

The Namesake Study Guide

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri

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Contents

The Namesake Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	5
Chapter 2.....	7
Chapter 3.....	9
Chapter 4.....	11
Chapter 5.....	13
Chapter 6.....	15
Chapter 7.....	17
Chapter 8.....	19
Chapter 9.....	21
Chapters 10-11.....	23
Chapter 12.....	25
Characters.....	27
Objects/Places.....	32
Themes.....	34
Style.....	37
Quotes.....	40
Topics for Discussion.....	42



Plot Summary

The Namesake is a novel by Pulitzer Prize winning author Jhumpa Lahiri. The novel follows the life of Gogol Ganguli from birth until middle age, chronicling his struggle to discover who he is as a second-generation immigrant. Gogol struggles, first with his unusual name and later with the traditions his parents insist on upholding that embarrass Gogol in front of his American friends. However, as Gogol grows older, he comes to appreciate what his parents went through when moving to this country and how hard it was for them to adapt to their adopted country. Gogol eventually finds some solid ground between his parents and the world they live in, bringing him some peace. *The Namesake* is a novel of self-discovery that is an emotional journey its readers will not soon forget.

When Ashima Ganguli becomes pregnant with her first child she has only lived in America for a short time and is still getting used to the unusual culture. Ashima's marriage is an arranged one and therefore is lacking in the strong emotions of an American marriage, leaving Ashima feeling isolated when she goes into labor. Ashima would have been surrounded by family members if she had been still in Calcutta, but in America, she is left to labor alone. Ashima gives birth to a little boy while her husband waits in the waiting room, thinking about his life thus far and the train accident that nearly took his life a few short years before. It is the memory of this train accident that comes back to Ashoke when the hospital insists Ashima and Ashoke name their baby before taking him from the hospital.

In Calcutta, it is traditional for a new baby to be called by a nickname until a good name can be chosen. Ashima and Ashoke have given the right to name their child to Ashima's grandmother. The name has been sent in a letter, but has not yet arrived by the time Ashima and the baby are ready to leave the hospital. Under pressure to give the child a name, Ashoke decides on Gogol, the name of a Russian author he admired and the author of the book he credits with saving his life the night of the train wreck. This will remain Gogol's legal name until the grandmother's letter arrives and they are able to give their child a proper name. However, the letter becomes lost in the mail and Ashima and Ashoke will never learn the name Ashima's grandmother chose for their child.

When Gogol is old enough to enter school, Ashoke picks a proper name for his son, Nikhil, and instructs the school to use this more formal name. However, the school principal becomes aware of Gogol's reluctance to respond to this name and refuses to allow him to be addressed by any name other than his legal name, Gogol. The issue of Gogol's proper name as opposed to his nickname is forgotten. However, Gogol grows to dislike his name. In an English class, Gogol learns of his namesake's complicated life and becomes embarrassed to be linked to such a man. Gogol resolves to rid himself of his name, taking steps once he turns eighteen to have his name legally changed to Nikhil. At first, Gogol is pleased with his name change, and is excited to hear himself addressed by this more Americanized name. However, when Gogol's father tells him about the train wreck that led to his name, Gogol feels guilty for shunning his father's first gift to him.



Away at college, Gogol experiences freedom for the first time. Gogol meets his first girlfriend, an American of whom his parents disapprove. Gogol also picks a career as an architect, despite his father's hopes he will follow him into engineering. When it comes time to pick a graduate program, Gogol elects to move to New York rather than accept a program close to his parents in Cambridge. Gogol embraces American culture, falling in love again with a young lady whose family is so normal, so American, that he is embarrassed to take his girlfriend home to see how different his own parents are. Gogol wants to be American, wants to embrace all that is American. However, when Gogol's father dies suddenly, he finds himself filled with shame for turning his back on his family. Gogol breaks up with his girlfriend and does all he can to help his mother and sister through this difficult time.

When Gogol's mother suggests that he meet with the child of a family friend, Gogol resists at first, aware that his mother is attempting to get him to settle down with a good Indian girl. However, the girl turns out to be someone with whom he has a great deal in common. Within a year, Gogol is married to this girl, settling down to make a life. However, the marriage starts on the wrong foot and it is not long before trouble begins to separate them. Gogol's wife has an affair, and they divorce before the marriage is two years old. This divorce is devastating for Gogol, but it brings him back home to where he begins to find the common ground between the world his parents came from and the world in which he lives. Gogol finds peace with himself and his name, accepting once and for all who he is.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The Namesake is a novel by Pulitzer Prize winning author Jhumpa Lahiri. The novel follows the life of Gogol Ganguli from birth until middle age, chronicling his struggle to discover who he is as a second-generation immigrant. Gogol struggles, first with his unusual name and later with the traditions his parents insist on upholding that embarrass Gogol in front of his American friends. However, as Gogol grows older, he comes to appreciate what his parents went through when moving to this country and how hard it was for them to adapt to their adopted country. Gogol eventually finds some solid ground between his parents and the world they live in, bringing him some peace. *The Namesake* is a novel of self-discovery that is an emotional journey its readers will not soon forget.

1968. Ashima Ganguli is making herself a midnight snack when her water breaks. Ashima, a recent immigrant from Calcutta, suffers from culture shock when she arrives at the hospital and is forced to labor in solitude. At home, Ashima would have been surrounded by her female relatives, getting advice from those who have been through this before. In America, Ashima is left alone and is afraid, unsure what exactly is happening to her. A kind nurse befriends Ashima, helping her through the labor as best as she can.

During her labor, Ashima thinks of the first time she met her husband. Ashima's parents had begun inviting men their home to meet Ashima over a period of several months, but none of the other men had accepted Ashima as their bride, a fact that left Ashima relieved. However, when Ashima arrived home from school one particular day, she was ushered quickly to her bedroom in order to change. When Ashima came back downstairs, she found strange shoes sitting in the family's entryway. Ashima stared at the American made shoes, then slipped her own feet into them to see what it was like. Ashima was ashamed of her actions, knowing what she was doing was shameful, but unable to stop herself. Ashima's mother called her into the sitting room then. Ashima slipped out of the shoes and laid eyes for the first time on Ashoke, a young man who had been studying abroad in America. Ashoke would not look Ashima in the eye, as was their tradition, but Ashima could sense his curiosity. It would not be until their wedding that Ashoke would finally gaze into Ashima's face.

On another floor, Ashoke waits for word of his child's birth. Ashoke thinks how fast time has past since Ashima first learned she was pregnant. Ashoke paces the waiting room, and then picks up a magazine to read while still pacing. Ashoke begins to think of another time when he was reading and it saved his life. Ashoke took a train to visit his grandfather. Ashoke's grandfather was a fan of Russian literature and shared his love with Ashoke. Ashoke was on his way to accept his grandfather's Russian books as it seemed his grandfather was near the end of his life and ready to part with his beloved belongings. On the way, Ashoke met a man who had traveled to London and American



and who made Ashoke promise if he ever had the chance to travel he would not allow anyone, not even his wife, keep him from it. Afterward, the man climbed into the bunk Ashoke was to have slept in while Ashoke read a short story by Russian author Nikolai Gogol. In the middle of the night, while Ashoke was still reading, the train derailed and crashed. Ashoke was saved when rescuers caught sight of pages of his book flying from his slowly released fist. During his long recovery from his injuries, Ashoke swore he would one day travel the world and he would not let anyone stop him.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Ashima, a young pregnant woman from Calcutta, is the first character introduced in this chapter. Ashima is a traditional Indian who has moved to America to be with her husband. Ashima misses her home, as evidenced by her desire to have her family around her while she labors with her first child. Ashima does not even know her husband all that well, having met him only briefly before marrying him. The reader can only imagine how frightening it must have been for Ashima to marry a stranger and then to be whisked off to a foreign country with this stranger as her only ally. To go into labor for the first time and be forced to suffer through it alone must have been very difficult. Ashima proves her strength of character by going through these difficult circumstances calmly and with little complaint.

Ashoke is Ashima's husband and the second character to be introduced. Ashoke is a young man who also has married a stranger. However, Ashoke has an advantage on his wife in that he had been to America before her and has the option of returning home. The reader will quickly learn that returning to Calcutta is not in Ashoke's plans. Ashoke suffered a terrible train crash and horrifying injuries that nearly killed him. As a result, Ashoke took to heart the advice of a man who died on that train and swore never to let anyone, even his wife, stop him from traveling as he wishes. This resolve will prove to be important in later chapters. It appears that the train crash has also shaped a great deal of Ashoke's personality, and will more than likely be mentioned again in later chapters.

