

**TEMPORAL ESTRANGEMENT AND EXISTENTIAL MEMORY:****A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO NOSTALGIA IN*****THE NAMESAKE***

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**Abstract**

This article will perform a phenomenological interpretation of the novel *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri that nostalgia in the novel does not serve as a sentimental feeling, but rather a philosophically substantive being-in-the-world. The article builds the notion of temporal estrangement, a state where the migrant self is established in incommensurable chronotopes and cannot wholly exist within a remembered past or lived present, based on the theory of inner time-consciousness by Edmund Husserl, this concept of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) by Martin Heidegger, on poetics of inhabited space by Gaston Bachelard and the distinction between *idem* and *ipse* identity by Paul Ricoeur. The article tracks how Lahiri's characters negotiate in the discussion of the topics of diaspora, temporal discontinuity, and the ethics of cultural memory, the article introduces the phenomenological model with the Svetlana Boym division into restorative and reflective nostalgia, the theorization of diasporic identity as becoming brought forth by Stuart Hall, and the introduction of the concept of the chronotope by Mikhail Bakhtin. It finds that *The Namesake* is neither a comforting story of assimilation, but a

strictly honest story of being a person who inhabits the world of complete irreversible displacement, a world whereby nostalgia is revealed to be the ultimate form of dwelling open to people whose origin nor residence will never completely overlap.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, Nostalgia, Temporal estrangement, Diaspora, Existential memory, *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri, Heidegger, Husserl, Bachelard

### I. Introduction: The Ache of Elsewhere

On the most fundamental level, the novel *The Namesake* (2003) by Jhumpa Lahiri is a meditation of the meaning of having a world within a person that is no longer outside of it. Ganguli family, uprooted to Calcutta and transposed to Cambridge, Massachusetts, live in two-time frames at the same time: the present lived in American suburban reality, but the past, alive in Bengal, which does not exist in memory, but rather as a structuring orientation to being. I suggest, in this essay, that nostalgia in *The Namesake* is not a sentimental literary effect, but instead a philosophically reeking mode of inhabiting-the-world best characterized through the conceptual apparatus of phenomenology - of time-consciousness developed by Edmund Husserl, of thrownness and dwelling developed by Martin Heidegger, and of the poetics of space developed by Gaston Bachelard. The novel has dramatized what I refer to as temporal estrangement: where the self is constituted among incommensurable chrono topes, incapable of wholly inhabiting the remembered past, of the experienced present, and so doomed to have something of a perpetual liminality. By making close interpretations of the diaspora experience of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, Gogol identity crisis, and the repetitive theme of naming

and un-naming in the novel, I believe that Lahiri discloses the nostalgia not as desiring to go home but as an existential memory mode, which through which the migrant subjects manage to navigate the tension of rootedness and displacement that is not resolvable. In this respect, it is a novel that would require to be read neither merely as a social realism but as a prolonged philosophical investigation of conditions of possibility of selfhood under diaspora.

## **II. Phenomenology, Time, and the Structure of Nostalgic Experience**

The phenomenological method of approaching nostalgia is the method of avoiding the tendency to reduce it to a psychological desire or nostalgia as conjured by the revisionism of history. The analysis of inner time-consciousness by Husserl is already a framework: to Husserl, each moment of conscious experience has a tripartite structure of retention (the just-past), primal impression (the now), and protention (the about-to-come). Phenomenologically this dilation of this retentional arc is what nostalgia is; a stretching back not merely to the recent past, but to a temporally and spatially distant world, which, however, has a gravitational effect on the experience in the present. This temporal arrangement acquires a very violent nature in the case of the migrant subject. The past world - its sounds, feel, social practices, space familiarity, etc. still acts as a frontier of anticipation and point of reference despite its becoming irretrievable. In the case of Ashima Ganguli in *The Namesake*, this irreversibility is the constitutive fact of her life in America. Even her first action in the novel - mixing Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts with chopped red onion to make something like the jhalmuri she used to eat in the Calcutta Street corners - is a phenomenological reconstruction, a bid to re-establish a sensory world which has been structurally displaced in her present.

