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The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri

By Marianne Brace

New York - city of opportunity and polyester saris

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Lahiri isn't the first to direct a spotlight here. Ten years ago, fellow Bengali-American Bharati Mukherjee wrote *The Middleman*. But whereas Mukherjee's short stories have all the punch and jive of a CNN bulletin, Lahiri's prose reveals her as a mistress of the small moment with a debt to the Russian classics. Unlike Mukherjee's mouthy mail-order brides and dodgy gun-runners, Lahiri's diffident deshi study fibre optics and teach at MIT.

The Namesake revolves around Gogol Ganguli, an ABCD or American-Born Confused Deshi (deshi being the generic term for Indians). It begins with his birth in 1968. Waiting for the letter from a grandmother in Calcutta containing the baby's bhalonam (official name), the child's parents settle on a daknam (pet name) to be used only by family and friends.

Nikolai Gogol is Ashoke Ganguli's favourite author. Like him, the Russian spent many years as an exile. More importantly, the young Ashoke was re-reading Gogol's "The Overcoat" during a train crash when he narrowly escaped death. "Gogol" becomes his son's moniker. Unfortunately, the grandmother's letter never arrives and Gogol comes to hate his name "for the irrelevance of it all".

The story spans 35 years, during which time the Gangulis never regard America as home; but their children, "expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them", experience all the highs and lows of the second generation. Graduating from Yale, Gogol - now known as Nikhil - qualifies as an architect, has love affairs, and finally marries an American Bengali girl he knew as a child.

As an 11-year-old, Gogol visits a graveyard and marvels at the Peregrines, Ezekiels and Uriahs buried there. He feels linked to those pilgrims by the shared oddness of their names. For his parents, the new pioneers, the link is the loneliness and dislocation. Yet Gogol is exasperated by his parents' timidity, their constant expectation of disaster, "their quiet disappointment". He hates how parochial they are, viewing a visit to New York as an opportunity to buy polyester saris for relatives back home rather than a chance to visit museums or ride the subway.

It's only when Ashima and Ashoke are among other Bengalis that they can relax. It's not until he is an adult and married himself that a mortified Gogol recognises the courage and obedience his parents needed to agree to an arranged marriage and a new life 8,000 miles from home. Their extended families far away, the characters must be surrogate uncles, aunties, sisters and brothers to each other.


Lahiri portrays that life in Boston with the relish of a newcomer. Insights and ironies are delicately handled. Ashima signs her husband's name on Christmas cards - a name which, in accordance with Bengali custom, she has never once uttered in his presence. Nothing escapes Lahiri's keen eye, from hanging kitchen utensils with their slight film of grease, to brown leaves flying across the road, "large as human feet". In a moment of extreme sensuousness the young Ashima, about to be presented to a possible suitor, sees his shoes in her parents' hall and steps into them, "causing her heart to race".

The two important women in Gogol's life are extremely well drawn: socially smart, unkempt Maxine who lives with her parents in Chelsea and New Hampshire, and sexy, cosmopolitan Moushumi, sporting tortoise-shell glasses and expensive hats. Occasionally, however, the details read like a glossy lifestyle magazine.

Maxine and her arty parents listen to jazz, eat osso buco, and walk barefoot by the lake, when not baking cobbles with "berries picked by hand". They're another version of the American dream: the kind cooked up by advertising executives for designer perfumes. The friends of chic Moushumi, meanwhile, are self-regarding film-makers and poets with Bloody Marys and brownstones in Brooklyn. Perhaps we're supposed to find them nauseating.

It's the very ordinariness of the Gangulis, however, that wins our sympathy. Their story is particular, but general too. Their struggles are both those of Bengali immigrants and of any family. We've all tasted Rice Krispies and green chillies - even if not at the same time.

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