

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, English

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture 50

Lecture 50: Diaspora and Cinema: Mira Nair's The Namesake

Thank you. Good morning, and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. Today, we are discussing our module on Diaspora and Cinema. So, for today's lecture, we will be starting our discussion with a new film, The Namesake. So, The Namesake, the film is based on Jhumpa Lahiri's novel The Namesake,



which was published in 2003, and then it was adapted into a film with the same title in 2007. The film was directed by filmmaker Mira Nair. Like Jhumpa Lahiri, Mira Nair is also a filmmaker of Indian origin.

So, Jhumpa Lahiri primarily writes. She is a prolific writer who is originally from India. Similarly, Mira Nair is a filmmaker. She is also an artist who traces her origin to India. They come from different generations of the diaspora.

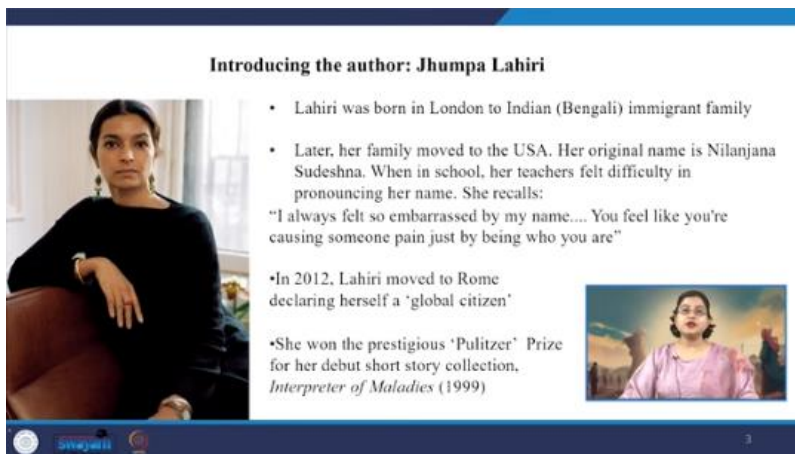
Lahiri belongs to the second-generation diaspora, whereas Nair comes from the first-generation diaspora. The film adaptation revolves around the life of a first-generation Indian immigrant family, the Ganguly family, in the USA. To be more specific, it is the story of a Bengali immigrant family, their cultural differences, and their struggles in the

process of acculturation in a completely different cultural setup. So, they travel from India, all the way from a very homely Bengali milieu, and then they are all together in a new environment in

America, and the entire film is about acculturation—how they adjust to the new American culture. Thematically, the film deals with the concept of identity, acculturation, and one's sense of belonging and unbelonging. Now, talking about the author of the original novel and namesake, Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London to an Indian Bengali immigrant family. Later, her family moved to the USA.

Her original name is Nilanjana Sudeshna, but she is better known as Jhumpa Lahiri to the world today. So, we recognize the author as Jhumpa Lahiri today. When she was in school, her teachers had difficulty pronouncing her name. She herself recalls, I quote Jhumpa Lahiri here, 'I always felt so embarrassed by my name.' 'You feel like you are causing someone pain just by being who you are,' unquote.

Introducing the author: Jhumpa Lahiri

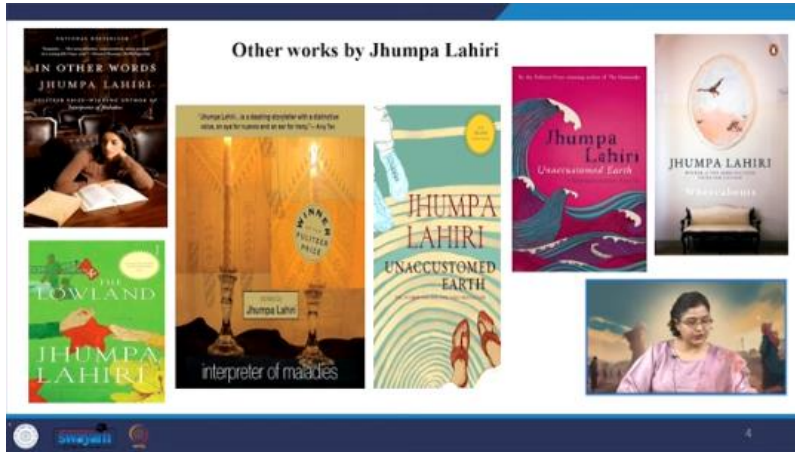


- Lahiri was born in London to Indian (Bengali) immigrant family
- Later, her family moved to the USA. Her original name is Nilanjana Sudeshna. When in school, her teachers felt difficulty in pronouncing her name. She recalls:
"I always felt so embarrassed by my name.... You feel like you're causing someone pain just by being who you are"
- In 2012, Lahiri moved to Rome declaring herself a 'global citizen'
- She won the prestigious 'Pulitzer' Prize for her debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999)

