

**Lahiri's Post-Racial Strangers:  
Alienation and Consumerism in *The Namesake***

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**Abstract:** With respect to the Marxian concept of “universal alienation,” we will attempt to account for the universalizing material conditions of late capitalism, considering the central characters as belonging to a global middle class of corporate workers and consumerists. Nikolai Gogol’s short story, *The Overcoat*, a recurrent motif in the novel, will be viewed as the novel’s precursor, providing an “allegorical key” to understanding the “economic” nature of this condition. It will be argued that the text’s affective impact could be analyzed in terms alienation from labor, from other people and a compensatory fetishistic consumerism. By reading *The Namesake* as a novel of capitalist alienation, we aspire to contribute to shifting the critical focal point from race to capital.

All that is solid melts into the air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. ... and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

– Karl Marx

### **My Petty Faustian Bargain**

When I first opened Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, I brought into dialogue with the text before me what Umberto Eco (1992) calls my “cultural encyclopedia” (p. 143). I was given mandatory reading from *Interpreter of Maladies* as an undergraduate. I had a very specific “system of expectations” (p. 64). I anticipated the text to, more or less, easily decode as I consulted my encyclopedia and I was hopeful to bring out of it a range of new significations based on my own “cultural code,” being an Iranian allowing me to perhaps be able to decode what goes unnoticed by a Western reader, my own encounter with the West overlapping to some degree with Lahiri’s experience of encountering this enigmatic cultural Other and its vicissitudes.

Yet upon reading the novel, my “horizon of expectations,” those that the consensus around the *ethnic genre* produce, was violently challenged by the text. I found the encounter to turn out very similar to when I read Sartre’s *Nausea*, and Kafka’s *The Trial*. I could not, in good faith,

convince myself that I was reading an *ethnic* novel. The “existentialist” code had intrusively imposed itself and the text had asserted its autonomy from the “the dominant code.”

If the Gnostic revelation was that there was a Kafka in Lahiri, and (why not?) a Lahiri in Sartre, practically, the mortal bargain with Mephistopheles turned into a Marxist orthodoxy. Was I not being sold the same thing in colorful packaging? And what was this thing? It is a package of “ideas,” the ideas of the bourgeois subject. What Marx means by “world literature” in the epigraph above is antithetical to market niche specialization along group lines. What if the colorful heterogeneity of “literatures” masks the revolutionary potential of a universal core, a traumatic kernel the task of criticism is to render explicit, to demystify? Lukàcs’s neglected estimation of bourgeois realism revealed its merit. I had discovered that Lahiri was also a bourgeois realist.

### **Reading *The Namesake* as Bourgeois Realism**

Upon reading, *The Namesake* proves to be almost refreshingly relatable. The story touches the heart more profoundly than any simple account of “cultural assimilation.” Even though the Gangulies are “model immigrants” and have achieved what the “American Dream” had in store for them, the story is a far-cry from the celebratory upbeatness of any American tall tale. It is a “sad” novel. A Marxist psychology would help us gain new insight into what Jameson identifies as one pole of the antinomy of realism, that is, “bourgeois affect.”

A structural analysis that pinpoints the novel’s problematic and resolution might not be unfruitful. In order to determine the novel’s problematic, we will take a hard look by asking these questions and try to find their correlatives in the text: What is the nature and the source of Gogol’s – as well as other characters’ – “unhappiness”? What is it that the juvenile Gogol is escaping from and finally in his maturity capitulates to? Furthermore, this model, that is, reading the novel as a *bildungsroman*, offers us an avenue into making sense of the narrative “teleologically.” It is a narrative of juvenile rebellion that proceeds towards mature acceptance.

Thus, let us look at *The Namesake*’s characters from a class perspective. Gogol, Mushomi, Ashoke and Ashima belong to late capitalism’s bourgeoisie, the denizens of the socio-economic “Global North,” the middle class that consumes the same products, well-educated technocrats, corporate “Yuppies” working for multinational corporations. Thus, as Friedman (2008, p. 120) points out, national/ethnic affiliations should, at best, be a secondary consideration in identifying them. They are primarily “global citizens” in belonging to a global socio-economic class of people. This fact is reflected by how Ashima registers her surroundings once they land in America. She is disillusioned by the squalor she had not expected when she came to the U.S. as she describes the state of “mild decrepitude” of her apartment building and the surrounding neighborhood she lives in. She complains that her apartment building is nothing like houses in *Gone with the Wind* and *Seven-Year Itch*, the movies she had watched back in Calcutta (*The Namesake*, p. 36).

