

The Namesake (2003) by Jumpa Lahiri

Overview

Jumpa Lahiri's first novel follows Gogol Nikhi Gangulis, a first-generation American from a Bengali family, as he comes to understand his personal, cultural, and familiar identities. Throughout, he struggles to understand the significance around his unusual name, even going as far as to change it to Nikhi, as well as its significance to his family. Lahiri, the daughter of Bengali American immigrants, explained how the novel grew out of a personal feeling of being between two cultures. In an interview she said, "I found myself sort of caught between the world of my parents and the world they left behind and still clung to, and also the world that surrounded me at school and everywhere else, as soon as I set foot out the door. So I've never not been aware of that division in my life."¹ The novel is the follow up to Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize winning story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* (2000) and was followed the novels *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *The Lowland* (2013). It was adapted into a movie in 2006.

Why was it banned?

The novel has been banned for sexual references, language, and depictions of recreational drug use.

Discussion questions

1. Indian culture plays a central role for the characters in the novel as they attempt to adapt to American culture and disassociate themselves from negative Indian stereotypes. India was a British colony from 1858 to 1947 but the presence of English customs and the English language are still felt in the country to this day. During the twentieth century, popular European novelists depicted India, including E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* or Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*. How do you see Lahiri's identity as an Indian American immigrant influencing the novel's representation of Bengali culture? How does this novel extend your knowledge of Indian culture?
2. Names, the traditions they carry, and their significance form central themes in the novel. The story behind Gogol's name is a major driving factor in the plot, where the character transitions from hating his name to wishing his father told him his name's significance when he was younger. Why do names form such a central theme in the novel and in Gogol's identity? How do you interpret the connections between Gogol the character and Gogol the Russian writer?

¹ PBS Interview http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment-july-dec03-lahiri_10-16/

3. Many American novels focus on questions of American identity, as well as the stark realities which come with adapting to a new culture, including Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* or Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. What does *The Namesake* add to your understanding of American immigrants? Was there anything which surprised you in the Gangulis family's transition into American culture? How can you relate the immigrant experience of the characters in the novel to depictions of immigrants and refugees on the news?
4. At one crucial point in the novel Gogol changes his name and becomes part of Maxine's family in a symbolic attempt to distance himself from his Indian heritage. What were your reactions to his efforts to distance himself from his Indian heritage and family? What do you think sparked his re-acceptance of his family, name, and heritage?
5. The novel has been banned in high schools for its depictions of sexuality, as well descriptions of Gogol's recreational drug use in college, under the justification that such scenes are too intense for high school students. Do you agree? What do those scenes add to the novel?

Similar works

How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents by Julia Alvarez

We Need New Names by NoViolet Bulawayo

The Life of Pi by Yann Martel

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy

The Jungle by Upton Sinclair

Recommendations for additional information

"The Overcoat" Nikolai Gogol

Lahiri PBS interview on *The Namesake*

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment-july-dec03-lahiri_10-16/