So this kind of cultural difference, struggle here, in order to assert who you are, be who you are and explain your position, your cultural position, the kind of background you have come from is something that Lahiri has been facing right since her school times when her family had moved to the USA. In 2012, we see that Lahiri moved to Rome and she declared herself as a global citizen. She won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for her debut short story collection titled *Interpreter of Maladies*, which came out in 1999. So, these are some of the works by Jhumpa Lahiri.

Her career actually boasts of some of the very important seminal works that have been created by her. So, we have the Pulitzer Prize winner *Interpreter of Maladies* and we have the *Lowland*, we have *Unaccustomed Earth* and then we have *Whereabouts*. All these

works have greatly impacted and shaped the career of Jhumpa Lahiri as a prolific and well-acclaimed author. Now coming to Meera Nair. Meera Nair was born in Odisha in India.



Nair is an Indian director renowned for her documentaries and her feature films which deal with subjects that reflect the real life issues in our society. So Nair was a graduate student of Delhi University and later she joined Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she developed an interest in documentary filmmaking. Her first documentary was titled Jama Masjid Street Journal, which was also a part of her thesis, a part of her academic curriculum. She then created a series of documentaries, which examined the traditions and cultures of India and these documentaries include Indian Cabaret and Salaam Bombay, Mississippi Masala, and then she took an interest in literary adaptations such as Vanity Fair, Amelia and The Reluctant Fundamentalist. Jhumpa Lahiri's renowned novel, The Namesake, which came out in 2003, tells us about the story of a Bengali immigrant family in America, the Gangulis.


Meera Nair adapts a cinematic version of Lahiri's novel. On the adaptation of a novel into a film version, I quote Peter Torop here, The main difference between film and literary work lies in the fact that literature is fixed in a written form, while in the film the image or representation is supported by the sound in the form of music or words, unquote. In the film adaptation by Mira Nair, one of the major issues is the conflict of cultural identity, which is experienced by the characters belonging to two different generations. The film stars actors like Kal Penn, Irfan Khan and Tabu in the lead roles.

It was produced by the Indian, American and Japanese studios. The film was released in the US on 9th of March 2007, following its screenings at different film festivals in Toronto and New York. Now, coming to the plot of the novel and the film. Ashima

Ganguly represents the first generation diaspora whereas her son Gogol Ganguly who is the main character and the protagonist of this story represents the second generation migrant. Each generation deals with different cultural conflicts that require the characters to deal with

Introduction- *The Namesake* (2003)

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- On the adaptation of a novel into a film version, Peter Torop writes: "The main difference between film and literary work lies in the fact that literature is fixed in a written form, while in a film the image (representation) is supported by the sound, in the form of music or words" (qtd. in Subrata Kumar Das)
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different ways of resolving and solving their problems. So, there are different problems posed by the society to these characters, and they have to find their way out. They have to solve their problems in different ways. They have different perspectives to look at the problems that a different culture and a different environment, an American life has to offer to them. Now, Stuart Hall observes that identity is an unstable and an ongoing transformation.

To quote Hall, cultural identity is not of fixed existence at all, lying unchanged outside of history and culture. It is not once and for all, unquote. So culture is something that is flowing, that keeps accumulating, that keeps, you know, picking up new elements from one's immediate environment, immediate reality. And so culture is likely to metamorphose, to evolve.

And similarly, our identity also evolves dramatically in terms of our changing perceptions, our new experiences that we garner, that we gather from everyday life. So, the Namesake is regarded as a literary work which depicts the spirit to celebrate the transformation of cultural identity, which is shown through the development of this figure, this protagonist figure of Gogol, as well as his mother Ashima, who in the end adopt a flexible sense of belonging to more than one culture. In 2007, the Namesake film adaptation, which was directed by Meera Nair, hit the box office.

A study of this film adaptation examined it through the lens of linguist Roman Jakobson's intersemiotic translation. This intervention, this scholarly intervention and study shows that Bengali culture is used by the film as a strategy to translate the novel into a filmic text of moving images. In his essay titled *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*, Linguist and critic Roman Jakobson describes intersemiotic translation as one of the three possible types of translation. According to Roman Jakobson, intralingual translation, which is different from interlingual translation or intersemiotic translation, is related to the science of one language only.