The introduction of these two characters begins to shape the story and give the reader an idea of where the story will go from this point on. Ashima and Ashoke are immigrants and as such, the reader must get the impression that the plot development will include such developments as struggles with culture shock and being homesick. The fact that Ashima and Ashoke are having a baby in this chapter also begins to suggest a direction in which their lives will go surrounding this child, such as the difficulties of parenting and the effects of American culture on this child.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The baby is born early the next morning. A name must be chosen for the child, but Ashoke and Ashima have decided to give this honor to Ashima's grandmother who has named all the children in her family. They are not concerned that they have not received the letter the grandmother mailed a month ago because in the tradition of Calcutta, they believe they have several months to wait. However, they soon learn that the child must have a name for his birth certificate before he leaves the hospital. In their tradition, they decide to give the child a nickname that will work for the birth certificate and then change his legal name when the letter arrives from the grandmother. Ashoke decides the nickname should be Gogol, after the author of the story he was reading the night of the train wreck. Ashima agrees.

Ashima and Ashoke take the baby home in the company of their few Indian friends, a young couple their own age and a professor from MIT. Their landlords, a hippie couple named Judy and Alan Montgomery, come down to see the baby. The Montgomery's give Ashima and Ashoke some baby clothes and furniture for Gogol. After everyone leaves, Ashima tells Ashoke she cannot handle raising this baby in America. Ashima desperately wants to go home to Calcutta where her family would help her. However, Ashoke likes living in America and does not intend to return to Calcutta any time soon. After a few days, Ashima falls into a routine with the baby and finds that she actually enjoys taking him out for walks, where people stop her and ask about him.

Letters begin to arrive from family and friends in Calcutta, congratulating them on the birth of their son. However, the letter from Ashima's grandmother does not come. By the time Ashima decides the letter is lost and sends a request that it be sent again, they receive news that Ashima's grandmother has suffered a stroke and no longer remembers most of her relatives, let alone the names she picked for Gogol. Ashima is saddened by this news. However, Ashima and Ashoke begin making many Indian friends who become like an adopted family, making it easier for Ashima to adjust to her new country and the absence of her family. When Gogol is six months old and it is time for his traditional rice ceremony, she and Ashoke invite these Indian friends to stand in for their family. It is a festive ceremony and Gogol eats everything he is offered. However, Gogol refuses to choose a profession by picking from the assortment of symbolic items he is offered, already rejecting his destiny.

After Gogol turns a year old, Ashima and Ashoke decide to visit Calcutta. Ashima spends several months preparing for the trip, making a sweater for her father and buying souvenirs for her other relatives. However, a few weeks before the trip is to take place, Ashima and Ashoke receive a phone call from Ashima's brother. Ashima's father has died. Ashoke arranges an emergency passport for Gogol, forced to use his nickname rather than a proper name due to the rush. The Ganguli family flies to



Calcutta six weeks earlier than planned, Ashima reluctant rather than excited because she is afraid to see her family in the grips of grief.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Ashima and Ashoke bring the baby home. Ashima is sad because she has no family to help her raise her baby and she is dependent on friends to help her. Ashima wants desperately to go back to Calcutta, but Ashoke refuses. The reader knows Ashoke's motivations for remaining in America and his resolution not to allow his wife to talk him into returning to Calcutta. These motivations suggest there might be some tension between husband and wife. However, Ashima's upbringing does not allow her to question her husband's decisions, so the subject is dropped almost as soon as Ashima brings it up.

Ashima quickly becomes accustomed to motherhood and finds that she enjoys filling her days with the tasks of caring for her child. Ashima and Ashoke also make a great number of friends in the small Indian community in and around Cambridge. Ashima and Ashoke accept these friends as surrogate family members, inviting them to play the vital family roles in the ceremonies that are included in the raising of a child. One of these ceremonies is the rice ceremony in which an infant is given solid food for the first time. Gogol accepts all the food, but during the part of the ceremony in which he is offered several objects that represent his destiny, Gogol refuses to take any of them, crying instead. This is symbolic of Gogol's frustration with his future, which should warn the reader that Gogol will have some difficulty in the future deciding on who he is, if not what he wants to be.

The letter Ashima and Ashoke have been waiting for with Gogol's proper name enclosed never arrives. Ashima attempts to have the letter resent, but learns that her grandmother has suffered a stroke. Ashima is devastated by this news because she was close to her grandmother and because it reminds her that life goes on in Calcutta without her and there is a lot of living that she is missing out on. When news arrives that Ashima's father has past away, this burden again underscores everything Ashima is missing back home. However, now Ashima is afraid to go home because she does not want to see her family suffering the burden of grief. This speaks to Ashima's character as well as her close ties to her family that are beginning to suffer through her absence.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

1971. After Ashoke finishes his studies at MIT and is offered a professorship at a college outside Boston, the Ganguli family moves. At first, they live in university housing, but soon decide to buy a home of their own. Ashima and Ashoke decide on a two-story colonial in a new subdivision. Gogol will have great memories of playing in the mud of the unfinished yard and chasing salamanders around the rocks. When Gogol is five, it is time to enroll him in kindergarten. Gogol is sick the first week because he does not want to go to school. Gogol's father has told him that he will be called by a new name at school. Since the grandmother's letter was lost, Ashoke finally took it upon himself to pick a name for his son. Ashoke picked Nikhil because it is a traditional Indian name and because it sounds similar to Nikolai, the author Gogol's first name. When Ashoke takes Gogol to enroll in school, this is the name he instructs the principal and teachers use for Gogol. However, after Ashoke leaves, the principal discovers that Gogol does not respond well to this name. Since Gogol is his legal name, the principal decides this is what they will call him.

The following May Ashima gives birth to a daughter. This time Ashima and Ashoke are prepared with a proper name already chosen for their child. They will call this child Sonali, which will eventually be abbreviated to Sonia. Gogol is thrilled to be a big brother and delights in playing with his small sister. Ashima and Ashoke, again making a great deal of friends from the growing Indian population in Boston, begin to socialize with these friends, sharing Sonia's rice ceremony with their friends as surrogate family members.

Already Gogol begins to rebel against his parents' insistence on keeping their home traditional. Gogol insists on having an American meal twice a week and talks his mother into making him bologna sandwiches for his lunches. In exchange, Gogol attends Bengali lessons twice a month to learn how to write in his parents' language. Gogol has also begun to notice the oddity that is his name. At first, Gogol loved his name. However, the older Gogol becomes and the more people have trouble pronouncing the name or commenting on its origin, the more Gogol begins to notice how different his name is from that of the other children. During a field trip to visit the home of a poet, Gogol is taken to a cemetery where the children are allowed to make rubbings of the names. Gogol finds as many odd names as he can, finding some recognition in these odd names. Ashima is not impressed with Gogol's rubbings, but to Gogol they are of utmost importance and he insists on keeping them for many years to come.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The fact that Gogol does not have a proper name continues to plague his parents. When Gogol is set to start kindergarten, Ashoke finally takes it upon himself to pick a



name for his child. A proper name is very important to Gogol's parents because it is inappropriate for a child to be called by his nickname in a public setting. However, when Ashoke takes his son to be enrolled in school, the principal refuses to comply with his request to call the child Nikhil because Gogol will not respond to the name. This upsets the Gangulis, though not enough to fight over it. Gogol, on the other hand, is pleased to continue to use the name Gogol, because that is all he has ever known and is what makes him feel comfortable. However, this will change.

Gogol eventually comes to realize that his name is unusual and that it makes him a standout in public. Gogol begins to resent his name, wishing it could be shortened to something more anglicized, like Nick or Bob. This is not something his parents want, however, so they do not understand Gogol's unhappiness with his name. In fact, Ashima and Ashoke go out of their way to make sure this problem does not arise with their second child, giving her a proper name from the beginning that is quickly shortened to a more anglicized name, exactly as Gogol would have liked.

