

DOI(Journal): 10.31703/gssr
DOI(Volume): 10.31703/gssr.2025(X)
DOI(Issue): 10.31703/gssr.2025(X.III)

p-ISSN: 2520-0348

e-ISSN: 2616-793X



GSSR

GLOBAL SOCIAL SCIENCES REVIEW

HEC-RECOGNIZED CATEGORY-Y

www.gssrjournal.com

Global
Social Sciences Review
exploring humanity

Volum X, ISSUE III SUMMER (SEPTEMBER-2025)

Article Title

Tracing the Unnameable: Gogol's Quest for the Real Self in The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri

Abstract

This paper examines Gogol's identity formation in The Namesake through Lacan's three registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. In the Imaginary, his fragmented self oscillates between the Russian writer's name and his adopted American identity, revealing a fractured self-shaped by external validation. Within the Symbolic, his dual names "Gogol" and "Nikhil" represent competing cultural codes that generate linguistic and psychic conflict. Encounters with the Real, through his father's death and marital breakdown, expose the limits of language and identity, confronting him with what resists representation. His shifting relation to names and desire underscores an ongoing search for coherence that remains unattainable. Integrating Lacanian theory with textual analysis, the paper argues that Gogol's struggle transcends cultural adaptation; it is an ontological pursuit of selfhood marked by loss, longing, and the impossibility of closure.

Keywords: Identity, Imaginary, Real, Self, Symbolic

Authors:

Saira Rauf:(Corresponding Author)

Lecturer, Riphah Institute of Language and Literature (RILL), Riphah International University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.
(Email: saira.rauf@riphah.edu.pk)

Shahid Imtiaz: Associate Professor, Riphah Institute of Language and Literature (RILL), Riphah International University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Sumaira Rauf: Lecturer, Department of English, Punjab Group of Colleges, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Pages: 280-288

DOI:10.31703/gssr.2025(X-III).24

DOI link: [https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2025\(X-III\).24](https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2025(X-III).24)

Article link: <https://gssrjournal.com/article/tracing-the-unnameable-gogols-quest-for-the-real-self-in-the-namesake-by-jhumpa-lahiri>

Full-text Link: <https://gssrjournal.com/article/tracing-the-unnameable-gogols-quest-for-the-real-self-in-the-namesake-by-jhumpa-lahiri>

Pdf link: <https://www.gssrjournal.com/jadmin/Auther/3urvlolA2.pdf>

Global Social Sciences Review

p-ISSN: [2520-0348](#) **e-ISSN:** [2616-793X](#)

DOI(journal):10.31703/gssr

Volume: X (2025)

DOI (volume):10.31703/gssr.2025(X)

Issue: III Summer (September-2025)

DOI(Issue):10.31703/gssr.2025(X-III)

Home Page

www.gssrjournal.com

Volume: X (2025)

<https://www.gssrjournal.com/Current-issue>

Issue: III-Summer (September -2025)

<https://www.gssrjournal.com/Current-issues/10/3/2025>

Scope

<https://www.gssrjournal.com/about-us/scope>

Submission

<https://humaglobe.com/index.php/gssr/submissions>



Visit Us



Citing this Article

24	Tracing the Unnameable: Gogol’s Quest for the Real Self in The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri		
Authors	Saira Rauf Shahid Imtiaz Sumaira Rauf	DOI	10.31703/gssr.2025(X-III).24
		Pages	280-288
		Year	2025
		Volume	X
		Issue	III
Referencing & Citing Styles			
APA	Rauf, S., Imtiaz, S., & Rauf, S. (2025). Tracing the Unnameable: Gogol’s Quest for the Real Self in The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri. <i>Global Social Sciences Review</i> , X(III), 280-288. https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2025(X-III).24		
CHICAGO	Rauf, Saira, Shahid Imtiaz, and Sumaira Rauf. 2025. "Tracing the Unnameable: Gogol’s Quest for the Real Self in The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri." <i>Global Social Sciences Review</i> X (III):280-288. doi: 10.31703/gssr.2025(X-III).24.		
HARVARD	RAUF, S., IMTIAZ, S. & RAUF, S. 2025. Tracing the Unnameable: Gogol’s Quest for the Real Self in The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri. <i>Global Social Sciences Review</i> , X, 280-288.		
MHRA	Rauf, Saira, Shahid Imtiaz, and Sumaira Rauf. 2025. 'Tracing the Unnameable: Gogol’s Quest for the Real Self in The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri', <i>Global Social Sciences Review</i> , X: 280-88.		
MLA	Rauf, Saira, Shahid Imtiaz, and Sumaira Rauf. "Tracing the Unnameable: Gogol’s Quest for the Real Self in the Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri." <i>Global Social Sciences Review</i> X.III (2025): 280-88. Print.		
OXFORD	Rauf, Saira, Imtiaz, Shahid, and Rauf, Sumaira (2025), 'Tracing the Unnameable: Gogol’s Quest for the Real Self in The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri', <i>Global Social Sciences Review</i> , X (III), 280-88.		
TURABIAN	Rauf, Saira, Shahid Imtiaz, and Sumaira Rauf. "Tracing the Unnameable: Gogol’s Quest for the Real Self in the Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri." <i>Global Social Sciences Review</i> X, no. III (2025): 280-88. https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2025(X-III).24 .		



