

What's In a Name?

Written by Dylan Callaghan | Writers Guild of America, West

Sooni Taraporevala knows more than a little about the world encompassed in Fox Searchlight's new film *The Namesake*. Based on Pulitzer prize-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake* tells an archetypal story of a generational culture clash, centering on a Calcuttan family that transplants to New York and struggles to maintain their son's sense of Indian heritage amid an alluring and erosive American culture. In her own young adulthood, the Bombay-born Taraporevala also came to New York, where she earned an undergraduate degree from Harvard. The Ivy League was also where she went deep into the study and appreciation of film and was motivated to earn an M.A. in Cinema Studies from NYU. Upon graduation, Taraporevala felt a strong pull to return to Bombay to pursue still photography. "I didn't want to pursue the two options open to a Cinema Studies graduate -- to teach or become a film critic," she explains.

Not too long after returning home she teamed up with Mira Nair, a close friend and fellow Indian she'd met while at Harvard. She penned the script for Nair's directorial debut, *Salaam Bombay!*, and the writer-director duo have since worked on nearly half a dozen films together including 1991's *Mississippi Masala*. Taraporevala, who still resides in Bombay, corresponded from India about her new project, her writing process, and why she happily embraces a position in the industry she describes as "marginal."

What made this particular story special to you?

It spoke to me on many different levels. I was familiar with the physical terrain of Cambridge, New York, India and the emotional landscape of moving between these different worlds. I could relate to every character in the novel. The young characters seemed a reflection of what we were like many moons ago, the older characters what we've become. When I first returned to India after spending four life-changing years at Harvard, I was a creature my parents could not recognize.

Like Gogol (the Russian author perhaps most famous for his novel *Dead Souls*), I've had an incident in my life where, because of the follies of youth, I did not fully appreciate the love of an older relative until it was too late. Then, like Gogol, I was filled with regrets. The familial bonds Jhumpa writes about so well, with so much nuance and truth, is what made this story extra special.

What were some of the most significant changes from novel to screenplay necessitated by the adaptation?

The novel doesn't have a conventional "plot" with rising action; it's a coming-of-age story that spans 30 years, two countries and two generations. We wanted the film to have the same sensibility as the novel, so the struggle was how to do this [and have a filmable plot].

The most significant change is the large time leaps the film makes. The novel also has many more characters and events. We had to choose what to use. But that is the case with most adaptations. I think the film is true to the spirit of the novel.

Are adaptation or original screenplays, like yours for *Mississippi Masala*, more difficult?

For me, adaptations are easier to write because the hard, creative work has already been done by the author. I've always felt that authors lose out in the awards season. For adaptations, they should have two awards -- one for the screenwriter and one for the author. When I adapt I always try and put myself in the service of the author, to use whatever craft I've learnt to translate from one medium to another. [But] while adaptations are easier, originals are more fun to write. *Mississippi Masala*, like *Salaam Bombay!*, was rooted in research. Mira and I traveled to Uganda and the deep south before I wrote the screenplay.

Is your writing routine particularly regimented?

When I'm writing a commissioned screenplay with a deadline, I am very regimented. I have an office I go to in the morning. I write until it's time for my kids to come home from school. I print out at home, read over the pages at night and am back in my office the next morning. I like to be consumed by whatever I'm writing -- if I have to take a break in between, it's much harder for me to rev up and get going again. So I like to work intensely until it's done.

Do you feel your screenwriting has benefited from living and working in India away from the Hollywood scene and amid the strong Indian film industry?

I think so. I think it's helped my writing to be living in the real world. I am very fortunate that I have two angels in America; Brad Gross and William Skrzyniarz, who represent me in L.A., leaving me free to enjoy the benefits of living away.

Except for one film, I've not really worked in the Indian film industry, so I am marginal everywhere -- in America as well as here in Bombay. I kind of like my marginal status. The only downside is that I don't have a community of writers I interact with, which is why I read *Written By* so avidly when it reaches me by snail mail.

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