [2004]: 1). With some replacement ingredients that she can buy in the United States, she cooks Indian snacks. However, they differ from what she ate in India, because she cannot use the same ingredients as she did in India. Discussing Lahiri's works from the viewpoint of food, Laura Anh Williams point out that this scene reveals both home and displacement, and abundance and lack (78). In addition, Anita Mannur associates the nostalgia of diasporas to their homelands with food; namely, their food allows them to reassemble

their lives as narratives to tell (15). In other words, immigrants remake a culture of their homeland with fictional reinterpretations. Ashima's quasi-Indian snack thus represents her flawed identity that, while she sets her foot both in India and in the United States, she feels she cannot belong to either country. This opening scene indicates the motif of this novel that deracinated Indian-Americans search for their roots between the two countries.

This restructured food suggests the conflict of immigrants in the United States. Ashima continues to make the Indian snacks even after giving birth to Gogol:

Though no longer pregnant, [Ashima] continues, at times, to mix Rice Krispies and peanuts and onions in a bowl. For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. (50)

Lahiri connects the life of immigrants with pregnancy; specifically, once they move to a foreign land, they can never go back to the place where they used to be. While they expect a new life, they can no longer live as simply as they used to. They have to adapt themselves to their new environment to live.⁵ Therefore, Ashima's Indian snacks signify the conflict that immigrants have to accept so that she can survive in the United States.

The replaced ingredients of the adapted food indicate the third choice for immigrants. When Gogol turns fourteen years old, Ashima cooks Bengali cuisine with replaced ingredients: “[Ashima] makes sure to prepare [Gogol's] favorite things: lamb curry with lots of potatoes, luchis, thick channa dal with swollen brown raisins, pineapple chutney, sandeshes molded out of saffron-tinted ricotta cheese” (72). Ashima makes these Bengali foods for Gogol and their friends from Bengal; it is noteworthy that she uses ricotta cheese to make sandesh, a Bengali dessert made with paneer and sugar. Ashima uses ricotta cheese to replace paneer, probably because it is much easier to buy than paneer in the United States. This replacement indicates that Ashima has adjusted herself to the life in the United States; however, it also represents the incompleteness that leads immigrants to feel they cannot belong anywhere. The Bengali

⁵ Tulasi Srinivas insists that globalization erodes the walls of traditional hierarchies such as caste, which gives Indians their identity (Srinivas [2006]: 209).

food with replaced ingredients reveals that Indian immigrants cannot reproduce their lost home. Rather, the food suggests their attempt to reconstruct their own cuisine in the hybridity of American and Indian cultures. Also, when it comes to Lahiri's interest in Italy, it should not be overlooked that Italian food replaces Indian because it implies that Italy may be the third choice for her.

Lahiri illustrates that once immigrants lose their home, they cannot regain it even if they go back to their native country. The Gangulis revisit Calcutta during Ashoke's sabbatical, when Gogol is fourteen. During the stay, although Ashima is at her old home, she does not enter a kitchen: "[Ashima] shops in New Market and goes to movies and sees her old school friends. For eight months she does not set foot in a kitchen" (83). Her avoidance of entering a kitchen indicates that she cannot belong to her old homeland after living in the United States for about fifteen years. Shedding light on the food culture of Indian immigrants, Tulasi Srinivas spells out that their nostalgia for India yields a home as a fantasy that helps the diaspora relive the India of the imagination (Srinivas [2006]: 211). Ashima has reinvented Calcutta in her imagination; therefore, Calcutta in the real world no longer exists as a place for her.

The Gangulis' visit to Agra, famous for the Taj Mahal, shows that the natives regard them as foreigners rather than Indians. The family behaves as foreign tourists there:

For a few days, in Agra, which is as foreign to Ashima and Ashoke as it is to Gogol and Sonia [Gogol's younger sister], they are tourists, staying at a hotel with a swimming pool, sipping bottled water, eating in restaurants with forks and spoons, paying by credit card. Ashima and Ashoke speak in broken Hindi, and when young boys approach to sell postcards or marble trinkets Gogol and Sonia are forced to say, "English, please." (Lahiri [2004]: 84–85)

Although Agra is an Indian city, its culture and language are different from the language and culture of Calcutta. Therefore, it is natural that the Gangulis, even Ashoke and Ashima, who grew up in India, feel as if they are foreigners; yet, this scene is significant in that native people do not see them as Indians, as boys who try to sell postcards to them suggest.⁶ Indian-Americans no longer have their homeland even if they go back there; rather, Indians regard them as other, as Americans do in the United States.

