

Tracing the Missing Letter: Reassembling Nonhuman Agency in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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Diasporic dislocation, cultural ambivalence, and intergenerational conflict all, understandably, mark the protagonist of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. After all, this is a novel, on the one hand, about an Indian couple, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, who emigrates to Boston in the 1960s, and, on the other, their American-born son. What makes life doubly frustrating for their son, however, is his quirky name: Gogol Ganguli. Needless (and despairingly) alliterative and neither American nor Indian in origin, Gogol's name is the result of a missing post from India. Because this letter, containing his official name ceremoniously chosen at his birth by Ashima's grandmother, never arrives, Gogol is cursed with a name that sticks like an unwanted stain all his life.

How can a mere piece of paper wield so much power over the lives of these characters? What networks are created or dismantled through this one object that goes missing? That the letter is crucial to the formation of social reality in this novel is obvious. However, scholarship on *The Namesake* is curiously one-sided, largely choosing to focus on the representational qualities reflected by the narrative. For example, Min Hyung Song, and Bakirathi Mani show how the novel promotes a heteronormative and patriarchal discourse that destabilizes its representational validity. In a similar vein, Tamara Bhalla writes that her initial readerly identification with Gogol's story takes a backseat because "[her] representational

investment as a literary scholar” (110) leads her to denounce Lahiri’s portrayal of ethnicity and women.

Bhalla’s linkage of literary scholarship and a *specific* mode of reading reflects the larger concerns of this paper. What these readings have in common is a “suspicion” of the text’s discursive elements; it sees social reality (both within the text and outside it) as produced solely by underlying power structures that should be brought to light. Indeed, critical inquiry within academia more broadly has often centered on the primacy of analyses that uncover these discourses of power and bias that are “hidden” within the folds of a text or social reality.ⁱ A “critical” mind is one that not only asks what the text is saying but what the text is *really* saying. This “hermeneutics of suspicion”, as Paul Ricoeur famously called it, is elevated to such heights that a surface-level descriptive assessment of reality is tantamount to naivete. “*Do you not see all the insidious ways this text promotes hegemonic ideology?*” the critical scholar might say to the “undiscerning” lay reader who is moved to an affective attachment of a text like *The Namesake*.ⁱⁱ

I do not deny that this Marxian-Freudian-Foucauldian-inspired mode of “suspicious” critique has its place in literary and social analyses. Power structures are real, sometimes invisible, always exclusionary, and play a central role in the formation of reality. Questions like “How is middle-class privilege and the model minority myth of educated South Asians reflected in this text?” “How does religion appropriate the woman’s body as a site of conflict?” are all important. But this form of interpretation is only one mode of reading—one that often passes off as superior and “scholarly”. In this paper, I suggest it is important to note how social reality is not only formed through discourse but also through an interaction between actors. I draw

from an alternative tradition of scholarship called postcritical reading, espoused by critics like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Heather Love, and Rita Felski who are attempting to decenter critique from its hallowed interpretational position within academia by offering other descriptive-based modes of reading. This essay wants to analyze how social reality comes to take its specific shape through transhistorical, transnational associations. In other words, I ask: what interactions take place on the surface of this text and how do these give rise to attachments, conflicts, and resolutions? In particular, I analyze *The Namesake* through the methodology offered by Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT). While sociological in its original conception, I show here how ANT's methodology of tracing associations between entities can be translated for literary analysis as well. In viewing reality as the product of the associations between human and nonhuman actors, Latour urges us to "reassemble" social agents to effectively understand the way the (textual) world works.

Reassembling is key to this paper. This analysis follows the "trace" left by a single nonhuman actor—the letter from India that contains Gogol's official "good" name but that gets lost forever in transit. In showing that the *absence* of this entity evinces it as a social agent in relation with a multitude of other agents, we see how nonhuman actors are fundamentally entangled with human actors in indispensable ways. How does a missing letter become a key player in the formation of identities and social realities? What other actors does it interact with? How do lives change in the process? Ironically, as I will show, it is not the presence of this object that reveals its nature as an actor but its pervasive absence. In the breakdown of the postal system's reliability, a network becomes unhinged, and causes ripples that extend throughout the entire narrative. Moreover, this essay reassembles not only the social agents

within a text but also outside it, showing how *The Namesake* itself is an actor within the real world. Thus, the text (like the fictional letter) is relationally embedded in a network along with its author and readers. Together, this triad too behaves as agents colluding to create social reality. Viewing social formation in a manner that takes into account how actors—human and nonhuman—behave relationally within a network will enrich literary analysis by offering an alternative to currently dominant forms of discursive readings that confine the definition of social reality.

