

Circulation of the Discourse of American Nationalism through Allegiance to Consumer Citizenship in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines South Asian American writer Jhumpa Lahiri's literary engagement with the re-Orientalization and sexualization of a collective subject described as Indian diaspora within the context of contemporary consumer culture. The essay explores the relationship between Lahiri's best-selling novel, *The Namesake* (2003) and its contemporary society by taking the point of view that diasporic literary writing is an example of a Foucauldian social apparatus—a new form of governmentality—that was used for the production of American nationalism after the events of 9/11. Here, we expose the material and ideological specificities that formulate a particular group of women as powerless consumers in the context of the post-cold war period. More precisely, we focus on the ideological elements of the routine consuming experiences of these women to unpack the manner in which the macropolitics of economic and political structures influence the micropolitics of the everyday experiences of Indian immigrants in the capitalist society. In Lahiri's fiction, the Indian woman's body—in its both first- and second- generation types—is figured as a deliberate site of economic and erotic excess that fundamentally complies with the contemporary heteronormative ideology of patriarchal capitalism, wherein the woman is essentially treated as the archetypal consumer. In effect, as the essay further argues, Lahiri's fiction dances to the tune of Western marketing demands of production and consumption.

Keywords: capitalism; consumerism; homogenization; Indian diaspora; *The Namesake*

INTRODUCTION

“A novel of exquisite and subtle tension” (Caldwell, 2003), “quietly dazzling” (Kakutani, 2003), “delicately handled” (Brace, 2003), “hugely appealing” (Prose, 2003), “fluid, accessible and, intermittently, very good” (Hussein, 2004), “assured and patient, inspiring ... [and] trustworthy” (McAlpin, 2003), “familiar” (Freeman, 2003), “a readable, perceptive, pleasant journey with a gifted observer” (D'Arcy, 2003), “[an] extraordinary story [a] wondrous, gentle book [that] is socially significant” (Lahiri & D'Souza, 2004), “memorable fiction,” “a moving first novel,” “[a] mix of quiet observation and heartbreaking honesty,” “authentic and lavishly imagined,” “beautifully rendered,” “the best of the year,” “A fine novel,” “A powerful and original voice,” (as cited in Lahiri, 2003, pp. i-iv); these are only some of the glowing reviews of the American mainstream press that valorized Jhumpa Lahiri's best-selling novel, *The Namesake* (2003). Within a relatively short time from its release, the novel began to amass overwhelming public recognition: it was nominated for the TIME Magazine Best Fiction Books in 2003; in the same year, this Pulitzer-Prize winning author's first novel was also awarded the LA Times Book Prize for Fiction; and in 2007, Fox

Searchlight Pictures released a cinematic adaptation of the novel by the same name – which was in turn similarly well received, winning the ‘Golden Aphrodite’ for its director, Mira Nair at the Love is Folly International Film Festival.

For the past few decades, not least since the immigration of the elite Indians to America during the 1960s, such meteoric success of Indian writing in English has been the subject of contentious debate. In an exploration of Indo-Anglian fiction, Shivani (2006, p.2) related this euphoric success of post-Rushdian Indian writers in English (IWE) to external commercial forces, and accused the American conglomerate publishing industry of enacting “the commodification of exoticized Orientalism in global capitalist exchange”. She asserted that these writers are massively over-praised due to their apparent internalization of the pre-established egregious stereotypes of the Indian diaspora.¹ In a similar fashion, Lau (2009) drew on Said’s notion of Orientalism to suspect some diasporic South Asian women writers of collusion in perpetrating Orientalism, in what she termed as ‘Re-Orientalism’. Here, it is the oriental, rather than the occident, that with consent consigns the Oriental to a position of ‘The Other’. In a more recent study, Dwivedi and Lau (2014) have questioned the authenticity of the exuberant reception towards IWE, focusing on the relationship between contemporary Indian writing and the demands of the western literary market. Within the discourse of western publishing industries, they argued, “IWE has acquired the status of a desirable commodity and a consumption item in the First World market, which may have to distort itself or severely self-sensor to remain desirable” (2014, p. 3). Indian culture, in this sense, is not only dramatically distorted, exploited, and colonized in the process of meeting the western marketing demands of production and consumption and accordingly utilized as an apparatus to facilitate the perpetuation of the prevailing capitalist ideology, but also “eroticized,” insofar as the cultural production of these writings “exists only as evidence of the Western fetishization” (Dwivedi & Lau, 2014, p. 4).

Intrigued by this notion of an ‘eroticized’ version of Indian culture, Martin-Lucas (2014) took this perception a step further to examine the specific mechanisms that helped conceive the association of diasporic criticism with sexualization of Indian culture. By examining the impact of paratextual features in the marketability of the Indian women’s writings in English, she disclosed the ongoing surreptitious inequalities and neo-Orientalist elements, such as the objectification of the diasporic woman for commercial purposes, within the contemporary discourse of neoliberalism. In this context, Martin-Lucas has introduced a discussion of literature and the book as a commodity—viz., a physical object designed for consumption of a target audience—that not only questions the aesthetic values and the realistic features of the text, but also locates the novelist as a sheer apparatus of production whose work is strictly regulated by capitalist corporations to meet the demands of a Western market.

