

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

# THE NAMESAKE 2006

Mira Nair

(English and Bengali)

## OVERVIEW

*The Namesake* is a faithful adaptation of a 2003 novel of the same name by Jhumpa Lahiri. The title refers to the fact that the son of the family at the core of the story is named after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. In fact, the film begins and ends with a young man reading Gogol while riding on a train. Bookended by those two scenes, the story follows the fortunes of Ashok and his wife Ashima (two Bengalis who move to New York) and their son Gogol, who is born there. Primarily, though, it is Gogol's life that the film documents, with all the pain and confusion that is inherent in the diaspora.

## CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

One point of cultural significance in this film (as in *Story* by Sujoy Ghosh) is the Bengali custom of having two names: a pet-name and a so-called 'good name.' In the film, that practice provides the opportunity for confusion concerning one's identity, especially for the American-born son named Gogol. There are also two deaths in the film and two funerals (cremations), which is important because that ceremony requires the son (or grandson) to play a prominent role; in the film, performing that role represents a major step in Gogol's coming-of-age process. Even more significant than these features of Indian culture are the reference to Nikolai Gogol's short story 'The Overcoat' and to Dostoevsky's famous statement that 'We all come from Gogol's overcoat.'

## MAIN CHARACTERS

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| Ashok    | Ashok Ganguli is the father of the family.           |
| Ashima   | Ashima is the mother of the family.                  |
| Gogol    | Gogol is their son, who has a second name of Nikhil. |
| Sonia    | Sonia is their daughter.                             |
| Maxime   | Maxime is Gogol's girlfriend.                        |
| Moushumi | Moushumi is (briefly) Gogol's wife.                  |

## STORY

*Travel* The film opens with a train rumbling through the landscape of Bengal in east India. Inside, young Ashok Ganguli is reading 'The Overcoat' by Gogol. An older man strikes up a conversation, suggesting that the young man should travel and 'see the world.' Ashok says that his grandfather always told him that was what books did, allowed you to travel the world. The setting is not precise, but references place it in the late 1970s. The scene ends with a train crash.

*Marriage* Years later, we see Ashok and his family interviewing a young woman as a prospective wife for him. Like him, Ashima is an educated, upper-class Bengali. Ashok's father declares that his son has been in New York for the past two years, studying for a PhD in sciences. For his part, Ashima's father claims that his daughter's best subject is English; then he asks her to recite something, and she complies with a cringe-worthy recital of 'I wandered lonely as a cloud.' Her father asks if she would be lonely in America, and she says, 'He'll [Ashok] be there,' which makes Ashok smile. They are married in sumptuous colours and pageantry.

*Foreign* Only a few weeks later, they are in a freezing winter in New York City. Ashok tries make Ashima feel at home, but she is lonely in the spartan and dark flat. He goes to the university, and she forages around in the kitchen, sprinkling chili powder on her Rice Krispies. She drags their dirty clothes to the laundromat, where old men strip half naked before throwing their rags in the machines. Her letters home tell a different story: 'I am very happy and the house is lovely.'

*Intimacy* Slowly, the newlyweds build a rapport and move toward physical intimacy. When Ashima also makes a mistake in housekeeping, he scolds her, asks for her forgiveness and they end up making love. A baby soon follows, exposing gaps between the Bengali parents and the American hospital staff in terms of medical practice and etiquette.

*Naming* The first moment of real drama arrives when the doctor asks for the child's name. The parents want to wait until the grandmother writes a letter suggesting a name, but the hospital can't release the baby until it has an official name. Ashok suggests that they name him 'Gogol,' temporarily until the letter arrives, after which they can change it on the birth certificate. The boy thus becomes Gogol Ganguli. Soon after, Ashima gives birth to a girl, named Sonia. Gogol's real name, or 'good name,' is Nikhil, but the boy himself prefers to be called Gogol. When Ashima's father dies, the whole family goes back to Calcutta for the funeral ceremony.

