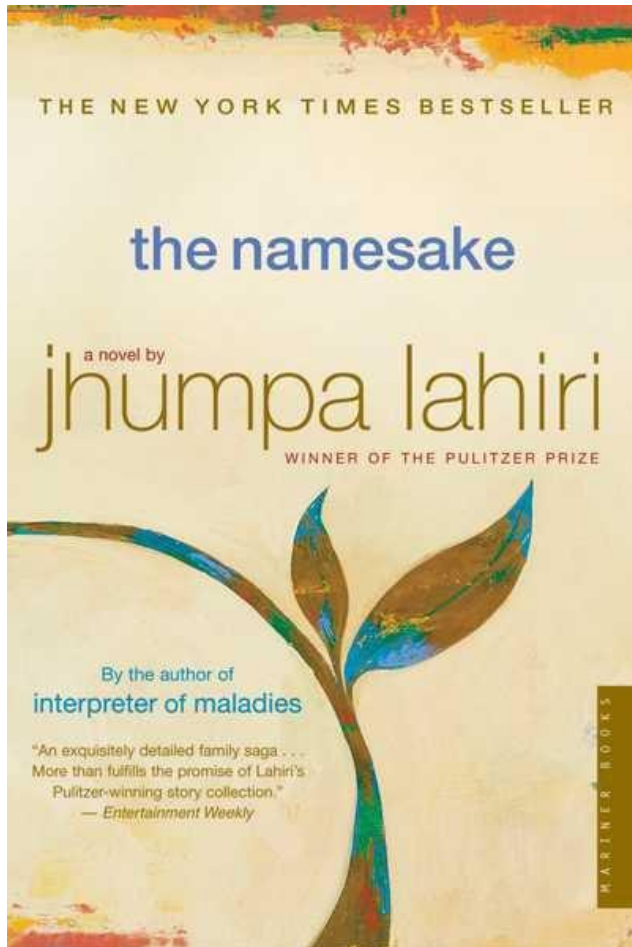


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1308897>

About the Book



From the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri's critically acclaimed first novel is a finely wrought, deeply moving family drama that illuminates her signature themes: the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures, the tangled ties between generations.

The Namesake takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. On the heels of an arranged marriage, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Ashoke does his best to adapt while his wife pines for home. When their son, Gogol, is born, the task of naming him betrays their hope of respecting old ways in a new world. And we watch as Gogol stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affair.

About the Author



Jhumpa Lahiri was born 1967 in London, England, and raised in Rhode Island. She is a graduate of Barnard College, where she received a B.A. in English literature, and of Boston University, where she received an M.A. in English, an M.A. in creative writing, an M.A. in comparative studies in literature and the arts, and a Ph.D. in renaissance studies. She has taught creative writing at Boston University, the Rhode Island School of Design, and the New School University.

Her debut collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It was translated into twenty-nine languages and became a bestseller both in the United States and abroad. It received the PEN/Hemingway Award, the New Yorker Debut of the Year award, an American Academy of Arts and Letters Addison Metcalf Award, and a nomination for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Lahiri was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2002.

Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake*, was a major national bestseller and was named the New York Magazine Book of the Year. She lives in New York with her husband and son.

Reviews

Booklist

Lahiri's short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize, and her deeply knowing, avidly descriptive, and luxuriously paced first novel is equally triumphant. Ashoke Ganguli, a doctoral candidate at MIT, chose Gogol as a pet name for his and his wife's first-born because a volume of the Russian writer's work literally saved his life, but, in one of many confusions endured by the immigrant Bengali couple, Gogol ends up on the boy's birth certificate. Unaware of the dramatic story behind his unusual and, eventually, much hated name, Gogol refuses to read his namesake's work, and just before he leaves for Yale, he goes to court to change his name to Nikhil. Immensely relieved to escape his parents' stubbornly all-Bengali world, he does his best to shed his Indianness, losing himself in the study of architecture and passionate if rocky love affairs. But of course he will always be Gogol, just as he will always be Bengali, forever influenced by his parents' extreme caution and restraint. No detail of Nikhil's intriguing life is too small for Lahiri's keen and zealous attention as she painstakingly

considers the viability of transplanted traditions, the many shades of otherness, and the lifelong work of defining and accepting oneself.

Publishers Weekly

One of the most anticipated books of the year, Lahiri's first novel (after 1999's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Interpreter of Maladies*) amounts to less than the sum of its parts. Hopscotching across 25 years, it begins when newlyweds Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli emigrate to Cambridge, Mass., in 1968, where Ashima immediately gives birth to a son, Gogol—a pet name that becomes permanent when his formal name, traditionally bestowed by the maternal grandmother, is posted in a letter from India, but lost in transit. Ashoke becomes a professor of engineering, but Ashima has a harder time assimilating, unwilling to give up her ties to India. A leap ahead to the '80s finds the teenage Gogol ashamed of his Indian heritage and his unusual name, which he sheds as he moves on to college at Yale and graduate school at Columbia, legally changing it to Nikhil. In one of the most telling chapters, Gogol moves into the home of a family of wealthy Manhattan WASPs and is initiated into a lifestyle idealized in Ralph Lauren ads. Here, Lahiri demonstrates her considerable powers of perception and her ability to convey the discomfort of feeling "other" in a world many would aspire to inhabit. After the death of Gogol's father interrupts this interlude, Lahiri again jumps ahead a year, quickly moving Gogol into marriage, divorce and a role as a dutiful if a bit guilt-stricken son. This small summary demonstrates what is most flawed about the novel: jarring pacing that leaves too many emotional voids between chapters. Lahiri offers a number of beautiful and moving tableaux, but these fail to coalesce into something more than a modest family saga. By any other writer, this would be hailed as a promising debut, but it fails to clear the exceedingly high bar set by her previous work.)

Library Journal

This first novel is an Indian American saga, covering several generations of the Ganguli family across three decades. Newlyweds Ashoke and Ashima leave India for the Boston area shortly after their traditional arranged marriage. The young husband, an engineering graduate student, is ready to be part of U.S. culture, but Ashima, disoriented and homesick, is less taken with late-Sixties America. She develops ties with other Bengali expatriates, forming lifelong friendships that help preserve the old ways in a new country. When the first Ganguli baby arrives, he is named Gogol in commemoration of a strange, life-saving encounter with the Russian writer's oeuvre. As Gogol matures, his unusual name proves to be a burden, though no more than the tensions and confusions of growing up as a first-generation American. This poignant treatment of the immigrant experience is a rich, stimulating fusion of authentic emotion, ironic observation, and

revealing details. Readers who enjoyed the author's Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, will not be disappointed.

