

## FILM

# THE NAMESAKE

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Based on Jhumpa Lahiri's Novel, Mira Nair's "The Namesake" (Bengali / English, colour, 120 mins) focuses on the human side of immigration. Sooni Taraporekala's script brings out the traumatic and liberating experiences of immigration. With a steel trunk, painted yellow and brown, Ashok Ganguly (Irfan Khan) is jostling through the crowds at Howrah Railway Station. On the Train to Jamshedpur, he reads Nickolas Gogol's "*The Overcoat*". A fellow journeyman (Jagannath Guha) advises him to pick a pillow and blanket, and see the world. After a while the train suffers a derailment. Back in Calcutta, Ashok is in bed, with his leg in plaster. The view in the skyline is of Saraswati goddess idol in mid-air, being raised by a crane.

The streets of Calcutta in 1977 are full of processions and barricades. Ashok has returned home from USA, where he has been doing his Ph.D. in fibre-optics. Ashima (Tabu) is introduced to Ashok Ganguly, by the parents, Ashima's father (Sabyasachi Chakravarty) is impressed by Ashok. The prospective groom asks Ashima, "Have you ever flown on a plane?" Ashima recites from Wordsworth's "Daffodils". They get married, and with garlands board on IA plane at Kolkata. Snowbound New York, with black silhouettes presents a different landscape. The husband prepares Tea in the morning. Ashima experiments with American breakfast, by filling a bowl with rice krispies, and sprinkling curry powder and peanuts. Her voiceover reads her letter to her parents in Calcutta, that she was all right, and gas was available all day and all night. She visits the Fulton fish market by the underground metro, with fears of getting lost. After love making, a sound of a train awakens Ashok from a Nightmare of the train accident. At the hospital before labour pains, Ashima requests the nurse for a longer frock. A son is born, and to complete immediate birth certificate requirements, Ashok names him Gogol, echoing the name of the author of "*The Overcoat*", the book Ashok was reading during the train accident. Ashima wants to return home, as she would not like to raise Gogol all alone. But USA was a land of opportunities. Soon daughter Soniya is born, and ceremonies of "annaprashan—first rice" are performed.

Gogol (Kal Penn) and Soniya (Sahira Nair) grow up in the suburbs of New York, where their parents have a wide circle of Bengali Friends. When a Telephone message from Calcutta conveys that Ashima's father has expired after a heart attack, she cries hysterically. She visits India briefly for the last rites, and feels that she has given birth to strangers.

Gogol goes to Yale for higher studies, and is advised by his mother that there would be lots of girls, but to marry a Bengali. Ashok presents Gogol a book of stories by Nikolai Gogol. Sometime later the family visits Calcutta. After spending an entire life outside the Native lands, the grown up children find interest in baul singers and Calcutta's bustling streets. Gifts have been brought for all, and the children soon wish to return home. Gogol goes on a morning jog followed by a fat servant. Ashok and Ashima take a rickshaw ride. Gogol clicks and sketches. The Victoria Memorial and the Taj Mahal provide grand photo backgrounds. Plodding through crowds at Howrah railway station, Ashok is seized with fears of the old rail accident.

Returning to New York, Gogol changes his name to Nikhil. He spends weekends with girl friend, Maxine (Jacinda Barret), in Long Island. When Gogol brings Maxine home, to meet his parents, he instructs her "No holding hands, no kissing". Cultural differences are visible, but blonde Maxine is greeted with warmth. Ashima now works in a library. Frequently Ashok is attacked by memories of the train accident, and he returns to Gogol's "Collected Tales and Plays", as a reminder of everything that followed the accident. Gogol spends his birthday with Maxine's family in a house on

Oyster Bay. Ashok, who visits Cleveland in Ohio, informs Ashima of a stomach upset, over the telephone. Later he died of a massive heart attack in a hospital. Ashima puts on all the lights at home, cries out aloud in the garden. Soniya informs Gogol, who shaves his hair. Wearing traditional dresses, the family performs Indian rituals at the funeral ceremony and 'sradha' prayers. An aloofness develops between Gogol and Maxine, as Gogol does not want to get away from his roots. The rites are performed on the banks of the Hooghly, and ashes and flowers are scattered in the river. Ashima wears white sari and white blouse, and advises Gogol to make up with Maxine.

Gogol meets Moushumi Chatterjee (Zuleikha Robinson), a student of French literature, on a blind date. Mousumi confesses to having affairs in Paris, but soon Gogol and Mousumi get married. Hindi film songs provide a background to mime and dance, as the couple count the dollars as gifts. The Bengali bride sticks to her maiden name, as she wishes to continue publishing under her old name. At the marriage anniversary party, Mousumi discloses that Nikhil also has a name, Gogol, which annoys the husband. She receives a letter to teach French at Surbonne, but declines as a good Bengali housewife. Mother, Ashima thinks of leaving for India, spending six months in India, and six months in USA, Mousumi reads Stendhal, while Gogol is asleep. Soniya is married to Benz, an American. Ashima decides to sell the house. When Mousumi plans a holiday in the Pyrenees in France an affair with Pierre is revealed. The marriage breaks up, as it was not enough that both were Bengalis. Ashima throws a farewell party with Indian friends. Gogol picks up a book of writings by Gogol, and the totem of living away from homeland and good luck returns. Ashima resumes singing with a Tanpura in Calcutta.

Personnal identify springs through in the Ganguly elders preservation and respect form their heritage. The children enjoy the popular American living style and culture, and are ill at ease with the Bengali Community's idio-synchratic manners.

Reminiscenes of the train accident and falling back on the writing of Nickolai Gogol fortify the past of Ashok. The three decades from the 1970s, from Calcutta to New York, covering two generations, surface as a mini-series of sari, jacket and currry culture. The exotic and familiar backgrounds, where the balancing of tradition and assimilation are played out, along with the emotionally charged portrayals can scarcely reduce the pace of the beginnings and conclusions of the different episodes. Abruptness and stereotypes are all too visible. The serious and the funny remain poignant in the family saga, but the script and Mira Nair's direction are overindulgent. Costumes and dialogue are well crafted in the recognizable reality. Frederick Elme's camera captures the swift plot movements with precision and mobility. The acting is brisk and sensitive. The numerous anxious pauses point to unease, and less to inner happiness or grief. The pictorial cycles in "The Namesake" are full of incidents and detail, but miss out on complex forms. □□□