*Young Gogol* Gogol grows up to be an unhappy teenager, uncertain of his identity as a Bengali-American and saddled with a ridiculous name that students mock. Both he and his younger sister are American kids with habits that their mother does not understand and their father does not approve. The family go on a holiday to India, allowing Gogol to experience the reverse experience of his parents going to America. While he is exasperated by the slowness and dirt, he is inspired by the Taj Mahal. After returning to the US, Gogol decides he wants to officially change his name to his good name, 'Nikhil.' His parents try to dissuade him: 'You're too old now. It's too complicated. What's done is done.'

*Girlfriend* Gogol, or Nikhil (or Nick) as he is now known, becomes a student of architecture and meets Maxime. While his own parents struggle to come to terms with his American dating customs, Maxime's parents are taken with Nick's handsome looks and exotic background. Gogol and Maxime become very close. Gogol brings Maxime home, but Ashima does know how to react when she kisses her cheek.

*Revelation* Just before Ashok leaves on a teaching assignment in Ohio, he finally explains to his son why he named him Gogol. He was a young student riding in a train (as shown in the initial scene of the film), Ashok says, when there was a crash. Emergency workers found no survivors until they noticed a hand holding a book, which was a volume of Gogol's plays and tales. That alerted them to the fact that the person was alive. That person was Ashok.

*Changes* A major change occurs when Ashok dies of a heart attack and Gogol begins to feel the pull of Indian tradition. His mother takes off her bangles, as widows do in India, and he shaves his head in order to fulfil a son's duty to perform his father's cremation. Gogol draws away from the ultra-American Maxime and retreats into a no-man's land of cultural ambiguity. She wants to go with him to scatter his father's ashes in the Ganges, but he says no, 'It's a family thing.' After the trip to India, he breaks off their relationship.

*Moushumi* Back in America, Gogol rekindles a friendship with Moushumi, a Bengali daughter of family friends, whom he met years earlier. They eventually get married, but she is bored with life as a wife and starts an affair with an old boyfriend in Paris. After Gogol divorces her, Ashima feels guilty for pressuring him to marry a Bengali. Meanwhile, she is relaxed about the fact that Sonia, her daughter, has a non-Indian boyfriend.

*Back to the beginning* Gogol goes home to help Ashima prepare for her journey back to India after selling their house. The final scene is a return to the first scene of a young man reading Gogol, only this time it is Gogol Ganguli on a journey into his new, undefined life.

## THEMES

*Identity* The underlying theme of this literary film is the complexity of identity, specifically cultural identity. The story focuses on the way a person's name can create and confuse one's identity. The choice of 'Gogol' as a temporary name for a new-born baby in America has enduring consequences for the child and deep meaning for its father. The choice is a spur of the minute decision, forced on the Bengali parents by the American legal requirement that a baby have a name on a birth certificate in order to be released from the hospital. They think of it as the child's nickname and plan to use

'Nikhil' as his official name. As a young boy, Gogol, decides to keep that name in school, since he knows no other, but it turns out to be the butt of jokes when he is in high school. Later still, as a young man, he decides to adopt 'Nikhil,' which his American friends effortlessly transform into 'Nick.' These name changes act as symbols of his chameleon identity and unsettled state of mind as a teenager in America with Indian-born parents. He is confused, angry and bemused. 'Of all the Russian writers in the world, why did my parents have to name me after the suicidal, depressed and paranoid one?' Gogol/Nikhil/Nick asks himself. 'Why not Leo or Anton?' The film also comments on names in other contexts. 'What kind of name is Max for a girl?' Ashima asks after she meets her son's girlfriend Maxime. An elaborate naming ceremony, Indian style, is also held for Gogol's sister, Sonia. But it is Gogol Ganguli, whose real Bengali name (Nikhil) echoes the Russian writer's Christian name (Nikolai), who is the namesake.

