

**NOVEL INTO FILM: *THE NAMESAKE*, A PORTRAYAL OF THE  
INDIAN DIASPORA**

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**Abstract**

*The present paper attempts to examine how film adaption of literary pieces works. Film adaptations are the future of cinema. Recently lots of films are made from literature. This paper is particularly focusing on Jhumpa Lahiri's novel The Namesake and its movie adaptation of the same name by internationally acclaimed dir. Meera Nair. It also seeks to understand the problems of Indian expatriate communities in the U.S.A. The film as well as the novel vividly portrays issues of identities of second generation immigrants in the U.S.A. The present paper also focuses on the theory of film adaptation and changes in the process of film adaptation.*

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## Novel to Film: Process of Adaptation

Nowadays numerous literary pieces are adapted into films. Literature provides film makers rich source of materials for the film making. This originality of thought and subject matter attracts film makers to make the film on the literary work. Both for the students of literature and the films, it is instructive to know how film as art and entertainment has related to literature. The process of film adaptation is defined as:

“The process of changing or transforming material from one medium (novel, stage play, short story, real life story etc) into another (i.e. film of TV)”.

(Freshman R: 2003)

Film adaptation is not that much easy task. A good novel by itself is not enough, but a director has to lean on the crutches of good dialogues and script to create the desire impact on his audience. The originality of thought and subject matter attracts film makers to make the film of the book. Besides that, the simple narrative style of the book also made it easy to make a film script out of the book. Nazarine Eric comments on this difficult task of adaptation as :

“Adapting novel into films is no easy task. The job is by means simpler because a story already exists. Adapting literature requires a great deal of reading, thinking, eliminating and compressing words, character and time frames.”(Nazarine, Eric: 2000)

This paper is intended to act as how adaptation of the novel 'The Namesake' into the film by same name works.

### **The term Diaspora:**

Today's most societies are multicultural societies and the writer who is living in such a society is affected by the amalgamation of various cultures. The problems of identity and issues of cultural alienation affects on the writer. The writer experiences, analyses and portrays that particular environment in his literary work. The immigrant experience and observations of expatriate writer is often reflecting in their fiction. As K.T. Sunita points out

"Indian expatriate writers do not write from the position of a distant foreign community, such as the exiled Black or West Indian novelists, but their writing reflects the perspective of someone caught between two cultures."(Sunita K.T.2000: p. 82)

Expatriate community is a post-colonial fact and it is an individual or a group of people moving to another country, the diaspora continues. The term 'diaspora' has multiple layers of meaning in academic circles today. The term 'diaspora' derives from the Greek meaning 'to disperse'. As Pramod Nayar points out:

"diaspora can be the voluntary or forced movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions. Having arrived in a new geographical and cultural context, they negotiate two cultures; their own and the new one. The diasporic culture is necessarily mixed and an amalgamation of the two cultures."(Nayar, Pramod, 2008:p. 189)

### **Biography: Jhumpa Lahiri**

Jhumpa Lahiri (born as a name Nilanjana Sudeshna) was born in 1967, in London. She has been a part of three countries. Having an Indian ancestry, born in U.K. and grown and settled in the U.S.A. Her first work, a collection of

short stories is, *'Interpreter of Maladies'* (1999) won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for the year 2000. Her first novel, *'The Namesake'* (2003) national bestseller adapted into a movie by the same name by Mira Nair in 2007. Her latest collection of short stories is *'Unaccustomed Earth'* (2008).

Jhumpa Lahiri is a second generation immigrant and hence better able to understand and vividly portrays the problem of expatriate communities in her novels. She mainly writes about the human condition of the Indian Diaspora in the America. She can be categorized as a multicultural, South Asian diasporic, having transnational identity and post colonial writer.

Jhumpa Lahiri also have two different names (like the protagonist Gogol / Nikhil Ganguly in ' The Namesake') – different on her birth certificate and different on passport. She herself mentioned her own dilemma of name in her interview with Jeffrey Brown:

"It's what my world is, and I have always been aware of my parents came from Calcutta. I have found myself sort of caught between the worlds of 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 of the door."(PBS: 2008)

### **The Namesake – Book**

*'The Namesake'*(2004) about issues to identity and cultural alienation of Indian immigrant in the U.S. This novel is an autobiographical novel, as it is much related to the life of Jhumpa Lahiri. The novel tells about the struggles of the Bengali Indian couple, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguly. Issues of identities of their American born Indian children Gogol and Sonia, is the main focus of the novel.

The novel begins with Ashima standing in her kitchen. She is at the verge of her first pregnancy. She gives birth to a baby boy. They named him as Gogol. Throughout the novel Gogol is haunted by his name, even when he changed it as Nikhil. He has been uncomfortable with his name because it is neither Indian nor American nor Russian too. This issue of name appears again and again in

the novel.

“ the writer he’s named after Gogol isn’t his first name. his first name is Nikolai. Not only does Gogol Ganguly have a pet name turned good name, but a last name turned first name. and so it occurs to him that no one he knows in the world, in Russia or india or America or anywhere , shares his name. Not even the source of his namesake” (The Namesake : p 78)

And therefore, this novel has its title, ‘ The Namesake’. Name provides an identity of an individual. Loneliness is one of the burning issues of an expatriate community. Ashoke and Ashima also have to suffer from loneliness as they settled away from their motherland. But it’s Ashima who has to suffer more than Ashoke as he goes out for work and stays busy with that.

