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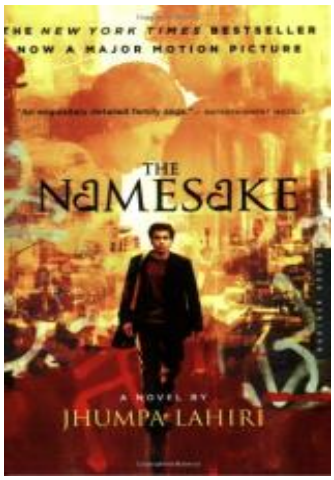
The Namesake

by Jhumpa Lahiri



About the Book

From the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of **Interpreter of Maladies**, Jhumpa Lahiri's critically acclaimed first novel is a finely wrought, deeply moving family drama that illuminates her signature themes: the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures, the tangled ties between generations.

The Namesake takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. On the heels of an arranged marriage, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Ashoke does his best to adapt while his wife pines for home. When their son, Gogol, is born, the task of naming him betrays their hope of respecting old ways in a new world. And we watch as Gogol stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs.

Discussion Guide

1. The Namesake opens with Ashima Ganguli trying to make a spicy Indian snack from American ingredients --- Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts --- but "as usual, there's something missing." How does Ashima try and make over her home in Cambridge to remind her of what she's left behind in Calcutta? Throughout **The Namesake**, how does Jhumpa Lahiri use food and clothing to explore cultural transitions --- especially through rituals, like the *annaprasan*, the rice ceremony? Some readers have said that Lahiri's writing makes them crave the meals she evokes so beautifully. What memories or desires does Lahiri bring up for you? Does her writing ever make you "hunger"?

2. The title **The Namesake** reflects the struggles Gogol Ganguli goes through to identify with his unusual names. How does Gogol lose first his public name, his *bhalonam*, and then his private pet name, his *daknam*? How does he try to remake his identity, after choosing to rename himself, and what is the result? How do our names precede us in society, and how do they define us? Do you have a pet name, or a secret name --- and has that name ever become publicly known? Do different people call you by different names? Did you ever wish for a new name? How are names chosen in

your family?

3. *Newsweek* said of Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize?winning collection of short stories, **Interpreter of Maladies**, "Jhumpa Lahiri writes such direct, translucent prose you almost forget you're reading." **The Namesake** is also subtle in style, elegant, and realistically paced. How are the events of the novel simultaneously dramatic and commonplace? What details made the characters real to you? Did you ever lose yourself in the story?

4. When Gogol is born, the Gangulis meet other Bengali families with small children, and Ashima finds that with a new baby "perfect strangers, all Americans, suddenly take notice of her, smiling, congratulating her for what she's done." How, for all of us, do children change our place in the community, and what we expect from it? Have you ever connected with someone you may have otherwise never spoken to --- of a different ethnic background or economic class --- through their children or your own?

5. In his youth, Ashoke Ganguli is saved from a massive train wreck in India. When his son, Gogol, is born, Ashoke thinks, "Being rescued from that shattered train had been the first miracle of his life. But here, now, reposing in his arms, weighing next to nothing but changing everything, is the second." Is Ashoke's love for his family more poignant because of his brush with death? Why do you think he hides his past from Gogol? What moments define us more --- accidents or achievements, mourning or celebration?

6. Lahiri has said, "The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are . . . who grow up in two worlds simultaneously." What do you think Gogol wants most from his life? How is it different from what his family wants for him, and what they wanted when they first came to America to start a family? How have expectations changed between generations in your own family? Do you want something different for your own children from what your parents wanted for you?

7. Jhumpa Lahiri has said of **The Namesake**, "America is a real presence in the book; the characters must struggle and come to terms with what it means to live here, to be brought up here, to belong and not belong here." Did **The Namesake** allow you to think of America in a new way? Do you agree that America is a real presence in **The Namesake**? How is India also a presence in the book?

8. The marriage of Ashima and Ashoke is arranged by their families. The closest intimacy they share before their wedding is when Ashima steps briefly, secretly, into Ashoke's shoes. Gogol's romantic encounters are very different from what his parents experienced or expected for their son. What draws Gogol to his many lovers, especially to Ruth, Maxine, and eventually Moushumi? What draws them to him? From where do you think we take our notions of romantic love --- from our family and friends, or from society and the media? How much does your cultural heritage define your ideas and experience of love?

9. Lahiri explores in several ways the difficulty of reconciling cross-cultural rituals around death and dying. For instance, Ashima refuses to display the rubbings of gravestones young Gogol makes with his classmates. And when Gogol's father suddenly dies, Gogol's relationship with Maxine is strained and quickly ends. Why do you think their love affair can't survive Gogol's grief? How does the loss of Gogol's father turn him back toward his family? How does it also change Sonia and Ashima's relationship?

10. Did you find the ending of **The Namesake** surprising? What did you expect from Moushumi and Gogol's marriage?

Do you think Moushumi is entirely to blame for her infidelity? Is Gogol a victim at the end of the book? In the last few pages of **The Namesake**, Gogol begins to read "The Overcoat" for the first time --- the book his father gave him, by his "namesake." Where do you imagine Gogol will go from here?

Author Bio

Jhumpa Lahiri, a bilingual writer and translator, is the Millicent C. McIntosh Professor of English and Director of Creative Writing at Barnard College (Columbia University). She received the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for INTERPRETER OF MALADIES, her debut story collection. She is also the author of THE NAMESAKE, UNACCUSTOMED EARTH and THE LOWLAND, which was a finalist for both the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award in fiction.

Since 2015, Lahiri has been writing fiction, essays and poetry in Italian. She has translated three novels by Domenico Starnone and is the editor of *The Penguin Classics Book of Italian Short Stories*, which was published in Italy as RACCONTI ITALIANI. Lahiri received the National Humanities Medal from President Barack Obama in 2014, and in 2019 she was named Commendatore of the Italian Republic by President Sergio Mattarella.

Critical Praise

"Dazzling . . . An intimate, closely observed family portrait."--- *The New York Times*"Lahiri handles issues of assimilation and belonging with her trademark mix of quiet observation and heartbreaking honesty."--- *Elle*"This poignant treatment of the immigrant experience is a rich, stimulating fusion of authentic emotion, ironic observation, and revealing details."

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