⁶ This scene may reflect Lahiri's childhood experience. She recalls that people in Calcutta recognized her as a foreigner because of her clothes (Lahiri [2016b]: 9).

Gogol's growth in this estrangement represents the conflict of an Indian immigrant who seeks a homeland. After completing his studies at graduate school at Columbia University, Gogol starts to make a living as an architect in New York and goes out with Maxine. Invited by Maxine's family, Gogol feels at home with them. The family shows interest in Italian culture. For example, they like watching the videos of *I, Claudius* and Antonioni's films (135, 136). In particular, Lahiri's reference to Italian food invites us to consider the adapted culture of immigrants. The favorite foods of Maxine's family indicate a mixed culture: "[Gogol] learns to love the food [Maxine] and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment paper" (134). These foods mentioned here are associated with Italian cuisine; still, it is suggestive that bouillabaisse comes from French food. That is, the mixed culture in Maxine's family implies a reinterpreted culture in the United States. Italian or Indian foods in the United States may differ from the ones in Italy or India because of difference of flavors or ingredients; however, the mixture and reinterpretation of these cultures generate a new place for immigrants. It is worth mentioning that Lahiri uses the word "exile" to describe Gogol with Maxine's family: "He feels free of expectation, of responsibility, in willing exile from his own life" (142). The words "willing exile" are reminiscent of Lahiri's words, "voluntary exile." Specifically, the Italian culture reinterpreted in the United States enables Gogol to be liberated from the suspension between Indian and American cultures.

The history of Italian immigrants suggests much about the reinterpretation of a culture. According to Lawrence Oliver, Italian immigrants to Ellis Island, New York, which is the gateway to the United States, drastically increased in the 1880s, known as the "new immigrant era"; by 1910, the number of Italian immigrants in New York was more than the populace in Rome (Oliver [1987]: 6).⁷ Italian immigrants, who engaged in low-wage labor in the late-nineteenth century, founded small districts called Little Italy in eastern metropolitan cities such as New York, Boston, and Providence. As Stefano Luconi maintains, Italian immigrants forged many groups in the early-twentieth century because of their various backgrounds, such as occupation and hometowns

⁷ According to Marcella Bencivenni, more than five million Italians moved to the United States from 1880 to 1940. About four-fifths of them came from the southern regions and the islands, and they represented the largest nationality of the "new immigrants" from southern and eastern Europe, constituting twenty percent of the total immigration population (Bencivenni [1987]: 7).

(Luconi [2004]: 152). However, dealing with Little Italy in detail, Fred L. Gardaphe points out that, despite these differences, they invented their community as Italian-America in Little Italy (Gardaphe [2003]: 12). Italian culture in the United States thus illustrates the culture reconstructed by Italian immigrants. In order to survive in the United States, they had to make a tight-knit community rather than preserving their original cultural backgrounds, which meant the denial of their past (15). In other words, they gave up the authority of their cultures and occupations by adapting themselves to American society, which brings to mind how Lahiri abandoned authority as a writer by quitting writing in English. Immigrants do not have a specific place or culture that they can be identified with; therefore, they have to make up their own space to survive in, even though they have to accept incompleteness.⁸

Lahiri's reference to the resemblance of India and Italy suggests the latter as a space reimagined by immigrants. As for Gogol's looks, Maxine's mother Lydia says, "You could be Italian" (Lahiri [2004]: 134). Although her comment sounds superficial, it cannot be ignored from the standpoint of Lahiri's interest in Italian culture; this remark indicates Lahiri's affinity with Italians. Meanwhile, this superficial resemblance does not indicate an actual connection between the two countries. When Gogol describes Calcutta as follows: "There's a lot of lovely Victorian architecture left over from the British. But most of it's decaying" (134), Maxine's father Gerald says, "That sounds like Venice" (135). Again, Lahiri mentions the superficial resemblance between Italy and India. However, Gogol answers him, "Only during monsoons. That's when the streets flood. I guess that's the closest it comes to resembling Venice" (135). His response implies that Calcutta does not necessarily resemble Venice. In addition, Venice is an imagined place for Gogol because he has never visited it. He tells similarities of the two cities based on his memory of going there in his teens. Taking into the consideration that he felt like a foreigner in India, we could see that Gogol notes the similarities of Venice and Calcutta by the imagination of a deracinated immigrant.