If Martin-Lucas’s (2014) general view of literature as commodity is correct, then this mainstream diasporic literature acts out a dual role as commodity and ideological mechanism. In this manner, its writings not only meet market demands of the consumer society but also produce specific appropriated consumer desires, and by so doing, strengthen the pillars of capitalist hegemony. That being said, to operate as an apparatus it is crucial that these texts comply with certain conventions at the level of form and content. With respect to the former, as Jun (2010) has explained in a similar discussion of the mainstream film industry, these works:

must evince a simple plot structure, straightforwardly linear narrative, and easily understandable dialogue. With respect to the latter, they must avoid delving deeply into complicated social, moral, and philosophical issues and should not offend widely-held sensibilities (chief among them the idea that consumer capitalism is an indispensable, if

not altogether just, socio-economic system). Far from being arbitrary, these conventions are deliberately chosen and reinforced by the culture industry. (p. 152)

After the events of 9/11, it was the production of American nationalism that was emphatically sought after in the US culture industry. Within this particular context, media technologies of various kinds worked together to constitute race and gender as regulatory formations under the pretext that racial and gendered minorities are potentially dangerous to both themselves and others and “thus have to be subject to forms of regulation and self-regulation” (Grewal, 2003, p. 539). One possibility whereby these populations could self-regulate and “improve themselves” was through their participation in consumer culture, which initially emerged as a need to recover from the Second World War, developed towards the end of twentieth century, and was reinforced after the events of 9/11 to produce American democracy and national identity (Miles, 1998; Grewal, 2005). It seems proper, therefore, to study *The Namesake* within this context and in relation to this body of theory and criticism with a crucial question in mind: How can the Third World writer’s view of the world become confused with the First World reader’s view; that is, how can the patriarchal capitalist view become the diasporic writer’s view without provoking any protest?

This essay pursues the question through an examination of Jhumpa Lahiri’s literary engagement with the re-Orientalization and sexualization of a collective subject described as Indian diaspora within the context of contemporary consumer culture. It explores the relationship between *The Namesake* and society by taking the stand that diasporic literary writing is an example of a Foucauldian social apparatus, a new form of governmentality that was used for the production of American nationalism after the events of 9/11.² Here, we do not intend to explain how literature as an apparatus of patriarchal capitalism manipulates readers; rather, we expose the material and ideological specificities that formulate a particular group of women as powerless consumers in the context of the post-cold war period. More precisely, we focus on the ideological elements of the routine consuming experience of these women that has so far gone largely unnoticed to delineate the ways consumerism considerably influences the everyday experiences of the Indian immigrants’ social lives in the capitalist society. To do so, however, it is crucial to differentiate between the notion of consumption and the ideology of consumerism. Whereas the former is described as an act, as “a set of social, cultural and economic practices,” the latter is considered as a way of life. In this sense consumerism becomes “the cultural expression and manifestation of the apparently ubiquitous act of consumption” (Miles, 1998, p. 4). From this point of view, not only is consumption an economic phenomenon, but it also has cultural dimensions and together with the associated ideology of consumerism, it legitimates capitalism. In Lahiri’s fiction, the Indian woman’s body—in both its first and second generation types, represented by Ashima and Moushumi, respectively—is figured as a deliberate site of economic and erotic excess that fundamentally complies with the contemporary heteronormative ideology of patriarchal capitalism, wherein the woman—whose quintessential example in the novel is presented in Gogol’s white American girlfriend, Maxine Ratcliff—is essentially treated as the archetypal consumer.

We argue that Lahiri’s harnessing of the Indian woman’s susceptibility and passivity to experiences of irrational consumption can be understood as part of her pro-assimilative literary project as a sign of allegiance to the regulated formations of American nationalism and the consumer citizenship as a precondition of living the much coveted “American Way of Life,” a situation which is commonly defined as a “love of freedom.” Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that it would be reductive to define ‘American Way of Life’ merely as a national formation in terms of political freedoms; rather, it is a collective notion that “encompasses economic, social, and cultural as well as political and geopolitical dimensions” (Grewal, 2003, p. 541). Even the phrase ‘way of life’ suggests “a whole gamut of experiences of work

in the home and outside, leisure activities, participation in public life as well as ideas of morality, beliefs and emotions (Grewal, 2003, p. 541). In other words, through the rhetoric of ‘American Way of Life,’ discourse of democracy and freedom are linked to political formations and economic power, and thus is promoted the ‘patriotic’ propaganda that to revitalize the ‘American Dream’ and to produce national democracy, citizens should adhere to consumer culture, “go shopping, and to return to life as usual even in the face of an economic recession” (Grewal, 2003, p. 555). It is also noteworthy that this discursive regime was established by promoting “individuality” through purchasing and displaying of standard (national) commodities (Bauman, 1999, p. 394).

Situated in the 1960s-to-present century and published in the years following 9/11, *The Namesake* thus emerges in dynamic relation to the prevailing consumer culture and consumer citizenship. In situating Lahiri’s novel within a patriarchal capitalist culture, we demonstrate how the notion of consumerism binds together first- and second-generation immigrant women’s experiences of subjectivity. By doing so, this essay expands upon recent scholarship in cross-cultural feminist studies that has turned its attention to the micropolitics of everyday life as well as to the macropolitics of transnational economic and political structures³.