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Objects as Nonhuman Actors

It will be helpful to begin with a look at Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as it will orient our focus on nonhuman actors and the importance of their role within society. In *Reassembling the Social*, a crucial work in the development of ANT, Latour reworks the taken-for-granted notions of the social that his field has come to embody. He espouses for a "sociology of associations" in which analysts study how human and nonhuman agencies form networks through entangled relationships with each other. The figurations of these agencies are called actors, which, for Latour, are anything that modify "a state of affairs by making a difference" (71). Thus, each actor exists within an assemblage, and conversely, each social assemblage contains a multitude of actors. Latour prods the sociologist to "follow the actors" (68) so that the actors themselves can define their trajectories, weaknesses, and durability

instead of having preconstructed social explanations imposed on them. Material things, therefore, are not passive intermediaries but participants and mediators in the formation of reality. In viewing an object as a Thing that is gathered and that prompts a gathering, Latour draws from Heidegger. However, he adds an important element: merely seeing an object as a scientific and political entity, what he calls a *matter of fact*, is only a portion of reality; to see its “thingness”, its essentially gathered qualities, is to convert a matter of fact into a *matter of concern*. Crucially, Latour extends this concern with gathering to the role of the critic: “The critic is not one who debunks, but the one who assembles” (Latour “Why Has Critique”, 246). This notion of assembling and looking for assemblages will inform my reading of *The Namesake*.

Latour’s view of objects as actors is often ignored by critics who see them as static, easily replaceable things lacking relational and agential power. Take, for example, Vijay Mishra’s discussion of the importance of objects to the diasporic community.ⁱⁱⁱ He points out that for the members of the “old” diasporic communities, like indentured laborers of the classic capitalist era, “imagination was triggered by the contents in gunny sacks: a Ganesha icon, a dog-eared copy of the *Ramayana* or the *Qur’an*, an old sari or other *deshi* outfit, a photograph of a pilgrimage, and so on” (4). For Mishra, however, this is in contrast to those of the “new” diasporic community whose migrancy after 1960 coincided with globalization and modern means of communication (emails, airplanes, telephones). For them, he claims, “‘homeland’ is now available in the confines of one’s bedroom ... networking now takes over from the imaginary” (4). I agree that the objects the earlier diaspora carried were perhaps the only physical reminders of home. However, I would argue that Mishra’s claim that an attachment to material objects from the homeland is now nullified and overtaken by “a simulacral world of

visual media" (4) is exaggerated. He divorces materiality from its relational connections, ignoring the entanglement of things and people that persists through affective associations and *in spite of* technological advancements. "Networking" cannot fully remove the relational value of things because of the networks formed between things and humans. Additionally, what changes is not a human's attachment to things but the nature of the things that she is attached to. Therefore, while a Ganesha icon or an old sari may no longer be in an emigrant's suitcase (although one can easily imagine that they could were they handed down to her, say, by her mother back home), what becomes the object of affection is the mobile phone she uses to call home. Nonhuman actors are deeply embedded in the sustenance of social reality and the maintenance of affection.^{iv}

The Agency of a Piece of Paper

In *The Namesake*, letters are crucial nonhuman agents. These bits of papers are not merely helpless intermediaries sent between countries by individuals who wield ultimate power over them. They are Things that assemble bodies and relations, and in forming these assemblages, they have the capacity to reduce the alienating effect of distance. Letters are the primary method of communication between the Gangulis and their families back home^v—Ashima writes of her life in America, providing mundane details like the workings of her four-burner stove and "the remarkably unblemished sugar, flour, rice, and salt" (10), and their families write back about the happenings in India. These seemingly quotidian details, exchanged back and forth through a larger postal network that cuts cross spatial and temporal

scales, form the basis of Ashima's existence. They control her movements and daily schedules as she "keeps her ear trained, between the hours of twelve and two, for the sound of the postman's footsteps on the porch, followed by the soft click of the mail slot in the door." (36). The letters gather a multitude of entities and interactions—Ashima and her physical faculties, her family in Calcutta, the postman who delivers the letter to Pemberton Road, the mail slot that is the temporary metal container, travel technologies, temporal schedules, human officials, and stamps. Additionally, they have the power to control her emotions with their very presence ("he has come home from the university to find her morose, in bed, rereading her parents' letters", 33), and their absence ("She cries after the mailman's visit because there are no letters from Calcutta", 34). For even when Ashima is in her late forties, she devotes an entire day reading her dead parents' letters, preserved in her closet, and lets herself weep (160). Letters are not only *reminders* to her of the relationships she is connected to via the postal network but are also the papery *remainders* of her relationships that she is simultaneously disconnected from by distance.