When Gogol goes to the cemetery and finds all these unusual names, he begins to feel somewhat better about his own name. However, Gogol's dislike of his name and his insistence on making his mother fix American food for dinner several times a week begins to suggest to the reader that Gogol is not happy living with such a traditional family while in a country that does not stress these same types of traditions. These rebellions begin to introduce some tension into the story, suggesting a possible direction for future plot development.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

1982. It is Gogol's fourteenth birthday and his parents are throwing a large party for him that includes all their Indian friends. Gogol does not enjoy the party because he does not know most of the kids invited. Gogol does not like most of his presents, either, and sets them aside for his mother to regift them to family members on their next trip to Calcutta. After the party, Gogol is in his room when his father brings him one last gift. Gogol is surprised since his father has never given him a gift without his mother's help before. However, Gogol is disappointed to find it is a book of short stories by Nikolai Gogol, his namesake. Gogol does not know why his father named him Gogol except that he liked his writings. Now Gogol discovers that Gogol is not even the writer's first name, making Gogol's name even more ludicrous than he had first believed. Despite the fact that the book appears to be important to his father, Gogol puts the book on a shelf and quickly forgets about it.

The following year, Ashoke gets a sabbatical from his university and the family arranges for an eight month visit to Calcutta. Gogol is not happy about this and protests as much as he can, but is still forced to go. The family stays with relatives, moving from home to home every few weeks, rather than getting an apartment of their own. There is little for Gogol and Sonia to do during the day, so they spend a great deal of time alone together, listening to mixed tapes on their Walkman. As a surprise, during the summer, Ashoke arranges for the family to visit Delhi and the Taj Mahal. For once, they are on a real vacation, using credit cards, staying in hotels, and relying on translators to get along. However, upon returning to Calcutta, Gogol and Sonia get sick and spend several weeks recuperating. Soon the family returns to America, and Gogol is relieved to return to normalcy.

The following year, Gogol takes an English class in which the teacher is aware of the origins of his name. During a lesson on short stories, the teacher introduces Nikolai Gogol. Gogol learns that Nikolai Gogol was depressed most of his life and killed himself by refusing to eat. Gogol is even more embarrassed of his name upon learning these facts and refuses to read the Nikolai Gogol story assigned to the class.

Gogol does not date in school and does not do much socializing, both things that do not seem to concern his parents. Gogol does sneak out one night, however, to attend a college party with some of his friends. On this night, Gogol meets a young lady to whom he claims his name is Nikhil. Gogol feels like a totally different person when he uses this name, a person who is confident. Gogol gives his first kiss to a girl that night and feels accepted, like a new man.



Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter jumps several years into the future from the last chapter. Gogol is now a teenager, entering those awkward years that most children find difficult. Gogol dislikes the fact that his parents invite all their Indian friends to his birthday party, people he does not like spending time with because they are nothing like his American friends. When Gogol's father gives him a book of Nikolai Gogol's short stories, he is annoyed and unimpressed. Gogol does not understand why Nikolai Gogol is so important to his father and therefore sees no reason in becoming interested in the writings himself. Then when a teacher at school teaches the class about Nikolai Gogol and Gogol learns that he was depressed and odd, Gogol is even more ashamed of his name. The reader must be wondering at this point why Ashoke has not told Gogol the significance of his name or the true reason it is important to him and if this information would have an impact on Gogol. These questions give the reader a direction for the plot development and keep the reader glued to the pages.

Gogol's family spends eight months in Calcutta. While Ashoke and Ashima come to life among their friends and family, Gogol and Sonia are bored and homesick. The contrast in these behaviors shows the difference between the parents and the children and also suggests a future source of tension between these two sets of characters. Later, when Gogol tells a girl his name is Nikhil and feels as though he is a different person, these sets up a precedence that once again gives the reader a hint as to the direction in which the novel will take. One of the themes of this novel is identity, and Gogol is at that age when his identity takes form and begins to shape who he will be as an adult. The fact that Gogol is unhappy with his name suggests that this will be the first place he will adjust when he begins to take on his adult persona in future chapters.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

When Gogol turns eighteen, he decides to change his name legally. Ashima and Ashoke do not think this is necessary, but they do nothing to stop him. Gogol thinks it is very anticlimactic when the judge signs the papers, forever changing his name to Nikhil. It is not until Gogol moves into the dorms at Yale that the change begins to show itself, however, since his parents, his sister, and all their friends will forever call him Gogol. At college, Gogol is known as Nikhil. Gogol feels like a different person, though he suffers a small amount of guilt for changing his name. Nikhil is a man who is more confident, more American, and a man who fits in with his fellow students.

All through his freshman year, Gogol returns home every other weekend. However, the more time passes, the less he feels as though he fits in. Not only this, but Gogol has decided to go against his father's wishes that he study engineering and adds art classes to his schedule. During his sophomore year, Gogol meets a young lady on the train ride to Boston. This girl, Ruth, also attends classes at Yale. Ruth and Gogol hit it off and all weekend Gogol can hardly wait to return to school in order to call Ruth again. When they meet the second time, there is some awkwardness between them at first that quickly vanishes. Ruth and Gogol begin to spend a great deal of time together and before long become intimate. Gogol can think of nothing but Ruth when they are separated. Over the Christmas holiday, Gogol would like to see Ruth, but he has not told his parents about her and is afraid to do so because he knows they will not approve. Instead, Gogol arranges a clandestine meeting in Boston for a day.

When Gogol's parents finally learn of Ruth, they are not impressed. They feel marrying an American would be a mistake for Gogol and warn him not to become too serious. A short time later, Ruth spends a semester studying at Oxford. Gogol misses her dearly, but when she returns, things have changed between them. Soon Gogol and Ruth are fighting so much that they decide to split up. The Thanksgiving of Gogol's senior year he is traveling by train to see his father, who is alone for the holiday because Ashima and Sonia went to Calcutta for a wedding. The train is delayed several hours because of an accident on the tracks. When Gogol finally arrives, he finds his father has been waiting for him for several hours. Gogol feels bad and tells his father he should not have waited so long. In the car on their way home, Ashoke finally tells Gogol about the train wreck that almost ended his life and the reason why he chose Gogol for his son's name. Gogol feels shock and surprise at this admission, and guilt for having changed his name.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Gogol changes his name because he never liked it and because he feels like a different, more confident person when he goes by the name Nikhil. Not only this, but Gogol figures that Nikhil was always meant to be his legal name. However, the name change



is difficult to get used to, and Gogol cannot convince his family to call him by anything but Gogol. Gogol takes his new name and begins a new life in college, shutting himself off from his family in a small way in order to find the independence of a man. Gogol is beginning to find his identity outside of his family, a theme of the novel, and a part of this is embracing the American side of himself rather than his family's more traditional ways.

On one of his many mandatory trips home, Gogol meets a young girl who attends classes on the same campus. Gogol and this girl hit it off right away and quickly become lovers. Gogol is excited by this relationship because it is his first real relationship. Gogol can think of little but Ruth, especially when they are apart. However, Gogol does not tell his parents about Ruth because he knows what their reaction will be. Sure enough, when they do learn about her, Ashima and Ashoke warn Gogol that marrying an American is not a good idea. Gogol refuses to listen to them, but this does not keep the relationship from ending just the same. This is Gogol's first love affair and it does not end well. The reader might wonder if the same will be true of Gogol's future relationships.

One night Gogol's train is late returning to Boston. Gogol finds his father waiting for him, deeply concerned. Gogol is unsure why his father is so concerned. When Ashoke tells Gogol about his own train wreck and the reasons for naming Gogol as he did, Gogol is humbled, shocked, and saddened. Ashoke's near death experience, a theme of the novel, is a shock to Gogol because it proves to him how human his father really is. To most children, parents are not human; they are above human frailties. Gogol has just discovered this to be untrue and it affects him in a deep way. However, how deeply it affects him still remains to be seen.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

1994. Gogol moves to New York City after college to attend a graduate program in architecture at Columbia, despite his parents' desire he attend a similar program at MIT. Gogol is now an apprentice in a large architecture firm. One night a friend from the firm takes Gogol to a party at someone's home. There, Gogol meets a girl named Maxine with whom he has a nice conversation. Early the next morning, Maxine calls Gogol and invites him to dinner at her parents' home. Gogol agrees, amused to be pursued by a girl rather than the other way around. When Gogol arrives at the Ratliff home, he finds it to be a Greek Revival, a piece of architecture he deeply admires. Gogol meets both of Maxine's parents and likes how normal they are, how different from his own parents.