REGULATING SOCIAL IRREGULARITY: CAPILLARY FUNCTIONING OF THE CONSUMER CULTURE

The Namesake is a story of a middle-class Bengali family, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, who migrate to the United States during 1960s so that Ashoke can pursue his PhD at MIT. A year after their residence in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Ashima delivers a baby son whom they name Gogol after a notorious Russian short story writer Nikolai Gogol. The narrative, as the title indicates, goes on with a particular focus on Gogol’s struggle with his namesake—as it appears to him to be an unusual name for both Indians and Americans—in the process of his integration with his American peers and his assimilation into the dominant culture. Years pass and while studying at Yale, Gogol starts dating. After a few fruitless attempts with American girls, he eventually marries a Bengali woman, a childhood friend called Moushumi Mazoomdar, who has recently ended an engagement with a white American man. Their somewhat arranged marriage, however, soon dissolves as Moushumi reveals her affair with another man. The novel thus ends with their divorce and Ashima’s decision, following Ashoke’s unexpected death, to spend half the year in India and the other half in the States.

Going back to the beginning of the novel, Lahiri’s specification of date and time reinforces that what the reader is about to read is no ordinary fiction but a microhistorical document that acts out in a “realist” modality to expose the Indian diaspora’s private and public life experience. The opening paragraphs of the novel, on the one hand delineate the way the trauma of migration and its subsequent cultural frustrations have troubled the newly-wed female character, Ashima Ganguli. On the other, it discloses a capitalist society wherein woman’s desire is contained within heteronormative boundaries, and institutional governmentality and panoptic policing of identities—in particular feminine subjectivities—appear to be inescapable. Within these paragraphs, Ashima is introduced as the optimal and paradigmatic consumer, both in service to the conventional patriarchal hierarchies of gender roles and a subject to the constant surveillance and monitoring of dominant industrial capitalism. This is realized through a spatial distribution of the heroine in the seemingly separate yet interrelated domains of home and hospital.

In the initial scene, Ashima is placed in a ‘domestic carceral’—imprisoned in the home and in the marriage plot—where the realization of her wishes and desires must be sacrificed for the sake of her social respectability. As a pregnant woman, and just “two weeks

before her due date,” we see Ashima working in the kitchen, “combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl ... add[ing] salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, [and] wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 1). The kitchen and the cooking utensils which represent both locus and method of female oppression, in the feminist critic, Helena Michie’s terms, are “a sign not only of domestic duty but of surveillance” (1998, p. 58) and are as dangerous to the well-being of the heroine as is the hospital where she is ferried to be taken care of.

The hospital, in Foucauldian analysis, is not conceived as an instrument of cure, but rather it has signified a constant focal point of the economic and social order, a new form of governing and discipline that exacts a perpetual surveillance on individuals, whereby the individual turns into an object of knowledge and medical interventions. The patients, Foucault (2007) observes, are individualized and installed in a space that permits classifications and combinations, a space where one can oversee them, record the events that take place, prescribe for them a regimen, and even modify the temperature of the environment “so that the hospital panorama imposed by the introduction of discipline [procures] a therapeutic function” (p. 148). Likewise, though the hospital offers Ashima the promise of safety from the dangers such as malnutrition and patriarchy that seem to lurk in and define her home, it also ironically figures as a place of physical and psychological danger to her, as both a site and instrument of policing.

An overwhelming advantage of her exile from the society to the private sphere of the home is that, at least, she enjoys power and freedom with respect to her body, clothing and food. It is at home, after all, that she wears saris, makes traditional Indian concoctions that produce in her the desire for “mustard oil” and a craving for “a humble approximation of the snack ... spilling from newspaper cones,” replaces the yellow-and-white-checked paper of the shelves, walks with swollen feet that “ache against speckled gray linoleum,” and painfully negotiates the domestic demands of femininity. Home for Ashima thus functions as a synecdoche for autonomy, a site where she moves around as she wants, eats and drinks, and does whatever she feels like doing. In the hospital scene, however, she hands over power to the institution, and as soon as she registers at the hospital, “She is seated in a wheelchair assigned to a bed by a window, in a room at the end of the hall ... [and is] asked to remove her Murshidabad silk sari in favor of a flowered cotton gown” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 2). She is then singularized and “cut off by curtains from the three other women in the room” and is instructed to time the duration of her contractions and is directed “to consume only the Jell-O and the apple juice” (Lahiri, 2003, pp. 3-5). Later, after the child is born and Ashima is ready to be released from the hospital, she is given “countless brochures on breast-feeding, and bonding, and immunizing, and samples of baby shampoos and Q-Tips and creams” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 27) whereby the absence of her autonomy is accentuated, albeit indirectly.

The brochures and samples thus use the home as a place for her education into dominant cultural ideologies, with a minor difference that they operate in the name of autonomy and choice. In other words, the hospital enacts and prescribes a perpetual observation of the mother’s behavior—whereby her breastfeeding or choosing of shampoos is carefully inspected and calibrated—with respect to the newborn baby. In this manner, we find an irruption and a supplementation of surveillance into quotidian reality where we see a transfer of supervision function from the hospital, viz. doctors and nurses, to their surrogates in society’s private sphere, namely the home and domestic space. The surrogate, Ashima Ganguli, must now do the work of the doctor for herself, and in effect exercise self-policing, and in so doing effectuate a literal internalization of disciplinary norms which, according to scholars of advice literature, happens to be the historical function of conduct books. The woman’s subjectivity in general, and Ashima’s in particular, is gendered and controlled through her insertion into a panoptic system to the point that she is “not only the object of the

gaze but herself enacts it” (Hurley, 1997, p. 68) so that she sees as the patriarchal capitalist society does.