According to Marx in *The German Ideology*, consciousness is “at first” determined by “material intercourse,” the economic necessity of “making a living” and satisfying “needs.” In this regard, the Gangulies are not so different from their native suburban middle-class neighbors, their own Brahmin relatives whom they visit regularly, or even an expanding middle class of native Indians from the lower strata of the feudal Indian caste system. Jameson (1991, p. xix) designates these developments as “gentrification on a global scale” coincident with the emergence of

“Yuppies” as the result of the globalization of capitalism and markets following the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies in the late 1960s and the 1970s.

The demystification of the “material immigrant” is a latent potential in Lahiri’s *The Namesake*. The force of what Bruillette (2007, p. 20) identifies as a market-driven “paratextual pressure” is discernable in Lahiri’s attempt to lure in ethnic interpretations. The Yuppie corporation man being a mutation of the modern urban clerk, Gogol and Josef K’s malaise are not radically different in that they have to labor under alienated conditions. “Let us look for the secret of the Jew not in his religion, but let us look for the secret of religion in the actual Jew” (Marx and McLellan 1977, p. 66). Let us look for the actual immigrant, one who labors nine-to-five if he is lucky to be employed, who pays mortgages, goes bankrupt, bargains, shops and consumes.

### **Conceptual Analysis: Alienation, Fetishism, Consumerism**

In *Marx’s Concept of Man* (1961), Erich Fromm outlines the contours of a Marxist psychology that builds upon the Marxian concept of *alienation*:

Alienation – or “estrangement” – means, for Marx, that man does *not* experience himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that the world – nature, others, and he himself – remain alien to him. They stand above and against him as objects, even though they may be objects of his own creation. (p. 44)

Alienation from labor, for Marx, is self-alienation since the self as a dialectical relationship between the body and non-body is mediated by labor. The result of appropriation of labor by the capitalist is that the laborer perceives a non-body of Nature that stands “above, beyond and against him” and stunts his self-actualization. In fact, “selfhood” as autonomous subjectivity is stymied once the laborer’s life-labor is objectivized as a “cog in the machine,” rendering him subject to the self-actualization of capital. As Fromm explains,

the worker, having no part in the direction of the work, being “employed” as part of the machines he serves, is transformed into a thing in its dependence on capital. (p. 47)

The qualities of the unity of self-actualization, lost to the worker, appears in the “fetishized” object. Alienation is when “thing” that are the creation of himself are worshiped by him as if they had magical, god-like properties. This illuminates what Marx means by “commodity fetishism” which is the essence of consumerism. Consumerism is, therefore, fetishistic and is different from simple consumption; it is a compensatory practice the self-alienated individual under capitalism engages in. Yet it only brings about transitory “euphoria” and fails. As the history of religion is a history of blasphemy and heresy, fetishism is ambivalent and always accompanied by chilling disillusionment and frustration. Fromm goes on to posit:

Capitalist production transforms the relations of individuals into qualities of things themselves, and this transformation constitutes the nature of the commodity in capitalist production. As in religion man is governed by the products of his own brain, so in capitalist production he is governed by the products of his own hands. (p. 50)

Fetishism of objects is a state of chronic frustration and dissatisfaction, prompting the alienated man to hysterically chase after ever new fetishes that have proliferated as his new needs:

The more man transfers his own powers to the idols, the poorer he himself becomes, and the more dependent on the idols, so that they permit him to redeem a small part of what was his. (ibid)

Furthermore, the prospect of death torments those who struggle to mitigate their loss by fetishization of capitalistic objects as Fromm notes in *Man for Himself* (1947, p. 162), “to die is poignantly bitter, but the idea of having to die without having lived is unbearable.”

