

# Relationships, marriage, and complexity in the namesake



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Within *The Namesake*, Lahiri presents the relationship between men and women as heavily shaped by their environment, heritage and socio-economic background. The relationship between the Ratliffs, Maxine's parents, Gerald and Lydia, is directly juxtaposed against the relationship of Ashoke and Ashima as being more loving and physically affectionate, due to the Western culture they have been brought up in. Gogol and Maxine's relationship is purposefully depicted as intensely and explicitly sexual to signify Gogol's character's rebellion against the sexual puritanism of his parents while Gogol and Moushumi's relationship is depicted as doomed to fail through the continual insecurity present within both partners as they struggle to find their identities. Thus, Lahiri approaches each couple through the lens of a post-colonialist writer, characterising each union through the vastly differing identities resulting from their different experiences.

Lahiri presents the relationship between Ashoke and Ashima as fairly austere, emotionally and sexually due to the dictum of Bengali customs. This can be seen through Lahiri's depiction of Ashima's reaction to one of the patients' husbands at the hospital, where she is about to give birth to Gogol, declares that he loves her. Ashima 'has neither heard nor expects to hear [this] from her husband; this is not how they are.' The matter-of-fact tone that Lahiri imbues Ashima's perspective with creates a sense of pathos for Ashima, but more importantly, it reveals the differing expectations of a married Bengali woman of her station would have of love, compared to a typical, modern American woman. Lahiri deftly deploys punctuation to create a pause for the reader, which has the effect of increasing the sense of finality of Ashima's assessment of her relationship, that it 'is not how they are.'

Lahiri potentially utilises the formality of the phrase 'not how they are' to show how far customs and traditions as well as Indian decorum have influenced Ashima and Ashoke, that even so far away from the homeland, or 'Desh' they still practice it. Although Lahiri avoids clear-cut moral positions and focuses on feelings and emotions of the characters rather than trying to interpret them, through the objective, 3rd person narrative, we the readers can infer she does seem to encourage sympathy for Ashima that she can never expect to hear loving platitudes, such as 'I love you' or 'sweetheart', from Ashoke because of the impropriety of the exchange as per Bengali custom. The fact that Ashima does not even say 'Ashoke's name' although she 'has adopted his surname, but refuses, for propriety's sake, to utter his first.' Lahiri perhaps allows the reader to glimpse this seemingly intimate detail about Ashima and Ashoke's relationships to convey how subsumed Ashima is to Ashoke, how she is no longer 'Ashima Badhuri', an identity personal to her, but now 'Ashima Ganguli', denoting her status as Ashoke's consort. Yet, Lahiri notes, 'propriety' with its connotations of rectitude and societal acceptability, prevents her from being truly connected with Ashoke. We the readers note how earlier in the novel, Ashima's grandmother expected no 'betrayal', predicting Ashima 'would never change.' This expectation, where the grandmother represents larger Indian society's expectations, seems to be a golem looming over Ashima's marriage, enforcing the old ways. Lahiri's purpose here might be to reveal to readers the limitations of traditions and how it can rob a marriage of passion and romance, at the altar of conformity. Thus, she explores their relationship through a post-colonial lens, insinuating that their Indian heritage has continued to shape them even as they have transgressed its physical

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borders, reminiscent of Elizabeth Brewster's line, " People are made of places." And so Ashoke and Ashima's relationship is made of the customs of their ' place', India and is portrayed as stifled because of it.

Contrastingly, the relationship between the Ratliffs is portrayed as very loving and physically affectionate despite their being past the throes of young love. We the readers witness this, through Gogol's wondering eyes, as Lahiri describes how ' vociferous [they are] at the table'. This is a deliberate choice by Lahiri to utilise the adjective ' vociferous' as it creates an impression of vehemence and clamour. This is the opposite of dinner with Ashima and Ashoke, as Lahiri tells us through Gogol's perspective, as they are ' indifferent to : movies, exhibits at museums, good restaurants, the design of everyday things.' Lahiri's use of ' indifferent' illustrates the apathy the Ganguli progenitors possess towards hallmarks of liberal, upper-middle class American culture that the Ratliffs take for granted. It is clear to the readers that Gogol wishes for his parents to possess the same ease with each other as Gerald and Lydia, Maxine's parents, that they can discuss such things with each other. However, Lahiri subtly hints to the readers that this is because of the immense privilege and wealth afforded to them, instead of the constant financial, personal and societal anxieties that first-generation immigrants experience. Lahiri further develops this idea with her vivid picture of ' the two of them kissing openly' and ' going for walks in the city'. The key observation here, made by Gogol, is that he ' has never witnessed a single moment of physical affection between his parents'. Lahiri conveys to the readers that the Ratliffs are like ' Gogol and Maxine', behaving in such an ' open' way because they have grown up around Western ideals of love,

perpetuated by Hollywood and enabled by their 'WASP' affluence. It is almost as if Lahiri has crafted the Ratliffs as a direct antithesis to the Gangulis whose love is a 'private, uncelebrated thing', which illuminates the traditional view that the intimacy between married individuals must remain hidden and covert rather than explicitly expressed, as it is with Gogol and Maxine, and later Moushumi.