Global Social Sciences Review

www.gssrjournal.com

DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr>



Pages: 280-288

URL: [https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2025\(X-III\).24](https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2025(X-III).24)

Doi: 10.31703/gssr.2025(X-III).24



Cite Us



Title

Tracing the Unnameable: Gogol's Quest for the Real Self in The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri

Authors:

Saira Rauf:(Corresponding Author)

Lecturer, Riphah Institute of Language and Literature (RILL), Riphah International University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

(Email: saira.rauf@riphah.edu.pk)

Shahid Imtiaz: Associate Professor, Riphah Institute of Language and Literature (RILL), Riphah International University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Sumaira Rauf: Lecturer, Department of English, Punjab Group of Colleges, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Abstract

This paper examines Gogol's identity formation in The Namesake through Lacan's three registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. In the Imaginary, his fragmented self oscillates between the Russian writer's name and his adopted American identity, revealing a fractured self-shaped by external validation. Within the Symbolic, his dual names "Gogol" and "Nikhil" represent competing cultural codes that generate linguistic and psychic conflict. Encounters with the Real, through his father's death and marital breakdown, expose the limits of language and identity, confronting him with what resists representation. His shifting relation to names and desire underscores an ongoing search for coherence that remains unattainable. Integrating Lacanian theory with textual analysis, the paper argues that Gogol's struggle transcends cultural adaptation; it is an ontological pursuit of selfhood marked by loss, longing, and the impossibility of closure.

Contents

- [Introduction](#)
- [The Borromean Knot: Interdependence of the Three Registers](#)
- [Theoretical Framework:](#)
- [Lacan's Registers of the Self](#)
- [The Imaginary Order:](#)
- [Gogol's Early Bond and Fragmented Self](#)
- [The Symbolic Order:](#)
- [Naming, Language, and Cultural Alienation](#)
- [The Real: Trauma, Death, and the Limits of Identity](#)
- [Gogol's Romantic Encounters and the Search for the Lost Object](#)
- [Homecoming and Cultural Reconciliation](#)
- [Conclusion](#)
- [References](#)

Keywords:

Identity, Imaginary, Real, Self, Symbolic

Introduction

This study explores Gogol's quest for a cohesive identity in *The Namesake* by Lahiri (2003) using the registers of Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. Within these registers, Gogol's search for the unreachable "object-cause" of desire drives and eludes him. Jhumpa Lahiri, a leading American novelist and Pulitzer Prize winner, is a poignant voice in contemporary Indian diasporic literature. She is the daughter of Bengali parents based in Calcutta. *The*

Namesake (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013) have established her as a highly influential fiction writer of her generation. Lahiri is a writer who bridges at least two cultures, Indian and American, and she resists essentialism, embracing hybridity in her narrative like other migrant writers. She is considered a part of the tradition of both migrant and bicultural writers. (Thomsen, 2008; Jain, 2010)

The Namesake is a story about the Indian diaspora, culture, race, and heritage that shows the



journey of a couple who leave India to build a better life in America for themselves and their children. Their son, Gogol, starts nursery and kindergarten. At home, he is called Gogol, keeping a close family connection to his nickname. In school, however, teachers insist that he use the name Nikhil. Therefore, the child's self-recognition varies depending on who is speaking: a child reflects who is addressing him. The story provides a private, comforting family perspective through Gogol, while the mandatory, distancing perspective imposed by the university introduces the name Nikhil. This opposition highlights the narcissistic alienation described by Lacan, where the ego is seen as a source of alienation. Gogol struggles constantly to find his identity as he tries to shape himself into someone he is not. He remains in conflict as he attempts to stay true to both worlds. *The Namesake* portrays the protagonist's process of becoming. (Ünlü & Bekler, 2024)