Literary Criticism

Gogol's Namesake: Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake

Allusions to Nikolai V. Gogol and his short story "The Overcoat" permeate Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, beginning with Gogol's being the name the protagonist is called through most of the book. Yet few of the reviewers of the novel mentioned Nikolai Gogol at all in their discussions of the novel, except to describe the protagonist Gogol's loathing of his name, or to quote without comment or explanation Dostoevski's famous line, "We all came out of Gogol's Overcoat." So far, no one has looked beyond the surfaces to examine the significance of the allusions to Gogol that are so much a part of the fabric of Lahiri's novel.

Without the references to Nikolai Gogol, it is easy to read the novel as simply another account of the difficulties of a first-generation American trying to "find himself," nicely written, but not particularly thought-provoking. It may seem merely unexamined documentation of the confusion of its main character, a confusion which itself has become a bit of a cliché. The conventional wisdom about first generation Asian Americans is that an awareness of two cultures is a kind of curse which makes them unable to understand who they "really" are, as if identity were nothing more than cultural identification. Read with an understanding of the significance of the Gogol story, however, the novel is much more clearly an elucidation of the causes and meaning of that confusion, which comes not only from having a multiple cultural identity, but from some of the ways in which people in modern American society tend to view identity. In particular, the allusions to Gogol, along with the motif of naming and Lahiri's own unique literary style, seem to suggest that some of the characters' unnecessary unhappiness arises from the tendency to identify oneself with the aspects of selfhood that William James called the material self, one's surroundings, clothing, food, and possessions, and the social self, the loves and friendships that surround us. Furthermore, in a mobile society like modern America, unfortunately, the relationships of the social self are apt to be transitory, which seems to be part of the protagonist's problems in *The Namesake*. In addition, although James includes the immediate family as part of the material self, the protagonist does not seem to realize the extent to which this is true until too late, which is also not uncommon. In any case, what is often left underdeveloped is the essential self, the organizing consciousness that strives to understand the meaning and patterns of the events of one's life in

this world, that searches for continuity, or that seeks a way to make peace with the irrational.

At first it seems that neither the hapless Akaky Akakyvitch of Gogol's story nor his eccentric creator can have anything in common with the bright, handsome, conforming Gogol Ganguli of Lahiri's novel, or this fantastic, grotesque, and very Russian nineteenth-century short story with the seemingly realistic novel about a twentieth-century Indian-American's search for an identity in American society. Nevertheless, "The Overcoat" is about identity, among other things. The protagonist's name, Akaky Akakyevitch, suggests a contradictory identity in itself, being a saint's name and yet sounding like a Russian baby-talk word for feces; and of course the name is also simply a repetition of his father's name. Akaky is a non-entity. A scrivener, he delights in copying out other people's writing, and yet is strangely unable and unwilling to try to write anything of his own, or even to change a word in the original text when he is specifically asked to. As a text, he isn't anyone; he is simply copies of what is written by others. But this copying is bliss. His very lack of identity is the source of his happiness. This changes when he is obliged to buy a new overcoat, a costly overcoat, and becomes another person. Or rather, he becomes his overcoat. He and his new overcoat are even invited to a party in its honor by the assistant head clerk of his department. He becomes a new man, noticing women, for instance, when before he would forget where he was while crossing the street. As he is coming back from this uncharacteristic outing, his overcoat is stolen. When he reports the loss to a local dignitary (on his co-workers' advice--no idea is his own), he is bullied and insulted for his temerity in approaching such an important person. Tellingly, the Very Important Person demands, "Do you realize, sir, who you are talking to?" (Gogol 263), as if he didn't know who he was himself, without its being reconfirmed by other's fear of him. Exposed to the cold once again, the overcoatless Akaky then catches a fever and dies, but this is not the end of the story. Shortly after Akaky's death, a "living corpse" who looks like Akaky begins haunting the same square in which Akaky was robbed, but this time as a stealer of overcoats rather than as a victim. One of this Akaky's victims is the same Very Important Person who bullied him, who had been mildly regretting his harshness, and who is now frightened into real repentance. The last we hear of Akaky and his ghost is when a policeman sees a burly man whom he takes to be the ghostly overcoat thief, accosts him, and finds instead a man who is clearly not Akaky, but may be the original thief who robbed him.

It's a strange story, suggesting very non-American ideas about identity and the undesirability of having a fixed identity. The overcoat that Akaky buys at such cost seems to be both the material self and the social self, both of which he previously lacked, and which he then mistakes for who he is.

Vladimir Nabokov even suggests that for Akaky, the coat is like a mistress or a wife--some one/thing that defines him as a normal member of society and yet paradoxically causes him to lose his essential self. One can read the story as a kind of parable about identity theft and shifting identities, in which Akaky goes from being no-one, to being an overcoat, to being a ghost, and finally to being, perhaps, a version of the very person who robbed him, or at least into something that can be mistaken for him. Charles Bernheimer has suggested that the story reflects Nikolai Gogol's own horror of having a fixed identity. One of the reasons that Gogol was unable to finish *Dead Souls*, Bernheimer says, was that "for Gogol to write *The Book* would be equivalent to a fixing of his personality, an act of definition that would subject his secret soul to understanding, to penetration and violation by the other" (54). Richard Moore suggests as well that Akaky's copying is parallel to Gogol's own writing in which he assumes a series of voices. There is a way in which Akaky, then, is a version of his creator. Moreover, the ending is deliberately ambiguous so as not to impose a meaning, an identity, on the story itself. The true protection seems to lie in not being known, not being knowable, and yet, some kind of outward identity is necessary too.

"The Overcoat" is a meditation on identity and loss, but exactly what it is "saying" about these abstractions is ambiguous, because the story is clothed in language and structured to evoke meanings and evade them at the same time. The meaning of the story is not just in the plot; in fact, Vladimir Nabokov suggests that to the extent that the story has a meaning, the style, not the plot, conveys it. The story combines voices and tones and levels of reality. Nabokov says, "Gogol's art discloses that parallel lines not only meet, but they can wiggle and get most extravagantly entangled, just as two pillars reflected in water in the most wobbly contortions if the necessary ripple is there" (58). Multiple, contradictory realities and identities exist as once. Like a Zen paradox, the story does not have a fixed meaning, but serves rather to create a space in which the reader can experience his own private epiphany.