Still, this idolatry/fetishism/consumerism is not limited to physical commodities but extends to other people and social status as well: a position in a company, an academic title, fame and recognition, acceptance by family as successful, etc. Yet, these, what Jameson (1991, pp. 341-345) glibly calls status “badges” that are frantically chased after fail to compensate. Other people, family, lovers and friends are experienced as soulless “things”: a successful marriage, a beautiful lover, distinguished company, etc. Increasing commodification in our era has rendered what Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884/2010, p. 100) termed “sex-love” into a commodified “experience,” some quantitative object-commodity that could be bought, sold and instantly consumed.

What has been controversial in Marx’s notion of capitalist alienation is its universality. For Marx, not only the working class but the middle-class bureaucrats and the capitalists themselves suffer from this condition. In fact, whereas the industrial factory worker is still in a more authentic relationship to the nature he manually transforms, “[t]he manipulators of symbols” suffer a doubled “alienation in language” (Fromm 1961, p. 55).

### **Alienation and Consumerism in *The Namesake***

*The Namesake* represents the late capitalist immersion in advertising images; the image is indistinguishable from the physical commodity. The brand names and logos have become integrated into the world of the narrative, standing for the physical commodities and part of the setting. The first sentence of the novel reads as follows:

On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. (*The Namesake* 8)

The brand names *Rice Krispies* and *Planters* make their presence in the first sentence. The advertising simulacra are incorporated into the world of the novel from the beginning to the end. This reflects the spirit of postmodernist consumerism which does not distinguish between the physical commodity and its image. The image itself has acquired exchange-value and exerts its concreteness in the world. Thus, logos and brand names are somewhat a concrete feature of the novel’s universe.

Here commodities have assumed the life of their own and, in a dialectical turn, drain away the life of the world they have merged with. It is as much a matter of the life of the commodities as the deadness of the surrounding world that constitutes the affective charge of the novel

experienced by the major characters. They live in a reified/commoditized world and experience it like a marketplace. This type of “second degree reification,” as described by Jameson (1991, p. 96), in the form of the image or the logo, extends to landmarks and institutions.

The landmarks in today’s cities are commoditized tourist sights, the institutions such as universities are brand names in an era of commercialization of education as they partake and compete in an international marketplace. It is in this commercial sense that Ashoke prides himself in becoming a faculty member of MIT, and Gogol’s sense of achievement in going to Yale could be accounted for, not only in the sense of mere recognition. In an almost purely commercial sense, The MIT and Yale are high-end brand names that give status to their equally commoditized wearer.

In full-fledged second-degree reification of the human individual, we do not need to know anything further about the minor characters except for their group-market affiliations. For instance, Dr. Gupta is a “mathematics postdoc” who visits Ashima after giving birth. Ruth, Gogol’s first girlfriend, is introduced to us as an English major who studies at one of the Yale colleges, etc. This reveals the essence of what Fromm (1961) means by “human commodity”:

not merely as commodity but also in the role of commodity, conscious and acting as commodity ... we have a lifeless mechanism, independent of the workman, who becomes its mere living appendage. Machinery is adapted to the weakness of the human being, in order to turn the weak human being into a machine. (p. 59)

### **Ashima’s Poetic Consumerism**

In Ashima’s first encounter with her husband, what catches her eye is a pair of high-end shoes that she mistakenly associates with the famous Indian chain-store Bata only to realize the brand is American (p. 14). The high-end pair of shoes and Ashima’s stepping into them become a symbol for their matrimony and future union. For Ashima, the shoe as the standard erotic fetish, is at once and primarily the high-end commodity. This expresses the erotic luster of the commodities as much as it is possibly an expression of sex-love’s mundaneness for her.

The same symbolic significance and its dialectical reversal could be ascribed to Ashima’s marriage-gift watch; the image of her married initials inscribed on the back of a high-end gift watch surrounded by the commodity specifications: anti-magnetic, shock-resistant and water-proof (p. 11). The image is meant to act metaphorically to address the hopes of their marriage and for that reason elevates the commodity to the status of the mythical sacrosanct as it by the same move empties out the latter of what could only make marriage “magical” in the first place: its humanness.