In the Symbolic domain, Gogol also undergoes a shift leading to the realigning of the signifiers, which make up his social and linguistic selves (Karl, 2007). His attempt to thus be re-included in the Symbolic structure with his terms, and making himself matching the parameters of professionalism and assimilationism which the Western professionalism represents, lies in the choice of the name: thus, by taking on the name of Nikhil, he makes a gesture towards the way of being in the world of the Symbolic structure, in which order one must be ready to behave according to Western terms. This action indicates a revolt against the "Name-of-the-Father" of his parents, i.e., the law against the genealogical and cultural law that they represent. However, the Symbolic network cannot easily include his new name; the memory of the train crash that his father was involved in, and the unresolved resentment Gogol has toward his father, place his role in this chain of command in an awkward position. (Assadnassab, 2012)

The Borromean Knot: Interdependence of the Three Registers

The Real alternatively captures in the present a powerful declaration that the food could not be digested by the nouns involved. The psychological impact of meaninglessness and existential nullity creates a shadow over Gogol as he rebrands

himself, a trauma linked to his father-figure coming very close to death, and a shift in identity from his father's to Gogol himself. According to Lacan, the Real is what resists symbolization and is constantly writing itself, and Gogol's discomfort before and after the name change indicates this unbridgeable gap at the core of his psyche.

The metaphor of the Borromean knot offered by Lacan throws a clear light on the way the three registers, the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, intertwine inseparably in the crisis of Gogol. The destruction of one (his old name/Gogol) will not set Subject free; the tattoo of ageless Gogol is carried on in all three echelons. He (the subject) can make an official break with the Imaginary reflection and strive to take on a new Symbolic identity. However, the Real, the establishing gap, is not affected thereby and still destabilizes and shapes his subjectivity.

Unl and Bekler (2024) introduce a formative analysis of positioning Gogol in Lacanian triadic registers according to which he allegedly remains a Lacanian infant searching for his lost object of desire, called object 30a, and, therefore, exemplifies how his name-change fails to eliminate an underlying identity break (Ünlü and Bekler 360). Adding to this psychoanalytic apparatus, Bhalla (2012) focuses on Gogol striving to be recognized and shows that the relentless confusion of identifying himself with different names or faces offends the idea of misrecognition in the Imaginary order and Symbolic order, which is proposed by Lacan (cited in Ünlü and Bekler

Kral (2013) describes Gogol's naming dilemma as simultaneously establishing and challenging symbolic filiation in line with the Lacanian notion of the Name of the Father (Kral 95). All this research puts the Imaginary and the Symbolic in the forefront. It leaves comparatively untouched the Real, the traumatic kernel enveloping the accident involving the father of Gogol and the vertigo of meaning. What could be analyzed in the future is how certain scenes in the text by Lahiri reflect the unassimilable residue of the Real and provide a more complete Lacanian interpretation of the identity crisis that had haunted Gogol up to his death.

Dawes (2007) claims that Gogol, the protagonist of *The Namesake*, remains engaged in molding the expectations of his family and that of

American society while constructing his identity. The pressure to conform to the North American Standards and his ancestral belonging to Calcutta-based Bengali Indian culture make him a person of divided loyalties as he tries to be loyal to both worlds, and in this way emerges as a representative immigrant in the contemporary American society. Dawes, as a Korean immigrant, also shares her memories that are very like the experiences of Sonia and Ashima (11).

Ashima and Ashoke, along with Gogol, left Calcutta (India) to settle in America, embracing the new world, but their old world continued to haunt them. It even made the American-born Gogol the man of divided loyalties and an instance of mimicry. At the time of delivery, it was not easy for Ashima to isolate herself from Bengali customs of naming the children, and for that, Ashima had to wait for her grandmother's letter, which was supposed to reveal the name of the newborn baby. The Bengali culture was also celebrated in Gogol's ceremony of 'annaprasan' (the first solid diet) with Bengali friends living in their vicinity in Boston and New England.

There are at least three characteristics that distinguish Gogol's change. Naturally, Gogol is Gogol, as his parents were required to give him a name in the hospital before they could leave after his birth. Since Ashoke loved the Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol's writings, the word "Gogol" held special significance for him. The rescuer was drawn to the fluttering, torn page of Gogol's short story in Ashoke's hands because, while reading the story, Ashoke also experienced a horrific link to the train accident. Naming his son Gogol, Ashoke feels a sense of gratitude to Gogol that relieves his horror of train-wreck tragedy. In a way, it is the father's choice that the son will have to explain throughout his life. Gradually, the boy develops a peculiar association with this odd surname. The narrator remembers, "He turns his head and smiles if someone in the room says 'Gogol'" (41). When Gogol enrolls in school under a new name, Nikhil, which somewhat resembles Nikolai, the Russian fiction writer's first name, this association is broken. However, the principal, Mrs. Lapidus, refuses to comply with the parents' request, stating that "At school, he will be referred to as Gogol per their son's wishes." (60). When he is asked for an explanation of his name and laughs at the oddness

of his name, Gogol feels frustrated. He fails to feel that his name resembles anyone of his study-mates or playmates.