The agency wielded by letters is connected to their role as a stand-in for the humans who write them. This figuration generates action that in turn mobilizes other nodes of actors. Ashima tapes on the wall over Gogol's crib the animals her father has drawn on the margins of the letters; if he will not be able to see his grandfather, at least the baby will see his drawings from his crib. Even the very act of writing home allows her parents to inhabit the same space as her. Thus when she writes to her mother "to avoid being alone" (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 50), physical space and mental space is enfolded. Ashima's isolation is taken away by the letter's ability to people the room she inhabits.

Nowhere is this agential attribute more evident or powerful than in one of the novel's most defining moments. When their baby is born, Ashoke and Ashima wait for a letter that will reveal what their child's "good" name (or official name) will be. At the hospital, when Ashima explains that her grandmother will be choosing their baby's name, the nurse asks, "Will she be here soon?" Ashima responds, "No. But a letter will." (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 26) Her grandmother does not have to be physically present to name the child because she has delegated^{vi} that role to a piece of paper. At this juncture, the letter is part of a node that entangles a heterogeneity of socio-material actors. Her grandmother is not only networked in a relationship with Ashima but more crucially, with the unnamed baby and, as the novel reveals, his future. That the letter contains a name also embeds her within larger state and legal requirements in America, as Ashoke finds out when the doctor tells him that their baby cannot be released from the hospital until his birth certificate has a name. Naming practices in India and America clash explicitly through this nonhuman actor that the Gangulis are waiting for.

This letter, however, never arrives. The rupture in what had until then seemed like a well-oiled postal network forces the baby's pet name, originally meant only for intimate familial use, to stick on as his formal name. Gogol is named after Ashoke's favorite Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. However, Ashoke's appreciation for the writer transcends his literary expertise. We find out that Ashoke had been involved in a train crash while a student in Calcutta; lying among the rubble, he has no way to attract the attention of the rescue team except to drop the crumpled paper he had been clutching—a page from Gogol's short story *The Overcoat* that he had been reading on the train. This episode and the concomitant physical injury that left him bedridden for months had urged him to move to America, study at MIT, and eventually settle

there. Later, Ashoke tries to assert on Gogol's first day of elementary school that his son's official name is Nikhil (a play on the writer's first name). Gogol Ganguli, however, is sent back with a letter from the principal stapled to a string around his neck. This letter, in contrast to the grandmother's missing one, informs Ashoke that his son will be called Gogol after the child's preference. While one name is lost, the other is chained around his neck.

What is in a Name?

Gogol's dissatisfaction with his name forms the crux of this novel. Several scholars have argued that the idiosyncrasy of his name can be seen as a metaphor for the cultural confusion and displacement of second-generation immigrant children.^{vii} Neither an Indian nor an American name, Gogol carries "all the ambivalence of ethnicity" through its intertextual reference to a third culture (Cardozo 14). I want to focus, however, not on the larger metaphors it may represent but on the rippling effects his name causes. He is teased in school, and imagines a dismal romantic life on account of it. By fourteen, he detests the very sight of his name on magazine subscriptions and name tags, so that when his father gifts him *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* on his birthday, Gogol the teenager is relieved to see no resemblance between him and his Russian namesake. The book his father regards as emblematic of saving his life is untouched and relegated to a top shelf for almost two decades. In that moment, an entity that has the potential to become a thing that gathers father and son turns into a discarded object, a matter of fact requiring no concern.

Gogol's dismay with his name is so strong that he tries "to correct...that error" (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 287) by legally changing it to Nikhil when he turns eighteen. When he steps out of the Court, he is ebullient. "He wonders if this is how it feels...for a prisoner to walk free" (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 102). His name no longer hangs around his neck, marking his confinement. Gogol however quickly finds that this procedure has created an almost split personal history: "he doesn't feel like Nikhil...the people who now know him as Nikhil have no idea he used to be Gogol" (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 105). As Heinze observes, his new name "has not been filled with his own past, not in a way that he can identify with it" (196). As he gets involved with different women over the course of the narrative, Gogol also finds that a change in name did not, in the end, ensure a thriving romantic life. His problems still persist—his distance from and embarrassment of his first-generation immigrant parents, his sense of a lack of control of his own life, his boredom with communal gatherings.

