

<http://digitalfilmmaker.net/dv/features/thenamesake/index.html>

## THE NAMESAKE: “this is home—the world she has created”

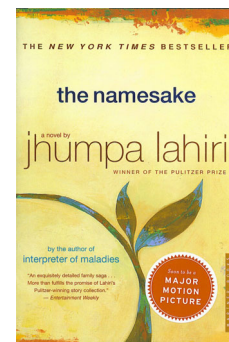
Pen's Points: ❀❀❀❀<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub><sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>

Special for The Digital Filmmaker  
by Jan Lisa Huttner



“There where my heart has settled long ago  
I must go, I must go,  
Who could imagine I'd be wand'ring so  
Far from the home I love  
Yet there with my love, I'm home.”

-- Sheldon Harnick  
(from “Fiddler on the Roof”)



**The Namesake opens in selected theaters nationwide on March 9, 2007.**

Mira Nair burst onto the international film scene in 1988, the year her first feature film, “Salaam Bombay!” was released. The applause was deafening. “Bombay” won five awards, including the prestigious Golden Camera award from the Cannes Film Festival jury. The folks giving out BAFTA, Cesar, and Golden Globe awards all nominated it for “Best Foreign Language Film,” and then it received the ultimate honor: an Oscar nomination.

Heady stuff, and after “Bombay,” Nair (rhymes with “Fire”) made seven more feature films (including two for American cable television) racking up an almost uncountable number of nominations from critics, guilds, and audiences alike. Having seen them all,

and loved them all, I can say without reservation that “The Namesake” is Mira Nair’s best film to date. Jhumpa Lahiri’s best-selling novel is the perfect vehicle for Nair, allowing her to explore with exquisite intensity the two themes that have most marked her career: the lessons to be learned from arranged marriages now that Hollywood has commercialized romantic love; and the search for “home” in an ever-flattening world.

Lahiri’s novel (also called “The Namesake”) is the story of Gogol Ganguli. Gogol enters the world on the first page, and he’s alone with his thoughts on the last page. Gogol is an East Coast kid: born in a Cambridge, Massachusetts hospital, he’s raised in a Boston suburb, and heads one state south to Yale University in his teens before settling into professional life in Manhattan, one state further south, as a young adult. Although Ashima Bhaduri and Ashoke Ganguli, Gogol’s mother and father, are essential characters, the novel is equally concerned with Gogol’s romantic coming-of-age: his first infatuation (with Ruth), his first committed relationship (with Maxine), his first casual affair (with Bridget), and his first marriage (to Moushumi). He’s a type Lahiri presumably knows very well: a self-described ABCD or “American-Born Confused Deshi.” (Although she was born in London, Lahiri grew up in Rhode Island.) It’s the brilliant work of a talented young woman just entering full adulthood. (Lahiri married in 2001 and her first child was born in 2002.)

Nair’s film, by contrast, is the work of a mature woman, twice-married and the mother of a teenager. She’s embedded Gogol’s story within a Ganguli family saga: Ashoke now opens the narrative and Ashima closes it. Since it’s no longer told in flashback, the details of their arranged marriage have more immediacy, and we get to know them as they are getting to know each other. Their early years in America are filled with longing for India, and their days and nights are punctuated with phone calls from and visits to Calcutta. Bundled up against a cold their relatives will never fully appreciate, they send letters and pictures “home,” until, eventually, as year follows year “home” becomes their house on Pemberton Road.



“The people they have grown up with will never see this life, of this they are certain. They will never breathe the air of a damp New England morning, see smoke rising from a neighbor’s chimney, shiver in a car waiting for the glass to defrost and the engine to warm...”

Quote from the novel (page 64).

Sophisticated film lovers no longer insist that an adaptation be completely faithful to its source. We now recognize that sometimes the film is actually better. (“The Devil Wears Prada” is a recent example.) “The Namesake” is the rare case in which both book and film are equally strong and their differences actually complement each other. With Gogol as her focal point, Lahiri works out into the wider world, whereas Nair focuses on

Ashima and Ashoke and works in. In both cases, youthful experiments are counterpointed with middle-aged accommodations.