In his early teenage years, Gogol feels attached to the odd and flamboyant names inscribed on the tombstones during his study tour of a graveyard. His anguish for his name is seen in this extract: "At school's Model UN Day, he detests having to wear a nametag on his jumper. In art class, he even detests singing his name at the bottom of his creations. He despises this name because it is ridiculous and obscure, and it has nothing to do with his identity; he is Russian, not Indian or American." (76), and he concludes, "He finds it shocking that his parents choose the most unusual namesake." (76). Afterward, in the lectures of Professor Lawson about Nikolai Gogol, the young Gogol learns about the curses, oddities, and anorexia of the Russian novelist Gogol, and decides to come out of his shadow. In his meeting with Kim, he introduces him to her as Nikhil.

When Gogol, a young college student, later asks his father if the name Gogol makes him think of Ashoke's near-death experience, the latter responds that "Gogol" is a symbol of life, joy, and hope for him. The pleasant result of a horrible incident in Ashoke's early years is Gogol the child (Karl, 2013).

Before he fully understands his father's narrative, Gogol decides to become Nikhil. However, the transformation into Nikhil also signifies maturing and an effort to reinvent oneself while attending college. He intended to get rid of his anguish, "No one takes me seriously" (100), and he decides to change his name officially. He lives with Ruth, the undergrade of classics and psychology, and later with Maxine, a graduate of art history, as Nikhil, but he still remains Gogol at his home for his parents. He experiences another dilemma: "He feels different from Nikhil. Not quite yet. The fact that many who now know him as Nikhil are unaware that he was once Gogol is one aspect of the issue" (105). This loss of his past memory for the sake of being Nikhil was unimaginable to him. He wanted to own his life as Gogol too, and this name unconsciously crept into his writing, such as signing "a slip of credit at the college bookshop" (106).

As a result, Gogol undergoes his second metamorphosis, becoming a Yale University architecture student. Visual art is inherited because

Ashima's father was a painter. Although Gogol is not particularly drawn to India, he was also influenced by the Taj Mahal's architecture during the family's trip there. He barely shares his memories of India, even of his occasional visits to his parental town. He first learns about ABCD, or American-born confused desi, at a panel discussion about Indian novels while he is a student at Yale University. However, he does not consider India to be his desh; therefore, he does not fit into this category. Nikhil may most immediately follow his passion for architecture at Yale, which leads to graduate school in New York and employment at a firm there. He experiences the shock of his father's unexpected death from a heart attack when he is in New York.

Gogol's third set of changes in romantic relationships is a direct result of his existence in New York. Although Gogol is assumed to have some pals, the book doesn't spend much time talking about them. Gogol's existence with three women is instead the focus of Lahiri's narrator: Ruth, while he is a college student; Maxine, while he is in New York; and, lastly, Moushumi, his wife, who holds a PhD in French literature and knows him as both Gogol and Nikhil. In turn, each lady represents a phase in Gogol's growth, and Lahiri takes care to give these female characters their own emotional depth. Though "one of his life's accomplishments is his relationship with her" (116), yet Gogol leaves Ruth, the daughter of hippies, when they feel that "something had changed" (120) as neither of them was ready to go with the partner; she wanted to study in England and he wanted to stay in the States. Gogol, and he in particular, doesn't seem to understand that Maxine genuinely loves him and wants to know all about his family's customs. Maxine is open and frank, but he remains secretive about his name, preferences, and love-making.

Later, the sudden death of Gogol's father creates a silence in their relationship that ultimately hurts Maxine and Gogol, who overhears from the conversation of her parents that she is interested in another boy, packs his luggage, and leaves her residence for good. Gogol, and he in particular, doesn't seem to understand that Maxine genuinely loves him and wants to know all about his family's customs. Gogol and Moushumi marry as they share certain traits of escaping their

parents' influence, but their marriage also contradicts their own priorities. Moushumi wanted to marry neither an American nor an Indian, but she had to marry an American (Gogol) of Indian background. She left her fiancé, Graham, as he mentioned that he was to be pleased with their Indian marriage. She is more fascinated by living in Paris, its architecture, culture, and intellectual tradition, and misses her friends. Her friends, Donald and Astrid, who are married and expecting a baby, speculate on the names for their baby in the company of other friends. This discussion also gives way to Gogol's name as Moushumi blurts out that he changed his name from Gogol to Nikhil. After a long time, he admits and tells that once he had this name as his father was a fan. He feels strange at heart at this moment as he reflects, "He had admitted to her that he still occasionally felt bad about changing his name, especially now that his father was no longer with him. She had also reassured him that it was reasonable and that anyone in his position would have followed suit. However, she now considers it a joke" (244). Gogol, who thinks that his parents' act of naming him was naïve and impulsive, declares finally, "it is impossible to have a flawless name. When a person reaches the age of eighteen, I believe they should be permitted to choose their own name. In the interim, pronouns" (245). Over time, Gogol experiments with many identities and approaches to his family and himself through his romantic relationships.

