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Reader Resources

The Namesake

by Jhumpa Lahiri



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“That’s the thing about books. They let you travel without moving your feet.”

Preface

What’s in a name? For Gogol Ganguli, American-born of Bengali parentage bearing a Russian writer’s surname, this question is neither easily answered nor easily dismissed. Straddling two generations, two cultures, and with two first names, Gogol moves through life with a sense he never quite fits in. His quiet angst and personal questioning almost derail him, careening—like the train that links him to his father and his destiny—from relationship to relationship. Jhumpa Lahiri’s understated exploration of identity and cultural assimilation in *The Namesake* illuminates for us all the question “Who am I?,” while bringing alive the colors, flavors, and textures of immigrant Indian life in America.



What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you’re a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

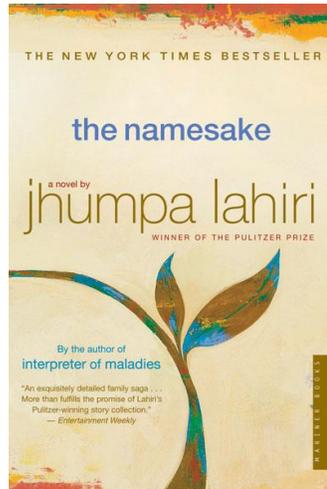
Introduction to the Book

A father and mother, a son and daughter: two generations of a typical Bengali–American family, poised uneasily atop the complex and confounding fault lines common to the immigrant experience. Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* deftly demonstrates how the familiar struggles between new and old, assimilation and cultural preservation, striving toward the future and longing for the past, play out in one particular set of foreign-born parents and their American-born children.

In the novel's opening pages, Ashima Ganguli, who left India to join her husband Ashoke in America, is about to deliver their first child, a son. Following Bengali custom, the child is to have two names—a pet name, for use only by family and close friends, and a "good" name, to be used everywhere else. Almost by mistake, the boy comes to be known as Gogol, named for his father's favorite Russian author. In a harrowing flashback, the reason for Ashoke's attachment to the Russian writer is revealed.

Gogol's father embraces their new life, while his mother longs for her homeland. As Gogol enters school, they attempt to convert his unusual name to a more typical one, but the boy stolidly rejects the transition, refusing to become, as he thinks of it, "someone he doesn't know." Soon he regrets his choice, as the name he's held onto seems increasingly out of place.

The novel's finely wrought descriptions of Bengali food, language, family customs, and Hindu rituals draw us deep inside the culture that Gogol's parents treasure while highlighting his alienation from it. Gogol finishes school, becomes an architect, falls in love more than once, and eventually marries, without ever fully embracing his heritage. His decades-long unease with his name is a perfect distillation of the multiple dislocations—cultural, historic, and familial—experienced by first-generation Americans. At the novel's climax, when loss compounds loss and Gogol's family structure is forever changed, he begins to understand, at least in part, his parents' longing for the past, and the sacrifices they made to help him be what he is—truly American.



Major Characters in the Book

Ashoke Ganguli

A Bengali man who comes alone to the U.S. to study electrical engineering. Weds Ashima Bhaduri via an arranged marriage in Calcutta. Father of Gogol and Sonia, a dedicated but undemonstrative family man with a lifelong attachment to Russian literature.

Ashima Ganguli

Journeys alone to the U.S. shortly after marrying Ashoke. Caring mother to Gogol and Sonia; stays in close touch with her family in India and maintains a growing network of Bengali friends and neighbors, as her family moves from city to city for Ashoke's career. At the end of the novel she bifurcates her life to spend time in the U.S. with her children and in India with her family of origin.

Gogol Ganguli

The "namesake" of the title, named after his father's favorite Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852). A first-generation Indian American whose uneasiness with his name exemplifies his difficulties in fitting in, either to his parents' expatriate world or to the world inhabited so comfortably by his American peers.

