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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

BOOKS OF THE TIMES; From Calcutta to Suburbia: A Family's Perplexing Journey

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

THE NAMESAKE

By Jhumpa Lahiri

291 pages. Houghton Mifflin. \$24.

Jhumpa Lahiri's quietly dazzling new novel, "The Namesake," is that rare thing: an intimate, closely observed family portrait that effortlessly and discreetly unfolds to disclose a capacious social vision.

It is a novel about two generations of the Ganguli family, and at the same time it is a novel about exile and its discontents, a novel that is as affecting in its Chekhovian exploration of fathers and sons, parents and children, as it is resonant in its exploration of what is acquired and lost by immigrants and their children in pursuit of the American Dream.

It more than fulfills the promise of Ms. Lahiri's debut collection of stories, "Interpreter of Maladies," which won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

The novel begins in Boston in 1968, with the birth of a boy named Gogol Ganguli. Gogol comes by his name through a series of random accidents and misunderstandings that will come to represent for him the unexpected trajectory of his family's life.

When a letter from his great-grandmother, suggesting a formal Indian name for him, fails to arrive from India, his father, Ashoke, impulsively settles on the name of Gogol, after the famous Russian writer whose book of short stories helped save his life many years ago in India. He had been reading the book when the train he was traveling on derailed; rescuers spotted him only because they saw a page of the book flutter from his hands in the dark.

It was on that same train that Ashoke met a stranger, who gave him the advice that would change his life: "Do yourself a favor," the man said. "Before it's too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late."

That is how Ashoke came to be a doctoral candidate in engineering in Boston, and that is how his new wife, Ashima -- whom he married in an arranged ceremony -- came to start a new life in a cold, gray city in New England. Ashima tries to hide her disappointment when she first sees the tiny three-room apartment that is their home: so different, she thinks, from the homes she remembers from American movies like "Gone With the Wind" and "The Seven-Year Itch."

She is terrified at the prospect of raising a child "in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare."

And yet slowly, cautiously, the Gangulis make their way in America. Ashoke becomes a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Ashima has a second child whom they name Sonali (soon to be called Sonia). And the family moves to the suburbs, buying a new house in a development.

"Their garage, like every other, contains shovels and pruning shears and a sled," Ms. Lahiri writes. "They purchase a barbecue for tandoori on the porch in summer. Each step, each acquisition, no matter how small, involves deliberation, consultation with Bengali friends. Was there a difference between a plastic rake and a metal one? Which was preferable, a live Christmas tree or an artificial one? They learn to roast turkeys, albeit rubbed with garlic and cumin and cayenne, at Thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around snow men, to color boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter and hide them around the house."

But while their house on Pemberton Road looks like all the other houses on the street, while the Ganguli children take bologna and roast beef sandwiches to school like all their friends, the family never feels quite at home in the cozy suburb. News of their relatives in India comes through the mail or noisily by phone in the middle of the night, and there is always

the sense of making do and making substitutions.

Newly made Bengali friends fill in as aunts and uncles at holiday celebrations; Rice Krispies, Planters peanuts and onions are mixed together to approximate a favorite Calcutta snack.

Being a foreigner, Ashima thinks "is a sort of lifelong pregnancy -- a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts."

"It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what has once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding."

Her son, Gogol, too, feels like a perennial outsider. In his youth he tries to distance himself from his Indian roots: he does not hang out with other Indian-American students, does not think of India as home, as his parents and their friends do, but as "India," like his American friends. Yet at the same time he often feels a sense of detachment, a slight sense of apartness.

Gogol realizes, while living with a girlfriend named Maxine, that she and her well-to-do parents possess a confidence and sense of familial continuity that he and his parents will never possess. When he later begins dating a Bengali woman whom he has known since childhood, he embraces their shared ambivalence about their cultural heritage even as he realizes that their alliance is "fulfilling a collective, deep-seated desire" on the part of their families.

Although Ms. Lahiri's portraits of the women in Gogol's life are somewhat sketchy -- Maxine and her parents, in particular, seem more like New York stereotypes than real individuals -- she narrates the story of her hero's coming of age with enormous sympathy and aplomb, while cutting back and forth to fill in the lives of his parents, as they settle into the modest satisfactions of middle age.

She uses her unerring eye for detail to annotate their emotional lives: Ashoke's hatred of waste, which makes him complain "if a kettle had been filled with too much water;" Ashima's meticulous upkeep of three address books, which contain the names of all the Bengalis she and her husband have known over the years.

In chronicling more than three decades in the Gangulis' lives, Ms. Lahiri has not only given us a wonderfully intimate and knowing family portrait, she has also taken the haunting chamber music of her first collection of stories and reorchestrated its themes of exile and identity to create a symphonic work, a debut novel that is as assured and eloquent as the work of a longtime master of the craft.

Photo: Jhumpa Lahiri (Photo by Marion Ettlinger/Houghton Mifflin)(pg. E8)