It is this ambiguity that draws Ashoke Ganguli, Gogol Ganguli's father, to the story in the first place. As he reads the story on the almost fatal train ride that becomes a turning point in his life, Ashoke thinks, "Just as Akaky's ghost haunted the final pages, so did it haunt a place deep in Ashoke's soul, shedding light on all that was irrational, that was inevitable about the world" (Lahiri 14). Lahiri does not tell us any more than this about what exactly it is that he understands about the irrational and the inevitable, because she, like Gogol, is working to evoke meanings rather than convey them. But perhaps one thing that Ashoke responds to in the story is the sense that both reality and identity are multiple, existing on many planes at the same time. Life is not a simple, rational, sequential experience. Ashoke gains some

unarticulated knowledge from the story that enables him to be many people at once and accept the contradictions of his life. He himself is both the dutiful son who returns to India every year to see his extended family and the man who left this hurt and bewildered family behind to begin a life in another country, both a Bengali and the father of two Americans, both the respected Professor Ganguli and the patronized foreigner, both Ashoke, his good name, and Mithu, his pet name. His world is not just India and America but the Europe of the authors he reads, his time both the twentieth and the nineteenth centuries. A person is many people, just as Akaky is all of the documents he copies and no one in himself. For Gogol Ganguli, however, the several identities that he takes on in the course of the novel are a source of pain, perhaps in part because he passively accepts them one after the other, often conjoined to a relationship with a woman, apparently confusing a series of material and social selves for who he is. Moreover, because these outer selves are sequential rather than simultaneous, they provide him with no sense of continuity, which is part of their function in the lives of more contented and secure people.

And as in Nikolai Gogol's short story, the meaning of Lahiri's novel seems to lie not so much in the plotline as in the style. It is a type of realism that assumes that to show reality, one must abandoned the tight causal plot of realism to show the randomness and irrationality of the events that define the characters' lives. In addition, the present tense prose, which at first may seem to be merely trendy and irritating, also creates the effect of "suppressing the shared past that connects writer and reader," as Ursula Le Guin has observed with some asperity about present tense prose in general (74). In this novel, however, the effect seems deliberate, as the characters are indeed cut off from their pasts--by physical distance, in the case of Ashoke and Ashima, or by the inability to understand the significance of the past, in the case of Gogol Ganguli and his wife Moushimi. Thus it seems appropriate that the readers are cut off from this past as well.

Lahiri's dispassionate, elusive style is one of the many items to come out of Gogol's overcoat. From him through Vladimir Nabokov and the modernists she has taken the idea that the style is the meaning, not merely the means of conveying it. The way in which she writes also comes through a tradition of American writers as well, particularly Hemingway and Raymond Carver, who acutely observe the details of physical reality as a way of implying the characters' inner struggles ("Big Two Hearted River" and "Cathedral," for example). Yet this style is blended with Gogol to create a hybrid entity, Russian, American, and Indian, through which Lahiri creates vivid characters whose identities are nonetheless unknowable.

Lahiri layers on detail after detail, until we can see the last eyelet in Ashoke's shoes. But something essential is always left out. We learn the names of all the people who attend Ashima's parties. We don't know what Ashima or Ashoke like about these friends or what makes them more than names. We know that the first girl Gogol has sex with was wearing "a plaid woolen skirt and combat boots and mustard tights" (105), but we don't know her name or what she looked like or even the details of her body that a man would be more likely to remember than the girl's clothing. We know what Gogol reads as a boy and the names of his boyhood friends, but we don't know what he thinks about these books or likes about these friends. We know what Gogol and his wife Moushumi say when they are chattering at yuppie dinner parties, but not what they say to each other when they are arguing or when they are expressing their love for each other. We sometimes learn what the characters feel, although more often, we are given a catalog of the details of their surroundings which they are noticing while they are having the feeling. And we almost never know what the characters are thinking, about who they are to themselves as they experience the rush of sounds and sensations that are their lives. Introspection, even if it were presented as interior monologue, would suggest that this voice was who the character "really" was. The effect is both eerie and deliberate, and perhaps suggests the ways in which essential identity, the self as a continuous organizing consciousness, is beyond the power of words to describe. We can only know the surface. A sense of what lies beyond the surface can only be evoked and illuminated.

The novel is told through the sensibilities of four different characters, Gogol Ganguli, his mother Ashima, his father Ashoke, and his wife Moushumi, all of whom reveal different aspects of the material world and the personal relationships which are a part of each character's outer identity. Of these people, Ashoke alone seems to have found the balance among the various aspects of self that enable him to live comfortably in a foreign country which his children will experience differently than he does. He has his family back in India, a network of Bengali friends whom he has known since coming to America, a house that he has lived in for years, and familiar Indian customs blended with American ones until the blending itself becomes familiar, all of which provide an outer protection for an inner self. The material world of America seems to be a source of unhappiness to Ashima (it is her consciousness, not Ashoke's, that frequently notices American habits with distaste). Thus throughout the book, she struggles to recover the material and social selves of her life in India and yet somehow adapt herself to life in the country to which she has come. For both Gogol and Moushumi, the process of finding a way to live comfortably with what seems to them a double identity, two very different outer worlds, is even more complex, since, like other young Americans, they tend to confuse the outer identity

with who they are. In part, they do this because modern consumer culture tends to encourage people to view themselves as their material selves, which makes finding a sense of self even more challenging for a person raised among different cultures and subcultures, especially if he concentrates on the question, "Which am I?," rather than realizing that he is both all and none of them.

Ashoke Ganguli seems to want to help his son discover a way in which to live with the complexity of identity. To begin with, following Bengali custom, he attempts to give him two identities, one identity, his *daknam* or pet name, who he is to the people who have known and loved him all his life, and another name, his *bhalonam*, his good name, who he is to the outside world. This will embed in him the knowledge that he is at least two people, who he is to his family and the people who care about him, and who he is to outsiders. Perhaps he also wishes to convey the idea that identity is multiple and many faceted, like reality. It is not one thing or another, but simultaneity, as his own life has been.