Theoretical Framework:

Lacan's Registers of the Self

The Parisian psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), brought together the key ideas of Sigmund Freud and Ferdinand de Saussure with his critical reflection and succeeded in exploring the chaotic nature of language and that of the unconscious, which subsequently gave birth to his so-called post-structuralist psychoanalysis. He challenges the Freudian notion that the subject does not express his suppressed desires in language, and they are randomly seen in slips of the tongue, fragmented dreams, and hypnosis (Parkin-Gounelas, 2001). He revises it so that the suppressed desires are expressed in language, but language is chaotic, and the recipient cannot understand them. He also revises Saussure's model of the sign and its three

implications through his claim that the sign is not a picture of anything rather it is a structure. He identifies the connection between the function of desire and the function of language. Desire that remains unsatisfiable looks for its appropriate expression in the pre-existing language structures, and in this competing relationship mirror image of the self is seen, which is Other for the Self. In his own words, the Other is “the very locus evoked by the recourse to speech” (Leitch, 2001). He also identifies the three ‘orders’ or ‘dimensions’: The Imaginary, The Symbolic, and The Real. As Lacan intended to explore the chaotic nature of language and the impact of its rhetorical energy, he chose a paradoxical and in-flux language. His terms cannot be taken in their literal meanings. The ‘imaginary’ stage is imaginary because the inter-relationship of the self and its image tries to constitute it in the contextual conflict of the specular I and social I. When that realization of ‘self’ enters the domain of articulation rather than symbolizing or referring, it is called the Symbolic stage and has a focus on the ‘structure of relations’. The third stage, The Real, is hard to explain, and it is seen in its effects on the orders of Symbolic and Imaginary. All three constitute the subjectivity of the subject. Lacan is thought of as a writer of paradox; what he says, he contradicts to expose the chaotic part of language, and hence it becomes difficult to summarize his stance adequately. Adam Philips, in his essay “The Manicuring of Jacques Lacan,” writes:

Among other things, Lacan's books contain the confessions of a self-justifying megalomaniac, which is unique in and of itself because such individuals rarely explain themselves, or at least not with such nuanced precision. Conversely, these are also the most fashionable and comprehensive psychoanalytic works since Freud's. (Phillips, 2000)

The Imaginary Order:

Gogol's Early Bond and Fragmented Self

When examined, Gogol's in the light of Lacan's concept of three stages of the subject formation, The Real, The Imaginary, and The Symbolic, the issues of his unstable identity, the failure of his relationship with the women he loved and married, the problematic adjustment with his parents, and with the alien culture are understood thoroughly and realistically. Before the sense of self emerges, Gogol lives in the realm which Lacan has called The

Imaginary. There is an idealized identification with the mother during the Imaginary stage, and there is no differentiation between the self and the Other. In this stage, Gogol is seen entirely dependent on his mother for everything he, as a child, requires. The acts of his mother such as pulling him out of the crib at 6 am for the first feeding, singing him the Bengali songs to put him sleep, seeing their “typed on the label of an antibiotic prescription is the name of the son's pet” of ear infection and perceiving it the violation of the non-public status of the pet name, and Gogol's first flight with his parents to India after his maternal grandfather's death, indicate that baby Gogol has no say in these matters (35-36). Likewise, Gogol's visit “to the public library for children's story hour” and his visit to the bank with parents are incidents where he is just a silent observer or participant without any significant gesture of his own choice. He is unable to differentiate between himself and ‘the other’ as his consciousness has yet to develop.

In this stage, whatever Gogol needs is immediately provided by his mother. He is unable to differentiate between himself and the objects that fulfill his needs. There is no ‘I’ but objects that satisfy his needs. But to grow in society and be an independent member of it, Gogol needs to be separated from his mother. He has to be a separate human being, an ‘I.’ With this awareness and consciousness that he should separate from his mother comes a sense of loss. The loss of the mother, the primal sense of unity with the mother, which, according to Lacan, a child does not face in the Real stage, as there is no language in that stage. By the term ‘Other,’ Lacan means other human beings, his parents, and those people who surround him on various occasions at home and places like markets and shopping plazas. In this stage, Gogol considers himself a part of his mother; no sense of independent existence is experienced by him. ‘Other’, in Lacan's writing, ‘frustrates’ the human being as he claimed in his seminar on Hegel's reading; it implies that Gogol's resentment begins at this stage, which can be noted later when he is enrolled in a school and he refuses to respond to the name, Nikhil. Gogol, like a Lacanian child, does not feel the loss or lack in his Real stage. It is language that helps us to differentiate things from one another. It also refers to absent things. Words, therefore, are symbols that stand for something

else. They are also used for the real objects that are not necessarily present.