Such a transference of surveillance from public society’s carceral institution to the domestic sphere accentuates the subjects’ internalization of the Foucauldian mode of social regulation, viz. disciplinary technologies: “the set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge” (Foucault, 1995, p. 28). These power hierarchies operate through structuring the dichotomy of deviance and normalcy and in consequence, an interplay of normativity and visibility, the clearest example of which is expressed in Ashima’s conversation with her obstetrician at the hospital. Whereas for the doctor, who is privileged to be the sophisticated observer with apparently flawless powers of perception and deduction, “Everything is *looking normal* nothing *feels normal* to Ashima” [emphasis mine] (Lahiri, 2003, p. 5). It is in this dialogue and the word choice of ‘look’ and ‘feel’ that we notice Lahiri’s fascination with and privileging of the male with the gaze⁴. *The Namesake* thus presents from its earliest lines a visual/architectural structure that subverts the dyad of public and private so important for the Indian diaspora. But in order for the Panopticon to function, it was crucial that the public and private spheres collapse into each other and ensure that the practices exercised in the private adhere to social norms and regulations⁵.

A notable example in which the distinction between public and private collapses is Gogol’s naming at the hospital that deviates from “a practice of Bengali nomenclature [that] grants, to every single person, two names,” and instead, as advised by Mr. Wilcox, follows the Western tradition of naming the child either after their parents or after a great person they admire (Lahiri, 2003, p. 25). In Bengali tradition, a pet name literally means “the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments,” and a good name is given “for identification in the outside world” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 26). But for Gogol, there is only one name, a pet-name-turned-good-name, only one identity both in the intimate interior life and the public space. In an intertextual reading of the novel, Mani (2012) takes ‘Gogol’ as “a metaphor for the ways in which the novel binds together personal and national history, private and public space, India and the United States” (p. 78). In this case, as the panopticon extends into the private sphere where “society’s disciplinary mechanisms are able to produce (under the guise of discovering) threats even where such threats are not readily visible. And in so doing, these mechanisms validate and perpetuate themselves—in producing threats they also produce the need to police those threats” (Hurley, 1997, p. 81).

Eventually, these devolutions from the halcyon days of home births in India attended by midwives and observed by loved ones to the medicalized and doctor-and-nurse-controlled hospital with its stark and regimented environment growingly discomforts Ashima. As she wonders whether she is the only Indian person in the hospital, she thinks,

it's strange that her child will be born in a place most people enter either to suffer or to die. There is nothing to comfort her in the off-white tiles of the floor, the off-white panels of the ceiling, the white sheets tucked tightly into the bed. In India, she thinks to herself, women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares, retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives.

(Lahiri, 2003, p. 4)

This hypothesis of the institutionalization of the hospital through its exercise of disciplinary mechanisms is also confirmed by the fact that Ashima and the new-born baby are not allowed to be discharged unless she and her husband choose a name for their son. This is revealed by a compiler of hospital birth certificates, the previously mentioned Mr. Wilcox

who, on the fourth day of her hospitalization, notifies them that “in America, a baby cannot be released from the hospital without a birth certificate” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 27), thus unveiling the way hospitals, to use Foucault’s words, “are constituted not only [as] a place of cure but also a place of record and the acquisition of knowledge” (2007, p. 151).

Also remarkable in this section is the implicit romanticization of the hospital as a place of security that in the light of feminist studies on childbirth is in accordance with the dominant consumer culture prevalent in the period following World War II. In other words, the medical care that the hospital advertises to provide—in the form of birthing suite, special birthing bed or wheelchair, and a friendly nurse with a “tray holding apple juice, Jell-O, ice cream, and cold baked chicken,” as well as a promise of a “perfectly normal delivery” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 5)—is “merely a façade for interventionist obstetric practice” and in a commercial system, is “another commodity competing in the open market” (as cited in Michie, 1998, p. 61) to persuade women to have their babies in hospitals. In consequence, Ashima and the three other women in the room, having recognized themselves in this commodity, become the literary prototype of the female consumer and accordingly posit the notion of the woman as the archetypal consumer, pre-established in the Cold War period in what Klinger refers to as America’s “ideology of affluence” or Hurley (1997) as its “culture of abundance” (p. 123).

Ashima’s consumerism is in fact previously established at the outset of the novel where the narrative starts with her culinary performance of making an Indian version of hot mixed and puffed rice. The details of the concoction she prepares, as well as the fact that she has been “consuming [it] ... throughout her pregnancy” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 1), though seemingly peripheral to the narrative, is significant in presenting the woman protagonist as the literary prototype of the female consumer. Her impulse to consume Indian food is not, to employ Rey Chow’s discussion on Orientalist desire, “unlike the ideologically suspect literary, historical, and cultural texts that Said rightly cautioned, depict the non-Western world with implicit Western motives and desires” (Williams, 2007, p. 70). Indeed, the narrative’s listing of Rice Krispies, Planters peanuts, red onion, salt, lemon juice, green chili pepper, and the missing mustard oil and so on, utilized to make merely “a humble approximation of the [original] snack,” draws attention to the parade of ingredients, extravagance and excess and highlights the metaphorical association of the food with desire and consumption.