*Diaspora* The confusion surrounding names is only one aspect of a broader theme of problems created when moving from one culture to another. These cultural clashes, both large and small, make up most of the story presented in the film. From the moment Ashima lands in New York, she has to adjust not only to a new husband, but to new ways of cooking, doing laundry, greeting strangers and, of course, speaking. She and Ashok are first-generation migrants, who maintain a sort of dual-cultural identity, using Bengali and English, eating two cuisines and modulating their behaviour according to context (inside or outside the house). Their two children, however, are American-born and grow up with only a slight awareness of Indian traditions. This generation-gap then creates tension with the family. A humorous example occurs when Gogol's aunt, visiting from India, mistakes his marijuana-induced red eyes as an illness and performs a ritual to drive away the 'evil eye.' Gogol is more amused than angry and says, 'Let me assure you auntie, there are no evil eyes in the United States of America.' To which, his aunt says, 'Just to be on the safe side. You never know.' A greater gulf is revealed when an exasperated Ashima reacts to her son saying 'I don't know why you guys named me Gogol.' Her response is, for her, unusually critical and sharply-worded: 'Don't call us "guys". Sometimes when I close my eyes and listen to you both, I feel like I have given birth to strangers.' To call your own children 'strangers' is not an easy thing for any mother, and Ashima loves both of hers. It is a powerful statement, which encapsulates the drama of the story.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **Ashok**

Character Ashok is a sensitive intellectual and loving father and husband, who shows empathy for everyone throughout the film. Only once does he lose his temper, and that very briefly with his young wife, who didn't know how to operate the dryer, shrunk all his sweaters. Even that momentary outburst is followed by him feeling ashamed and making up to Ashima.

### Illustrative moments

*Reflective* Ashok studies and later works as a scientist, but he is also deeply immersed in literature, hence his obsession with Gogol. Reflecting on Gogol's life becomes his way of understanding himself. At one point, he tries to explain this to his son, whom he has named Gogol. 'You see,' he says to the teenage boy, 'Gogol spent most of his life outside his homeland, like me.' His son nods, but then Ashok says something that perplexes his son (and most viewers). 'You see,' he says, 'We all came out of Gogol's overcoat.' This line is taken directly from the source novel, which borrowed it from Dostoevsky, who greatly admired Gogol's short story called 'The Overcoat.' In that story, the overcoat is an external trapping that nevertheless has the power to transform a shy man into one with confidence. Still, the overcoat is only covering and is eventually stolen. Reflecting on the story, Ashok seems to suggest that external things, while important in a material sense, are ultimately superficial.

*Shy* Ashok is a mildly successful man in his unspecified field of science, but he never displays ambition or promotes himself. Quite the opposite, he is a shy person, content to remain in the background and observe others, like a novelist. That reticence, combined with an enquiring mind, is illustrated in one of the gentlest moments in this quiet film. He and Ashima have gone back to India on holiday and visit one of the large public gardens in New Delhi. They stroll along pathways, trimmed with flowers and lined with trees, until he stops. 'There's something I've always wanted to

ask you, but never had the courage,' he says. 'Why did you say yes? All those years ago?' They have been married fifteen years and only now he asks her about her feelings for him.

**Tender** Ashok shows his tenderness throughout the film, from the very first scene when he and Ashima arrive in New York. But the most delicate scene, to my mind, comes much later when he is talking with his grown-up son, Gogol. It is an important scene, perhaps the key moment in the entire film, because Ashok finally reveals to his son why he called him Gogol (Ashok was taken for dead after the train crash and only noticed as alive because his bloody hand held a book by the Russian writer). After hearing that story, the son asks his father if he is reminded of the accident when he thinks of him. 'Not at all,' Ashok says. 'You remind me of everything that happened after that. Everything that has been a gift.' How many fathers have told their sons that they are a 'gift'?

## **Ashima**

**Character** As a young woman, Ashima is a talented musician and good student. Married to Ashok in America, she finds her feet and assimilates, to a degree, to the host culture. She has an independent spirit and a sense of humour, as well as a kind nature.