Therefore, in *The Namesake*, Italy serves as a fantasy for uprooted diaspora. After breaking up with Maxine, Gogol marries his childhood friend Moushumi, who is from

⁸ In this era of massive migration, many Americans claimed that immigrants could not be assimilated in American society; Congress thus passed the Immigration Act of 1924, which placed strict quotas according to the national origins of immigrants. The quota system remained until the Immigration Act of 1965 abolished it (Fleegler [2003]: 1-2).

Bengal. However, their relationship does not go well; thus, Gogol comes up with an idea of going on a trip to Italy with Moushumi: "A trip together, to a place neither of [Gogol and Moushumi] has been—maybe that's what he and Moushumi need. . . . He thinks of Italy, Venice, the trip he will begin to plan. Maybe it's a sign that they are meant to go there. Wasn't the Piazza San Marco famous for its pigeons?" (273). As shown here, Gogol does not know much about Venice; he knows only things that guidebooks for tourists mention, such as the pigeons at the Piazza San Marco. However, Gogol, who has no real place to take root in, needs an imaginary space. Thus, the place to solve his problem with Moushumi must not be a real place where he has ever been. Therefore, he never sets foot in Italy; before Gogol visits Venice with Moushumi, she dates another man, and they eventually break up.

III. "We All Came out of Gogol's Overcoat": The Void That Penetrates from Gogol to Lahiri

When considering Italy as the third choice for Indian-Americans who cannot belong to either India or the United States, Homi K. Bhabha's argument on "the third space" comes to mind. He discusses the hybridity of the two cultures: "The importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Bhabha [1990]: 211). He asserts that the third space generates as a result of the merge of two cultures. His argument here is highly suggestive in that he mentions authority founded by hybridity. It is worth noting that he insists that a hybrid space has newly structured authority.

Meanwhile, Bhabha's argument on hybridity and the third space does not fully apply to Lahiri. By refusing to translate her Italian into English, she wants to keep Italian separated from English:

One day I was explaining to [Italian writer Francesca Marciano] why I was opposed to translating myself even though I'm technically capable of doing so, and I said, "Everything in my life, from the very beginning, was and is and shall be some kind of mixture, some kind of hybrid, some kind of hyphenated something." . . . Now that I've been able to carve out this other reality—this

Italian writing, thinking, crafting—I don't want those things to mix. I don't want the Italian and the English to merge. (Lahiri [2016c]: 40)

Lahiri feels as if her English is “a hairy, smelly teenager” (Lahiri [2016a]: 119), compared with Italian. She thus does not allow her English to touch her Italian, which is like “a newborn” (119). Lahiri confesses that she has been a hybrid person as a hyphenated Indian-American from the beginning. Bhabha associates a hybrid space with authority; however, Lahiri does not want her hybridity with authority, because it is hybridity that has put her in an “in-between space,” in Bhabha's words.⁹ In other words, it is her hybrid identity that has suspended her between India and the United States. Translating her Italian into English by herself gives authority to her texts. However, even though she gives up authority as a writer, she chooses imperfection that she acquires by her will. Therefore, Italy as the third space is different from Bhabha's third space, which generates from hybridity, in that Italy as her third space stands aside from the hybridity of India and the United States.

Lahiri recognizes that her identity without authority brings her a void. She writes that her nothingness serves as her impulse to write: “I come from that void, from that uncertainty. I think that the void is my origin and also my destiny. From that void, from all uncertainty, comes the creative impulse” (159). Her words underscore that, regarding her childhood as Indian-American, one plus one did not equal two but zero. Contrary to Bhabha's hybridity, Lahiri finds nothing from the merger of Indian and American cultures. As she writes, the hybridity yields a void to her. She has always had the sense of lack, as Ashima always misses some ingredients when making Indian snacks. This unfulfilled sense of hyphenated identity had urged her to write, as she articulates: “Imperfection inspires invention, imagination, creativity. It stimulates. The more I feel imperfect, the more I feel alive” (113). Now that she has given up writing in English, she has a different kind of imperfection that comes from the limitation of her Italian. Nonetheless, paradoxically, this limitation lets her go beyond the soil that had confined her as a flawed immigrant; in her words, “in spite of the limitations the horizon is boundless” (43). Therefore, writing in Italian signifies that she has found a new soil and is escaping from the hyphenated identity. She still embraces a void because Italian does

⁹ Bhabha explains an “in-between space” as follows: “These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining of the idea of society itself” (Bhabha [1994]: 2).

not give her authority; still, it is significant that, by accepting another void by herself, she is liberated from her perpetually flawed identity as an Indian-American.