However, if this excessive female desire is established as a problem to be solved, particularly with respect to the missing ingredients and the possible poverty of nourishment that indicates a poverty of emotional nourishment for Ashima in the new country and in the process of her adaptation to the new social order, her desire is regulated and re-identified by the disciplinary technologies of the commodity culture. In effect, we find Ashima missing “the hustle-bustle of the hospital, and Patty [the nurse], and the Jell-O and ice cream brought at regular intervals to her side” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 32). And this would seem to locate the novel in tense relation to the postwar cultural capital in which we have attempted to contextualize *The Namesake*, in a commodity culture whose “economic viability hinged on its perpetual production of new desires and meanings” (Hurley, 1997, p. 96). But, what is prominent, and perhaps threatening, in this commodity saturation is the instrumentalization of the diasporic subjects—as mechanisms of mobility in a capitalist society and in service to raw consumerism—and the ensuing cultural homogenization that by seemingly obscuring cultural classifications such as class and race, induces in migrants an impulse to assimilate. In this context, it is unsurprising that within four years of the family’s residence in the US,

to a casual observer, the Gangulis, appear no different from their neighbors. Their garage, like every other, contains shovels and pruning shears and a sled ... They learn to roast turkeys ... in Thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around snowmen, to color boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter and hide them around the house ... [and finally] they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati. (Lahiri, 2003, p. 64)

In a similar fashion, Lahiri renders Moushumi with Ashima's penchant for materialism and portrays her as another model capitalist consumer that follows certain feminized aspects of consumer culture such as cosmetics and fashion. But before she delves into Moushumi's characterization, Lahiri depicts a tantalizing prospect of the much coveted American way of life through the sumptuous lifestyle of Gogol's American girlfriend, Maxine Ratliff and her middle-aged parents, Gerald and Lydia.

CONSTRUCTION OF NORMALCY: THE STANDARDS OF CONSUMER CITIZENSHIP

The Ratliffs are presented as the 'icons of a better life' and Lahiri renders in them many of the central features of the consumer culture: "its promise of abundance, luxury, unlimited pleasure and happiness" (Featherstone, 1983, p. 4). Here, the economic success of the bourgeois white family is presented in a form of embodiment that bespeaks American national belonging and security for Gogol and alternately his family who seem to be socio-economically foreclosed from fully accessing such a fulfilling lifestyle. In effect, Gogol's encounter with the glamorously stylized images of femininity, sexuality and family life of Maxine's family conceives in him the assumption that the Ratliffs are living more happily and effectively than his parents or their Indian relatives. It is the over-optional life of the Ratliffs' that Gogol finds in sharp contrast to the over-routinized life experienced by his parents. As he wanders around the Ratliffs' summer lake house he realizes that,

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 Yet he cannot picture his family occupying a house like this, playing board games on rainy afternoons, watching shooting stars at night, all their relatives gathered neatly on a small strip of sand. It is an impulse his parents have never felt. (Lahiri, 2003, p. 155)

In marked contrast to the fulfilling lifestyle of the Ratliffs, the lives experienced by his parents and their Indian community is 'disorienting' and prosaic. In addition, Lahiri does not even render in middle-aged Gerald and Lydia the onset of decline, as she does in the case of Ashoke and Ashima, rather she endows them with promising moments to "revitalize their bodies, sex lives and relationships" (Featherstone, 1983, p. 7). Through this American white family, Lahiri thus portrays tantalizing images of socio-economically successful people that are able to live life to the hilt. It is within this consumer culture that Gogol is not only cajoled into conformism, as he consciously does so and feels "effortlessly incorporated into their lives" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 136), but also offered the promise of transcending his social and racial difference, not least when both Maxine and Lydia remark on his considerable difference from his Bengali companions.

With respect to Maxine, it is evident that she lives a luxurious life and functions as the "representative of Western high culture and cosmopolitan sophistication" (Bhalla, 2008, p. 194). Her extravagant patterns of accumulation and consumption are featured when Gogol enters Maxine's private bathroom, wherein he finds the shelf above the sink glossily replete

with “different creams for her neck, her throat, her eyes, her feet, daytime, nighttime, sun and shade” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 132). The listings, as the commodity products of consumer culture, also function as a powerful advertisement for this particular American way of life, insofar as very soon Maxine’s high consumption lifestyle captivates Gogol and engenders in him a thirst for this new and exciting way of life. Maxine’s high consumerism is further emphasized when she goes shopping at expensive stores and buys cashmere cardigans and exorbitantly pricey colognes. To Gogol’s astonishment, she buys excessively, without even a moment of deliberation.

