

Culture Clash

The immigrant experience meets generation gap in Mira Nair's *The Namesake*

By Ella Taylor | *The Village Voice* | March 6, 2007

Packed with female book club members, a screening of Mira Nair's *The Namesake* left no doubt about the film's target audience—yet it seems a pity to confine the movie behind the bars of a chick flick. Dividing its time between the fortunes of a Bengali immigrant to New York and those of her anxiously Americanized son, *The Namesake* combines the intimate pleasures of a family saga with a finely sustained inquiry into the difficult balance between separation and integration that shapes the lives of first-generation immigrants and their children in crucially different ways.

This is home turf for Nair and screenwriter Sooni Taraporevala, two South Asian expatriates who previously collaborated on the exuberant charmer *Mississippi Masala*, an unexpected hit whose sneaky gift for laying the burden of weirdness on the host culture helped put Nair on the map. *The Namesake* carries faint echoes of the carnal physicality that makes Nair's more lightweight movies so much fun to look at—*Monsoon Wedding* was a dandy piece of froth, and *Vanity Fair* survives only on its looks—but it's a quieter, more mature work.

Based on a first novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, whose short-story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* won her a Pulitzer, *The Namesake* is a study in hot and cold as it moves between the heat and dust of Calcutta and the ice and slush of Queens, New York, where Ashima (played by the Indian star Tabu) lands with her new husband Ashoke (Irfan Khan), a cerebral engineer she knows only from their arranged marriage. Still, their love blossoms as lonely, isolated Ashima grudgingly makes concessions to this strange American world of washing machines and overflowing supermarkets. Soon the couple moves to the suburbs, where they become part of the Indian diaspora community that maintains its links to the old country while prospering in the new.

Not so her restless son, hell bent on becoming a hip American and rushing into the arms of a bohemian shiksa. Best known for his antic turn in the comedy *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*, Kal Penn tones down the goofiness just enough to lend an air of pathos to this gangly outsider who's stranded between two worlds, neither of which feels like home. Like many children of immigrants, he channels all his resentment into a profound loathing for his foreign name, Gogol Ganguli.

Though *The Namesake* never fully resolves the episodic formlessness of Lahiri's novel, there's method and meaning in its loose ends, which both define the predicament of the second-generation immigrant and confer on him a strategic advantage in navigating modern urban life. When we leave Gogol, he's still figuring out the immigrant's eternal dance between tradition and modernity, between adapting to the new world and longing for roots. Only now he understands that the dance never ends.

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