Gogol Ganguli's distress regarding his name represents Lahiri's longing for the third space, where she can pursue a void by her will. It is highly suggestive that Gogol, in his teens, is a "passionate devotee" of the Beatles, especially John Lennon, whose obituary he tacks on his bulletin board (Lahiri [2004]: 74). Gogol's infatuation with the Beatles may be associated with the song "Nowhere Man," which Lennon mainly sings, because it represents Gogol's anguish that he cannot find his place either in the United States or India, living in a "nowhere land." Because of this unease, before entering Yale University, Gogol, who feels discomfort with his name, decides to legally change his name to Nikhil: "[Gogol] wonders if this is how it feels for an obese person to become thin, for a prisoner to walk free. 'I'm Nikhil,' he wants to tell the people who are walking their dogs, pushing children in their strollers, throwing bread to the ducks" (102). By changing his name by himself, Gogol is freed from the flawed identity that has confined him as a prisoner since his childhood. His name has made him feel that he has no place for his roots because it is neither American nor Indian; in addition, it is not even Russian, because it is the last name of Nikolai Gogol. Specifically, his name Gogol suggests that he has to live as a nowhere man from a nowhere land. Yet, it is noteworthy that he does not choose a common American name but Nikhil, because it does not let him belong to any place as before. Although it is associated with Nikolai, it is still not Russian. Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that the name sounds like nihil, which implies nothingness, or void, because the sound of "k" is lost in the Russian pronunciation of "kh." Therefore, even though he changes his name, he still exists in his nowhere land, which echoes Lahiri when she says that void is her origin and destiny.

From the viewpoint of a void that a person has to carry, Gogol's "The Overcoat" works as a significant motif of *The Namesake*. The protagonist Akakii Akakievich, a government clerk, engages in the routine work of making copies of documents, as his repetitious name indicates. However, he quits his routine one day; he decides to buy a new overcoat because his old one is worn. That is when he passionately dedicates himself to the job in order to save money: "From that time forth, [Akakii's] existence seemed to become, in some way, fuller, as if he were married, as if some other man lived in him, as if he were not alone, and some charming friend had consented to go along life's path with him—and the friend was no other than that overcoat, with thick wadding

and a strong lining incapable of wearing out” (Gogol [1992]: 89). As he seems like a whole different person, Akakii works hard at his job for his new overcoat.¹⁰ His passionate devotion resembles Gogol Ganguli’s excitement in feeling as if he became a whole new person by changing his name. For Gogol, his new name serves as a new overcoat that allows him to gain a new identity.

Nonetheless, “The Overcoat” reveals that his void keeps haunting Akakii even after he buys the new coat. A tragic accident befalls him: He is robbed of his new overcoat by bandits: “Akakii Akakievich felt [bandits] take off his coat, and give him a push with a knee: he fell headlong upon the snow, and felt no more. In a few minutes he recovered consciousness, and rose to his feet; but no one was there. He felt that it was cold in the square, and that his coat was gone. . .” (94). He dies soon after the robbery because of a high fever. It is remarkable, in the previous paragraph, that Akakii just “seems to be fuller” when he becomes passionate about buying a new overcoat, because it seems to imply that he never fulfills his void.

Akakii’s death suggests that Gogol Ganguli also never escapes from a void even though he changes his name. After he changes his name to Nikhil, American friends call him Nick; yet, his sister Sonia refuses to call him by the new name, saying, “You can’t [change your name]. . . . Because you are Gogol” (Lahiri [2004]: 221). She indicates that, even though he changes his name, he cannot escape from his void because he has to live in a suspended space as long as he lives. As the letter that never arrived implies, he has to wander in a space no one knows.

Moreover, Akakii’s overcoat represents Lahiri’s new language. She depicts her encounter with Italian as “love at first sight,” as quoted earlier. Her passionate devotion to learning the language is associated with Akakii’s hard work to buy a new overcoat. Casting off her old overcoat, English, she attempts to acquire a new one, Italian. Akakii’s tragedy that he loses his overcoat in the end resonates with Lahiri’s destiny that she has to carry her void even by writing in Italian. Now that Lahiri writes in Italian, we see that the motif of Gogol’s “The Overcoat” penetrates from *The Namesake* to her life as a writer.