But the good name Ashoke later selects, Nikhil, the five-year old Gogol and his school reject; and then the eighteen-year-old Gogol rejects the name Gogol and becomes his good name, Nikhil, to everyone except sometimes his parents. Ashoke has given his son two names, two identities, but Gogol must find their meaning for himself in the country and the time in which he has been born. And with his acceptance and rejection of his two names, he begins a pattern of first accepting and then rejecting outer identities that seem imposed on him by others and which he is seems unable to distinguish from his essential self. He seems to think he must be one thing or another, Bengali or American, rather than accepting ambiguity and multiplicity.

The name Gogol means very different things to Gogol and Ashoke. To Ashoke, the name Gogol is first of all a reminder of the way in which the reading of Gogol's short story saved his life, how it was his dropping of the page from the story that alerted rescuers that he was still alive after the train wreck and made them stop and pull him out of the wreckage where he would otherwise have perished. It is a rebirth of himself in a different form, as a person who wants to leave India and travel to other places, to form an identity for himself different from the one created by his life in India. And so, in a way, is the birth of his son. But Gogol is also a connection to his own family, to his grandfather who told him to read the Russian realists, and whom he is going to see at the time of the train wreck. There is an identity here that transcends culture, as generations of Indians (ultimately, Gogol Ganguli becomes the fourth) find a sense of life's essence in an English translation of a Russian work.

But to Gogol Ganguli, Gogol is simply a strange name that he has been saddled with by accident. It makes him too different. (And it probably doesn't help that when pronounced correctly, the name sounds like the English word "goggle"). When he is in high school and supposed to study Gogol's story in English class, he refuses to read it. And strangely, instead of leading a discussion of the story itself, his teacher tells them about Gogol's life, focusing on Gogol's inner torment and his death by self-starvation. Gogol the writer is reduced to what was most bizarre about his personal life, for the delighted horror of American teenagers. He is treated in exactly the way the living Gogol most feared. He becomes his difference, not his genius. And ironically, because of Lahiri's style, the teacher himself becomes nothing more than his clothing and his mannerisms. To Gogol Ganguli, then, Gogol becomes the identity of a foreign madman who never experienced sex or any of the other initiations that lead to an adult identity for modern Americans. And yet he is still ambivalent. As Lahiri explains, "To read the story, he believes, would mean paying tribute to his namesake, accepting it somehow. Still, listening to his classmates complain, he feels perversely responsible, as if his own work were being attacked" (92).

Throughout the novel, many of the most significant conversations between Gogol Ganguli and Ashoke begin with Nikolai Gogol, as Ashoke attempts to connect with his son through Gogol the same way that the Russian writer connected him to his grandfather. But Gogol Ganguli rejects these gestures, not recognizing them for what they are. When Gogol Ganguli is fourteen, his father gives him a hard-bound copy of Gogol's short stories; Gogol thanks him politely and then continues listening to his Beatles' album. When Ashoke quotes to him, "We all came out of Gogol's Overcoat," Gogol Ganguli asks, "What's that supposed to mean?" His father doesn't answer, but merely tells him it will make sense to him someday (78). Characteristically, Lahiri doesn't tell us how it makes sense to Ashoke, or how it will later make sense to his son. Later, when Gogol is no longer officially Gogol but Nikhil, Ashoke does tell him directly part of the personal significance of the name to him, how it was by dropping the page of Gogol that he was rescued the night he almost died. When Gogol asks his father if he then reminds him of that night, Ashoke replies, "You remind me of everything that followed" (124). For Ashoke, Gogol is a new life, a rebirth, the creation of another life in another country, both his own life and his children's. While Gogol Ganguli is disturbed by this knowledge, Lahiri doesn't tell us precisely what he understands from it, except to imply, perhaps, that he feels to some degree guilty about having changed his name to Nikhil.

For at eighteen, Gogol rejects the name, and with it, the trans-cultural identity that his father tried to give him. Although Nikhil is an Indian name, it enables him to try on a sophisticated identity he thinks he wants, sexy,

cool, "normal." (He is "Nick" in dialogue later in the novel, especially when he is talking to Americans who are not the children of immigrants). Nikhil is his overcoat which makes the ways in which he is different from other Americans invisible. Thus it is as Nikhil that he first kisses a girl, thinking afterward as he tells his friends about it, "it hadn't been Gogol who kissed Kim. Gogol had nothing to do with it" (96). It is Nikhil whom he becomes at college and as Nikhil that he has his first girlfriend. Yet despite their apparent intimacy, he never introduces the girlfriend Ruth to his parents, because "He cannot imagine being with her in a house where he is still Gogol" (114). And Ruth herself is part of a series of identities which Gogol tries on, in this case, probably, the identity of typical Yale student. She is never precisely who she is in herself, since we never know the traits he values in her or what they talk about or who he is to her. The relationship dissolves when she goes to England and comes back full of British mannerisms and expressions which have no place in his life. Thus, a person who had once seemed the emotional center of his life moves out of it forever, beginning a pattern which will continue throughout the course of the novel. Perhaps it is not particularly unusual that he seems to have no lasting friendships to give him a sense of continuity either; his emotional life centers on his lovers, and when each woman ceases being his lover, she moves out of his life entirely, taking with her the self he was with her.

The overcoat, the name Nikhil, seems to represent part of the material self, along with the personal possessions, the clothing, the food, the houses and apartments. The transient love affairs like that with Ruth through which Gogol becomes a series of alternate identities are also the overcoat. Or to be more exact, his relationships provide him with possible identities which he passively accepts, at least temporarily. But to him, unlike his father, these identities come one at a time and are mutually exclusive and transitory. They are not what protect him from the outside world, but rather a disguise that he confuses for himself.

This becomes even more clear when time shifts, and we next see Gogol twelve years later when he is an architect living in New York, where he has gone in part to escape being too geographically close to his family. Although he is now a grown man, he still seems to be going through the adolescent struggle to form an identity for himself separate from the world of his parents. His being an architect seems to be a metaphor for the building of an outer self that he himself has designed. Yet he doesn't seem to have been able to do that. Tellingly, he wanted to build homes, but ends up designing staircases and closets for offices instead. Instead of making personal spaces, he creates impersonal public ones; even his own apartment remains as an impersonal space, without décor, without anything of him in it--or perhaps its very absence of personality reflects him and the way in

which he lives elsewhere, in other people's spaces and material and social selves.