Gogol finds himself quickly accepted in Maxine's life, spending more time with her and her parents than he has with his own family in several years. Gogol learns about cooking with Lydia, Maxine's mother, and culture from Gerald, Maxine's father. Soon Gogol informally moves into the Ratliff home. That summer, Gerald and Lydia go to their summer home in New Hampshire, leaving Gogol and Maxine at home alone. Gogol enjoys this despite the lack of air conditioning in the old home. A few days before Gogol and Maxine plan to join Gerald and Lydia in New Hampshire for a week, Ashima calls and asks Gogol to come visit her and Ashoke for the weekend. Ashoke has received a grant to direct research in Ohio and Ashima would like Gogol to spend some time with him before he leaves. Ashoke will be going by himself, leaving Ashima alone for the first time in their marriage. Gogol reluctantly agrees to lunch on the way to New Hampshire.

Gogol is nervous when he arrives with Maxine, refusing to remove his shoes at the front door, as is tradition in his parents' home. Gogol is embarrassed later when his mother fusses over them, serving a dinner that clearly took a lot of preparation and refusing to sit down to eat herself until everyone else is finished. Gogol cannot get out of the house quickly enough, not bothering to respond to his mother's request that he call when they arrive in New Hampshire.

In New Hampshire, Gogol finds relaxation, a joy he's never truly known before. With nothing to do all day, he and Maxine find plenty to keep themselves busy. On his birthday, toward the end of their visit, the Ratliff's throw Gogol a party. Despite being grilled by guests about his ethnicity and his visits to Calcutta, Gogol finds the entire week exciting, just the kind of life he always imagined for himself. Gogol never bothers to call home to make sure his father got to Ohio okay or to make sure his mother is all right alone.



Chapter 6 Analysis

Gogol has moved to New York, once again attempting to put physical distance between himself and his family. Gogol increases the distance between himself and his family symbolically when he becomes involved with Maxine Ratliff and embraces not only her home and her family, but her culture as well. Gogol finds the way the Ratliff's live to be exactly the type of family life he has always wanted. Everyone is more relaxed and there is not as much emphasis on traditions. Gogol is in love, but more, he is in love with a life he always wanted. Gogol is embracing an identity that is not entirely his own, touching on a theme of the novel. This new identity shows its weakness when Gogol meets friends of the Ratliff's, who question his ethnicity and his travels in India. However, Gogol does not seem to notice these holes.

Gogol's father receives a grant to do research in Ohio. Instead of rushing home to wish his father a good trip, since the man will be gone nine months, Gogol avoids the idea all together. Gogol does not want his parents to meet Maxine. However, Gogol finally relents, under pressure from his mother, and agrees to go for lunch. However, in comparison to Maxine's family, Gogol finds his parents' behavior mortifying and is relieved to leave home. This episode, in combination with Gogol's refusal to call his parents to check their welfare, highlights Gogol's growing dissatisfaction with his parents and points the reader in a direction the narration is likely to take over the next few chapters.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Ashima has decided to make Christmas cards herself this year. Ever since Gogol and Sonia insisted the family celebrate the holiday, Ashima had been hard pressed to find cards that did not mention Christianity or religion, so this year she has decided to create her own cards with a drawing from one of her father's letters she saved long ago.

Ashima has adjusted to living alone over the past few months, though she misses the noise of her children and the company of her husband. Ashima does not understand why her children felt the need to move so far away, Gogol in New York and Sonia in California, but she knows it is important for them to find their own identity, so she tries not to fight their choices. Ashima has begun to make a few changes in her own life.

Ashima has a job now, working part time in the local library. Ashima has even made friends among the other ladies working there, her first real American friends in twenty years of living in this country.

While working on the cards, Ashima gets a phone call from Ashoke. Ashoke is in the ER of a hospital because of stomachache that will not go away. Ashoke assures Ashima that it is nothing serious, but asks her to make an appointment with their family doctor for the following weekend when he expects to be home. Ashima returns to her work, only mildly concerned. However, when Ashoke does not call again several hours later, Ashima becomes concerned. Ashima calls his apartment, regretting that Ashoke does not have a cell phone. Ashima then tries the hospital when the phone at the apartment is not answered. After a short time, Ashima speaks to a woman who claims to have been an intern who worked on Ashoke. The doctor tells Ashima that Ashoke has passed away of a massive heart attack.

Gogol is getting in late at the Ratliff home when he learns that his mother has called several times. Annoyed, Gogol does not rush to call her back. However, the phone rings again and this time it is Sonia. Gogol takes the first flight to Ohio in order to identify his father's body. After leaving the hospital, Gogol goes to his father's apartment and empties it out before returning to Boston. Gogol stays with his mother and sister for several weeks, ignoring Maxine's pleas to allow her to come be with him and to encourage him to return to New York. Gogol embraces his family's traditions; eating a mourner's diet and helping his mother and sister pick out a funeral picture of his father. The body is cremated in Ohio as is their tradition and the ashes are aside to be scattered in India. Finally, Gogol is forced to return to work in New York. On the train ride he thinks of his father and of a special time they spent together when he was a child, full of regrets for missed opportunities the past few years.



Chapter 7 Analysis

Ashima has grown accustomed to living alone and has even begun to make American friends through her part time job at the local library. Ashima even spends her time working on Christmas cards, something she would not have bothered to do when Gogol was younger. The culture shock, a theme of the novel, that Ashima suffered when she first moved to America is clearly beginning to subside. Ashima is much more relaxed now, happier in her adopted country. However, this happiness is quickly dissolved when Ashima learns that her husband has died in Ohio. This turns the plot in a new direction, not only for Ashima, but for her children as well.

Gogol learns of his father's death on a night when he was too tired to deal with his mother and her constant phone calls. Gogol does the right thing and immediately flies out to Ohio to deal with the business end of death. Upon returning to Boston, Gogol throws himself into the traditions of his family, traditions he has shunned up to this point, and cuts himself off from Maxine, the Ratliff's, and the family he had so readily embraced before. Gogol has lost himself in his father's death, submerged in guilt that will color the way he sees the world for some time. Again, this surprise death turns the direction of the plot development, causing Gogol to question his very identity, another theme of the novel, and perhaps reassess who he is and where his life is going.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

A year later, Gogol is still in New York, but his relationship with Maxine has ended. Gogol's mother begins to call him, suggesting he call a family friend's daughter, Moushumi. Gogol is not interested, in part because he knows his mother is trying to marry him off and partly because he is preparing to take his board exams in architecture and he is busy with that. However, Ashima pressures him so much that Gogol finally relents. On the first meeting, Gogol is surprised to find himself attracted to this woman and wanting to spend more time with her. Over the next week, Gogol begins to remember all the times he met Moushumi at family parties. When they meet for lunch, Gogol shares these memories, and once more finds himself wishing he could spend more time with Moushumi. In fact, after Moushumi picks out a hat at a local store, Gogol finds himself returning to buy it, despite its incredible price, and putting it away for Moushumi's birthday.

The following weekend, Moushumi invites Gogol to have dinner at her apartment. Moushumi is attempted to make a meal that she should have prepared ahead of time and it burns when Gogol whisks her off to the bedroom instead. Within a few months, they move belongings into each other's apartments. Over this time, Gogol learns that Moushumi moved to Paris after college in order to escape her parents' need to make a good marriage for her. There, Moushumi fell in love and became engaged. They returned to New York for the wedding. However, Moushumi learned one night of her fiancy's unhappiness with the cultural traditions surrounding their nuptials and a resulting fight ended their relationship. Moushumi was grief stricken and humiliated, hiding out at a friends until she could get on her feet again. Now Moushumi finds a second chance with Gogol.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Gogol has ended his relationship with Maxine and gone on with his life in New York. Ashima wants Gogol to contact the child of a friend, but he is reluctant because he is not ready to be in a serious relationship again. However, Gogol finally relents and meets Moushumi. Moushumi is a lot like Gogol in the fact that she has, to a certain degree, shunned her heritage and adopted an educated American way of life. They are also quickly attracted to each other. Gogol quickly becomes involved with Moushumi, more ready for an intimate relationship than he had thought.

Moushumi eventually relates to Gogol about a previous relationship she had been involved in. Moushumi lived in Paris and met an American there with whom she became engaged. The family was happy and quickly got the couple involved in the planning of a traditional Indian wedding. However, the fiancy could not handle these traditions and this caused a fight between him and Moushumi that ended the relationship. This not



only shows the reader the vulnerable state in which Moushumi is in when her relationship with Gogol begins, but also shows her history in romance as being just as rocky as Gogol's. This episode also suggests a direction for the plot development, giving the reader hope that Gogol has finally found a woman to settle down with.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

They marry within a year in a traditional wedding their parents have planned for them at the Double Tree hotel in New Jersey. The ceremony itself is highly traditional, but Moushumi refuses to wear the traditional clothing for the reception, putting her own spin on things. Gogol and Moushumi are not allowed to be alone until late in the night, finally given the space to share a hotel room alone. After Moushumi has a shower, they open their cards and total up the large amount of money they have been given in checks. Gogol and Moushumi use the money to put a down payment on a small apartment in the city.