Sonia Ganguli

Gogol's younger sister, who is less troubled than he by their shared cultural heritage, or by the strictures and oddities of their household. Her steadiness—a peaceful life with her mother after her father's death, and a happy marriage—throws Gogol's chronic discomforts into sharper relief.

Maxine Ratliff

The only child of wealthy, urbane New Yorkers, and Gogol's first post-college girlfriend. Maxine represents so many things that Gogol believes he values: art and music, sophistication, and ease in the world.

Moushumi Mazoomdar

Appears first as the book-reading child of a neighboring Bengali family, noteworthy only because of her aloof air and deliberate English accent. The adult Moushumi resurfaces as Gogol's love interest and eventual wife. She too stages a rebellion against her heritage, living alone in Paris for a time.

About the Author

Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967)

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London to Bengali émigré parents in 1967. When she was three, her family moved to South Kingstown, Rhode Island, where her father was a librarian and her mother a teacher.

Like her character Gogol, Lahiri experienced some confusion over her name

when starting school. Her parents tried to enroll her using her "good" names—Nilanjana and Sudeshna—but the teacher insisted that those were too long, and opted instead for her pet name, Jhumpa. Lahiri notes that, "Even now, people in India ask why I'm publishing under my pet name instead of a real name."

Lahiri began to write at age seven, sometimes creating short fiction pieces with her friends during recess. She later wrote for the school newspaper. She received her undergraduate degree from Barnard College, then moved to Boston to attend Boston University, from which she received three master's degrees—in English, comparative literature, and creative writing—and a PhD in Renaissance studies.

While in Boston, she worked in a bookstore and interned at a magazine; she has noted that, had she stayed in New York, she might have been too intimidated to write: "In New York I was always so scared of saying that I wrote fiction. It just seemed like, 'Who am I to dare to do that thing here? The epicenter of publishing and writers?' I found all that very intimidating and avoided writing as a response."

Lahiri received a fellowship from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown from 1997 to 1998. In 1998, *The New Yorker* magazine published "A Temporary Matter," one of the stories that would appear in her first collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*. In 2000, the collection won the PEN/Hemingway Award for the year's best fiction debut, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. She is the first Indian-American woman to receive this award.

In 2003, she published *The Namesake*, a novel, and followed that in 2008 with a second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*. Next she wrote *The Lowland* (2013) and a memoir—written in Italian—*In Other Words* (2016). Lahiri and her husband Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush have two children.



Jhumpa Lahiri. Photo by Elena Seibert.

An Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri

On February 14, 2013, Josephine Reed of the National Endowment for the Arts interviewed Jhumpa Lahiri. Excerpts from their conversation follow.

Josephine Reed: How would you describe the plot of *The Namesake*?

Jhumpa Lahiri: It's about the process of becoming American, understanding the ways in which that's possible. The heart of the book is about a family's relationship to America and to the change that inevitably happens when a person leaves one's place of origin and arrives in a new world, which is very much an American story.

JR: We see an uncertainty about identity filtering down to the next generation in *The Namesake*, in Gogol.

JL: Gogol is very typical in wanting to be American. I think most young people just want to conform on some level, and then they stop wanting to conform and maybe become more interesting; but there's a stage of simply wanting to be accepted and not questioned. [Gogol's parents] may be lost, and they may be homesick, but they never doubt for a moment where home is—whereas for Gogol that sense of home is not fixed because India is not his home, and America is not yet his home.

JR: Issues of identity play out in his relationship with his parents—he sees them as foreign, and that's troubling to him. Can you talk about some of that tension?

JL: I can speak maybe just from my own experience. I think my impulse as a child was to protect my parents from what I perceived as sort of ignorance. But the other emotion was a frustration with them, because I wasn't there to protect them; I was their child, and I wanted them to protect me. It creates a strange dynamic when you speak the language better than your parents, when you go into stores and you're a child and they ask you what kind of washing machine your parents are interested in because they don't trust your parents to articulate themselves. These kinds of things can be very troubling, they're frustrating, they made me angry, they made me sad, they made me overprotective of my parents, concerned for them and also frustrated that they weren't more seemingly capable.