### Illustrative moments

**Protective** Ashima learns to love Ashok after the marriage, as is the norm in Indian arranged marriages. She does not 'worship' him or regard him as above her in status; rather, she loves him as an equal. But she is also protective of him, which only mirrors his concern for her well-being. A memorable example of her protective, almost maternal, instinct occurs when they have moved to New York as newly-weds. After about a week in their somewhat cold apartment and their first love-making, Ashok has a nightmare and wakes up dazed. 'What happened?' she asks. Ashok can't explain what is bothering him and just stammers something about not knowing. 'Come here,' she coos, drawing him to her like a child as she begins to sing a Bengali lullaby. Ashima trained as a singer in India, and now that cultural capital comes in handy when trying to soothe a troubled husband.

**Confident** Ashima grows into a self-confident woman during her marriage to Ashok in America. She navigates the foreign territory very well, eventually making friends among white and Indian Americans, getting a job and driving a car. She also becomes Ashok's equal, as illustrated in a wonderful bit of dialogue when they are on holiday in India. Ashok wants to know why she married him—why she said yes to him so many years back. 'Simple,' she answers with a smile. 'You were the best of the lot. Better than the pensioner with four children. And the cartoonist with one arm.' Ashok takes this in with a serious expression, and Ashima adds, 'In truth, I always liked your shoes.' This is a reference back to a moment when Ashima was about to meet Ashok's parents as their prospective daughter-in-law; waiting outside the room. She notices Ashok's shoes lined up outside, she sees the label 'made in America,' steps into them and walks around for a minute. In other words, she, too, was impressed with the idea of America and with a man who lived there.

## **Gogol**

**Character** Gogol is the focus of the film's depiction of cultural confusion in the diaspora. Born in the USA, he grows up like an American teenager but struggling to understand his parents' background and his own 'stupid' name. He is a 'normal kid,' despite the confusion, and shows sensitivity and thoughtfulness.

### Illustrative moments

**Confused** Of the four members of this American-Indian family, Gogol is the most confused about his cultural identity, starting with his odd-sounding name, neither American nor Indian. His frustration, bordering on anger, is expressed in a scene at the breakfast table one morning. The family have just returned from a trip to Calcutta, and Gogol says, 'I've been thinking a lot about my name. I mean "gogol" is fine on my high school diploma. But can you imagine it on a resume or credit card?' His father asks him to explain what he means, and Gogol says that he just can't understand why they gave him that funny name. 'You guys decided to give me his name when you knew all this stuff about

him? That he was suicidal, depressed, paranoid.' Ashok says, 'You forgot to mention that he was also a genius.' That witty remark that does not alleviate his son's disquiet about his name.

*Inspired* The American-born Indian boy grows up interested in drawing and plans to go to Yale to study engineering. On a trip to India, however, he becomes inspired by the Taj Mahal. His parents are sitting on a stone bench in front of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century monument, when Gogol approaches them and bursts out, 'I think I'm going to major in architecture.' When his father asks about his plans for engineering, Gogol replies with enthusiasm, 'Not any more. You see, architecture has everything. Engineering, drawing, aesthetics.' He also mentions that his grandfather was a painter. This choice of career reflects his dual cultural heritage: the aesthetics are Indian, while the structural mechanics are American.

*Split loyalties* The confusion of his culturally hyphenated identity grows more intense as he leaves high school and begins his first real romance with an American girl. They are deeply, if briefly, in love, sharing interests and outlooks on almost everything. The dilemma of choice arises when his mother's father (the painter) dies and the family plan to return to India to scatter his ashes in the Ganges. Even before that, Gogol shaves his head in order to help his mother perform a funeral ritual in America. When Maxime, his girlfriend, says she wants to go with him to India, he says she can't come. 'Because it's a family thing,' he explains, with a pained expression. She says that she thought they were family, but he won't change his mind. He is upset about the death, and she suggests that they go away on holiday to 'get away from all this.' He looks at her and says, 'I don't want to get away.' His allegiance is pulled in two directions, and eventually the India side wins.



(Ashok with his son, Gogol)



(Ashima)



(Gogol with his wife, Moushumi)



(Ashok and Ashima walking in a garden in India)