Ashima's grandmother's letter, had it arrived, would have had the force of an active participant in the creation of social reality. It would have been one among the many nodes forming a network to avoid "the accident of being named Gogol" (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 287). However, as Latour writes in *Reassembling the Social*,

...there might exist many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence. In addition to 'determining' as serving as a 'backdrop for human action', things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on (72).

While the presence of the letter would have allowed certain important things, the absence of the letter exerts even more influence over the Gangulis' life, ironically covering the whole gamut of "metaphysical shades" that Latour reserves for an agent that is physically present.

As an absent presence, the letter also creates a new topology of associations. The crucial new node that enters this reality is that of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol and his book of short stories. As we have already seen, these actors don't not exist in isolation. Not only is the protagonist connected to the writer through his name, both Gogols are entangled in a relationship with Ashoke as well. Ashoke does not only regard the earlier Gogol as an exemplary writer, he also regards him as his savior (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 21). Moreover, the physical books he has written become for Ashoke the very embodiment of their author. He derives a particular comfort in seeing Gogol's name on the spines of the books in his library, an attachment that cuts across centuries and continents. When he names his son Gogol, the hapless protagonist too enters this matrix of interacting actors—Ashoke's traumatic train wreck, his passion for Russian literature, Gogol the writer, his books, Russia, and *The Overcoat* and its quirky-named protagonist Akaky Akakyevich.

Within this matrix also enters the book of short stories Ashok had given to Gogol on his son's fourteenth birthday. By the time Gogol (and the reader) returns to this book in the final pages of *The Namesake*, his father has died of a heart attack, his mother is preparing to leave their home in America to return to India, and Gogol has had a divorce. He spots the book among a box full of other books Ashima intends on giving away:

The jacket is missing, the title on the spine practically faded. It's a thick clothbound volume topped with decades-old dust. The ivory pages are heavy, slightly sour, silken to the touch. The spine cracks faintly when he opens it to the title page. *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*. "For Gogol Ganguli," it says on the front endpaper in his father's tranquil hand, in red ballpoint ink, the letters rising gradually, optimistically, on the diagonal toward the upper right-hand corner of the page. "The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" is written within quotation marks. (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 288)

The book is no longer a discarded object; it is a many-textured thing, layering within its folds the physical remnants of the past—dust and his father's handwriting. "The man who gave you his name" might refer to the author of the book he holds, his namesake, and "the man who gave you your name" to Ashoke himself, pointing to Gogol's surname. But Lahiri seems to leave this ambiguous. Surely these signifieds can be reversed and still hold true, because "his name" and "your name", Nikolai Gogol and Ashoke Gogol, Gogol Ganguli and Ashoke Ganguli, (Nikhil) Gogol Ganguli and Nikolai Gogol all transpose onto each other within the name and person of Gogol Ganguli. Each man has named the protagonist, and the protagonist has been named after both men. In the end, the book not only embodies for Ashoke the writer who saved his life, but also embodies for Gogol his father who "dwells discreetly, silently, patiently, within its pages" (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 290). The book becomes an assemblage of various actors across time and space; it renders possible the beginning of Gogol's reconciliation with his namesake and his father who named him.

The novel ends with Gogol starting to read the book. The act is significant—until then, he had shunned the book because he had believed that to read it “would mean paying tribute to his namesake” (Lahiri, *The Namesake* 92). More importantly, the *Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol* is no longer buried; first Ashoke, and then his son ensures “the busy afterlife of [this] literary artifact” (Felski 160). That the act of reading puts the reader in connection with not only the book but also its author is not true only within Lahiri’s fictive world. If we were to view *The Namesake* itself as an agential actor within a lattice of other actors, what would we discover?