The voice of the novelist and the eye of the filmmaker are in perfect synergy. In scene after scene, Nair creates iconic images that depict intense emotions. Facial expressions, subtle gestures, even pieces of furniture, all capture the ineffable. Before they've ever made eye contact, Ashima sees Ashoke's shoes, and the tiny moment in which she daringly slips her feet into them resonates throughout the entire film. Yes, the novelist has described these shoes in detail, but it is the filmmaker who shows us how well they fit. They're big, of course, but not too big. These shoes, on Ashoke's feet, will take Ashima to America, and she immediately senses that they will protect her without overwhelming her.



“Glancing at the floor where visitors customarily remove their slippers, she noticed, besides two sets of chappals, a pair of men’s shoes that were not like any she’d ever seen on the streets and trams and buses of Calcutta, or even in the windows of Bata...”

Quote from the novel (page 8).

The casting is also perfect: Ashima (Tabu) is a luminous beauty whereas Ashoke (Irrfan Khan) is a sweet-faced geek. Kal Penn, current filming the sequel to his highly-successful 2004 feature “Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle,” brings a comic touch to his performance as Gogol that helps the filmmaker age him from 15 to 30. Jacinda Barrett, who played a similar role to great effect in “The Human Stain,” is lovely as Max, and Zuleikha Robinson, alluring in “Hidalgo,” is ravishing here as Moushumi.

DP Frederick Elmes’ cinematography is also outstanding. Well-known in the indie world for his work with Jim Jarmusch (“Broken Flowers,” “Coffee and Cigarettes,” “Mystery Train,” and “Night on Earth”) and David Lynch (“Eraserhead,” “Blue Velvet,” and “Wild at Heart”), Elmes here incorporates elements from time spent in both Bill Condon’s academia (“Kinsey”) and Ang Lee’s suburbia (“The Ice Storm”). His palette deftly differentiates the past (with its golden memories and blood-tinged nightmares) from the present (with its lonely moments and communal rights of passage). Nair and Elmes even give us a tour of the inner arches of the Taj Mahal, finding intimate angles just as beautiful as the grand picture postcard entrance.

For over forty years, male critics have described the musical “Fiddler on the Roof” as “sentimental,” always assuming that “Fiddler” was primarily targeted at Jews pining for Anatevka; but Jews are not the world’s only exiles. Audiences everywhere have embraced “Fiddler” (where it was as popular in Japan as it was in Israel). Like the

“Fiddler” team, Nair and screenwriter Sooni Taraporevala are eloquent students of diaspora. Just as Tevye, the father figure in “Fiddler,” is expelled from Anatevka, Jay, the father figure played by Roshan Seth in Nair’s 1991 film “Mississippi Masala,” is expelled from Uganda. But Ashima is like Tevye’s daughter Hodel; she makes a conscious choice when she leaves Calcutta. The dilemma first articulated in the lyrics Sheldon Hamick wrote for Hodel (“Far From the Home I Love”) has now achieved its poignant realization in “The Namesake.”



“And though she still does not feel fully at home within these walls on Pemberton Road Ashima knows that this is home nevertheless—the world for which she is responsible, which she has created, which is everywhere around her...”

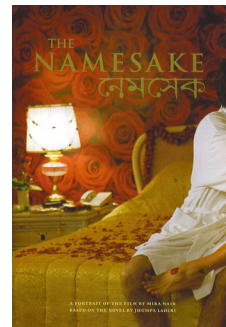
Quote from the novel (page 280).

Invocations of the goddess Saraswati open and close Nair’s film, reminding us that human life is both eternal and evanescent: home is a place we hold sacred in our hearts, but it is also the place where we put on our shoes each morning to greet the new day.

© Jan Lisa Huttner (March 1, 2007)



All photos courtesy of Newmarket Press. All Rights Reserved.



Lifelong movie buff Jan Lisa Huttner is the managing editor of *FILMS FOR TWO: The Online Guide for Busy Couples* (a website devoted to promoting films of interest to both male & female audience members). She writes monthly columns for Chicago’s *JUF News*, as well as freelance articles for numerous print publications & websites. Her article on the 2004 Oscars for *Women’s eNews* received the award for “Best News Writing – Web” from the National Federation of Press Women in September, 2005.



To surf Jan’s database (with dozens of films written &/or directed by women), visit:

[www.TheHotPinkPen.com](http://www.TheHotPinkPen.com)