Once settled in the U.S., after Ashima gives birth to Gogol, the Gangulies plan a visit back to Calcutta. Yet Ashima is to be shocked by the news of her father’s death while in preparation for the trip. Ashima goes to Jordan Marsh department store to buy her relatives souvenirs. The shopping spree episode together with the loss of her purchases on the commuter train and the death of Ashima’s father come in a succession. In a sense, the death of Ashima’s father is foreshadowed by the loss of her shopping bags on the train. After losing them on the train, Ashima

pushes the stroller back down Massachusetts Avenue, weeping freely, knowing that she can't possibly afford to go back and buy it all again. For the rest of the afternoon she is furious with herself, humiliated at the prospect of arriving in Calcutta empty-handed. (p. 48)

There is a one-to-one correspondence as the mourning of the shopping bags immediately precedes the mourning of her father's death. Loss of shopping bags, at the same time foreshadows and stands on a parallel with the sudden death of Ashima's father forming a metonymy of loss. Or are we not misplacing the terms of the displacement given the ever-present "paternal" security the commodities provide for her and his biological father's marginality, physical and symbolic absence? The ritualistic dumping of the gift intended for the father marks the moment of acceptance in her grief process. What is the sacrifice and what is being honored are blurred into the condensation of poetic undecidability.

### **Ashoke and Gogol as Commodity-Men**

Unlike Ashima, Ashoke is not susceptible to poetic sentimentalisms of this sort. His street-wise ambitious bent manifests itself in his political quietism, an unquestioned subservience to white-color work ethics that single-mindedly pursues career advancement and status. When Ashoke is hired as an assistance professor, this is

everything Ashoke has ever dreamed of. He has always hoped to teach in a university rather than work for a corporation. What a thrill, he thinks, to stand lecturing before a roomful of American students. What a sense of accomplishment it gives him to see his name printed under "Faculty" in the university directory. What joy each time Mrs. Jones says to him, "Professor Ganguli," your wife is on the phone. (p. 54)

He glances at the Vietnam War, Naxalite Insurgency and the ethnic war between Pakistan and India as a pastime while drinking a coffee, consuming the image of social conflict and political turmoil with complacent silence. His career success allows Ashoke to become a full-fledged Yuppie-consumerist. "Becoming an American" and "Cultural Assimilation" seems to be, in substance, full adoption of multi-cultural consumerism:

They purchase a barbecue for tandoori on the porch in summer. Each step, each acquisition, no matter how small, involves deliberation, consultation with Bengali friends. Was there a difference between a plastic rake and a metal one? Which was preferable, a live Christmas tree or an artificial one? (p. 57)

They constitute with their Bengali friends what Jameson (1991, p. 341) calls a "neo-ethnic group." This group identity primarily comes into being by way of throwing of parties, Indian ceremonies in rented halls, etc. But that does not prevent them from celebrating the American holidays and participating in their respective markets. What they share with their acquaintances boils down to consumerism in the same ethnic and non-ethnic markets. What constitutes their bond is consumerism. These acquaintances are a faceless crowd. We scarcely know their names, much less their personalities. They partake in the Gangulies' celebrations and mourning but their presence provides neither joy nor consolation.

Meanwhile, the employment of an extended metaphor of an imposed name, its refusal and subsequent half-hearted acceptance has compelled a broad range of ethnic-identitarian interpretations. Yet these emblematic episodes, upon close reading, seem to lend themselves equally convincingly to “economist” readings with the theme of capitalistic alienation rather than a primarily ethnic conundrum. The refusal of an infant Gogol in his Rice Ceremony is that of a forced choice between careers (p. 46). Later, an adolescent Gogol is in a fit of panic in an English class that discusses Nikolai Gogol’s biography. Gogol’s embarrassment reaches its height when the writer’s failure in his career and his “writer’s block,” which precipitated into madness and an agonizing death, was brought up (pp. 94-97).

Nikolai Gogol’s torment and “writer’s block” seems to be an extreme case of the state of resentment caused by, as Marx puts it, mutilation of the laborer into a “fragment of man,” which turns “the charm of work into hated toil” (Marx and McLellan, p. 520) and the degradation of subjective, qualitative human life into an objective commodified “career.” At some point, and periodically, the fetishistic “status badge” is simply disenchanting and fails to inspire. Alienation sets in motion a cyclical oscillation between fetishistic attachment to capitalistic things and disillusionment. This is what Gogol wants to rebel against and refuse: the reduction to usefulness that constitutes “the bitterness of death without having lived” for the commodity-man.