Maxine, a beautiful, wealthy American woman from an old WASP family has sought him out after they met at a party and absorbed him into her world and her lifestyle. He spends most of his time in the house where Maxine lives with her parents, learning their tastes in food, wine, dress, and conversation. She has a sense of herself, of the continuity of her life with that of her parents and grandparents that he thinks he will never have, because he doesn't have a sense of what he might have in common with his parents emotionally or intellectually. At one point, "He realizes that she has never wished to be anyone other than herself ... This, in his opinion, was the biggest difference between them" (138). And yet he never actively tries to create another identity for himself, as his parents have done, or to make sense of the one he has by trying to understand more about the permanent relationships in his life, those with his family.

Maxine's sense of continuity and selfhood enable her to weather unhappy love affairs (she has just gone through one before meeting Gogol) without being devastated by them. Perhaps this is part of what draws him to her. She and her house and her parents' summer place in New Hampshire and their whole material world are his next identity. He is Maxine Ratcliff's lover, or, as her parents introduce him, "the architect Max brought up with her" (157). It's a lovely, expensive, comfortable identity, given to him as a love-token, which he seems to accept without thought.

The only problem is that he cannot reconcile it with his identity as Ashima and Ashoke's son and thus on some level, it feels like a betrayal. It's not just a rejection of the home and food and conversational style of his parents, or of personal habits that are not to his personal taste; to him it seems a rejection of them. Thus he imagines hearing the phone ring in the middle of the night at the summer cottage and thinks it's his parents calling him to wish him a happy birthday, until he realizes that they don't even know the number. The call is an imaginary connection to a self he has tried to cut himself away from to become something different from the identity which he thinks has been given him by his parents. It is a reminder of the guilt he feels in rejecting their world and by extension, them. He hasn't yet realized that instead of being an identity imposed on him from outside, they are part of the pattern of key relationships in his life through which he can define himself.

Gogol's way of living with Maxine and thinking about himself changes when Ashoke dies suddenly and unexpectedly of a heart attack. The material self is not the real self. And yet it is also necessary, just as Akaky's overcoat

was. The paradox is true in the way the multiple realities and identities of "The Overcoat" are true. Ashoke has created a material self of familiar rituals, places, and foods and social self in his relationships with other Bengali families, both of which have formed a buffer for him, allowing him to live as a complex human being in a country which still seems to feel foreign to him. When Ashoke dies, all that is left of him are his material and social selves, the anonymous apartment where he was living by himself while on a fellowship at another university, his clothing, which Gogol Ganguli collects from the hospital, his rental car, the meager possessions in the apartment, the more ample possessions in the house he shared with Ashima, the scores of condolence letters that come from colleagues and friends that represent a lifetime's network of relationships. These things both are and are not Ashoke. They make the absence of his living self in all its potential so much more acute. Perhaps to feel that sense of lost potential, Gogol stays overnight in his father's apartment, drives the car, and then returns to stay for weeks in the house in which Ashoke lived with Ashima, not only to comfort his mother but to immerse himself as much as he can in who his father was.

Lahiri describes all of Ashoke's possessions and the places he lived in intricate detail, catalog after catalog of specific and vivid descriptions of objects, their shape, color, texture, turning them into a trope for Gogol's grief. She describes the objects instead of the grief to show us more powerfully that grief's intensity, for the grief is beyond words. Only the objects are not. They alone can evoke that an approximation of that grief.

She also describes the objects because that is what Gogol focuses on while feeling that grief. Among Ashoke's possessions is a copy of *The Comedians*, Graham Greene's bitter novel about murder and revolution in Papa Doc's Haiti, in which the characters come to regard the horror of the police state with a mixture of idealism, cynicism, and a strangely energizing despair. Like "The Overcoat," it's a work about the absurdity of the human condition, and it's a key to understanding something of Ashoke's sensibility and his rich and complex intellectual life. This is the book he was reading when he died. But Gogol apparently never thinks to read it.

After his father's death, and in part perhaps because of his guilt over the way he had distanced himself from his parents, he separates himself more and more from Maxine and her world, presumably to Maxine's confusion and distress. But he himself doesn't seem to realize why he is doing this. Finally, when the relationship ends, we are told almost nothing about what he thinks or feels. We merely learn what he does and more tellingly what he fails to do. When Maxine comes to visit him in his family home, now a place of mourning of which she is not a part, he "doesn't bother to translate what

people are saying (in Bengali), to introduce her to everyone, to stay close by her side" (182). It is the same technique Lahiri used to convey Gogol's desolation at the loss of his father, but now it is used to imply something different, to suggest, perhaps, the difficulty of understanding one's own motivations, especially concerning deeply felt emotions. The self that he assumed with Maxine is abandoned, an empty shell of a self he can walk away from with few regrets. It is not who Gogol is. Indeed, Gogol defines himself primarily by who he isn't, by rejecting or refusing to choose potential definitions, as he did when he was a baby and refused to choose the object that was supposed to foretell his occupation in life.

There seems to be in Gogol a reluctance to explore on his own, to make the active choices through which some people can gain a sense of self. After Ashoke's death, a memory returns to Gogol, a memory of one of the few significant exchanges between father and son Lahiri reports which did not involve a discussion of Nikolai Gogol, perhaps because it suggests an idea about identity so different from that of Gogol, of identity as something to be actively created. (Yet it too is one of the many simultaneous and contradictory truths about reality and identity). Ashoke takes Gogol Ganguli on a walk on Cape Cod, picking their way over the rocks to the last point of land, the furthest point east, the place where they can go no further, with Gogol literally following in his father's footsteps. "Try to remember it always," his father tells him. "Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go" (187). The anecdote is an open metaphor, and although Gogol Ganguli himself doesn't seem to explore its meaning, the emblematic image seems to suggest the way in which his father had wanted to guide him, to show him that exploration could be exhilarating, that he wasn't "too little" to discover for himself where he could go and what he could do. It also suggests that the action of seeking can in itself be part of who one is, how one defines himself. However, at the time, and indeed even as an adult, Gogol doesn't seem to understand this meaning or this feeling. In fact quite the opposite sensation occurs to him later, when he is in Paris with his new wife Moushumi on what could have been like a honeymoon for them but which is not. He looks at the way in which Moushumi had created a new life in a foreign country for herself when she had lived in Paris before she met him. He thinks, "here Moushumi had reinvented herself, without misgivings, without guilt ... He realizes that this is what their parents had done in America. What he, in all likelihood, will never do" (233).

