

The Namesake: for the most part, a failure to “concentrate on the things that matter”

Joanne Laurier
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The Namesake directed by Mira Nair, screenplay by Sooni Taraporevala, based on the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri

What’s in a namesake? In the new film by Indian American director Mira Nair (*Monsoon Wedding*, *Salaam Bombay*), a drama centered on a young Indian man raised in the US and named for a famed Russian author provides the opportunity to explore what it means to live in and be torn between two different worlds.

In *The Namesake*, when Ashoke Ganguli (Irfan Khan) miraculously survives a train wreck in Calcutta in 1974, he credits the author of the story he was reading at the time of the accident, Nikolai Gogol, for his good fortune. The example of the nineteenth-century Russian writer, who spent most of his adult life outside his homeland, inspires Ashoke to travel abroad and gain a Western education, returning to Calcutta for a traditional arranged marriage with Ashima (Bollywood star Tabu) and then settling in New York City to raise a family.

“The Overcoat” is so significant for Ashoke that he names his son Gogol in the hope that some day the boy (Kal Penn), whose official name is Nikhil, will understand that “we all came out of Gogol’s overcoat.” As Gogol the writer makes much of his leading character’s name, Akakii Akakievich [“the circumstances were such that it would have been impossible to give him any other name...”], so too, when Gogol Ganguli gets older, his “pet” name comes to symbolize for him conflicted feelings about his Indian origins.

Young Gogol, a Yale-trained architect, begins to immerse himself in the upper-class WASP life of his girlfriend Maxine (Jacinda Barrett) at the expense of his family, until tragedy befalls the Ganguli household. Grief, in part driven by guilt, brings to the surface all that is unresolved in Gogol, who then summarily dumps his blonde love in favor of embracing more-conservative Indian values. This leads him to the sophisticated Moushumi (Zuleikha Robinson), a Bengali woman newly arrived from Paris. However, they prove to be proceeding in culturally opposed directions, and their relationship crashes. In the end, the film argues for what Nair calls the “seamless see-saw” between cultures.

The link of the novel and film to Gogol’s “The Overcoat” seems to lie in the fact that the Russian story’s protagonist, a nonentity of a clerk, sees in the purchase of a new overcoat, a

mere material thing, a remedy for his pitiable state. When the beautiful coat is stolen, and no one will help him recover it, his hopes are dashed and he dies without much of a struggle. Presumably, the social strivings of Gogol in Nair’s film, the effort he makes to attain a certain lifestyle and status in America, to the detriment of his family and culture, are coming in for criticism here.

Nair’s characters are elegantly drawn. They shuttle back and forth between Calcutta and New York over the span of 30 years, allowing the director, as she says, to “link the old Bengali world and the hot new Asian cool of New York City today.”

This is the sort of comment a filmmaker comes up with, no doubt, to “pitch” her film both to producers and to a potential audience. It is a kind of unfortunate film industry shorthand. Given the real pressures on an independent filmmaker, Nair can perhaps be granted some leeway. But to the extent that it genuinely reflects her aspirations, it suggests some of the limitations of the project.

The Namesake concerns itself with an upwardly mobile social layer in both India and the US. A perfectly legitimate subject for an artist. The treatment of this milieu is weakened and somewhat distorted, however, because it remains the film’s almost exclusive focus. Why did Nair find it necessary to sanitize two deeply socially polarized cities—New York and Calcutta—by placing out of sight all but a tiny, privileged segment of the population?

What the artist chooses not to show can be as telling as what he or she chooses to show. It’s not criminal to ignore the pressing social reality, but it constitutes under present conditions virtually an act of self-censorship, and makes for less interesting cinema.

Also adding to the difficulty is the fact that the film’s considerable aesthetic appeal, or at least its picturesque character, acts largely to dilute, rather than to sharpen its view of things. The artistry functions too often as a form of anesthesia. For example, the movie’s mesmerizing composition and colors are seductive. Perhaps too seductive.

