

# THE INDEPENDENT

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## The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri

By Amer Hussein

### *A passage from paneer to pecorino*

American writers of foreign provenance have an endearing way of explaining their culture to the uninitiated. In her first novel, Jhumpa Lahiri informs us that "Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person, two names. In Bengali the word for pet name is *daknam*, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates." The practice of renaming is crucial to *The Namesake*. The hero, named after the Russian writer Gogol, misses out on a proper (in Bengali parlance, "good") name because of an oversight and a death. Then, though he seems to have managed perfectly well with it, he realises he carries his namesake's surname, and decides to retrieve the abandoned forename - "Nikhil" - before university.

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For so important a metaphorical device, the moment of renaming resonates shallowly. It does, however, point to an emerging theme: the second generation's desperate desire to remake themselves, and discard an embarrassing ethnic identity. Gogol is the son of the Gangulis, middle-class migrants from Calcutta to America. His father, who finds a respectable post as a university lecturer, is very happy in his arranged marriage to Gogol's mother. In the way of many migrant women, she retains the social customs and idiosyncrasies of her own country, but almost imperceptibly adapts.

The Ganguli children are diehard Americans. Familiar with the Bengali language, brought up on Bengali food, taken to India on long holidays, they nevertheless have no doubt about their identification. Lahiri only rarely stresses the host community's prejudices. Moments of racism, difference or mere incomprehension are sparsely narrated, and other communities alluded to hardly at all.

The pressure to conform to white middle-class standards pervades the novel. Gogol falls in love with white girls and distances himself from his parents' comfortable, but suffocating, milieu. His progress from their home and hearth is often described in culinary terms: he develops cosmopolitan tastebuds for the sort of wines and foods one buys from pricey delicatessens. These are catalogued relentlessly: prosecco, arugula, pecorino, etc. His friends, particularly after he moves to New York as an architect, spend more time eating out than cooking. The one dinner a girlfriend (the Indian Moushumi) prepares is burnt while the couple make love.


The significance of his renaming is underlined when "Nikhil" falls in love with Moushumi - who knew him as a child by his original name. Lahiri narrates their romance as an entirely convincing return to roots. But Moushumi, who has strayed even further from Bengali-ness into the realms of prosecco, prosciutto and feminist theory, finds a sneaky, pre-feminist solution to the dilemma of stale married love.

Covering about 30 years in a very American mode, the novel manages to represent, without patronising, life within the confines of a professional expatriate enclave. Lahiri is at her best when mapping these confines, and

the conflicts between individual pursuits and family loyalties. The Namesake is fluid, accessible and, intermittently, very good indeed. Fans of Lahiri's short stories are unlikely to be disappointed by this more substantial fiction.

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