In March, Gogol and Moushumi travel to Paris where Moushumi has been invited to deliver a lecture. In the first few days, Gogol feels as though he is in the way with Moushumi and her friends. Finally, Gogol decides to spend his days alone, visiting sights in the city. However, this leaves him feeling left out of Moushumi's life. When they return to New York, Gogol and Moushumi attend a party at the home of a friend. Gogol is bored and lonely during this party, not fitting in with Moushumi's friends. The conversation surrounds baby names since the host is expecting her first child. This bores Gogol, despite his own drama over his name. Gogol escapes the party and finds the hostess's husband in the kitchen cooking. While discussing whether or not Gogol and Moushumi should move to Brooklyn, Gogol learns that it was in this house that Moushumi lived while grieving the loss of her fiancé. This leaves Gogol feeling out of place in his wife's life.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Gogol and Moushumi marry in a ceremony that is designed to please their parents. Gogol is satisfied with this despite his previous rejection of his family traditions in his teen years. However, Gogol only wants to be married and he is happy to be with Moushumi. However, this begins to change when he and Moushumi travel to Paris. Gogol is threatened by Moushumi's past and her connections to Paris. Gogol's unhappiness increases when they return to New York and he attends a party with Moushumi. In the past, these parties were bearable because he and Moushumi would spend time alone together. However, Moushumi is more interested in her friends than in Gogol this time. This disturbs Gogol, but does not change his affection for her.

Gogol is in love, but has gone from one extreme to another in his search for his own identity. Gogol shed his family traditions at one point, embracing the culture of the world he lives in. Then Gogol goes the other direction, embracing the traditions of his family. Now Gogol has married a woman just like him. His unhappiness now suggests that perhaps Gogol has once again gone too far in his search and ended up in a situation that will not make him happy. This gives the reader a new direction for the development

of the plot over the next few chapters, wondering where this relationship will take Gogol next.



Chapters 10-11

Chapters 10-11 Summary

1999. Now Moushumi is the one who feels out of place. Moushumi won a fellowship to Paris but turned it down without telling Gogol about it. Moushumi is discontented as a result. When Gogol and Moushumi celebrate their first wedding anniversary, Moushumi is unhappy with the entire evening, beginning with the gift Gogol gave her, the restaurant where they dine, and the time they spend alone. One morning at the university where she works as a teacher's assistant in the French department, Moushumi is sorting the mail for a secretary who mysteriously passed away and finds a resume from a man she once knew. This man, Dimitri, is a friend she knew in high school whom she had an unsatisfied crush on. Moushumi writes down his number, unsure what she intends to do with it.

Moushumi goes home that night and searches for a book Dimitri once gave her. The next day, Moushumi calls Dimitri. They begin seeing each other several times a week, at first as friends but quickly becoming lovers. At first Moushumi is ashamed and filled with guilt, but after a while, the guilt fades. Moushumi increases the amount of time she spends with Dimitri.

Moushumi has gone out of town and Gogol is left alone in their apartment. The heat is off, so Gogol goes into the office to work on a drawing that is due soon. On the way home, Gogol decides to buy a Christmas gift for Moushumi, but he does not know what to get. Gogol looks in several stores but finds nothing that suits his needs until he sees a travel book in a bookstore. Gogol decides a trip to Italy would be the perfect gift for both he and Moushumi. Then Gogol heads home, stopping to get some groceries because he knows Moushumi will be hungry when she gets home.

Chapters 10-11 Analysis

In the previous chapter, the reader is given an idea that Gogol's marriage is not as happy as he would have expected. In this chapter, that theme is continued as Moushumi begins to reveal her own unhappiness. Moushumi does not like the way their anniversary goes and is unhappy that she felt she had to give up a fellowship that would take her back to her beloved Paris. This alone suggests to the reader that Moushumi is unhappy in her marriage. However, when Moushumi finds the resume of an old boyfriend and writes down the number, the reader can be very sure that this cannot lead to good. Moushumi begins to have an affair, moving the plot into a predictable but unhappy direction.

Gogol is unaware of the darkness beginning to take over his marriage. Gogol knows Moushumi is not happy, but does not sense how bad things have become. Gogol goes shopping for a Christmas gift for his wife, an act that a man who is about to face a



divorce would most likely not do. In fact, Moushumi is still a priority in Gogol's life as evidenced by his desire to buy her the ingredients for a good dinner after she returns from a business trip. The reader feels pity for Gogol at this point, seeing this relationship going in the same direction as Gogol's last two relationships. Once again, Gogol will be forced to reassess his identity, giving the reader one more hint to the direction of the plot will take in its final chapter.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

2000. Ashima has decided to sell the house now that her daughter is engaged to be married. Ashima will live in Calcutta with her brother for six months out of the year and return to America to spend six months between the homes of her children. Ashima feels free for the first time in her life, though leaving the house makes her feel as though she is leaving Ashoke behind for the last time. Ashima is throwing a Christmas party one last time in her home and her children will soon be there to help. Ashima is happy about this, feeling as though her life has finally settled into a happy pattern she can live with.

Gogol arrives in Boston in time for his mother's party. Gogol is happy to be home, despite the rocky year he has just survived. Gogol and Moushumi were on their way to Boston for Christmas the year before when Moushumi accidentally let Dimitri's name slip into their conversation. The truth about the affair came out and Moushumi moved out of the apartment. A few months later, after signing the divorce papers, Moushumi told Gogol she would be moving back to Paris. Gogol was heartbroken over the end of the marriage, and embarrassed and feeling inadequate as well. Being home now is like a salve on the wound. During the party, Gogol goes upstairs to find his father's camera and wanders into his own childhood bedroom. Among a group of books, Gogol finds the Nikolai Gogol book his father gave him on his fourteenth birthday. For the first time, Gogol opens the book and begins to read 'The Overcoat', the same story his father was reading the night of his near fatal train crash.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Ashima has decided to sell her house. This is a big step for Ashima. Ashima has always been cared for by her husband or her children, but has finally made the decision to move out on her own. Ashima has become her own person after fifty years of life. This brings Ashima's life full circle and brings her to a place where she can finally just be her own person and worry only about herself for once. No more culture shock, no more traditions to uphold, and no more children to raise. It is a fitting end to Ashima's story.

Gogol too has come to the end of a part of his life. Gogol's marriage has ended after his wife revealed the affair she had been having. Moushumi has decided to return to Paris, the only place she has been truly happy. Gogol does the same, returning to his mother's home. There was once a time when Gogol would not have gone to his mother for peace, but Gogol has matured enough that he has discovered that his parents are not the enemy. Once home, Gogol finds the book his father gave him of Nikolai Gogol's stories. For the first time, Gogol begins to read it. This is symbolic of Gogol coming to terms with his name, with his identity. This also brings Gogol full circle and satisfies his struggle to find himself, though his newly discovered identity is not a clear-cut, one or

the other choice. Gogol has found level footing somewhere between his family and the world where he lives, finding his identity in a place that satisfies both parts of himself.



Characters

Nikhil 'Gogol' Ganguli

Nikhil is the son of Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli. Nikhil is a second-generation immigrant from India. Nikhil's parents are very traditional, continuing to live in America how they would have lived in India with a few adjustments. Nikhil grew up with the name Gogol, which was intended only to be a nickname, or pet name, until a good, proper name could be obtained from his great-grandmother. However, the letter with Gogol's good name in it became lost somewhere between India and America and the great-grandmother became incapacitated before anyone could ask for a new letter. This left Gogol without a good name the first five years of his life, which is not unusual in the Indian tradition. However, when Ashoke registered Gogol in school and insisted the school officials call him Nikhil, the principal refused to enforce this wish because Gogol did not want to answer to a strange new name. Gogol would come to regret this decision some years later, however, when it occurred to him how unusual his name was and how he would have preferred a more anglicized name.