JR: Names, as the title of your book suggests, are important. Can you explain pet names in the Bengali tradition as opposed to the "good" name?

JL: I think the pet name is very much connected to one's formative years and childhood and affection. And one's mother and father would never, ever, ever use anything but a pet name for one's child. You tend to go to

school with your good name and what ends up happening is that you've got two names to represent the sort of home version, the more intimate version, versus the out-in-the-world, being-educated, working-at-a-job version—the formal version, as it were, versus the informal.

JR: When Gogol goes to school, his father tells him the "good" name that he's chosen for him, which is Nikhil.

JL: I think in an American context, it would be doubly disconcerting to suddenly enter school and be told by your parents, "Oh, by the way, not only are you going to spend all day away from us in the company of a teacher you've never met and don't know, but she's going to call you this other name." I imagine that would be very distressing to any child.

JR: Can you touch on the sense of displacement the Ganguli family experiences?

JL: Gogol's parents appear most at home when they go back to Calcutta, where there is a certain sort of blissful abandonment of a...level of anxiety and uncertainty that they carry with them as foreigners. I think it's impossible, virtually impossible, to live as a foreigner in any country. No matter how at ease, affluent, educated, articulate you are. When it's not your place, it's not your place.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Jhumpa Lahiri

1940s

- 1947: British India divided into two sovereign nations, India and Pakistan.

1950s

- 1950: The Indian government outlaws the caste system.
- 1952: The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, also known as the McCarran-Walter Act, targets immigrants who support communism or anarchy.
- 1957: Dalip Singh Saund elected the first Indian American voting member of U.S. Congress.

1960s

- 1965: U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 liberalizes immigration.
- 1966: Indira Gandhi elected India's Prime Minister.
- 1967: Jhumpa Lahiri born in London.

1970s

- 1970: Jhumpa Lahiri and her family move to Rhode Island.
- 1970: America's first Hindu temple built in Flushing, New York.
- 1971: East Pakistan becomes Bangladesh

1980s

- 1980: The United States Refugee Act of 1980 raises cap on annual admission of refugees to 50,000 per year.
- 1984: Indira Gandhi assassinated.
- 1989: Lahiri graduates from Barnard College.

1990s

- 1990: The Census counts more than 450,000 Indian immigrants living in the U.S.
- 1993: Lahiri receives an MFA from Boston University's Creative Writing Program.
- 1999: Lahiri publishes first short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*.

2000s

- 2000: *Interpreter of Maladies* wins Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.
- 2003: *The Namesake* published.
- 2006: *The Namesake* made into a major motion picture directed by Mira Nair.
- 2006: Lahiri receives NEA Literature Fellowship.
- 2007: Bobby Jindal elected the first Indian-American governor (of Louisiana).
- 2008: Lahiri publishes second short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*.

2010s

- 2010: Lahiri serves as consultant to the HBO series *In Treatment*.
- 2010: Nikki Haley elected the first Indian-American female governor (of South Carolina).
- 2012: Lahiri named to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

The Indian Immigration Experience

The U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 liberalized America's immigration laws by replacing quotas based on national origin with a greater emphasis on family relationships and the need for highly skilled immigrants. These changes helped accelerate the pace of Indian immigration to the U.S. Today, Indian Americans are the country's third-largest population of Asian ancestry, after Chinese Americans and Filipino Americans. In 2010 nearly three million Indian immigrants lived in the U.S.

Indian immigrants to the U.S. tend to be highly educated; almost 67 percent have at least a bachelor's degree, and nearly 40 percent have a graduate degree. Indian Americans have a disproportionate presence in professions such as engineering, technology, and medicine. India's vast education system produces tens of thousands of engineering and technology graduates each year, and English is widely taught in Indian schools.