So, intralingual translation pertains to the science of one language only, whereas interlingual translation occurs between two different languages. Furthermore, we see that intersemiotic translation includes translation between two different media. For example, it could be a translation between a verbal medium and a musical medium or a verbal medium into a cinematographic medium, and so on. So, Meera Nair's film *The Namesake* draws on the immigrants, especially Ashima and Ashok Ganguly's experiences, to explore the meaning of culture and identity in a diasporic space.

So, It's the story of this couple, Ashima and Ashok Ganguly, and then the film goes on to focus on the experience of the second generation, their son Gogol Ganguly. The film travels in time and space with the Ganguly couple from India, from Calcutta in India to America, where they set up a family in a very different cultural environment. The film begins with Ashima, who is seen attending a classical music class. After Ashima arrives home, her mother asks her to come to the drawing room as a man is waiting to see her

for marriage. This is a common practice in the tradition of arranged marriage back in India. The next scene gives a kaleidoscopic picture of a Bengali marriage ceremony. So, the girl is seen, the marriage is arranged, and the ceremony takes place. The film uses several Indian cultural icons in order to emphasize India,


In order to represent India as the root of the protagonist's identity. One important visual cultural motif or icon that keeps recurring in the film, something not mentioned in the original novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, is the idol of the goddess Saraswati. The idol appears in scenes whenever there is an important stage in Ashima's life. When Ashima's marriage is fixed with Ashok, she is guided by older women to embrace a new life on her wedding day.

She is blessed by the senior women to embrace this transition in life and her new life, the expectations it entails. It is a typical depiction of Indian family values and cultural

identity. Her new life suggests both her conjugal life and the life she is expecting in America. The idol of Saraswati appears three times in the film, almost as a recurring image. It has significant importance in the film's portrayal of India and Indian culture, which serves as the essence, the basic roots shaping Ashima's identity.

Culture and Identity

- When Ashima's marriage is fixed with Ashoke, she is guided by older women to embrace her new life on her wedding day. It is a typical depiction of Indian family values and cultural identity. Her new life suggests both her conjugal life and her life in America



Embrace the new

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The first time the image of Goddess Saraswati appears is when the film introduces Ashima as an Indian classical music singer. However, the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri provides no such information before the scene showing her marriage with her husband Ashok. Thus, the image of Saraswati appearing at every turn of her life is a cinematic experiment by Nair. By portraying Ashima as a traditional singer, the film creates an allusion, a symbolic connection between the figure of Saraswati and Ashima through her love for the arts, especially through her love for music, her attachment and fascination for it.



This connection is further strengthened by the role of music in the film's narrative. As I was saying. This connection serves as a cultural and religious anchor throughout the film, guiding the viewer through the plotline of the story. The reference to Goddess Saraswati, which is a key trope in the film, is therefore crucial for understanding Ashima's cultural and religious roots. In India, we all know that Saraswati is widely regarded as the goddess of knowledge, arts, and music.

The film also projects a similar appearance, or rather appearances, for traditional musical instruments such as the Veena. The Veena is a very important metaphor, which is something we always see in the hands of Goddess Saraswati's icon. She is seen playing the Veena, and the film also depicts this Veena in the hands of Ashima.

Culture and Identity

- Saraswati is widely known as the goddess of knowledge, arts, and music. The film also projects similar appearances of the traditional musical instrument, the *Veena*. The instrument, *Veena*, is also an icon that is popular in the depiction of Saraswati. *Veena* symbolizes Saraswati as the goddess of arts and music
- The second appearance of the icon of Saraswati occurs in the scene that shows Ashima, who is about to deliver a baby. The idol is shown in the film as being moved on a cart, crossing the road. This movement also depicts Ashima's transition in life from a wife to a mother


Saraswati

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She is shown playing a Tanpura or Veena in the film. The instrument Veena is also an icon that is popular in depictions of Goddess Saraswati, as I mentioned earlier. Thus, the Veena symbolizes Saraswati as the goddess of arts, aesthetics, and music. The second appearance of the icon of Saraswati occurs in the scene showing Ashima, who is about to deliver a baby. Saraswati's image is once again shown at a point in Ashima's life when she is about to give birth.

The idol is shown in the film as being carried on a cart crossing the road. This movement of Saraswati could depict Ashima's transition in life from being a wife to becoming a mother. Finally, the third appearance of the goddess Saraswati is the most important of all, as it summarizes the whole idea of the film through this symbol. The idol emerges in the last scene of Ashima, who is back in India, and once again she resumes her initial position as an Indian classical music singer, which becomes almost like going back to the starting point, the beginning of the film.