When Gogol visits a graveyard with his school on a field trip, he readily identifies with the dead: “these ancient Puritan spirits, these very first immigrants to America, these bearers of unthinkable, obsolete names.” The image of Gogol copying the names of the dead, slouched over tomb stones (p. 76), could be read as a macabre parody of the expression “making a name for yourself”: the bourgeois wisdom that encourages career advancement at the expense of political quietism and an amoral utilitarian opportunism. Furthermore, the copying of tombstone engravings mirrors Akaky’s plight in Nikolai Gogol’s *The Overcoat* as a scrivener – a human Xerox machine – positivizing Fromm’s “doubled alienation” of “manipulators of symbols.” A mechanical exercise in the service of the machine which instrumentalizes the corporation man seems to be what the young Gogol acts out in a spell of demonic mimicry.

Yet, following in his father’s footsteps, Gogol’s move to New York City marks his turning into a full-fledged Yuppie. He works at a multinational corporation. The status afforded to him by his academic and professional affiliations lands him in parties attended by art-savvy liberals, Yuppies like himself, enamored by the consumption of “High Culture.” This is when he meets Maxine.

### **Fetishizing Maxine’s Class**

As Friedman (2008) observes, in this episode, “class trumps race” (p. 122). Maxine’s family’s upper-middle-class mannerisms are contrasted with the tastelessness of petty-bourgeois lifestyle that lacks those “refinements,” that is, their “High Culture,” their connoisseurship in gourmet food, wine and art. These trappings of affluent upper-middle-class lifestyle are experienced by Gogol as a romantic ideal. This is the life without alienation. These people are at one with one another and themselves. They live a perfect romantic dream of unity with nature:

She has the gift of accepting her life; as he comes to know her, he realizes that she has never wished she were anyone other than herself, raised in any other place, in any other way. This, in his opinion, is the biggest difference between them, a thing far more foreign to him than the beautiful house she'd grown up in, her education at private schools. In addition, he is continually amazed by how much Maxine emulates her parents, how much she respects their tastes and their ways. At the dinner table she argues with them about books and paintings and people they know in common the way one might argue with a friend. There is none of the exasperation he feels with his own parents. No sense of obligation. Unlike his parents, they pressure her to do nothing, and yet she lives faithfully, happily, at their side. (*The Namesake*, p. 142)

Gogol's time with Maxine is idealized to the proportions of a Edenic union. The vacation to the Ratliffs' lake house replicates the standard tropes of the romantic retreat into nature, the "second nature" of romanticism as a bourgeois reflex against the oppressive "first nature" of capitalism. In turn, the idyllic picture of the Ratliffs' rural residence is seen by Gogol as a utopia, an alternative to urban and suburban decadence of the petty bourgeoisie:

"Welcome to paradise," Gerald says [...] though he is only three hours away from his parents' house, this is an unknown world to him, a kind of holiday he's never been on [...] The family seems to possess every piece of the landscape, not only the house itself but every tree and blade of grass. Nothing is locked, not the main house, or the cabin that he and Maxine sleep in. Anyone could walk in. He thinks of the alarm system now installed in his parents' house, wonders why they cannot relax about their physical surroundings in the same way. The Ratliffs own the moon that floats over the lake, and the sun and the clouds. It is a place that has been good to them, as much a part of them as a member of the family. (p. 159)

Yet the dream only lasts so long as Gogol comes to slowly realize, despite all that seems different about the upper middle class, they are not that different after all. Gogol's disillusionment with his new fetish is reflected by his associating the Ratliffs with morbidity. Upon visiting the Ratliffs' private graveyard it dawns on him that they, as WASPs, are the descendants of the Puritan settlers (p. 158). They are susceptible to consumerist fetishism even though of a more pretentious kind. He realizes that, for Maxine and her family, he is just another exotic diversion: an object, a fetish. Gogol perceives himself as an object for Maxine. He might easily get replaced when he grows mundane for her.

