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A story told with sensitivity and subtlety

Aruti Nayar

The Namesake

by Jhumpa Lahiri. Flamingo. Pages 291. Rs 395.

THE quote "A dazzling storyteller" by Amy Tan on the jacket seems inappropriate because Jhumpa Lahiri is too subtle to be dazzling. Reading *The Namesake* is neither being bowled over by the brilliance or eloquence of the writer nor being overpowered by descriptions overly dramatic or intensely lyrical. An amazing felicity expresses itself in a manner sensitive and highly nuanced. It is not an overwhelming experience because hers is not the intrusive authorial presence that can inspire awe by its erudition, almost browbeating the reader. Instead, one is gently pulled into the narrative until (without realising) one starts sharing the world of Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol and participating in the ebb and flow of their lives. Jhumpa weaves a story spanning three decades of Gangulis' lives in the USA with a finetuned sensibility that combines realism—social and psychological — and the complexity of the mindscape.



Jhumpa's understated style is the hallmark of *The Namesake*

A single incident, a train accident, becomes the leitmotif. "He has failed to push these images away: The twisted, battered, capsized bogies of the train, his body twisted below it, the terrible crunching sound he had heard but not comprehended." Along with the accident that changed Ashoke Ganguli's life at the centre is the book, *Overcoat*, by his favourite author Nikolai Gogol that saved Ashoke's life. The name Gogol that he gives to his son becomes as much a burden as it is a symbol of an identity that Gogol cannot relate to. He changes his name to Nikhil and this conflict between both names and identities is brought in sharp focus. A consummate narrator, Jhumpa gives different dimensions to what a name can mean. It is not only a way of knowing yourself but also how you perceive yourself and others perceive you.

Jhumpa captures in a graphic manner the ways and means in which Gogol, the protagonist, and his family try to make sense of the world they have opted for, the dilemma of living in a country and not belonging. Also brought out is the effort required to mediate not only between people and situations but also between cultures and social practices. She brings alive the multiple selves constructed so painstakingly to make sense of the unknown world that is as much a land of opportunities as it is of conflict and confusion. Her canvas is not overlaid with bold strokes and overwhelming colours. Instead, Jhumpa displays the dexterity and skill of a miniaturist fleshing out the people, places and events with small deft strokes that combine external detail, emotions fleeting and the turbulence within.

Whether it is the acute loneliness of Ashima, perseverance of Ashoke or anguish of Gogol's mind, it seems life-like and real. No memorable quotes or scintillating passages but one still empathises with the characters "dwelling unconnected, in a perpetual sense of expectation, of longing." It is this expectation and longing that defines the diaspora experience, she likens to being in a state of perpetual

pregnancy as it were.

In a realistic way the writer brings out how one can work and live in a country for decades and not belong. The protagonist does not want to remain unquestionably in his parents' world but there's no way that he can escape it too. This, for him, accentuates the ambivalence and the otherness of being in an alien country. Of course, his pet name is bound up with a catastrophe he has unwillingly embodied for years.

This in-between existence of Nikhil/Gogol is exemplified by his relationship with his American girlfriend Maxine. The manner in which she and her parents bond and belong to their environment is something that he and his family will never be able to do. The hyphenated life he leads is further accentuated by his marriage to and subsequent split with Moshumi, who might be a fellow Bengali but her sensibility and orientation is more European — Parisian to be precise. A truly global citizen Mo is more comfortable with Dmitri, her German lover, than she is with Gogol. Mo has used the immigrant experience to gain exposure and push the frontiers of her personality. There is no ambivalence or lack of certitude here.

If the book begins with the birth of Gogol, it ends with his mother's decision to leave what has become home. Ironically, after struggling to make the USA her home for 33 years, Ashima must move, after her husband's death, to divide the time between Calcutta and the USA. "Now she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere". She will miss the carefully constructed world that had been "home nevertheless—the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her, needing to be packed up, given away, thrown out bit by bit."

The theme of homelessness is portrayed without going overboard, devoid of undue pathos or excessive sentimentality. In the hands of a less dexterous writer the quotidian details would have become boring and the strains of nostalgia (always understated) maudlin. A slice of life, nevertheless, comes alive. Gently delineated characters are fleshed out and they are as authentic as is their milieu. The effortless ease and the simplicity is deceptive since it conceals a definitive sense of structure that could not have been achieved without tremendous hard work.

If the test of a writer is the ability to make the reader feel for the characters and empathise with the trials and tribulations in their life, Jhumpa certainly succeeds in that.