The Namesake as an Actor

In arguing that the writer, the reader, and the text are all coactors that mediate the production of meaning and the durability of a work of art,^{viii} Rita Felski draws our attention to how novels cannot be wrenched out of the variegated interactions it sustains. Firstly, this novel is intimately connected with its author. Many elements of the work are autobiographical—Lahiri’s parents had an arranged marriage in Calcutta and then moved to New England where her father worked at a university, Lahiri herself was a second-generation Bengali-American, and she had an abiding interest in how books connect parents and children.^{ix} *The Namesake*, then, exists in a relationship with not only Lahiri the writer but also with her larger personal experiences, relational ties, and the immigration policies that allowed her parents to move to America. Lahiri’s heterogenous subject position itself—an indication of the array of networks she occupies—has prompted an entire collection of essays called *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri*, in which the editors wonder if she should be categorized as a Bengali writer, an Indian writer, as

Asian American writer, a postcolonial writer, an American writer, or a global writer.^x Like Gogol Ganguli's name cannot be pinned down into neat categories, neither can his author's literary position.

Secondly, this text actively participates with its readers, like the literary critics this essay opened with. Social connections are strengthened through reading groups, book reviews, academic institutions and their syllabi, movie adaptations,^{xi} critical scholarship that engage with the work, and, this is often overlooked, word-of-mouth endorsement from one affected reader to another. The attachment that books create with their readers is part of its process of "latching on to receptive hosts" (Felski 166). In this way, *The Namesake* affords sociability and identification among its readers (just as much as it affords critique and accusations of its "hegemonic and middle-class narrative of immigration"^{xii}).

Lastly, and this is connected to the previous two points, as a reader of *The Namesake* and the writer of this essay, I too exist as an actor in the network generated by this book. My own diasporic subject position within academia informed not only my decision to read this book but also my opinions about it. The book as a nonhuman actor, through its interaction with me and countless other actors, has altered, in some sense, the literary, social, and personal landscape it is embedded within.

What this network would have looked like if Ashima's grandmother's letter never got lost, we do not know. However, in tracing the associations that the (absence of the) letter triggers through the novel and outside it, we see how nonhuman actors play powerful roles in the formation of subjectivities and interactions. They push us to recognize their agential

existence and their inevitable entanglement with humans. A suspicious interpretation of this text would have focused on the discourses it reflects and solidifies. This, I contend, would have given only a partial view of the social reality it creates. We would have missed the objects in this novel that play an indispensable role in the production of that reality. Thus, through a study of assemblages, we have a richer analysis of the diasporic world generated by *The Namesake*.

Notes

ⁱ See Felski, Latour.

ⁱⁱ See Tamara Bhalla on how members of NetSAP, a South Asian reading community in America, reacted largely positively to *The Namesake*; these lay readers identified strongly with its diasporic themes and conflicts, as opposed to Bhalla herself.

ⁱⁱⁱ The term “diaspora” has a rich history of negotiations. Initially used to refer to the Jewish dispersion, it later expanded to include a whole host of migrants including expatriates, political refugees, exiles, mobile laborers, and indentured laborers. For a detailed analysis of the socio-historical complexities of this term, and the ways it has been reworked, see Mishra, Tölölyan. For the purpose of this paper, ‘diaspora’ will refer to that group of middle-class South Asians who started moving to America with the passing of The Immigration Act of 1965, looking for an American education and upward economic mobility. This is the demography that Lahiri also focusses on in the novel.

^{iv} Consider also, for example, family heirlooms that are passed down, or even tawdry-seeming items like Christmas ornaments that become the carrier of tradition and meaning even in the age of “networking”.

^v Ashima, rather than Ashoke, is depicted as predominantly maintaining communications with family in India. Within the novel in general, Ashoke shows little sign of the cultural dislocation that Ashima undergoes, one that seems to be connected with her role as a housewife and his work at MIT as a professor. This corroborates Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt’s assessment that “Lahiri deliberately portrays first-generation migration and foreignness as a gendered phenomenon to explore the split between the private and public selves and the domestic versus exterior spaces shared by these first-generation subjects” (169).

^{vi} The notion of delegation is important in ANT because it refers to how one actor makes another actor do things. Social action is shifted or dislocated from one node in the network to another that then becomes part of that network. See Latour, *Reassembling* 70.

^{vii} See Cardozo 18, Heinze 193.

^{viii} See Felski 12, 84, 171.

^{ix} See Lahiri’s piece “Trading Stories” in *The New Yorker*.

^x See Dhingra and Cheung, ix.

^{xi} *The Namesake* was made into a movie of the same name by Mira Nair in 2006, starring Kal Penn, Irrfan Khan, and Tabu in leading roles, and featured a cameo role by Lahiri herself.

^{xii} See Mani 69.

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