To be thrown is to be already placed in the world that one did not make, a world of cultural inheritance, linguistic habitus and historical circumstance. To have this thrownness is au-

thentic existence; to be conscious of the givenness of a factual situation as the ground on which any projection in the future must go is authentic existence. What is tragic about the estrangement of time as portrayed by Lahiri is the fact that the thrownness of the migrant is doubled: he is thrown into the two worlds at the same time and neither of them can be owned in their entirety. Ashoke and Ashima are thrust into Bengal, into the Ganguli family, into Bengali language and Bengali kinds of sociality; but also, into America and the claims of the strange culture, the foreign weather and the foreign grammar of self. The nostalgic desire which hovers throughout the novel is the phenomenological residue of this dual thrownness the experienced inability to connect one thrown origin with the projected possibilities. In this regard, Lahiri's novel may be read as a literary phenomenology of migration itself: a disciplined attempt to describe what double thrownness feels like from within, before any theoretical framework has the chance to domesticate its disorienting force.

### **III. Ashima and the Poetics of Inhabitation**

The Poetics of space by Gaston Bachelard states that the house is not just a mere structure, but the main location of existential anchorage - the first universe of the self, the place where daydream and memory are deposited into identity. To be in space is to leave it to become an expansion of the inner world, in the case of Bachelard, the corners of a room, the warmth of a kitchen, the smell of stairwells are all part of the process of the creation of an intimate phenomenology of being. When such a bond is broken off - whether by exile, migration, or forcible displacement of the self - then the self is deprived of its spatial correlate and must perform the arduous task of re-inhabitation in a new locality.

It is of this Bachelardian sensitivity that Lahiri makes the relationship Ashima has towards the apartment in Cambridge. The opening pages of the novel create the atmosphere of the

apartment as a strange place, which is familiar in terms of its domestic layout, but is somehow wrong in terms of the materials, its size, the lack of the appropriate sounds and smell. Ashima skips across it in a tentative provisional way like the space has not yet deserved her occupancy. Her homesickness is not merely a state of emotion but a state of being, she is a personality without a house, a mind without the spatial measurements that would enable it to be complete. The making of the phone calls to Calcutta, the cooking of Bengali meals, the preservation of the religious rituals, all these are Bachelardian practices of inhabiting, trying to superimpose the apartment in Cambridge with the affective space of Calcutta.

What is philosophically important in this case is that the nostalgia that Ashima experiences is not a backward-looking nostalgia, towards an unchanging past that can be retrieved. It is not merely that she would like to go back to Calcutta, as it used to be; she desires to discover Calcutta, or what is functionally equal to Calcutta, in the present. This is what the difference between nostalgia as restorative (aimed at reconstructing the lost object) and nostalgia as reflective (awareness of the loss and its use as an orientation source), which is theorized by Svetlana Boym. Lahiri depicts Ashima wavering between these poles, but the real point of the novel is that it is only reflective nostalgia, the kind of nostalgia that turns loss into a mode of production, albeit melancholic one, that is able to do the migrant condition justice. To insist on restorative nostalgia as certain of the peripheral characters in the novel do is to run the risk of a dangerous delusion; to deny nostalgia is to give up the integrity of the self over time. In this respect, the novel by Lahiri can be interpreted as a literary phenomenology of the very process of the migration: a rigorous effort to write about what it is like to experience double thrownness on the inside, before any theoretical framework can become tamed enough to handle the disorienting power.

#### **IV. Ashoke, the Train, and Existential Memory**

When Ashima is determined as being temporarily estranged by these two main elements, the domestic and the senses, the same thing is done to Ashoke, being planned around the one actual traumatic experience, which is the defining memory of his life, the train crash that almost kills him as a young man, and which he is rescued, against all odds, because somebody finds the pages of the short stories of Nikolai Gogol grasped in his hand. This incident, which Ashoke describes to his son Gogol only once, towards the middle of the novel, is not only a biographical point, but a phenomenological turning point. It is the point which separates the temporality of Ashoke into a past and a present, the point which changes his attitude towards time, which is no longer linear development, but the existential thickening. Existential memory, as I am applying it here, means those memories which do not simply describe the past, but which represent the self, involving by their content and affective weight, the most fundamental levels of what constitutes the relationship of oneself to existence. The train accident is one such memory to Ashoke. It is the kind of thing that Maurice Merleau-Ponty could call a bodily schema: something so entrenched in the flesh that information about all further perception and conduct. Ashoke walks through this life with a greater sense of contingency and appreciation of his simple survival that both his American coworkers and even his own family cannot comprehend. This is why America does not bring out the same corrosive nostalgia that it brings out in Ashima: he has already experienced in a cellular way the feeling of radical discontinuity. Migration is only a repetition, in another place, of the discontinuity that he experienced on the train.