Gogol grew up stuck in a world that was full of constant contradictions. Gogol went to school with children who celebrated Christmas and Thanksgiving, who rode bikes and played video games, who had freedoms. Gogol's home life was full of traditions and strict rules. Gogol's family often celebrated holidays and traditions that none of his school friends had heard of or understood. Gogol feels his parents are unusual and backward, an embarrassment to him. When Gogol goes off to college, he cuts himself off from his parents except for the occasional visit home, afraid to introduce his friends to them for fear of what his friends will think. Gogol hides the fact that he has a girlfriend from them, again afraid of being embarrassed and aware his parents will not approve.

When Gogol's father dies suddenly, he has a change of heart with regard to his family. Gogol had cut himself off from his parents to the point that he only saw them once or twice a year. Gogol was living with a girl whose parents were everything Gogol had always wanted in a family. However, after his father's death, Gogol realizes how precious his family is to him. Gogol once again embraces his family and cuts himself off from his girlfriend and her family. As a result, when handed the opportunity to date an Indian girl, Gogol jumps in headfirst, and quickly finds himself married to a family friend. However, the marriage is not based on love and trust. Gogol's wife is unfaithful and the marriage ends less than two years after it began. This disaster leaves Gogol devastated, but it also leads him back to his family and helps him find an identity of himself that includes both his family traditions and the culture of his adopted country.

Ashima Ganguli

Ashima Ganguli is a twenty-something woman when she marries a man she barely knows and moves from her home in Calcutta to Cambridge, Massachusetts. The move



is a culture shock to young Ashima and she finds herself confined to her home because she is frightened to explore her new world. Ashima becomes pregnant and the pregnancy makes her even more homesick than before. Ashima longs for her family during this time of change in her life. After the baby is born, Ashima is convinced she will not be able to handle carrying for her child alone in a strange country. However, Ashima becomes so deeply engrossed in her son's care that she begins to explore her world and make friends among other Indian immigrants nearby.

Ashima surrounds herself with surrogate family members, other immigrants in the area, creating a family and a social circle that allows her to continue to live in the traditions of her home country. Even after moving to a suburb of Boston, Ashima continues to live in this way, isolating herself from the culture of America as much as possible. This isolation makes Ashima feel safe, but leaves her children feeling like aliens among their American friends. It is not until her children are grown and gone that Ashima finally begins to make friends with Americans, taking a job in the local library and befriending her co-workers. After more than twenty years in America, Ashima is finally beginning to assimilate, although she continues to wear a sari and celebrate Indian holidays. Ashima has adjusted to her adopted country. However, after her daughter becomes engaged, Ashima decides to sell her home and move back temporarily to Calcutta to live with her brother.

Ashoke Ganguli

Ashoke Ganguli is Ashima's husband. Ashoke is a graduate student at MIT. Before deciding to move to America, while still in college, Ashoke was in a train accident that nearly took his life. Before the accident, Ashoke met a man who encouraged him to see the world rather than only reading about it in books. Ashoke made this promise to himself while recuperating from his injuries. Even Ashima's unhappiness after the birth of their son does little to shake Ashoke's desire to continue living in America. Ashoke is strong and determined, despite the fact that he misses his family as much as Ashima misses her own.

Ashoke becomes a professor at a college in Boston where his family will live for the next twenty years. Ashoke is a successful professor who will later in life get a grant to conduct work in Ohio. When Ashoke takes the grant with another professor he moves by himself to Ohio, leaving Ashima alone in Boston. Ashoke makes a trip home every few weekends to see Ashima, but otherwise lives in a small apartment in Ohio. One day Ashoke calls Ashima and tells her he has gone to an ER because of a stomachache. Several hours later Ashima learns that Ashoke has died of a sudden, massive heart attack. Ashoke's death devastates Gogol and causes him to embrace his family in a way he has not done since he was a small child.



Sonia Ganguli

Sonia is the youngest child of Ashima and Ashoke. When Sonia was born, her parents had a traditional Indian name ready for her, afraid of making the same mistake they had made with Gogol. However, this traditional name becomes abbreviated to Sonia when she is still a small child. Sonia is five years younger than Gogol and therefore not a huge part of his life in the early part of the novel. Sonia becomes more important when Gogol and his family spend eight months in Calcutta, as she becomes Gogol's only friend. Later, after the death of their father, Sonia moves in with her mother and takes care of her for several years. It is not until Sonia becomes engaged that Ashima finally decides to sell her home and move to Calcutta to live with her brother and his family.

Ruth

Ruth is Gogol's first serious girlfriend. Ruth and Gogol meet on a train to Boston. Ruth goes to the same school as Gogol, but they never met until that night on the train. Ruth and Gogol have a lot in common and began to talk in a way that Gogol has never experienced with a woman before. After returning to school, Gogol looks Ruth up and they begin to see each other on a regular basis. Gogol and Ruth become a couple. However, Ruth takes off for a semester in Europe and when she returns, things have changed between them. Ruth has grown up and is no longer the same person Gogol once loved. At one time, Gogol could do little all day but think about Ruth. Now Ruth is gone and Gogol is almost relieved. Ruth is Gogol's first love and his first long time relationship, teaching him things that will help him in later relationships, making her an important character within the novel.

Maxine Ratliff

Gogol meets Maxine at a party after he moves to New York to join an architecture firm there. Maxine is bold and different from any woman Gogol has ever known before. Gogol is instantly attracted to her and is not put off by her forward behavior. Gogol goes to Maxine's home for dinner and meets her family, finding himself drawn to their normalcy, their American ways. Gogol embraces this life, embraces this family. Before long, Gogol is living in Maxine's home, though he keeps his apartment so his parents will not know about his change in address. Gogol spends his nights learning from Maxine and her family. Gogol even vacations with the Ratliff's. During this time, Gogol avoids his family and keeps Maxine from them, taking her to meet his parents only once. Gogol is embarrassed by how backward his family appears as compared to the Ratliff's and does not want to show Maxine the world he came from. Maxine is Gogol's second serious girlfriend. This relationship continues for more than a year until Gogol's father dies and he finds himself embracing his family once more.



Gerald and Lydia Ratliff

Gerald and Lydia Ratliff are Maxine's parents. Gogol loves the Ratliff's because they are everything that America stands for to Gogol. Lydia works with textiles in the Met. Lydia knows a great deal about art; on this subject, she and Gogol have a lot in common. Lydia is also an amateur gourmet cook. Gogol learns a great deal about cooking from Lydia. Gerald is a lawyer. Gogol admires his work ethics and his money, as well as his character. Gogol wants to be like the Ratliff's. However, the reader is given insight into the Ratliff's when Lydia asks Gogol if he was born in America, suggesting this has something to do with her desire to accept him into her family. The Ratliff's are important to the plot and therefore important characters because they symbolize the American culture that Gogol wants to embrace as his own.

Moushumi Mazoomdar

Moushumi is the daughter of a family friend of the Gangulis. Moushumi spent the first thirteen years of her life in London and arrived in America with an English accent. This set Moushumi apart even among the Indian friends of her parents. Gogol barely remembers her when his mother suggests that he give Moushumi a call. However, Gogol begins to remember Moushumi once they meet again. Moushumi and Gogol are surprised to find themselves attracted to each other, but are not terribly surprised when they find themselves getting married barely a year after they begin to date. It seems their marriage was ordained by their family.

Gogol and Moushumi start their marriage on rocky feet. Moushumi takes Gogol to Paris only to leave him feeling left out while she spends time with her friends as he tours the landmarks of the historic city. When Moushumi and Gogol return home, they spend time with some of Moushumi's friends, and again Gogol feels left out. Moushumi too is feeling the difficulties of marriage and begins to search outside her marriage for happiness. Moushumi has an affair with an old boyfriend. When Gogol learns the truth, the marriage ends, and Moushumi returns to Paris.

Nikolai Gogol

Nikolai Gogol was a Russian writer. Ashoke is a fan of Nikolai Gogol's and is reading one of his short stories when the train on which he is riding crashes, nearly ending his life. Because of this episode, Ashoke names his son Gogol. Gogol begins to dislike his name in his teen years. This dislike only grows when Gogol takes an English class in high school where he learns about Nikolai Gogol's history. Nikolai Gogol was a man who was prone to depression. Nikolai Gogol would become so depressed in middle age that he would stop eating. Nikolai Gogol would die from starvation despite the attempts of friends and family members to save his life. Gogol finds this history embarrassing and it is not until he learns of his father's train wreck that he begins to understand why his father named him after this odd man.