Maxine’s consuming lifestyle is also accompanied by stylistic elements that Lahiri deploys to elicit a consumer glance from Gogol and the reader. She provides this consuming gaze with the commodities and fashionably arrayed bodies that are subjected to a continual process of symbolization: the Ratliffs’ spectacular house as a Greek revival as well as their paradise like summer house in New Hampshire are hence portrayed not in a brief account, but in minute detail. The “consuming visuals” of the house, its magnificent exterior in conjunction with the interior sumptuous decors, both metaphorically and literally, indicate a materialistic lifestyle of the American family that holds out the promise of fulfilled desire. In addition, Lahiri’s commodification of the Ratliffs’ holiday resort in New Hampshire and her inviting of the consumer glance of the reader to step inside the narrative to experience the “paradise” like spectacle, unpacks her emphatic rendering of the neoliberal individuality, self-expression and liberation within the high consumption lifestyle of the family. The resort is an unknown world to Gogol, “a kind of holiday he’s never been on” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 152), the place where Maxine lost her virginity, and a cloistered wilderness wherein Gogol feels free from the shackles of his family. In this manner, the meaning Lahiri ascribes to the lake house goes beyond its intrinsic commodity quality, and becomes not only a source of pleasure and love but also the site of seemingly incompatible experiences of discipline and individuality.

The Ratliffs are successful and free in that they are able to adopt a disciplinary control over their bodies, selves and relationships. This is both reflected in the fact that even though there is nothing in particular to do in the lake house there is still “a certain stringency to life, a willful doing without” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 154), and also highlighted to a large extent in the “hundreds of cookbooks, food encyclopedias and volumes of essays about eating” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 130) that lie on the shelves of their house. In this sense, the Ratliffs act out as an exemplary neoliberal family in which, to quote from Koshy (2013), the “responsibility for the security, well-being, and quality of life of citizens has devolved from the state” (p. 346) to the family’s own capacities as free individuals. In this context, once again, the achievement ideology, in which distinctive individuals like Gogol are provided with an opportunity to transcend class backgrounds, and in consequence homogenize and assimilate into the mainstream capitalist culture, is highly reinforced.

INTERNALIZATION OF SOCIALLY PRESCRIBED STANDARDS: THE SECOND-GENERATION IMMIGRANTS

Moushumi’s manipulation by institutionalized mechanisms of capitalist society, and in consequence, her alienation from her true identity is revealed as soon as she appears in the novel. As an old acquaintance whom Gogol remembers only vaguely, Moushumi appears in the narrative as sitting at a bar, stylishly donned, eyes “heavy-lidded and bodily lined on the top lids, in the manner of 1960s movie stars ... [and] reading a paperback book ... with a collection of white shopping bags [lying] at the base of her stool” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 193). Her voracious desire as a female consumer—both literally and metaphorically reflected in the goods, the book, and her fashionable clothing—is progressively reinforced in these lines first

by her ordering herself a martini with olives and a blue packet of a luxury brand of cigarette, Dunhill, before Gogol arrives at the bar, and later by her reckless sensuality that ultimately ruins her marriage. What is left unarticulated but strongly implied here is the way mass media cajoles individuals into a mass conformism by encouraging the imitation of the fashions of the upper orders. Moushumi's cultivation of the fashion—showcased by the movie stars—in the process of her assimilation into the dominant high culture, though on the surface appearing to offer a new realm for achievement and self-expression, operates as constituting a legitimate way of life that is advertised by the mainstream culture. Fashion, in this respect, as the product of class distinction, provides the female consumer with a plethora of choices that enable her to identify herself as a member of the dominant high culture, and not that of an alternative group. Fashion thus functions as both constraining and emancipatory, in a sense that the satisfaction it renders the consumer is essentially a social and not an individual one. From this perspective, as Simmel (1957) also remarked, fashion not only offers social obedience alongside differentiation, but also reflects the underlying workings of a mobile society, wherein the demands of the individual and society are coalesced, to the point that “[t]he individual can get from fashion what he or she pleases—a sense of individuality alongside a feeling of belonging—while society itself can reap the concurrent economic benefits” (Miles, 1998, p. 91). In a similar way, Moushumi's locality in the bar suggests a double entanglement in the construction of her insatiable consumer identity. On the one hand, the bar as a commodity stimulates desire in its customers, and on the other, it offers pleasure and gratification.

Besides, the public sphere of the bar is immediately described and identified as singularly feminine: at the same time that its darkness, silence and small space offers disconcerting intimacy, the growing number of the incomers portends moments of indulgence and luxury. Here, the public space of the bar acts out as a substitute to and an extension of the private domain, providing Gogol and Moushumi with a cozy place together with an experience of gratifying intimacy and cheerfulness. Situated in such an intimate locality and thus portrayed as an archetypal consumer, in this rendezvous, Moushumi's economic excess is instantly bound up with her female sexuality, rendering in her the features of a clichéd figure of the *femme fatale* whose insatiable female greed, in conjunction with her lust for commodities, operates as an agent of destruction that ultimately ruins her husband, Gogol. The significance of this image—i.e., Moushumi as *femme fatale*—is twofold: her skill in arousing male desire, insinuated in her “opaque black tights” and “slightly overpowering” perfume that distracts Gogol situate her both as a *subject* and an *object* of consumption. On the one hand, her desire to consume provides her with an active position in relation to other commodities, while also positioning her as an ideal subject and a victim of the dominant ideology of consumption. On the other hand, with respect to Gogol's voyeuristic gaze, she operates as a commodity in the service to male consumption. We suggest that it is through this transformation of Moushumi's position within the discourse of consumerism that Lahiri adheres to the assumptions of the traditional heteronormative patriarchal discourse. Within the domain of heterosexual relations and capitalist structures, woman is conventionally “seen as an object exchanged between men ... compelled to render herself as seductive as possible in order to attract the gaze of the male buyer” (Felski, 1995, p. 64). In effect, Moushumi's desire for commodity brings about her moral laxity and a flagrant expression of her animalistic impulses, a conspicuous example of which happens during her stay in Paris. After she moved there, as she recounts to Gogol, her sudden emancipation from the fetters of family prohibitions made her highly susceptible to promiscuity and transformed her “into the kind of girl she had once envied, had believed she would never become” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 215). The passage in which Lahiri presents a vivid picture of Moushumi's insatiable female greed and reckless sensuality is worth quoting here:

Suddenly it was easy, and after years of being convinced she would never have a lover she began to fall effortlessly into affairs. With no hesitation, she had allowed men to seduce her in cafes, in parks, while she gazed at paintings in museums. She gave herself openly, completely, not caring about the consequences ... She allowed the men to buy her drinks, dinners, later to take her in taxis to their apartments, in neighborhoods she had not yet discovered on her own ...some of them had been married, far older, fathers to children ...the men had been French .German, Persian, Italian, Lebanese. There were days she slept with one man after lunch, another after dinner. (Lahiri, 2003, p. 215)

In fact, Lahiri's portrayal of the erotically driven nature of female consumption through Moushumi holds her up as a striking example of the sexual disorder that exists at the core of the ideology of consumerism. Felski is useful here, again, in clarifying the relationship between sex and capitalism: "The culture of consumerism reaches into and disrupts the sanctity of the private sphere, encouraging women to indulge their own desires in defiance of their husbands and of traditional forms of moral and religious authority" (p. 74). Perhaps the most telling example of this disruption, in which, as we suggest, Lahiri ventures homogenization by leveling of racial differences, is when the private sphere of Moushumi's body turns into a space of public gratification, wherein the sexual cravings of men of multifarious races—i.e., of French, German, Persian, Italian, Lebanese, Indian, and American—are fulfilled. The intermingling of the private and public spheres accordingly destabilizes the subject/object and active/passive polarities in the existing commodity culture. In effect, Moushumi, as the subject of the consumer culture is instrumentalized as yet another capitalized object to serve the demands of patriarchal society. Therefore, much like Ashima's excessive desire, if Moushumi's insatiable female greed appears as a problem that has yet to be solved, Lahiri thus does so by re-identifying it as culturally acceptable, in the process of assimilating the Indian characters into the dominant neoliberal ideology of the state.

Yet within this context, another crucial point has to be taken into account. If promoting Moushumi's hedonism, as a representative of Indian diaspora, provides the (white) patriarchal capitalist with economic benefits and implicitly with promises of the other's homogenization, on the other hand, its effects destabilizes the intimate relations between the sexes, i.e. between the brown woman and the brown man, and the structure of the (brown) patriarchal family. In other words, Moushumi's new form of female subjectivity, emanating her ferocious sensuality, threatens to break down the conventional distribution of gender roles within the Indian family structure, and in the process of female social advancement diminish, feminize and annihilate the brown man.⁶ We argue that in Moushumi, this motif of the woman whose greed for consumerism ends in her husband's social and psychological breakdown is depicted in her unrestrained sexual desire that disintegrates the pre-existing Indian praxis of advancing piety, thriftiness and the prosperity of the family unit. Moushumi thus heralds a new form of femininity that dismisses these ethics and traditions of the first generation Indians. In the new generation it is the logic of materialism and extravagance that evidently triumphs over what Moushumi calls her mother's "illusion" of propriety and prosperity.

Finally, in the portrayal of the rise of Moushumi from an obedient, unstyled, and unconfident girl raised in an inhibitive family to the status of the deviant figure of the femme fatale who is "without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind" (Lahiri, 2003, p. 214), Lahiri maps out a complex relationship between femininity and capitalism, associating Moushumi's desire to consume with her moral laxity. Moushumi, in spite of her Indian origin, is after all a product of America, and her class and racial mobility—from an unstyled submissive Indian girl to a classy defiant British to French to American one—help her, though at times secretly, to alter social conditions to gratify her own erotic desires. In other words, it is the constant proximity of Moushumi to the allures of the western way of life—neoliberal and capital—and the abundance of luxurious commodities—the men "lavish[ing]

her with perfume and jewels” (Lahiri, 2003, p. 215)—as well as her own uncertain racial and class identity that instigate her sexual profligacy. In this manner, Lahiri renders in Moushumi an ideal subject of a capitalist society that takes woman’s insatiability, to use Felski’s words, as “a natural manifestation of an all-consuming primordial female desire” (p. 79).