The choice of Moushumi as a lover and then a wife seems to have been part of an unconscious attempt to concretize another identity, an adult identity that would connect him to his childhood world and to his family. But to say he chooses her is perhaps to misrepresent the case. She is the daughter of a

Bengali couple whom Ashima and Ashoke had known since coming to America, and whom he calls at his mother's insistence. When Moushumi turns out to be attractive and interesting, the two begin dating, and then decide to get married in part because their families assume that they will marry and there seems to be no good reason not to. He passively assumes this other identity in marrying her, as he assumed the identity Maxine had offered him. Although there are habits and traits he loves about her, a factor in both his love for her and hers for him is not just the person him/herself, but the image of the self reflected back through the other. In fact, a waiter in a restaurant once mistakes them for brother and sister rather than lovers, which suggests the way in which they are mirror images of one another, versions of the same experience, both seeking identity from material things and from sequential and temporary relationships, just as Gogol's Akaky had done with his overcoat.

But for Moushumi, however, the ways in which the partner reflects the self proves problematic, because her sense of identity seems in many ways more incomplete and insecure than Gogol's, at least in the way in which she is presented through Gogol's perceptions of her actions. Like Maxine, Moushumi has undergone a broken relationship just before she met Gogol, but unlike Maxine, Moushumi was totally devastated by this breakup because she had invested so much of herself in it. The relationship defined her, and thus its ending was a kind of death of the self. She seems to have found little else to sustain and confirm her when this part of herself is gone--except the material self, and the self created by yet another relationship, this time the one with Gogol. Tellingly, one of Moushumi's friends later accidentally calls Gogol "Graham," the name of Moushumi's former fiancé, which suggests that perhaps Gogol is simply a substitute for Graham in Moushumi's mind as well.

Moushumi loves the sense of herself which she created while she was living in France, of herself as brilliant, sensual, exotic, and cosmopolitan. But this self seems primarily material. This may be why it is so important to her to conform to all the habits and customs of the French when she and Gogol are in Paris, not having her picture taken "like a tourist," and worried that Gogol will order a café crème at the wrong time of day and identify himself as a bumbling American tourist.

She also likes the American self she has created through her artsy-academic friends, Astrid and Donald, who also seem to be a predictable set of ideas and behaviors and possessions, nothing more than the material self that they share with thousands of other educated urban upper middle-class Americans. (One wonders about the extent to which Moushumi is to them simply an ethnic accessory to their ready-made yuppie outfits, a Pashmina

shawl thrown over their designer name-brand overcoats). There must be more to them than that, and yet this is how they seem to Gogol.

And it is to them Moushumi turns for all advice on furnishings, food, and clothing, so that she gets the American material self right too, an American material self that Gogol feels he neither has nor wants a part in. The inadequacy of this upper middle-class American material self of Astrid and Donald is suggested by an emblematic scene in which Moushumi and Gogol celebrate their first anniversary at a restaurant recommended by Astrid and Donald. The place is hard to find, unimaginatively decorated, over-priced, and the chicly tiny portions of food leave both of them ravenous, just as the yuppie material self does. This section is narrated from Gogol's point of view, with his perceptions of Moushumi's actions and his distaste for the material self she is creating for the two of them. The technique enables Lahiri to establish Gogol's growing sense of the fragility and falseness of these created selves that consist of where one lives, where one shops, what one talks about, and how one dresses. If he sees in this a reflection of his own behavior, Lahiri doesn't tell us.

The next section, dated 1999, switches from Gogol's interior perceptions to Moushumi's, making her the fourth character from whose perspective we see the world. In this section we get no sense of her attempt to build a material self for her and Gogol that dominated his recording consciousness. Rather, she seems most concerned with not being swallowed up by the identity of being a married woman, which she associates with her mother's helplessness and dependency. Again, like Gogol, her sense of herself seems to come more from refusing identities rather than trying to form one for herself by making sense of her own experiences. She has refused to change her last name to Ganguli, part of the novel's pattern of probing the relationship between naming and identity. She deliberately spends time by herself, telling Gogol she is studying, a lie that seems as necessary to her as the time alone to maintain a sense of herself as a separate entity from him. She is also troubled by what Gogol has come to represent to her in her own mind. "Though she knows it's not his fault, she can't help but associate him, at times, with the very life she had resisted, had struggled so mightily to leave behind" (Lahiri 250). Gogol himself has wondered earlier "whether he represents some sort of capitulation or defeat" (Lahiri 231). Unfortunately, his intuition seems to be right. Although Gogol is referred to as Nikhil in this section and this section only, since this is how Moushumi thinks of him, the Nikhil to whom she responds is not the sophisticated man that Gogol thought he was becoming in assuming that name, but the safe and familiar man she associates with her own awkward adolescence. Just as Gogol saw in Ruth and Maxine an identity he thought he wanted and then ultimately could not reconcile with his own sense of himself, however vague and

unarticulated that sense of self might have been, so Moushumi seems to see in Gogol an identity for herself that she doesn't want to be.

This pattern of looking for identities in relationships seems to be dangerous for both Gogol and Moushumi. It is because of the sense of herself that she feels with Gogol, a self she doesn't want, that barely a year after she and Gogol are married, she has an affair with an older, less attractive man with the unlikely name of Dimitri Desjardens, a man she knew and was infatuated with back when she was the bookish girl who had crushes on unattainable men and seemed to herself doomed never to have a boyfriend. The name of Moushumi's lover is significant, again a part of the motif of naming. The first name is the same as that of the adulterous protagonist in Chekov's "The Lady with the Pet Dog" and of the tormented brother in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The last name, which looks French and yet has an Anglicized pronunciation, suggests the kind of multicultural, cosmopolitan identity Moushumi would like to claim. (The pet name he has for her, "Mouse," doesn't sound particularly promising).

Gogol learns of the affair when she accidentally mentions her lover's name and then immediately reacts with such horror that Gogol understands at once that this is not just the name of some friend he doesn't know, but of a man with whom she is having an affair. All that Lahiri tells us of his response is, "And for the first time in his life, another man's name upset him more than his own" (283). At first it seems strange that it is the name, and not the man, that he hates. However, it is the name, or the part of herself symbolized by that name, that Moushumi has fallen in love with, so it is strangely appropriate that the name itself disturbs Gogol.