In this sense, Ashoke’s explanation regarding his son’s name sounds critical. On

¹⁰ Olga Partan observes that Akakii’s sudden change represents Nikolai Gogol’s influence from Italian comedy and the traditional character Pulcinella, who often shows a contradictory nature and a split personality (Partan [2005]: 555).

Gogol's fourteenth birthday, Ashoke tries to explain why he named his son after the Russian author. However, he does not; instead, quoting Fyodor Dostoyevsky's words, he just says, "We all came out of Gogol's overcoat" (78). Ashoke alludes to his past, that is, that his life was saved by Gogol's "The Overcoat"; his son thus owes his birth to the Ukrainian writer, because he would not have been born if Ashoke had died in the train crash. In "The Overcoat," Akakii's tragic story represents that he cannot escape from his void no matter how passionately he dedicates himself. Therefore, if Akakii is connected with Gogol Ganguli, Ashoke's words sound like a curse to his son that he has to bear his void of being incapable of belonging anywhere. Even his new name does not liberate him from the curse, as Akakii's death after he buys his new overcoat suggests. Moreover, it is possible to say that Lahiri herself comes from Gogol's "The Overcoat," because she also pursues her new overcoat: Italian. If so, Ashoke's words would indicate Lahiri's destiny that she has to keep wandering in linguistic exile.

Nonetheless, even if Lahiri cannot be liberated from a void, her linguistic pilgrimage brings her salvation. As quoted earlier, she admits that the void itself has been her impulse to write. By writing, Lahiri has found her own place: "I write on margins, just as I've always lived on the margins of countries, of cultures. A peripheral zone where it's impossible for me to feel rooted, but where I'm comfortable. The only zone where I think that, in some way, I belong" (Lahiri [2016a]: 93). She has written precisely because she has held the sense of incompleteness. It is essential for her that she voluntarily holds the void even though Italian brings her much more inconvenience than English. If we remember that Italian culture in the United States represents the reinterpreted fantasy for Italian immigrants, the space Lahiri invents in her adapted language, Italian, works as a place for her.

Conclusion

Dealing with an Indian-American family in *The Namesake*, Lahiri depicts the anguish of those who cannot find their roots either in India or in the United States. Examining the novel from the time when Lahiri had left the United States for Italy and published *In Altre Parole* in Italian, the signs of her interest in Italian culture can be discovered. The Italian culture Lahiri describes in the novel represents an imaginary space that comes from a reinterpreted fantasy that Italian immigrants in the United States had established. Lahiri portrays Italy as the third alternative for uprooted Indian-

Americans; however, the space does not apply to Bhabha's argument on the third space, because he emphasizes the hybridity with authority. In Lahiri's case, in the meantime, she does not make her third space authoritative. Rather, Lahiri's Italy implies the incompleteness that she has embraced since her childhood; specifically, Italy in *The Namesake* reveals Lahiri's standpoint as a deracinated immigrant. This sense of imperfection that she can never satisfy led her to leave for Rome, putting herself in voluntary exile.

In addition, exploration of Gogol's "The Overcoat" as a motif of *The Namesake* sheds light on Lahiri's craving for what is never satisfied, which is represented by Akakii's overcoat, robbed in the end. For Lahiri, an overcoat represents Italian. She can never master it no matter how hard she tries; in other words, imperfection always goes along with her. Nonetheless, she pursues nothing but this imperfection. Since her childhood, she has been destined to live with her flawed identity, which she could not choose but had to accept. As she writes, a void indicates her destiny. However, by writing in Italian, she succeeds in accepting this void by her will. She can never fulfill it; still, she finds a new standpoint as a writer, not an author, who gives up her authority. Even though she does not have authority, she can have the freedom of voluntarily embracing her void, because Italian is a language that was not imposed by someone but one that she herself chose. As a writer without an authoritative language, she reveals that her deracinated identity allows her to choose a language by her will. Thus, an examination of *The Namesake* with focus on the references to Italian culture provides significant tips that foretell her move to Rome. Although she is regarded one of the most significant writers in contemporary American literature, her linguistic pilgrimage to try to fulfill her void will make the frameworks of American literature more complicated, but more multifaceted.

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