According to Lacan, the 'mirror age arrives when the child is between six months and eighteen months of age. The child sees his reflection in the mirror and starts considering himself as a unified being. He considers himself separated from the rest of the world. He sees his image in the mirror and considers it to be real. The child, therefore, moves from insufficiency to anticipation. He looks into the mirror and finds his reflection, then moves back to see the objects around him, including his mother. This activity of looking into the mirror and looking at the objects fills him with a sense of being a whole or complete person. The concept of the ego, or "I," is formed in this stage, which is the "Imaginary" domain. An illusory identification with an image in the mirror creates the concept of a self or subject. However, this stage is pre-linguistic and pre-oedipal and is reliant on imagination.

It is in this stage that Gogol, like a Lacanian, subject shifts from having needs to having demands. One of his demands is recognition from the 'other.' Now Gogol believes that he is separated from his mother and from other things that exist in his surroundings, and that they are not part of it. He can walk a little on his own. Furthermore, he manages to eat his food and can utter words in two languages, English and Bengali. He prefers a pen to other objects and feels confident in whatever activity he performs. The confidence of being a complete whole is a kind a compensation for the loss of his unity with his mother. On the one hand, this consciousness of being separated gives birth to a sense of lack and anxiety, and on the other, makes it possible for Gogol to enter culture and society. While following Gogol's development, Lacan's caution should be kept in mind that the subject's sense of completeness is also supplemented by his feeling of alienation as he claims that when an infant sees in the mirror he has dual feelings of identification (or the wholeness of the self) and of alienation (due to the realization that image is fake and inadequate).

The Symbolic Order:

Naming, Language, and Cultural Alienation

After Gogol has formulated some idea of 'otherness' and of his self, he enters what Lacan calls The Symbolic order. It is difficult to separate the

Imaginary order from the Symbolic order as they overlap and co-exist. Primarily, the Symbolic order is the structure of the language itself. It is Gogol's learning of the language that he enter the rarefied cultural and social environment around him. With his entry into the American culture and society, his identity issue comes to the surface. He refuses to be known and called by the name his parents had selected for him. He indulged in a heated argument with his father over the issue of changing his name. Ultimately, his father allowed him to have a name of his liking. He, therefore, changed his name from Gogol to Nikhil. He was so overwhelmed with the joy of having a new name. But his joy was temporary. Nevertheless, the protagonist is invariably caught up in the psychological web of name-changing. Even after changing his name, Gogol's identity issue is not resolved. Initially, he does not enjoy being Nikhil, a new name and a new identity. With this new name, he feels cut off from his family and past. His mind becomes a cauldron of confusion and conflict. He always feels uncomfortable with his parents, who remind him of his past and his Bengali roots. Even after having a name of his own choice, Gogol remains mentally unsettled and perturbed. He does not feel like or behave like Nikhil. Those who know him as Nikhil do not know his past. He realizes that they know him only in the present. He feels as if he is an actor playing the role of being Gogol at some time, and at another time, he is Nikhil.

The Real: Trauma, Death, and the Limits of Identity

Gogol suffers from a sense of great loss and separation from the original object, his mother. This stage has been identified and called by Lacan the Symbolic order. The entry into the Symbolic order means separation from the other objects, and the most significant separation is the separation from the intimate union with one's mother, which the subject experiences in the Imaginary order. In the Symbolic order, the pattern of cultural rituals, social conventions, and standards forms complete social truths. During this stage of his life, Gogol transitions between signifiers as a Lacanian subject. The Symbolic order is grounded on the idea of lack and loss. The subject in The Symbolic Order discovers life as a set of signifiers and signifieds. This order is also the structure of language itself.

And language is a continuing process of difference and absence. The subject, therefore, shuttles between one signifier to another in search of the original loss. In search of that loss, the separation from his mother, Gogol begins to pursue substitutes for his mother. Consequently, he is involved in a love relationship with various girls and identifies himself with each. Resultantly, he loses his own identity in the process.