### **Ashoke's Traumatic Death**

Akaky's mechanical alienated labor as a scrivener is a parallel image to Ashima's writing out postcards to 800 Bengali acquaintances whose names and addresses she copies out from her bulky address books. Ashima and her Bengali acquaintances fall miserably short of what a community promises to be. Atomized individuals, their relationship is to the commodity-objects they privately consume. This brings us to closer to another modality of alienation: alienation between workers. The act of exchange could only be meaningful if the worker whose labor goes into the commodity is directly connected with the one who consumes it. The alienation of the



shopkeeper from Ashima is foregrounded as the commodity fails to act as the mediator as is the claim by bourgeois economists. In fact, it is the very obstacle between them:

She remembers the day she bought the oldest book, soon after arriving in America, one of her first trips out of the apartment without Ashoke at her side, the five-dollar bill in her purse feeling like a fortune. She remembers selecting the smallest and cheapest style, saying “I would like to buy this one, please” as she placed the item on the counter, her heart pounding for fear that she would not be understood. The salesperson had not even glanced at her, had said nothing other than the price. (p. 164)

Meanwhile, only an old TV is Ashima’s companion when her husband and children are away. The malfunctioning TV as the emblematic post-industrial commodity, in “the age of communication,” proves despondently inadequate. It is a dead machine, standing for the colossal inhuman and dehumanizing machine of the postmodern marketplace:

Sometimes, not knowing what to do with herself after dinner, she is already in bed by then, in her nightgown, watching the small black-and-white television they’ve owned for decades that lives on her side of the bed, the picture gradually disappearing, a rim of black perpetually framing the screen. (p. 167)

She meditates upon the fact that she has spent her whole life “in only five homes.” She sees her life as an appendage to a succession of objects: “One hand, five homes. A lifetime in a fist” (p. 172). The only one that reaches out to her is a telemarketer more disturbingly mechanical than the TV, a bio-mechanical appendage to the marketplace: “She answers after half a ring, but it’s only a telemarketer, some poor soul on weekend duty, asking reluctantly if a Mrs., um – ‘Ganguli,’ Ashima replies tartly before hanging up” (ibid). As she desperately reaches out for her husband, she is only to realize that her husband too, has all along been a commodity-man, a disposable object, a cog in the machine that has been “expired”:

And then the young woman tells her that the patient, Ashoke Ganguli, her husband, has expired. Expired. A word used for library cards, for magazine subscriptions. A word which, for several seconds, has no effect whatsoever on Ashima. (p.173)

With Ashoke’s death, the world of logos, advertising simulacra and hysterical consumerism loses its fetishistic luster. Commodities become mere objects as lifeless as Ashoke’s dead body as “[t]he relentless uniformity of it upsets him profoundly, more so than even the hospital, and the sight of his father’s face” (p. 179). Ashoke’s life could only be confirmed by the objects in his possession at the time of his death. It is as though he was merely an extension of the commodities he consumed and the property he owned:

A jar of Pond’s cold cream, his father’s lifelong answer to aftershave, sits at the side of the sink. He goes to work immediately, going through the room and putting things into garbage bags: the spices, the cold cream, the issue of *Time* magazine by his father’s bed... On his first trip to the basement, Gogol sees a table on which other tenants have left things up for grabs: books, videotapes, a white casserole with a clear glass lid. Soon the table is filled with his father’s hand-held vacuum, the rice cooker, the tape player, the television, the curtains still attached to their collapsible plastic rods. From the bag he’d brought back from the hospital, he saves

his father's wallet, containing forty dollars, three credit cards, a wad of receipts, photographs of Gogol and Sonia when they were babies. He saves the photograph on the fridge. (p. 180)

Gogol fumbling with his father's corpse harkens back to the earlier graveyard episode. In building up a "career" and acquisition of "status," he realizes that he cannot rise above them as their creator and those do not lift him up, become one with him in a synthesis but reduce him to the level of their objectivity. He is aware that he is just like his father.

### **Mushumi as Gogol's Double**

Mushumi's upbringing is identical to that of Gogol. They are even mistaken for siblings by the others. In this sense, Mushumi is Gogol's mirror image. Being Gogol's "castrated double" what Moushumi represents is the typical consumerist nihilist; a chronically dissatisfied personality, sex-addict, a chain-smoking shopaholic. The logical progression of the "distancing" projection which Mushumi represents is her disappearance from the field of vision, their *divorce*.