Lahiri tells us little more about the suffering Gogol experiences at the breakup of his marriage and nothing at all about Moushumi's feelings. Instead, we get long descriptions of each of them going about their daily lives during the period when Gogol was still unaware of the affair. In all of these descriptions, they are alone, and we see almost nothing of their interactions with each other. The effect is strangely cinematic, and suggests perhaps the ways in which the outward behavior of people is what is most knowable and yet is nevertheless so misleading.

When we see Gogol next, when he returns to his parents' house to help his mother pack up their belongings prior to selling it, he seems changed, more complex, more aware of the contradictions of his life and more accepting of them. In this section, he looks back on his relationship with Moushumi and realizes that "it seemed like a permanent part of him that no longer had any relevance or currency. As if that time were a name he'd ceased to use" (Lahiri 284). He seems to be becoming aware that the discontinuity of his

life is one of the sources of his pain. He has other insights into the complexity of his identity as well, as he begins to understand that he is not defined by one relationship, but by all the things that have happened to him and by the ways in which he has tried to understand these experiences. And he comes to some understanding as well of the irrationality and unpredictability of the life that has defined him. "Things that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end" (Lahiri 287).

Of course, much of anyone's life is accidental. Ashoke's life was accidental as well, having the good luck to survive a train wreck when the genial man next to him died, and having married a stranger who turned out to be a person he could love and respect. But he had also made conscious decisions to change his life, as he did in coming to America. He seemed to have inner resources his son lacks, including an acceptance of the irrational and of the fluidity of his own identity. Perhaps by understanding more about his father and what a writer like Nikolai Gogol meant to his father, Gogol could understand something of his own passivity as well and the inadequacy of the ways in which he had sought to define himself.

It is immediately after this insight about the accidental quality of his own life that he finds the copy of Nikolai Gogol's short stories which his father had given him those many years ago, and reads for the first time the inscription that his father had written for him, "The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" (288). He reads this while a celebration of multiplicity and hybridity is taking place downstairs, a Christmas and going-away party for Ashima, attended by her Bengali-American friends who have made a Christian holiday now part of their own family tradition even though they are not Christian. It seems an emblem of the potential for a continuous blended and fluid identity that Gogol may be now ready to accept about himself.

We are left to ponder with Gogol the meaning of both the sentence that Ashoke wrote and the name Gogol was given. The name can mean genius, the need to lose identity rather than find it, an understanding of the absurd tragedy of mistaking yourself for your overcoat, a world of multiple realities, of the irrationality and randomness of life, all of the things the fourteen-year-old Gogol Ganguli didn't realize he might need to understand. And yet these may have been exactly the sorts of things he needed to know to help to prevent at least some of the "out of place and wrong" things from happening to him and to enable him to create a self more of his own choosing, rather than one composed of what he had refused or what others would have chosen for him.

Finally, then, in both its style and plotline, in the characters' repeating patterns of behavior, we get hints of how the various aspects of the self can interact and of the many things identity can be. We see for one thing that this interaction may vary from one person to the next, as the four main characters show, and that not only do individuals differ, but the same person can react differently at different times, can feel he or she "is" different aspects of the self. Gogol's unhappiness may not come from the problems of being bi-cultural, precisely, but from his own limited self-understand and his rational impulse to see alternative selves as binary and mutually exclusive. Both nationality and ethnicity affect one's sense of identity, because they are part of the material self, and yet they are not all of what one is, and there are ways in which multiple and seemingly conflicting material selves may increase the difficulties of self-knowledge. Yet there is a self beyond and within this that can never be articulated, only sensed and evoked--as are the meanings of this novel. As in Nikolai Gogol's "the Overcoat," the form, the language, and the subject matter of the novel work together to help us to find the space in which to discover our own meanings and contemplate the ineffable.

Source: Caesar, Judith. "Gogol's Namesake: Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *Atenea* 27.1 (June 2007): 103-119. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 282. Detroit: Gale, 2010. Literature Resource Center.

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions

Source:

http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/lahiri_namesake.shtml#discussion

1. *The Namesake* opens with Ashima Ganguli trying to make a spicy Indian snack from American ingredients — Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts — but "as usual, there's something missing." How does Ashima try and make over her home in Cambridge to remind her of what she's left behind in Calcutta? Throughout *The Namesake*, how does Jhumpa Lahiri use food and clothing to explore cultural transitions — especially through rituals, like the *annaprasan*, the rice ceremony? Some readers have said that Lahiri's writing makes them crave the meals she evokes so beautifully. What memories or desires does Lahiri bring up for you? Does her writing ever make you "hunger"?

2. The title *The Namesake* reflects the struggles Gogol Ganguli goes through to identify with his unusual names. How does Gogol lose first

his public name, his *bhalonam*, and then his private pet name, his *daknam*? How does he try to remake his identity, after choosing to rename himself, and what is the result? How do our names precede us in society, and how do they define us? Do you have a pet name, or a secret name — and has that name ever become publicly known? Do different people call you by different names? Did you ever wish for a new name? How are names chosen in your family?

3. *Newsweek* said of Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, "Jhumpa Lahiri writes such direct, translucent prose you almost forget you're reading." *The Namesake* is also subtle in style, elegant, and realistically paced. How are the events of the novel simultaneously dramatic and commonplace? What details made the characters real to you? Did you ever lose yourself in the story?

4. When Gogol is born, the Gangulis meet other Bengali families with small children, and Ashima finds that with a new baby "perfect strangers, all Americans, suddenly take notice of her, smiling, congratulating her for what she's done." How, for all of us, do children change our place in the community, and what we expect from it? Have you ever connected with someone you may have otherwise never spoken to — of a different ethnic background or economic class — through his children or your own?

5. In his youth, Ashoke Ganguli is saved from a massive train wreck in India. When his son, Gogol, is born, Ashoke thinks, "Being rescued from that shattered train had been the first miracle of his life. But here, now, reposing in his arms, weighing next to nothing but changing everything, is the second." Is Ashoke's love for his family more poignant because of his brush with death? Why do you think he hides his past from Gogol? What moments define us more — accidents or achievements, mourning or celebration?

