

The namesake analysis essay



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Jhumpa Lahiri used women as a literary device, “ foil”, in her novel *The Namesake* to help contrast with the protagonist, Nikhil “ Gogol” Ganguli in order to shape his identity. There were quite a few women that came and went through Gogol’s life span in the novel but three essential women were his mother, a woman by the name Maxine, and his first wife, Moushumi. The literary device that is being used allows the women to either be completely different, or completely similar with a little twist. These three women are so important during the novel because they all play a huge role in Gogol’s destiny of finding himself and appreciating where he came from.

An important part of this story is the tragic event that happened with Ashoke Ganguli that almost took his life. In 1961 Ashoke was in a terrible train accident and during the wreck he was reading a series of short stories by a Russian author, Nikolai Gogol. In 1968, Ashima Ganguli is about to give birth to her first child with her newly wedded husband Ashoke. They were one of few Bengali couples in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Being Bengali, it was tradition for them to wait for a letter from Ashima’s grandmother with the name of the newborn child. Well they never end up receiving the letter and end up giving the child the pet, Gogol, on the birth certificate until they heard from the grandmother. Turns out that Ashima’s grandmother’s letter was lost and she dearly sick. Once Gogol goes to go to school, his parents give him the name Nikhil. In 1971 his sister Sonia is born. When Gogol turns fourteen, Ashoke gives him the Nikolai Gogol series that means so much to him, but Gogol didn’t seem to have any interest.

Then once Gogol read the story “ *The Overcoat*” in his junior year of high school, he becomes ashamed and confused of his name and before going to

college he changes his name to Nikhil. Nikhil attends Yale and starts to drift away from his culture to the American lifestyle. In 1994 Nikhil is in a relationship with a woman named Maxine Ratliff whom opens a whole other life to Nikhil. During Christmas time Ashoke passes away and Nikhil has the responsibility of taking care of his family at this point. Conflicts with Nikhil and Maxine come up that causes them to go separate ways and then Ashima sets Nikhil up with a family friend, Moushumi Mazoomdar. Before they know it, Nikhil and Moushumi are married and it doesn't last as Moushumi has an affair and they get divorced. The novel ends with Nikhil discovering the series of books his father gave him on his fourteenth birthday and he finally appreciates it.

The first woman that helped shape Gogol in this novel was Ashima Ganguli, Gogol's mother. Ashima was born and raised in Calcutta so has a hard time adjusting to her new life in America with her new husband. She is very conservative and is very homesick as she feels alone living in Cambridge. Being that she misses her family so dearly it's hurtful for her that her children grow up so unappreciative of the Bengali traditions and that they want to keep their distance from her. So tied to tradition, she dislikes many of the American women her son dates. As years past, Ashima and her children become distant, but after the death of Ashoke, she seems to become the key that keeps her family together. She plans on moving back to her homeland of Calcutta but then she realizes that she has gotten used to the life in American and she begins to understand and let in the American life her children enjoy so much.

Being that Ashima is Gogol's mother, anything about her would play a huge role on which Gogol's grows to become. In this novel, Ashima plays the role of the Bengali mother whom is lost to why her own son doesn't appreciate where they come from. She is the glue that keeps the culture in Gogol's life, and as the mother loves Gogol unconditionally and will always have the culture there for when he was ready. Ashima is a character that emphasizes the difference between Gogol's American lifestyle, and the Indian traditions.

Maxine Ratliff is the next "foil" in Gogol's life that helps Gogol shape his identity. Gogol was working in New York City at the time that he meets Maxine at party. Throughout Gogol's whole life, his parents wanted him to stick to his culture and this is why Gogol is so attracted to Maxine; she is exactly the opposite of the typical Bengali woman his parents would approve. Gogol and Maxine begin to date and she introduces him to a new lifestyle that he enjoys so much because it is the American lifestyle that he wished was his lifestyle. She was very rich, sophisticated and had a lot of class. In the novel, Maxine is the woman in Gogol's life who ironically steers Gogol back to his roots.

It seemed to Gogol that meeting Maxine was perfect, he was living the life he wanted so differently from his own. From the fancy dinner parties her parents hosted, to the trip to New Hampshire; Gogol slowly drifted more and more from his family and his culture because he thought this was the life "Nikhil" belonged in. However once Ashoke died, Maxine become a symbol of the distance that had came between Gogol and his family. He began to feel guilt, and as the man of the family he went back to collect the stuff from his

father's apartment and when Maxine couldn't understand the importance of him being there for his family is what separated the two.

Gogol's first wife, Moushumi Mazoomdar, had also help steer him to his true identity. Moushumi was first introduced in the beginning of the novel during Gogol's fourteenth birthday that ironically ignores the birthday boy. After the death of Ashoke, Ashima reintroduces the two and they begin to go on a few dates. Moushumi is a foil that was created to have a lot in common with the main character, Gogol, to help him meet the middle of American and Bengali cultures. Gogol and Moushumi were both rose by Bengali immigrants and they both have an artistic eye. They both graduated from top universities, and experimented with foreign relationships. Even so they had so much in common, the most important thing in common was that they both gave up trying to live their own lives to live the ideal life everyone expected of them. The sad truth is what ended their marriage in the end.

As they both thought that getting married was the best thing possible, it just wasn't meant to be. Moushumi is a foil because even though they had so much in common, the affair she has with Dimitri Desjardins is a sign that she would risk her marriage to stray away from her roots once again. Unlike Gogol, who was still trying to find a way to connect with his Indian roots. Although they do not last, Moushumi was put in the novel to emphasize not necessary how " better" Gogol was, but how he was destined to meet in between the two cultures.

Gogol has many females that play many roles throughout his life but the three women that were used as the literary device, " foil", were Ashima,

Maxine, and Moushumi. Ashima is the foil that tried steering Gogol to his roots of the Bengali culture. Maxine is the foil that lived the complete opposite American life at ease that Gogol wished he lived; and Moushumi was the spitting image of Gogol; which when they ended, finally allowed him to meet in the middle of the two cultures. The novel ends at a Christmas party for Ashima's departure to Calcutta, and Gogol at last begins to read the Nikolai Gogol series his father gave him his fourteenth birthday and this was a symbol of his growth in finding himself.