Prominent Indian-American businessman Vivek Wadhwa noted in *Businessweek* that most Indian immigrants arrived in the U.S. relatively recently, after 1980. He attributes their success in part to the competitiveness of the Indian education system, which teaches hard work at an early age. He also credits the entrepreneurial spirit and acceptance of other cultures that arise from living in a sprawling, under-resourced country that includes six major religions and 22 languages.

Indian immigrants who come to the U.S. for higher wages and broader career options also expect their children to take full advantage of American education. A 1992-96 study in California demonstrated that Indian-American students excel academically, outperforming most other immigrant groups. But many young Indian Americans also report some degree of cultural dislocation, deploying the acronym "ABCD," or "American-Born Confused Desi," to describe themselves and their experience. (Desi refers to second-generation South Asians.)

In a 2009 essay contest conducted by the Hindu American Foundation, one such young writer compares herself to superheroes like Batman and Wonder Woman, owing to her "double life" straddling both her parents' distant world and the Minneapolis suburb where she grew up. She also notes that Hinduism, as one of the world's oldest religions, contains elements of many other faiths, and so to be a Hindu in America is to experience "a melting pot within a melting pot." Finally, she points out that recent films such as *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) have provided an opportunity for Americans to learn more

about her religion and cultural heritage, bringing her country of origin "into the spotlight" in positive ways.

An Indian immigrant family arriving in the U.S. in 1970 would have had many more reasons to feel isolated than a family arriving today. The first Hindu temple in the U.S., built in Flushing, New York, didn't open until 1970. Today there are hundreds throughout the country, in big cities like Chicago and also in smaller population centers. "Bollywood" films, Hindu-language movies created in Bombay's thriving film industry, often play in theaters dedicated exclusively to south-Indian films; the United States is by far the largest export market for these movies. The Internet and more accessible telecommunications tools have made it possible for families to stay in touch across long distances and many time zones, and the same technologies have exposed millions of Americans to Indian cuisine, dress, architecture, and societal customs.

Today, from spices and textiles, to music and art, India is a visible and vibrant aspect of American life. Due in part to decades of successful immigration, India's presence in the U.S. is also recognition of the tremendous contributions made by Indian Americans to U.S. business, technology, education, and culture.

Other Works/Adaptations

Lahiri and Her Other Works

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, published in 2003, is preceded and followed by two highly acclaimed short story collections: *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008).

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Hemingway Award, *Interpreter of Maladies* was also named *The New Yorker's* Best Debut of the Year, and is on Oprah Winfrey's Top Ten Book List. Six of the stories are set primarily in America, while three are set in India. The stories based in the U.S. focus on themes familiar to readers of *The Namesake*: the characters' cultural displacement, their distrust of American society, and the chronic missed connections between first- and second-generation Indian immigrants.

Many of Lahiri's stories include an embedded travel narrative. Whether transported across the country or around the world, Lahiri makes her characters' displacements both universal—most readers grasp how it feels to be in an unfamiliar setting—and specific, as their dislocations affect their closest relationships, and their choices about the future. Lahiri's narrative stance from her characters is often slightly distanced; this allows the reader to move seamlessly from one character to the next as the points of view shift. Having multiple points of view within one story also helps the reader see each character's strengths and flaws.

The title of *Unaccustomed Earth* is taken from the first section of *The Scarlet Letter*, in which the narrator notes that his children should establish themselves in new soil, "unaccustomed earth," in order to flourish. The eight stories in this collection, three of which are linked, deal primarily with Indian Americans born in the U.S. who struggle to understand the previous generation's attachments to the past.

Despite Lahiri's thematic focus on the Indian immigration experience in her writing, she does not note any Indian writers, or works about the immigrant experience, directly affecting her. When asked in interviews about her influences from prior generations, Lahiri has mentioned Chekhov and Tolstoy, and in particular, Thomas Hardy, because of the complexity and fullness of the worlds he creates, and the balance between "human drama and the world around it." She also notes that she learns factual things, like historical practices in agriculture, from this generation of writers.