When Ashima is pregnant she was in the hospital, but there is no one to be with her. She thinks as:

“If she is the only Indian person in the hospital....”

(The Namesake, P. 03)

She remembers that when she was at the airport in India coming for the U.S., there were:

“twenty six members of her family”

(The Namesake, P. 04)

In his early twenties, Gogol has had affairs with several American girls Ruth and Maxine before marriage. His parents warn him that a marriage of Bengali boys and American girls ends up in divorce. He takes this seriously and marries to Moushumi, a Bengali girl which nonetheless meets the same fate. Afterward his father died of a massive heart attack. Ashima, after the death of her husband, decides to live for six months in India and six months in the U.S.

At the end of the novel, Gogol finds the unread book by Nikolai Gogol, that his father has presented him on his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday. He turns to read the first story 'The Overcoat.' The novel ends with the ideas in Gogol's mind:

"The givers and keepers of Gogol's name are far from him now. One dead, Another a widow, . . . . . without people in the world to call him Gogol, no matter how long he lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace."

(The Namesake, P. 289)

The novel constantly focuses on the contrasting experiences of the two generations of expatriates. They develop taste and ideas more in keeping with the society in which they live. The second generation expatriate has always issues of identity. They are neither here nor there. They become the hybrid one. They suffer from cultural alienation and in the end they develop their new culture. That is what 'The Namesake' is about.

### **The Namesake – Movie**

'The Namesake' (2007), directed by Mira Nair, with its screenplay by Sooni Taraporevala, is based on the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri. The film received very positive replies across the globe and won several awards also. Mira Nair is an internationally acclaimed director of 'Monsoon Wedding', 'Salaam Bombay!', 'Mississippi Masala', 'Vanity Fair' and other films.

After doing adaptation of 'Vanity Fair', Mira Nair returned to the multicultural themes. Nair picks up a theme that tries a synthesis of the new culture ( the adopted country ) with the old culture ( the motherland ).

In an interview, Nair recounts her experiences of reading the novel for the first time:

“I did not keep it down, I kept reading it. I read it in a state of complete grief. My first fever to make it. . . . it captured the loss that finality to bury a parent that is not one’s home . . . it was only then that I understood that it was thirty years of two cities I have lived in most of my life in Calcutta and New York. It was personal at many levels here.”

([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Av90d\\_wk060](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Av90d_wk060).)

The film also shifts between India and the United States. It begins with a train accident. Ashoke was travelling in the train and his life is saved by sheer luck. He was reading the book ‘The Overcoat’ by Nikolai Gogol. The train meets with an accident and a number of people die. The rescue team finds Ashoke holding the pages of the book and they find him alive. This is a miraculous escape.

Film set in 1970s Calcutta and in 1990s New York. ‘The Namesake’ tells the story of an immigrant Bengali family – the Ganguly’s who tries to blend the new culture with their old culture. In the beginning Ashima (actress Tabbu) get married to a Bengali man Ashoke (actor: Irrfan Khan). After their marriage they shift to America. Ashima gives birth to a baby boy, Gogol. The film also shows Gogol’s (actor: Kal Penn) struggle over his name.

The film uses landscape, background and visual images vividly. Irrfan Khan, Tabbu conveys through their acting a powerful and controlled performance. Tabbu gracefully and gleefully matures from a young girl to an understanding mother who takes up the responsibilities of their kids an alien surrounding. For Mira Nair, life in exile – voluntary or imposed is always good material for her cinema. With the theme of emigration, she also shows the loss and a longing for home. The Namesake is also the story of the sacrifices of parents made for their children.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s comment on the film is also remarkable:

“The Namesake made its voyage from paper to film. . . .  
Movies also occupy a much more public place than

novels do. They are publicly created, publicly consumed. But Mira has woven certain strands into the screen that only my family and I can fully appreciate, so that the film remains, for me, a deeply personal experience . . . thanks to Mira's passion for a boy named Gogol . . . to have someone as devoted and as gifted Mira reinvent my novel, to watch her guide it safely and exquisitely into the magical arena of the motion picture, has been a humbling and thrilling passage. Together we have arrived at the closest I have felt to artistic collaboration and, most precious of all, an indelible friendship."

(T.N: Portrait of the film by Mira Nair: p 8, 9)

That is what the filmed version of 'The Namesake' is meant for Jhumpa Lahiri and also for all other Indian immigrant people.

### **Comparison between Book and Film:**

The novel as well as the movie describes the hardships of the Indian immigrant people to the United States. With maintaining the rapport of the novel Mira Nair is successful in visualizing the events and incidents from the text. 'The Namesake', the movie is becomes a journey of visual imagination that conveyed the inner lives and outward experiences of the characters in it. Thus, the novel as well as the film becomes a geographical and psychological journey of two generations. This film is as brilliant as the novel from which it was made, and brings out both the novel's inner issues and provides a new emphasis and experience. Both Mira Nair and Jhumpa Lahiri express the emotions of Indian Diaspora powerfully.

Mira Nair is an internationally acclaimed Indian filmmaker. The people all over the world have well accepted the novel. Its film adaptation further made it famous and its fame reached its pinnacle. 'The Namesake' is the most remarkable film of Mira Nair to date.



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Mira Nair sits with LX.TV host SuChin Pak

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