Gogol's Romantic Encounters and the Search for the Lost Object

Gogol's encounter with the girls brings him into contact with American society, with all its cultural and social diversity and disparity. He meets Ruth at Yale University, where he is a student of Renaissance architecture, and believes that she would ultimately take him to his real object. Gogol comes to know that Ruth belongs to a distinct family background. Her parents are hippies, and she received her education at home till she joined school in grade seven. Although this information regarding Ruth was quite shocking for him, as he could never imagine himself belonging to such a family background, he felt pulled towards her. Both Ruth and Gogol belong to two diametrically opposite and disparate cultures, and the gap between their cultures is unbridgeable. Ruth reflects her interest in Gogol's culture and history, yet Gogol could see that their relationship was not durable. Nevertheless, Gogol takes a fancy to Ruth and feels that his search for the original, the Real object, has succeeded and that Ruth is his destiny.

Gogol finally realizes that his parents would reject Ruth as his wife. He feels caught up between his past and present. Even Ruth is unable to satisfy his search for the loss of the Real. Dejected and disappointed, he decides to break up with Ruth. He avoids his daily encounter with her. Gogol, at this stage, feels emotionally destabilized and upset. The desire for his mother is a permanent one. He laments the possession of his mother. His mother is a fixed image in his memory; his social activities and involvement with other women do not help him to erase it. To look for substitutes for his mother as the Lacanian subject normally does in the Symbolic order, Gogol embarks upon traveling. His search for the Real object, his mother, whose loss he experienced in the Lacanian Imaginary order, takes him to another girl, Maxine. She, by

her race, is a Caucasian woman born in America. Their regular meetings lead them to a highly involved love relationship.

Gogol is impressed when Maxine's parents show interest in his Bengali culture and Indian background and allow them ample time to understand each other. Maxine does not keep any skeletons in the cupboard regarding her past. She is an embodiment of Western culture and values. She openly discusses with Gogol her past sexual relationships with her boyfriends. Their discussions on various topics of social and cultural orientation reveal the fact that the cultural chasm between them is unbridgeable. Gogol knows that his mother is deeply rooted in her Bengali culture and social milieu. Gogol's return to his family following the passing of his father is incomprehensible to Maxine. The fact that Maxine and Gogol live in completely different worlds of culture and civilization, and that there is no point of contact between them, is demonstrated by the death of Gogol's father and his return to his family. His mother would never accept Maxine as a member of her family. So, it is the cultural and ethnic disparity that stands as an obstacle between Gogol and Maxine. For him, his romance with Maxine was nothing but a temporary experience and diversion.

The shift in Gogol's relationships with his female partners reflects his infatuation with an illusory image that he believes to be real for a certain period. Commenting on this journey of the Lacanian subject, Hugette Glowinski writes, our image provides a (necessary) illusion of unity, while simultaneously projecting our sense of self onto an external reference point, such as a mirror or the Other. The individual recognizes both with their reflected image (the other) and with the absence within the Other. This image is a distortion and a defense mechanism, yet it remains our reality; it shapes the subject in both imaginary and symbolic ways (Glowinski, [2001](#)).

Homecoming and Cultural Reconciliation

Gogol returns to his family after his father passes away. He is dismayed by Maxine's unusual behavior towards his family. Maxine once admitted to him that she was jealous of his family. To Gogol, this was not only absurd but also unacceptable. He, therefore, left Maxine for good. His mother's miserable and lonely condition affects him emotionally, and he decides to come back to his

home in Massachusetts. His return to his Indian heritage is symbolized by his return to his American home in Massachusetts. It dawns on him that he is not an American youngster but an Indian.

Gogol's homecoming, in a way, is an announcement of the fact that is now his search for the Real, a substitute for his mother, would direct him to a girl of Bengali background. In one of his telephonic conversations with his mother, Ashima mentioned the name of Moushumi, the daughter of their Bengali acquaintances. Gogol recalls his vague familiarity with her name. After a short stay in Massachusetts, her family moved to New Jersey. He remembers her holding a book even at the parties. She had a British accent. Her parents attended his father's funeral. With all such common traits and close association with his family, Gogol could imagine Moushumi as an apt substitute for his mother he was in search of. "After speaking over the phone, Moushumi recommended a pub in the East Village, where they met up. Like movie stars from the 1960s, she has heavy lids and bold lining on the top lids of her eyes. She has chic, narrow tortoiseshell glasses and middle-parted hair pulled back into a chignon" (193).