Although the title character in *The Namesake* is named for a Russian author, Nikolai Gogol, Lahiri does not include him among her most admired writers, noting that his writing is much more antic and stylized than her own. But the

statement, "We all come out of Gogol's overcoat," which is spoken by Gogol's father Ashoke in Lahiri's novel, is in a sense a tribute to the original Gogol, who preceded, and influenced, so many more significant Russian writers.

Throughout all her published works, Lahiri writes in a distinct and clear manner. In a 2008 interview in *The Atlantic*, Lahiri says about her writing style, "I like it to be plain. It appeals to me more... My writing tends not to expand but to contract."

Unlike many of her contemporaries, Lahiri's language is unadorned, even transparent, drawing the reader into the story without calling attention to itself in any way. She consistently eschews big dramatic scenes containing lots of action for smaller, more interior moments. Her characters struggle with their internal conflicts—the things they can't bring themselves to tell their loved ones, or the ways in which they feel trapped in their own lives.

Although quiet in language and scene, Lahiri's prose is still vivid through the specificity of its details. Food, clothing, books on a shelf, or a gesture—Lahiri renders each of these with such clarity and simplicity that the reader easily finds herself inside the world of the story.

Works by Lahiri

Fiction

- *Interpreter of Maladies*, 1999
- *The Namesake*, 2003
- *Unaccustomed Earth*, 2008
- *The Lowland*, 2013

Nonfiction

- "Cooking Lessons: The Long Way Home" (6 September 2004, *The New Yorker*)
- "Improvisations: Rice" (23 November 2009, *The New Yorker*)
- "Reflections: Notes from a Literary Apprenticeship" (13 June 2011, *The New Yorker*)
- *In Other Words*, 2016

Discussion Questions

1. In the opening scene, Ashima is making a snack for herself, and near the end she prepares samosas for a party. Food plays a large role throughout the novel. How does the author use food to evoke specific emotions?
2. This novel, less than 300 pages long, spans more than 30 years. What techniques does the author use to compress time and move the story forward?
3. Much of the story is told in the present tense. Why would the author make this unusual choice?
4. Maxine and her parents live in an elegant townhouse, while Gogol's family has an ordinary suburban house. How does the author use these two settings to help the reader understand these different families?
5. Gogol's discomfort with his name is one of the novel's main themes. Also, Ashima never addresses her husband by his given name, because such a name is "intimate and therefore unspoken." What other names in the novel are important, and why?
6. Gogol's sister Sonia is present in only a few scenes in the novel, and the story is never told from her point of view. Why do you think that Lahiri left her a less-developed character than Gogol? What purpose does she serve in the story?
7. There are two train accidents in the novel, one involving Gogol and one his father. How are the two accidents linked, and how do they serve to drive the characters closer together, or farther apart?
8. How does Gogol evolve as a character, from his first days of school to his life as an adult, with a profession and a wife? How does he stay the same?
9. The author has stated in multiple interviews that she strives to write in a plain, unadorned way. What impact does her chosen style have on the reader?
10. *The Namesake* is written in third person, but various characters serve as the "point of view" character, telling the story from their perspective. How many different "point of view" characters are there, and how does the author shift the narrative between them?

Additional Resources

Interviews with Lahiri

- [Interview with Melissa Block on National Public Radio](#), August 2003.
Lahiri reads excerpts from *The Namesake* and discusses naming convention in Indian culture, the narrative structure of the novel, and its universal themes.
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1415693>
- [Interview in *The Atlantic*](#), April 2008.
Lahiri discusses the process of writing, her literary influences, and the vulnerability of being a writer.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/04/jhumpa-lahiri/306725/>

Books that influenced Jhumpa Lahiri

- Mavis Gallant's *The Collected Stories of Mavis Gallant*, 1996
- Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 1891
- Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, 1850
- William Trevor's *The Collected Stories*, 1993

Books similar to *The Namesake*

- Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, 2003
- Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, 2006
- Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home*, 2008
- Abraham Verghese's *Cutting for Stone*, 2009

Credits

Works Cited

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