The arranged marriage of Ashoke and Ashima is presented uncritically, a beautifully executed event that produces a loving and harmonious relationship. What does this suggest? It is no

doubt true that an arranged marriage can be a successful one. But should human happiness depend on accident and social maneuvers? What's next? Is there some hitherto undetected positive feature in the caste system?

While this is not what Nair has in mind, that the film can generate such questions is connected to the bigger problem of accurately rendering life and society. An artist of her intelligence and sensitivity is clearly not indifferent to poverty and other social problems. To have trained the camera on all the social gradations in Calcutta and New York, however, would probably have meant entering waters that Nair finds too daunting, too overwhelming. The skepticism of the artist about the possibility of social transformation, inadequate knowledge of history and an element of complacency combine here, with unhappy results. The director sticks to a detail, to "what she knows," and compensates for this narrowness by lavishing upon it all the artistic pizzazz she can muster.

In opening the film with a remarkable performance by Ashima, a classically trained singer, the stage is set for the film's questionable contrast: India, with its ancient culture, its Taj Mahal and its rituals versus America, the cold, and "cool," land of opportunity. Even such a contrast, in fact, is rather stereotyped and, at a certain level, untrue.

On this score, there are various scenes in which the decks are stacked. Maxine's detached, upper-crust family is no match for the warm, tradition-following Gangulis. Moreover, the latter's interaction with people in the US outside the Bengali immigrant community is never pleasant, such as in the hospital sequence when Ashima gives birth to Gogol attended by an uncaring staff. Also problematic is the Americanized Gogol's adoption of traditionalism after the family trauma. It advances a "back-to-the-roots" solution, or at least raises such a possibility, currently in vogue as one of the false answers to social alienation.

A word needs to be said about a pivotal line in the film. When Ashoke tells his son that "we all came out of Gogol's overcoat," he means that were it not for Gogol the Russian author, Gogol Ganguli would not have been born. That has perhaps two meanings, one less literal than the other. First, Ashoke identifies the story somewhat mystically with his survival on the train, and, second, he means that the boy would not be what he is if his father, Ashoke, had not followed Gogol's example and made a life for himself outside of his own homeland.

Nair rather trivializes this, or removes herself from the discussion to some extent, by commenting in an interview: "My community is *Monsoon Wedding*, the raucous, beer-drinking party animals. And [author Lahiri's] community is more the erudite, cultural and professional Chekhov-reading people."

In fact, the aforementioned line, attributed to Fyodor Dostoyevsky, is a reference to Gogol's historic artistic-intellectual influence.

Insofar as the relationship to Gogol means anything to the director, and presumably it must mean something—or why has she chosen to adapt Lahiri's novel?—it indicates the desire, not uncommon among contemporary artists, to make a connection to a cultural figure of the past. But, as is often the case, a meaningful or coherent continuity is not really established. The contemporary artist invokes the older figure, but is he or she really following in those footsteps?

Gogol was a great writer; he dealt with all sorts of problems—social, cultural and psychological—in a bold and innovative way. Although he was a political conservative, he engaged with life and did not censor or restrict himself. The totality of human situations was his field of operations. The same cannot be said for most present-day artists, including, by and large, Nair.

Dostoyevsky's quip refers to Gogol's role in helping to invent nineteenth-century Russian (and European) literature. Gogol himself wrote: "It was Pushkin who made me look at things seriously. I saw that in my writings I laughed vainly, for nothing, myself not knowing why. If I was to laugh, then I had better laugh over things that are really to be laughed at. In the *Inspector-General* I resolved to gather together all the bad in Russia I then knew into one heap, all the injustice that was practiced in those places and in those human relations in which more than in anything, justice is demanded of men, and to have one big laugh over it all.

"But that, as is well known, produced an outburst of excitement. Through my laughter, which never before came to me with such force, the reader sensed profound sorrow. I myself felt that my laughter was no longer the same as it had been, that in my writings I could no longer be the same as in the past, and that the need to divert myself with innocent, careless scenes had ended along with my young years."

Gogol also wrote, and this might be applicable to *The Namesake*, "Always think of what is useful and not what is beautiful. Beauty will come of its own accord." And elsewhere he said: "Concentrate on the things that matter." Something like that is demanded of today's artist as well.



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