The existential memory of Ashoke however also contains a certain cultural transmission. Naming his son Gogol, the author whose pages have rescued his life, he tries to imprint upon

the following generation his principal memory, to render the past readable and present with the help of such a very simple and, at the same time, significant name. This is an act of deep phenomenology: an effort to push the horizon of his temporal experience into the future to see to it that the most radical of his moments of consciousness is not merely a withdrawal to the precincts of his personal oblivion. The tragedy of the situation as the novel passes is that the name is working in exactly the reverse direction: instead of the existential memory of Ashoke being passed on to Gogol, it is where the other estrangement of Gogol to both his father and his own identity is most keenly experienced. What Ashoke sees as a gesture of intimate bequest - the giving of his most formative subjective experience - is taken by his son as an inexplicable burden, a marker of origins that he can find nowhere inside himself, and is an illustration of how the memory of existence is not transmitted even within the most intimate of relationships.

## **V. Gogol, Naming, and the Fragmented Self**

The problem of naming in *The Namesake* can never be tied out of the phenomenological problem of selfhood and of time continuation. Personal identity in Husserlian phenomenology is not a given in the metaphysical sense of the term, but an accomplishment - a narrative construction, which involves the process of continually incorporating past experience, present consciousness, and future expectations. The name, in most cultural situations, serves as one of the major tools of this integrative action: the linguistic label that unites the historical multiplicity of the self, such that others and self can identify a subject running through the disjuncture's of time and transformation.

The name disturbs and does not guarantee this continuity, as it does to Gogol Ganguli. Being born with a pet name (daak naam) which is supposed to be substituted with a good name (bhalo naam) as per the Bengali tradition, Gogol is permanently marked with a name which

does not fit in both the Bengali tradition and the American environment where he is being raised. The name signifies his always provisional condition, a self that gets trapped between two systems of naming, two cultural economies of identity. The fact that soon he legally changed his name to Nikhil, which is Bengali and can be pronounced by all, is not a solution to this problem but a symptomatic reaction to the problem: a way of trying to get rid of the perceived burden of nostalgic descent through simply replacing one name, and along with it, one identity. The difference between *idem*-identity (sameness, continuity of substance) and *ipse*-identity (selfhood, the capacity to keep one word, to do what was pledged over time) by Paul Ricoeur can help one see the phenomenological implications of the renaming that Gogol did. What Gogol wants in becoming Nikhil is a less hazardous *idem*-identity an identity that never keeps on reminding him of his efforts at assimilation with the burden of an origin story that is not his own. However, what is shown in the novel with much pathos is that *ipse*-identity cannot be legally replaced. The self which Gogol has become, a self-created by the specific displacement through time of growing up the American, born child of Bengali immigrants, the self which bears the absence of the death of Ashoke as a wound, cannot be called into being knowingly. This nostalgia is returned, in the last pages of the novel, not as sentiment, but as ontological reality, Gogol reads the Gogol short stories again, the inscription on the cover written by his father becoming, under the influence of existential memory, readable in a way previously unreadable: Gogol is restored, by this means of existential memory, to an inheritance he had been trying to disown.