What unites them is their desire to escape the influence of their family and shared culture, their experience as second-generation immigrants, and their fascination with mutual acceptance without question. They resemble each other as closely as a restaurant waiter might consider them brother and sister. Gogol feels insulted but soon realizes that "it's true that they have similar coloring, dark hair, high cheekbones, long, slim bodies, and straight eyebrows" (224). Like Gogol, she intends to follow her whims. Gogol soon learns the benefits of being an integral part of his family. Moushumi, on the other hand, is swept away by the strong tide of Western culture; she immerses herself in parties with her intellectual and artistic friends. It has been rightly noted, "the narrative temporarily switches from Gogol to Moushumi when she enters the book, and her point of view provides an additional viewpoint on how the child in Lahiri's stories serves as a cultural translator" (Friedman, 2008). Like Gogol, she is an immigrant raised in America. Another similarity between Gogol and Moushumi is that both had affairs. Gogol's affair with Maxine ends, and Moushumi terminates her relationship with Caucasian American Graham. The failure of their affairs indicates that the cultural gap between

them was insurmountable. They are united by their ethnic identity rather than their class.

Gogol's encounter with Moushumi reminds him of a painful truth. Moushumi does not look happy in their marriage; she still misses Graham and has an affair with Dimitri Desjardins, wondering "if she is the only woman in her family to have ever cheated on her spouse" (265). Later, Gogol learns of this affair when they are returning home to spend Christmas with his mother and sister. "he was chilled by her secret, which made him numb and spread like a poison through his veins" (282). They decide to break up, and she goes to New York alone, then moves to Paris after getting divorced. He realizes, "Maybe for novelty's sake or because they were afraid that the earth was slowly fading, they had both turned to each other and their shared universe for solace.

" (284). The novel ends with Gogol at his mother's house during his sister Sonia's wedding. He is alone in his room, about to read the story, *The Overcoat*, from *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*, a book once given to him by his father, Ashoke. The narrator states, "he will start a new position in a month, creating his designs for a smaller architectural firm. With the business adopting his name, there is a chance that he will eventually become an associate. And then, in contrast to Gogol, who was deliberately concealed, legally degraded, and now all but lost, Nikhil will continue to live on, openly celebrated" (290).

Conclusion

In this way, Gogol's quest for his real self continues. His journey is paradoxical in many respects and looks Lacanian as his perception of 'gain' and 'loss' acts. He wanders in quest for an appropriate name for himself, but he is neither fully Nikhil nor Gogol. He owns one name and the other tempts him. The same is the case with his cultural association and family association. Like a Lacanian subject, he experiences his independence/separation with the feeling of alienation. His romantic affairs ultimately fail to provide him alternative to his lost union with his mother. Though life does not cease when the novel concludes and Gogol is only 32, it reminds the readers of the echo of Lacan that 'the lost object is one that the subject never had, the loss brought into being by symbolization itself' and Gogol, as a name, is also a symbolic code.

References

- Assadnassab, A. (2012). *Displacement, an unknown freedom: Cultural identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake* (Master's thesis, Dalarna University). Dalarna University School of Languages and Media Studies, English Department. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:538672/fulltext01.pdf>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Bhalla, T. (2012). Gogol: Reading and recognition in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 37(1), 105–129. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mel.2012.0013>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Dawes, T.-A. (2007). *The Namesake: Struggle for identity*. *Mako: NSU Undergraduate Student Journal*, 1(1). <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/mako/vol1/iss1/2/>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Friedman, N. (2008). From hybrids to tourists: Children of immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 50(1), 111–128. <https://doi.org/10.3200/CRIT.50.1.111-128>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Glowinski, H. (2001). Alienation and separation. In H. Glowinski, Z. Marks, & S. Murphy (Eds.), *A compendium of Lacanian terms* (pp. [specific pages]). Free Association Books. <https://www.karnacbooks.com/product/a-compendium-of-lacanian-terms/12082/>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Jain, R. K. (2010). *Nation, diaspora, trans-nation: Reflections from India*. Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203814017>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Karl, F. (2007). Shaky ground and new territorialities in *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali and *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 43(1), 65–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449850701219892>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Král, F. (2013). Mis-naming and mis-labeling in *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, 36(1), 93–101. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.5292>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Lahiri, J. (2003). *The Namesake*. Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Company.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Leitch, V. B. (2001). Jacques Lacan. In V. B. Leitch (Ed.), *The Norton anthology of theory and criticism* (2nd ed., pp. [specific pages]). W. W. Norton & Company. <https://books.google.mu/books?id=qYN4QgAACAAJ&hl=da>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Parkin Gounelas, R. (2001). *Literature and psychoanalysis: Intertextual readings*. Palgrave Publishers.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Phillips, A. (2000). The manicuring of Jacques Lacan. In *Promises, promises: Essays on literature and psychoanalysis*. Basic Books.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Thomsen, M. R. (2008). *Mapping world literature: International canonization and transnational literatures*. Continuum.
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)
- Ünlü, Ö., & Bekler, E. (2024). A Lacanian gaze into Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. *Cankaya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 18(2), 359–368. <https://doi.org/10.47777/cankujhss.1549250>
[Google Scholar](#) [Worldcat](#) [Fulltext](#)