Extended Family and Local Family

Ashima and Ashoke surround themselves with Indian families from the area in America where they live. Ashima and Ashoke find it difficult to cope with the loss of family in their adopted country so they embrace friends as family members. It is a great part of their tradition as Indians to share many of the milestones of everyday life with family. There are a great number of holidays to celebrate in their traditions that require family. Ashima and Ashoke share all these events with their Indian friends. Though many of these friends are not given names in the novel, they are constantly present throughout Gogol's life. In the end, when Ashima decides to move back to Calcutta, Gogol feels regret that he is not close enough to any of these people to have them continue to stay in his life. Gogol will forever be Gogol in the eyes of these people, not Nikhil, and it makes him sad to know that with his mother's leaving, this part of his life will go with her.



Objects/Places

Gogol Book of Short Stories

Gogol's father gives him a copy of a book of Nikolai Gogol's short stories in order to share with him the stories he loved as a young man and that inspired him to give Gogol his name.

Train Crash

Ashoke nearly died in a train crash when he was a young man, several years before he married Ashima. It is the memory of this train crash and the desire to read his Gogol book that saved his life that causes Ashoke to name his son Gogol.

Missing Letter

Ashoke and Ashima put off naming their son in order to use a name Ashima's grandmother has mailed to them in a letter. However, the letter becomes lost in the mail and they never learn the name the grandmother intended their son to have.

Resume

Moushumi finds a resume at NYU that puts her back in touch with an old boyfriend after she and Gogol marry. Moushumi has an affair with this man, ending her relationship with Gogol.

Sari

A sari is a traditional dress for Indian women. Ashima insists on wearing a sari her entire life, even while living in America.

Traditional Indian Food

Ashima insists on feeding her family traditional Indian food rather than using American convenience foods while living in America. Gogol finds this tedious and embarrassing.

Pemberton Road House

The Ganguli family buys a house on Pemberton Road in Boston when Ashoke takes a position with the local college. It is here that the family will live for more than twenty-five years.



Cambridge, Massachusetts

Ashoke moves Ashima to Cambridge shortly after their wedding because he was attending classes at MIT. Ashima is not happy at first but soon comes to accept her new home.

Calcutta, India

Both Ashoke and Ashima are born and raised in Calcutta and will take many family vacations back to Calcutta while their children are small.

Ohio

Ashoke takes a grant that requires him to live in Ohio for several months. It is while working in Ohio that Ashoke dies of a heart attack.

New York City, New York

Gogol moves to New York after college, first to attend graduate school and then to work at a large architecture firm.

France

Moushumi lived in France before she married Gogol and moves back there after their divorce.



Themes

Identity

Gogol grows up with an unusual name. Gogol is used to being the only Indian in a group of children, of standing out in a crowd. However, Gogol feels as though his name only makes this worse. No one else in the world has a name like Gogol. Even, the Russian writer, his namesake, does not have Gogol as his first name; it is his last. Gogol is not teased over his name and the only trouble he gets from other people is mispronunciations and the occasional question. However, Gogol feels that the strange name makes him stick out like sore thumb. Gogol decides to change his name when he turns eighteen, picking a name his father once picked for him in the tradition of Indian society. At first, Gogol is ecstatic at his change of name. However, when Gogol finally learns the truth as to why his father gave him such a unique name, Gogol begins to feel guilty over his antipathy toward the name.

Gogol's name is not the only part of his family's identity that he objects to. Gogol feels that his parents' strict adherence to the traditions of Bengali ways is an embarrassment. Gogol dislikes the effort his mother goes to when cooking meals for guests, her insistence that the guest eat heartily, and her refusal to sit down to her own meal before her guests are done. Gogol also dislikes that his parents only socialize with other Bengalis and refuse to adapt to the traditions of America. As Gogol grows, he rejects many of the Bengali traditions, resents his family's frequent trips to Calcutta, and cuts himself off from his parents as quickly as he can. Gogol embraces the affections of other families, American families that are drastically different from his own, searching for himself in their ways rather than those of his mother and father. However, after his father dies, Gogol feels differently, turning to his family's traditions with more gusto than he ever embraced them before. As a result, Gogol ends up in a bad marriage that ends before its even two years old.

Gogol's search for his personal identity among his parents' traditional style of living is a major theme to this novel. The first sign of Gogol's unhappiness is his dissatisfaction with his name. However, it soon becomes clear to the reader that this is just a symptom of Gogol's difficulties with living in a Western civilization with parents who still practice the traditions of the Eastern world. Gogol is an American, a second-generation immigrant, who has no guidance as to how he should behave in his adopted country. At first, Gogol rejects his parents and embraces the culture of the American people around him. However, Gogol feels guilty for this after his father's death and goes the other direction, embracing the Indian world by marrying an Indian woman. This does not work out for him, either, as the woman he marries does not love him, but marries him out of a sense of obligation to her own parents. Finally, however, Gogol discovers himself, a man who is both Indian and American, and in this way solves the struggle of his search for an identity.



Culture Shock

Where Gogol finds himself forced to search for his personal identity, his parents know who they are. However, who his parents are does not mesh well with the world they have chosen to live in. Ashima and Ashoke move to America so that Ashoke will have the opportunities of education and the experience of seeing a world his parents only read about. Ashima is not happy from the start, afraid of being in a new place without anyone she knows nearby. Ashima does not even know her husband that well since the first time they looked each other in the face was the morning of their wedding. When Ashima has a baby, the homesickness becomes even more intense, as it is a tradition in her country to have family around during the birth and the first year of the child's life. Ashima confesses to her husband that she cannot do this and wants to go home. However, Ashoke refuses.

Soon, Ashima becomes involved in the day-to-day activities of her child's life and finds enjoyment in this routine. Shortly after, through her husband's work, they begin to meet other Indians also living in Cambridge. As a way to comfort herself and to bring home to her, Ashima surrounds herself with other immigrants from India. Ashima brings India to her, throwing parties where she only invites other Indians and following the traditions of home with these new friends. This habit continues through her children's childhoods, causing them frustration with their mother's refusal to accept the traditions of American culture. Slowly, Ashima begins to accept small pieces of American culture, celebrating Christmas and Thanksgiving, as well as making her children traditional American meals such as Hamburger Helper. However, it is not until her children have grown up and left home that Ashima begins to make friends with people of all races when she takes a part-time job at the local library.

Death

Death is a theme of this novel because it is Ashoke's near death experience that led him to name his son Gogol, and it is his death of a heart attack that causes Gogol to begin to accept his heritage, an acceptance that eventually leads to him finding his true identity. When Ashoke is a young man in his early twenties, he is journeying on a train to visit his grandfather when the train derails, crushing many of the sleeping cars and killing many of the passengers. Ashoke should have been asleep in one of the bunks of his sleeping car, but instead he stayed up late reading a short story by Gogol. After the crash, Ashoke lay in the dirt with pages of the book clutched in his hands. Later, when Ashoke is found, it is the movement that these pages make when he flexes his hand that catches the attention of his rescuers. Ashoke remembers this moment while waiting for the birth of his first child. When the moment comes to name his son, it is the name of the author that first comes to his mind.

Ashoke does not tell Gogol this story until a few years after he changes his name. When Gogol learns the truth, he feels guilty about his unhappiness with his name and his insistence on changing it. However, he does not feel guilty enough to adopt the name



Gogol once more. It is not until his father unexpectedly dies that Gogol begins to regret his choices. Gogol embraces his family once more after his father's death, rejecting his American girlfriend and her family over his own. This leads Gogol to a relationship with the daughter of one of his mother's many Indian friends. Gogol and this girl marry, pleasing their parents and embracing to a certain degree the traditions of their parents' homeland. However, the marriage is not based on love and trust. The marriage quickly falls apart and Gogol finds himself alone again. This event is embarrassing and shocking for Gogol, but it allows him to finally find an identity that is somewhere between the traditions of his parents or the more lax culture of America.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is third person omniscient. The author uses Gogol and Ashima as narrative characters most often. However, the novel is written heavily in exposition, or descriptive passages, which allows the author's own voice to come through almost as often as those of her characters. The author uses this technique in order to cover a great deal of time in a short number of pages. This technique also allows her to tell her story tightly and with great control without the added richness of dialogue and a multitude of dramatic scenes.

