

# "The Namesake" | A Bengali-American family wrestles with its identity

By Moira Macdonald | The Seattle Times | March 16, 2007

"For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, 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 had once been ordinary life, only to discover that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect."

Listen carefully to the music behind the opening credits of Mira Nair's warmhearted drama "The Namesake," and you'll hear something that sounds like a brief flutter of wings. It's an appropriate sound for an often-soaring film that's essentially about flight; about making a life somewhere far away from where you began, and about the feeling of being in different air. Jhumpa Lahiri's beautifully quiet 2003 novel, an acclaimed best-seller, told the story of Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli, a young couple from Calcutta who arrive in the U.S. to begin their married life. The story continues over the next several decades, as the Gangulis' children (particularly their son, Gogol) grow up as Americans yet still Bengalis; almost fitting in, yet just outside the circle.

Lahiri's language weaves a delicate spell, so precisely that you'd think it difficult to translate its gentle waves of words into film. (Ashima, pondering her grown children's frequent changes of address, realizes that she's only lived in five different places. "One hand, five homes. A lifetime in a fist.") But Nair and screenwriter Sooni Taraporevala bring the novel's velvety heart to the screen. The film glides smoothly over the years, touching down to give us the vignettes that make up a life: a baby's birth, a first day of school, a graduation, a funeral, a wedding, the warmth of a holiday party, the bittersweet flavor of the memory of a father-son journey taken long ago.

Nair, who has a special gift for warm stories of family (see her lovely "Monsoon Wedding" from 2001), lets the camera linger on the details of her characters' homes. Ashima and Ashoke's first apartment, meager and drafty, has a family photo hung carefully on the wall. Though Ashima (Tabu, a beautiful Indian actress who can speak volumes with a sad smile) bravely writes cheerful letters home, she is despondent in this strange, cold new world; they have arrived in New York in winter, and the chill seems unbearably gray. Her young husband (Irrfan Khan) is a near-stranger, but they must be each other's home; their bed becomes a haven. We see them growing to love each other, at a pace as stately and subtle as a season's change.

The children arrive, a suburban house is purchased, and the years go by. Gogol, named for the Russian author, struggles with his identity; rejecting his name and his parents, falling in love first with a bouncily blond American (Jacinda Barrett), then an alluring Bengali (Zulheika Robinson) with secrets of her own.

By movie's end, the baby who once represented new life in a new world has become a man, and the warmth of "The Namesake" seems to rise to embrace us. The chilly grays give way to saffron-colored light; the foreigner is, at last, home again.

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