## **VI. The Diaspora as Temporal Condition**

The theorization of the process of becoming diaspora (as opposed to the being of a particular state) as a type of identity which is always produced via representation and is always in pro-

cess, as proposed by Stuart Hall, is an effective way of bridging the gap between the phenomenological analysis formulated above and the bigger cultural politics of *The Namesake*. Diasporic identity does not, to Hall, consist of essence or purity but rather in understanding, as necessary, a heterogeneity, a hybridity, that is not a synthesis of two essential originals but a routine negotiation with historical discontinuity. The very strange aspect of this processual quality is dramatized by Lahiri in her novel: the Ganguli's family is not merely torn between India and America but a continuous and unresolved work of self-constitution on the other side of the migration fault line. What phenomenology can offer to the cultural theory put forward by Hall is a finer language to describe its affective and temporal aspects of process. The diaspora is not simply a state of culture or politics, but a state of being in time, an experience of co-existence which is constituted by the existence of chronotopes that are irreconcilable. It is applicable here, in connection with the concept of the chronotope, as formulated by Mikhail Bakhtin: the diasporic subject is situated in many chronotopes at the same time, and the collision of the chronotopes produces the aura of the affective texture of temporal alienation. The Calcutta chronotope (thickness of family, the cycles of Bengali year, sounds of a particular urban setting) and the American chronotope (spatial dispersion, cycles of the academic year, austerity of the Massachusetts landscape) in *The Namesake* are not merely juxtaposed but are perceived by the Ganguli characters as structurally irreconcilable, each one making the other somewhat unreal.

Within this context, nostalgia is the phenomenological register of chronotopic friction the experience of living in the interstitial between worlds of time. It is not an adaptive breakdown or a lapse into the past, rather it is the constitutive effect of the diasporic condition, the affective equivalent of a structural impossibility. *The Namesake* Lahiri has done very well by making this condition phenomenologically faithful enough that the reader is moved not just

sympathetically towards the Ganguli characters but also somehow participatory in the sense of having the present experience as always too thin and too thick, too alien and too insistent. Through this, the novel itself can be said to serve as what we can call an estrangement text: a work, the formal success of which is to defamiliarize the category of temporal belonging itself, to make visible a structure of experience most of its readers are living in, simply by virtue of being part of one chronotope, have hitherto never been required to analyze.

## **VII. Conclusion: Memory as Dwelling**

The Namesake fails to end this tension that it carefully builds. When Ashima finally resolves to spend one-half of the year in Calcutta and the other half in America, to be, in her own words, an eternal visitor to both locations, this is not a victory of the hybrid, but a skilled adjustment to irremovable alienation. Our sense of Gogol, as he ends up by re-reading his father's Gogol, sitting in the house where the layered layers of the American life of the family are, is, so to speak, a homecoming, an acknowledgement that existential memory is not to be avoided, that it is the self that is always and already the result of what are literally called the strata through which it has migrated in time, that nostalgia, in its ultimate philosophical sense, is not an emotion, but a form of consciousness.

What Lahiri can provide, however, is not a reassuring story of assimilation but a phenomenologically truthful one of what it takes to be a subject who is constituted through time discontinuity. The novel challenges its readers to see nostalgia not as a sign of weakness nor as a simplification of the intricacy of his/her temporal formation but as a way of cognitive and ethical fidelity, a refusal to close the wound of displacement, since it is also the origin of his/her most distinctive ways of seeing and valuing. In this regard, The Namesake in some way takes part in what could be described as an ethics of memory: a literary undertaking that insists

upon the irreducibility of the past as a constituent of present selfness, and that not only laments the painful work of existential recollection as not pathological but as the ultimate available mode of dwelling in the world of the origin and the world of habitation that will never fully concur. It is the philosophical idiom best suited to the literary project of Lahiri, and its adherence to description of experience as it is experienced internally that is phenomenology, the adherence to description of the structures of consciousness in all their complexity prior to their being subjected to theoretical reductions. Both *Phenomenology* and *The Namesake* do not succumb to the temptation to solve the problem of temporal estrangement by conceptual sleight of hand: both books do not provide a formula of how to reconcile the irreconcilable. What they each present instead is something better and more truthful, a language that is accurate enough to describe the particular texture of a condition that millions of people live in yet which has been consistently misrespected, trivialized or disregarded by the dominant culture. To learn to read *The Namesake* phenomenologically, then, is to learn to read a novel, but also to move, a auction, but only momentarily and vicariously, and temporally, within the world of the diasporic subject: a world where memory is not the past, but the very matter of the present, in which nostalgia is not an escape, but its ultimate and exacting form.

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