CONCLUSION

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* functions as both an artistic genre and a socio-political-economic institution—specifically, as an integral part of a form of governmentality that is both regulative and productive of American nationalism through its allegiance to consumer citizenship. As a literary apparatus, it instantiates the ideological interests of the existing patriarchal capitalism that mobilizes the apparatus itself through representational strategies that organize the characters and the readers into a unified scopic regime and in so doing cajoles them into a mass conformism to controlled high consumption lifestyles. Consumerism thus formulates the part and parcel of the very fabric of *The Namesake*, within which the female protagonists—the first-generation immigrant woman, Ashima Ganguli; the second-generation Indian immigrant woman, Moushumi Mazoomdar; and the American white woman, Maxine Ratliff who is depicted as an ideal prototype for the first two — are presented as the archetypal consumers. Consumer culture pervades the micropolitics of these characters’ everyday lives and constructs their daily experiences; it is not only ubiquitous but also ephemeral, not least because it perpetually alters its form and reasserts its influence in new forms. Lahiri presents consumerism as psycho-socially constraining and enabling. In terms of the individual experience, consumerism structures everyday lives, encroaching in areas of social and private life that are considered to be free of the demands of the marketplace, and yet offers the illusion of consumer freedom. Therefore, at the same time that consumerism appears to be a matter of personal appeal and choice, it operates as an ideological form that turns the individuals into disciplined and passive consumers.

Portrayed as the paradigmatic consumer, the newly-immigrated Ashima’s distinct private and public lifestyle is immediately regulated, disciplined and instrumentalized into mass conformism not through a fear of difference, but with a promise of a better quality of life. The predetermined meanings of the goods—i.e., the cooking ingredients, exotic cook books, traditional Indian clothes, literary books, and her body—as well as her social activities—e.g., her childbirth, or naming the child — are all institutionalized and subjected to a continual process of re-symbolization, so that they comply with the dominant ideological commandments of patriarchal capitalism. Moushumi’s desire for commodity is closely associated with her moral laxity and her transgression of sexual mores. Even though she enjoys a high consumption lifestyle of unashamed hedonism, what seems to be disturbing is that none of her excessive relations with men can satisfy her perverse erotic desires, because what seems to be desired is not the desire itself, but the imaginary satisfaction. Therefore, although Moushumi’s emergence as a modern superwoman—one that seems to have banished the traditional Indian transcendent ethics—promises a potential source of resistance to consumerism, her freedom is indeed the celebration of the neoliberal individualism. Finally, what binds Ashima, Maxine and Moushumi together is thus a sociological notion of the sameness of their desire and instrumentalization. Hence, if racial hierarchies seem to be blurred by the First World and Third World women’s shared instincts and passions, by their common bond of primordial, desiring femininity, yet, it is the Third World women’s subordination to the achievement ideology that disciplines and re-defines them to the interests of bourgeois capitalism. In this context, one can easily relate the warm reception of *The Namesake* by the American publishing industry to its dancing to the tunes of western marketing demands of production and consumption.

END NOTES

¹ In a similar discussion, Spivak blames the immigrant writers for conforming to mainstream American culture and perpetuating the pre-existing power relations. She calls Indian American writers “at best native informants for first world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other” (Spivak, 1988, p. 284), and concedes that “the hyphenated Americans [...] might rethink themselves as possible agents of exploitation, not its victims” (Spivak, 1999, p. 357).

² Obviously, both diasporic writing and Foucauldian forms of governmentality predate the events of 9/11. Hence, what is suggested by newness of this *new* form is that the racial formation of post-9/11 events was a recuperation of the Cold War Orientalism brought back to serve new purposes. In *Transnational America*, Grewal (2005) traces this form of governmentality to much older and different colonial legacies.

³ In a 2003 revisit to her essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse”, Mohanty urges for feminist solidarity through anticapitalist struggles and argues for the need for a materialist, “grounded, particularized analyses linked with larger, even global, economic and political frameworks” (p. 501). She asserts that an anticapitalist transnational feminist practice requires a close attention to “the quality of life as the criteria to distinguish “between social minorities and social majorities” (p. 506). In a similar way, in this essay, we seek to draw attention to make the operations of discursive power visible and unpack the way the values of the capital are naturalized and, as Foucault observes, “fixed” (as cited in Mohammed, 2016, p.126)

⁴ In privileging masculinity with the right to look, Lahiri “legitimizes the perpetuation of socially prescribed notion of sexual difference” and in so doing defines her fiction “as both a record of and a participant in the social, sexual, and political “paranoia” of contemporary American society (Asl & Abdullah, 2017, p. 221)

⁵ Koshy’s “Neoliberal Family Matters” (2013) offers a significant explication of the way neoliberal governmentality can colonize the family sphere as a site to formulate and accumulate human capital. According to her, “in contrast to earlier ideologies of the private sphere as a harbor from the commercial values of the marketplace ... [in a neoliberal order] the family is restructured around the intensive production and reproduction of human capital” (p. 347). In terms of the Indian immigrant family, the domestic domain thus becomes a place of self-regulation in the process of achieving a model minority identity.

⁶ In other words, Moushumi’s individuality “[i]n the diasporic world of *The Namesake* ... is associated with social deviance” in a way that she becomes a signifier of guilt and abnormality (Asl, Abdullah, & Yaapar, 2016, p.154). In intriguing study on Lahiri’s debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Asl, Hull & Abdullah (2016) have examined the manner woman’s subjectivity as well as her ferocious sensuality is equated with monstrosity and animality—in particular with Sartrean notion of hole and slimey. To read an in-depth analysis, see Asl, M. P., Hull, S. P., & Abdullah, N. F. L. (2016). Nihilation of femininity in the battle of looks: A Sartrean reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter". *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 16(2), 123-139.

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