Gogol's melancholia on his wedding day coincides with mourning grief for his father. As he identifies with his father's disposability, Mushumi's pathological consumerism only amplifies his despair. Moushumi's refusal to adopt Gogol's last name and her keeping of her wedding gown planned for her aborted marriage to Graham indicates a lack of authentic matrimonial bond. What their marriage involves, after all, is shared shopping and consumerism; buying a quaint apartment, furniture and gastronomical adventures. The remnants of Graham, Moushumi's previous fiancé in their lives, is a reminder of his own objectified nature in the eyes of his spouse. He is simply a convenient replacement and as readily disposable:

He imagined her walking along the sidewalk, carrying grocery bags from the supermarket that was on the next corner, in love with another man. He doesn't feel jealous of her past per se. It's only that sometimes Gogol wonders whether he represents some sort of capitulation or defeat. He doesn't feel this always, just enough to nag at him, settling over his thoughts like a web. (p. 235)

The narrative comes to a close right after Gogol and Mushumi's separation. Lying on his back, Gogol is clutching in his hands, the neglected and rebuffed gift from the mourned father: the collection of stories by Nikolai Gogol. It pictures a kind of Freudian heavy-hearted capitulation to the Law of the murdered "Primordial Father." The finality of this resolution, however, is undermined by the parallel with Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* which we are, time and again, invited by the narrative to draw. Thus, the final image of the novel is ambiguous. Are we not to anticipate Gogol – and perhaps the reader in a moment of meta-awareness – to rouse and turn into a vengeful presence to the social order like Akaky's ghost?

### **Conjuring Akaky's Ghost**

The Asian immigrant, lured by the promise of American Dream, has been the indispensable gear for retaining American capital's competitiveness. The invisible labor of the immigrant's wife and children, equally indispensable, hardly ever enters the conversation when even the surplus-value producing working-man is demonized by a racist right-wing. In this climate, the only thing

they possess which is of tangible value is their labor-power. It is a matter of survival, more so for the dark-skinned immigrant, to reduce herself to usefulness. The remorseless calculations of the marketplace under the ever-present racist threat make some instances of multiculturalist interventions what Engels calls “cloak of love,” impotent to prevent and effectively counter the reproduction of this invisible, mundane, yet no less brutal violence inflicted on the immigrant.

In a recent article, titled “Universal Alienation” (2018), David Harvey expounds and advocates a “universal humanism” based on the universality of capitalist alienation which cuts across all sorts of social and cultural stratifications. Ashoke’s empathy with Akaky marks the moment of the realization of a universal struggle:

Each time he was captivated by the absurd, tragic, yet oddly inspiring story of Akaky Akakievich, the impoverished main character who spends his life meekly copying documents written by others and suffering the ridicule of absolutely everyone. His heart went out to poor Akaky, a humble clerk just as Ashoke's father had been at the start of his career. Each time, reading the account of Akaky’s christening, and the series of queer names his mother had rejected, Ashoke laughed aloud. He shuddered at the description of the tailor Petrovich’s big toe, “with its deformed nail as thick and hard as the shell of a tortoise.” His mouth watered at the cold veal and cream pastries and champagne Akaky consumed the night his precious coat was stolen, in spite of the fact that Ashoke had never tasted these things himself. Ashoke was always devastated when Akaky was robbed in “a square that looked to him like a dreadful desert,” leaving him cold and vulnerable, and Akaky’s death, some pages later, never failed to bring tears to his eyes. (*The Namesake*, p.120)

In the words of Ashoke, the story represents “all that was irrational, all that was inevitable about the world” (ibid), which includes Akaky’s spectral campaign of terror that wreaks indiscriminate havoc upon the oppressive social order.

Like Akaky, careers dehumanize the characters’ lives, standing over their heads, consigning them to mechanical toil and disposability. One’s lovers and acquaintances are inhuman commodity-people that appear and vanish into thin air. They feel themselves as an extension to their possessions and social status. Compensatory consumerist fetishism condemns them to a life of momentary euphoria and chronic dissatisfaction. The ghost of Akaky still haunts our world, our consciousness and contemporary literature. Perhaps it is time for the post-racial stranger to refuse the forced “culturalist” consolations and unite in revolutionary struggle.

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