6. Lahiri has said, "The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are . . . who grow up in two worlds simultaneously." What do you think Gogol wants most from his life? How is it different from what his family wants for him, and what they wanted when they first came to America to start a family? How have expectations changed between generations in your own family? Do you want something different for your own children from what your parents wanted for you?

7. Jhumpa Lahiri has said of *The Namesake*, "America is a real presence in the book; the characters must struggle and come to terms with what it means to live here, to be brought up here, to belong and not belong here." Did *The Namesake* allow you to think of America in a new way? Do you agree that America is a real presence in *The Namesake*? How is India also a presence in the book?

8. The marriage of Ashima and Ashoke is arranged by their families. The closest intimacy they share before their wedding is when Ashima steps briefly, secretly, into Ashoke's shoes. Gogol's romantic encounters are very different from what his parents experienced or expected for their son. What draws Gogol to his many lovers, especially to Ruth, Maxine, and eventually Moushumi? What draws them to him? From where do you think we take our notions of romantic love — from our family and friends, or from society and the media? How much does your cultural heritage define your ideas and experience of love?

9. Lahiri explores in several ways the difficulty of reconciling cross-cultural rituals around death and dying. For instance, Ashima refuses to display the rubbings of gravestones young Gogol makes with his classmates. And when Gogol's father suddenly dies, Gogol's relationship with Maxine is strained and quickly ends. Why do you think their love affair can't survive Gogol's grief? How does the loss of Gogol's father turn him back toward his family? How does it also change Sonia and Ashima's relationship?

10. Did you find the ending of *The Namesake* surprising? What did you expect from Moushumi and Gogol's marriage? Do you think Moushumi is entirely to blame for her infidelity? Is Gogol a victim at the end of the book? In the last few pages of *The Namesake*, Gogol begins to read "The Overcoat" for the first time — the book his father gave him, by his "namesake." Where do you imagine Gogol will go from here?

Multimedia

***Pulitzer Winner Lahiri Returns With 'The Namesake'* (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1415693>

A discussion of novel and novelist on NPR.

***A conversation with author Jhumpa Lahiri* (Video Clip)**

<http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/1741>

An interview with Lahiri from Charlie Rose.

The Namesake (Movie)

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1301930>

(Call number: DVD Drama Namesake)

The son of Indian immigrants born in America wants to fit in with fellow New Yorkers, but his family is unwilling to let go of their traditional ways.

Further Reading

Interpreter of Maladies: Stories by Jhumpa Lahiri

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1155546>

(Call number: Fiction Lahiri)

The nine stories in this stunning debut collection unerringly chart the emotional journeys of characters seeking love beyond the barriers of nations and generations. Imbued with the sensual details of Indian culture, these stories speak with passion and wisdom to everyone who has ever felt like a foreigner. Like the interpreter of the title story, Lahiri translates between the strict traditions of her ancestors and a baffling new world.

Bangladesh: a country study by Richard F. Nyrop

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1000420>

(Call number: 954.92 Ba)

Area handbook for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh: from a nation to a state by Craig Baxter

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1129664>

(Call number: 954.92 Ba)

In 1996, Bangladesh celebrates its 25th anniversary. When the country became independent from Pakistan in 1971, it proclaimed itself a parliamentary democracy with four goals—democracy, secularism, socialism, and nationalism. This comprehensive introduction to Bangladesh's history, polity, economy, and society reassesses its successes and failures in reaching these goals after a quarter century of nationhood. Craig Baxter traces the development of national identity in the region, first as part of India and then of Pakistan, and the slow evolution toward statehood. He also explores the formative periods of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and British government that preceded Pakistani rule and subsequent independence. Anyone wishing to understand this poor, populous, but ambitious young nation will find this book an invaluable reference.

Author's official website

<http://www.randomhouse.com/kvpa/jhumpalahiri/>

Author website administered by her publisher.

Read-Alikes

***Book Club To Go!* *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1209379>

(Call number: Fiction Ali)

Already hailed by the *London Observer* as "one of the most significant British novelists of her generation," Ali has written a stunningly accomplished debut about one outsider's quest to find her voice. What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was mantra, fettle, and challenge. Nazneen's inauspicious entry into the world, an apparent stillbirth on the hard mud floor of a village hut, imbues in her a sense of fatalism that she carries across continents when she is married off to Chanu, a man old enough to be her father. Nazneen moves to London and, for years, keeps house, cares for her husband, and bears children, just as a girl from the village is supposed to do. But gradually she is transformed by her experience, and begins to question whether fate controls her or whether she has a hand in her own destiny.

The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1255611>

(Call number: Fiction Desai)

In a crumbling, isolated house at the foot of Mount Kanchenjunga lives an embittered old judge who wants to retire in peace when his orphaned granddaughter Sai arrives on his doorstep. The judge's chatty cook watches over her, but his thoughts are mostly with his son, Biju, hopscotching from one New York restaurant job to another, trying to stay a step ahead of the INS, forced to consider his country's place in the world. When a Nepalese insurgency in the mountains threatens Sai's new-sprung romance with her handsome Nepali tutor and causes their lives to descend into chaos, they, too, are forced to confront their colliding interests. The nation fights itself. The cook witnesses the hierarchy being overturned and discarded. The judge must revisit his past, his own role in this grasping world of conflicting desires-every moment holding out the possibility for hope or betrayal. A novel of depth and emotion, Desai's second, long-awaited novel fulfills the grand promise established by her first.

Love Marriage by V.V. Ganeshananthan

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1308561>

(Call number: Fiction Ganeshananthan)

In this globe-scattered Sri Lankan family, we speak of only two kinds of marriage. The first is the Arranged Marriage. The second is the Love Marriage. In reality, there is a whole spectrum in between, but most of us spend years running away from the first toward the second. [p. 3] The

daughter of Sri Lankan immigrants who left their collapsing country and married in America, Yalini finds herself caught between the traditions of her ancestors and the lure of her own modern world. But when she is summoned to Toronto to help care for her dying uncle, Kumaran, a former member of the militant Tamil Tigers, Yalini is forced to see that violence is not a relic of the Sri Lankan past, but very much a part of her Western present. While Kumaran's loved ones gather around him to say goodbye, Yalini traces her family's roots-and the conflicts facing them as ethnic Tamils-through a series of marriages.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Extra!

As a group, discuss cultural ideas that your parents may have tried to instill in each of you and how you processed their attempt. Did you accept or reject what they taught you?