The point of view works well because the author is careful to denote changes in narrator with chapter breaks or paragraph breaks. The author is also cautious when allowing her own voice to shine through, rarely making outright statements. This keeps down the confusion that can happen with such a narrative style. The point of view is engrossing and allows the reader to become emotionally attached to the characters in a way that makes the reader care how the plot develops and where the characters will end up at the end of the novel. The point of view is clear and concise, easy to read and appropriate to the plot development.

Setting

The majority of the novel is set in Boston. The Ganguli family first lives in Cambridge and then moves to Boston where they buy a house. The house is a common American two story colonial, like any other house on the block. The Ganguli's plant a lawn and lays a flagstone path to the front door. The inside sports wall-to-wall carpeting and the typical accoutrements of any American household. It is a home that is a complete contrast to the family who lives inside. The elder Gangulis are immigrants from India who refuse to accept the culture of their adopted country. They surround themselves with other Indian immigrants, socializing only with these other immigrants. They live in America but their hearts still belong to India. Calcutta is the true setting to the elder Gangulis and is a setting the family visits several times in the first half of the novel. Calcutta is a crowded, hot city that the Ganguli children dislike despite their hereditary connection to it. However, it is home to their parents and it will forever be home.

Other settings in the novel are the places Gogol lives while in college and afterward. Gogol lives in the dorms while attending Yale. Gogol spends little time here and the room is not described in great detail. After the dorms, Gogol shares several apartments with fellow students, but again these places are not described. When Gogol moves in with Maxine, her home is described in detail due to the spectacular architecture and Gogol's chosen profession of architecture. The house is large and as different from his parents' home as Maxine's parents are from his own. The settings within this novel are



highly symbolic without playing a part in the story beyond that. This works because it keeps the story on the characters and does not distract from the plot.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is precise English. The use of more formalized English lends authenticity to the fact that many of the characters of the novel speak another language as their first language. There are also phrases within the narration that are in Bengali, an Indian dialect that is spoken as the primary language of the elder Gangulis and their friends. Some of these phrases are explained within the text but not in such a way that it interrupts the flow of the narration. The phrases are used in such a way as to further enrich the sense of authenticity to the background of the Ganguli family.

The novel is easy to read despite the foreign phrases used throughout. It is written simply in descriptive phrases with very few dramatic scenes and a small amount of dialogue used throughout. The language makes this technique richer and allows the reader to get to know the characters despite the lack of scenes. It is important to the plot development that the reader relate to and care about the characters, because it is the characters that drive the story. Since such a large amount of time passes in this short novel, the exposition helps get in all the important events and the language enriches the character development, achieving what the author needed to achieve without leaving the reader wishing there had been more scenes or more dialogue to further show the characterization of the important people driving the plot.

Structure

The novel is divided into twelve chapters that are each about twenty to thirty pages long. The chapters are not titled and they are not divided into parts. A few of the chapters begin with a year marker, letting the reader know when a large amount of time has been passed between chapters. Time passes very quickly in this novel; therefore, these markers are quite helpful in keeping the reader up to date. The chapters are written mostly in exposition or descriptive passages, leaving little room for dramatic scenes or dialogue. This technique also allows for the great amount of time that passes throughout the novel.

The novel follows two story lines. The first is that of Ashima and her difficult adjustment to living in America after spending the first twenty years of her life in Calcutta. Ashima has a difficult time in adjusting to the more relaxed culture of America after living with strict traditions in India. Ashima surrounds herself with Indian friends and adheres to the traditions of her home country for most of her life, despite the objections of her children and the amount of time that she lives in America. The second story line follows the birth and first thirty-three years in the life of Ashima's son, Gogol. Gogol is a second-generation immigrant who has difficulty finding his own identity in the two worlds in which he lives. Gogol lives in the Western world, in a culture that allows a man to wear blue jeans and eat pork. However, Gogol's family lives with the traditions of India in

which a woman does not call her husband by his formal name and wears flip flops inside their home. These two story lines intersect many times throughout the novel, both coming to their conclusion simultaneously as the novel reaches its climactic end.



Quotes

"Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over." Chapter 1, p. 2

"In November, Gogol develops a mild ear infection. When Ashima and Ashoke see their son's pet name typed on the label of a prescription for antibiotics, when they see it on top of his immunization record, it doesn't look right; pet names are not meant to be made public this way." Chapter 2, p. 36

"Mrs. Jones lives a life that Ashoke's mother would consider humiliating: eating alone, driving herself to work on snow and sleet, seeing her children and grandchildren, at most, three or four times a year." Chapter 3, p. 48

"Not only does Gogol Ganguli have a pet name turned good name, but a last name turned first name." Chapter 4, p. 78

"There is only one complication: he doesn't feel like Nikhil. Not yet. The problem is that people who now know him as Nikhil have no idea that he used to be Gogol." Chapter 5, p. 105

"He prefers New York, a place which his parents do not know well, whose beauty they are blind to, which they fear." Chapter 6, p. 126

"At the bottom of the cards, over and over, she signs their names: her husband's name, which she never once uttered in his presence, followed by her own, and then the names of her children, Gogol and Sonia. She refuses to write Nikhil, even though she knows that's what he would prefer. No parent ever called a child by his good name. Good names had no place within a family." Chapter 7, p. 165

"A year has passed since his father's death. He still lives in New York, rents the apartment on Amsterdam Avenue. He works for the same firm. The only significance difference in his life, apart from the permanent absence of his father, is the additional absence of Maxine." Chapter 8, p. 188

"He thinks back to the story he cannot bring himself to tell these people, at once as vivid and as elusive as it's always been: the capsized train in the middle of the night, his father's arm sticking through a window, the crumpled page of a book clutched in his fist." Chapter 9, p. 244

"At home, Nikhil suspects nothing. As usual they have dinner, talk of their days. They clean up the kitchen together, then sit on the sofa and watch television while she corrects her students' quizzes and exercises. During the eleven o'clock news, they have bowls of Ben and Jerry's, then brush their teeth. As usual they get into bed, kiss, then slowly they turn away from each other in order to stretch comfortably into sleep. Only Moushumi stays awake." Chapter 10, p. 265



"Gogol wakes up late on a Sunday morning, alone, from a bad dream he cannot recall."
Chapter 11, p. 268

"He leans back against the headboard, adjusting a pillow behind his back. In a few minutes he will go downstairs, join the party, his family. But for now his mother is distracted, laughing at a story a friend is telling her, unaware of her son's absence. For now, he starts to read." Chapter 12, p. 291



Topics for Discussion

Ashima and Ashoke's marriage is arranged by their parents. What do you think of this sort of marriage? How did this arrangement affect Ashima when she moved to America? What impact did this have on their lives overall? Why did they remain married so long? Did they finally fall in love? How did this affect Ashima's take on marriage and divorce?

Why don't Ashima and Ashoke have a name picked out for Gogol when he is born? Should they have? Is Gogol his legal name? How does this affect his parents' traditional values? Why do Ashima and Ashoke attempt to have Gogol enrolled in school as Nikhil? Why does the principal not allow this to take place? Is this appropriate on the principal's part?

Why does Gogol not like his name? Can you relate to Gogol's unhappiness with his name? How? Does Gogol's desire to change his name offend his father? Why does Ashoke not tell Gogol the true story about his name? Would it have made a difference if Gogol had known about his father's near death experience before he changed his name? Why does it not make a difference when Gogol does learn the truth?

Why does Gogol have so much trouble with love? Why does Gogol's first relationship end? Does this have anything to do with Gogol's self esteem? What about the second relationship with Maxine? Does Gogol's obsession with her family have anything to do with the eventual end of the relationship? Why or why not? What about the third? Why does Gogol's marriage turn sour? Why does his wife cheat on him? Did they marry for the wrong reasons?

There is a lot of symbolism in this novel. List a few examples of symbolism. What does each object symbolize? Why is this important to the plot? How would the story be different without this objects symbolism?

Why is the novel called Namesake? How is Nikolai Gogol important to the overall story? Is Gogol really the person Gogol is named after, or is his name symbolic of something else? How does Gogol's name and the history of his namesake shape the person he becomes as an adult? How are these two men's lives parallel to each other? How are they different? How is Gogol's namesake important to the overall theme of the book?

Analyze the writing style of this book. How would this book be different if it were written with more dramatic scenes rather than the long descriptive passages? Would the book be better or would dramatic scenes take something away from the overall feel of the book? What other changes could the author have made to make the novel more entertaining, more mainstream? How would these changes have affected the overall impact of the novel?