Gogol and Maxine's relationship is Lahiri's embodiment of the sexual rebellion that Gogol undertakes, almost as if to spite the sexual puritanism his parents have experienced. They go 'skinny-dipping', which is an extraordinarily subversive act for Gogol, perhaps more psychologically than physically, because of his parents', particularly Ashima's, discomfort at being disrobed publicly, which he has been influenced by. His mother is ashamed when her 'Murshidabad silk sari' is removed, as it symbolises a stripping of her identity and her connection to her Indian past, symbolised by the proper noun 'Murshidabad'. Lahiri intends to show the readers that Gogol eschews this modesty, rebelling through the sex act with Maxine, because he desires, above all, to distance himself from the lives of his parents. Lahiri suggests this through her slice into his innermost thoughts, revealing that he believes, when they 'make love on the grass that is wet from their bodies', 'he is free.' The phrase 'he is free' is almost Freudian in concept, as Lahiri implies he is attracted to things missing from the model of love shown to him; that his rebellion stems from the sexual repression he experiences second-hand from his parents. Through his sexual rebellion and promiscuity he sets himself inevitably free from his inferiority complex he possessed in his youth, believing he cannot 'court girls' like his peers. We, the readers, also note

Maxine is as far as one can get from Ashima physically, with 'dirty blonde hair' and eyes that are 'greenish'. Like Ruth, Maxine is overtly Caucasian, and Lahiri possibly intends to demonstrate how deep-seated Gogol's insecurities with his Indian heritage is, that he seeks stereotypically American women to aid his conformity to wider American society, through overtly sexual behaviour. Thus, we can deduce that Lahiri presents their ill-fated but passionate union as an allegory for the desire of the second-generation immigrant, symbolised by Gogol, to assimilate and rebel against the traditions imposed upon them by their parents, similar to Moushumi, showing how Lahiri connects the portrayal of relationships with heritage.

Finally, Lahiri presents the relationship between Gogol and Moushumi as destined to fail due to their perennially insecure identities that are constantly in flux. As Scott Peck said, 'Not only do self-love and love of others go hand in hand but ultimately they are indistinguishable'. Moushumi and Gogol, Lahiri reiterates throughout the later part of the novel, can never truly love each other because they are not truly comfortable with each other. This is particularly true of Moushumi; Gogol at least makes some attempt to reconcile the two halves of his identity whereas she cannot find solace in either being American or Indian. This can be seen when 'she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt'. The use of the verb 'approached' gives us a sense of Moushumi's character; Lahiri alludes to how wary, and yet eager, she is of exploring other viable identities to swap in exchange for her own. She is portrayed as self-loathing through her sordid affairs with 'married [men]' who were 'far older, fathers to children in secondary school.' Once again, Lahiri employs a Freudian undertone where

Moushumi's promiscuity is directly linked to her lack of confidence in her own identity as an Indian-American woman; she desires to be French, to live the French way, almost reminiscent of Emma Bovary in 'Madame Bovary'. We the readers realise she can never truly love Gogol because he represents a 'capitulation or defeat' for her because he is neither Graham nor Dimitri Desjardins, who represent for her, a permanently tangible escape from the stifling reality of living up to her parents' expectations due to their ethnicity and upbringing which she finds exotic. Lahiri communicates to us Moushumi's feeling 'wildly transgressive' though she 'genuinely liked Nikhil.' Lahiri intends to show us that because Gogol himself struggles with the conflict of being Nikhil-Gogol, they are not meant to be together as both have a tenuous hold on their identities, constantly in flux due to their hyphenated identities.

Lahiri portrays relationships in *The Namesake* as being coloured by the personal and racial histories of the characters. Gerald and Lydia behave intimately so openly and unconcernedly because everyone else around them did the same. Ashima and Ashoke, on the other hand, cannot and do not because of their strict upbringing and bring Gogol up the same way only to have him rebel, echoed by his ex-wife Moushumi.