So, the film ends by completing a circle, and it ends where it had begun. This last scene of the film is different from the idea of Ashima that is given in the original novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, which shows Ashima's identity transformation. To quote from Lahiri's novel, 'She is not the same Ashima who had lived in Calcutta.' So, in the novel, the transformation in the protagonist's personality is evident. The fact that her personality has irreversibly changed is clearly stated and implied,




situating Ashima back to her first appearance. The filmic experiment by Nair, however, tries to show Ashima's loyalty toward her ancestral roots, toward her ancestral culture. The presence of the idol of Saraswati also indicates several things. A. India's spiritual identity as a recurrent point of reference, coming back in the film again and again. B.

It functions as an allusion between the character of Ashima and the symbol of the goddess. And finally, it represents Ashima's connection to the roots of her Indian culture, which shapes her identity. Until the end of the film, the idol remains unchanged and intact. Now, coming to Ashima's son Gogol, Gogol is a second-generation diaspora and decides to pursue his career as an architect.

Culture and Identity

- The third appearance of the goddess Saraswati is the most important of all, as it summarizes the whole idea of the film through this symbol. The idol emerges in the last scene of Ashima, who is back in India and once again resumes her initial position as an Indian classical music singer, as shown at the beginning of the film
- This last scene of the film is different from the idea of Ashima given in the novel, which shows Ashima's identity transformation, "*she is not the same Ashima who had lived in Calcutta*" (Lahiri). So in the novel, the transformation in the protagonist's personality is irreversible
- Situating Ashima back to her first appearance, the film tries to show Ashima's loyalty toward her ancestral culture. The presence of the idol also indicates:
 - ☐ India's spiritual identity as a recurrent point of reference
 - ☐ Secondly, it functions as an allusion between Ashima and the goddess





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In his understanding of architecture, the Taj Mahal plays a quintessential role, something that traces its roots to Indian culture. The Taj Mahal is another Indian cultural icon that is used by the film to replace the influence of the Yale buildings on Gogol. So, Gogol has seen too many Gothic architectural structures. Lahiri's novel, especially, is full of descriptions of European Gothic architecture, which also leaves an impact on Gogol's mind and on his career as an upcoming architect.

In Nair's film, we see that the Gothic buildings have been replaced with the famous Taj Mahal to demonstrate Gogol's sense of belonging. So, this particular Indian Mughal architecture in the film is presented as a strong influence on Gogol's education, on how he understands architecture. So, this is also a very different experience from his understanding or his observation of the Yale buildings, the structures that are built in the West. So, Gogol, being raised by Indian parents in an American setting, is not very distant from Indian culture in the first place.

Culture and Identity

- ❑ Thirdly, it represents Ashima's connection to the roots of her Indian culture, which shapes her identity. Till the end of the film, the idol remains unchanged and intact
- ❑ Gogol, Ashima's son, a second-generation diaspora, decides to pursue his career as an architect. The Taj Mahal is another Indian cultural icon used by the film to replace the influence of Yale buildings on Gogol. Lahiri's novel is full of descriptions of European Gothic architecture
- Nair's film has replaced the Gothic buildings with the famous Taj Mahal to demonstrate Gogol's sense of belonging. India's Mughal architecture in the film is presented as a strong influence on Gogol's education. Gogol, being raised by Indian parents in an American cultural milieu, is not very distant from the Indian culture. The presence of the Taj Mahal in the film not only decides Gogol's future as an architect, but also impacts his personal life



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The presence of the Taj Mahal in the film not only decides Gogol's future as an architect but also impacts his personal life. The Taj Mahal is known as a quintessential symbol of love, a timeless emblem of love. It inspires Gogol to name his own house Moushumi Mahal after his wife, right? After the icon of love, he names his own house Moushumi Mahal, and this is a wedding anniversary gift to his wife. An Indian traditional act that Gogol performs

Later in the film is the tradition of tonsuring or shaving one's hair, a ritual of shaving one's head after the death of his father. The novel mentions it in passing. However, the film elaborates on the visual representation through multiple points of view. So, tonsuring is essentially a Hindu ritual that shapes Gogol's cultural identity. The entire scene is shown through a mirror reflection, hinting at Gogol's identity, which seems fragmented between Indian and American values.


The film stresses the fact that Gogol has understood the importance of Indian rituals and traditions. The Namesake's filmic adaptation by Nair shows the portrayal of India as the root of the Ganguly family's identity. The film shifts from the novel and is more inclined to embrace India as the origin of this family's identity, especially for Ashima and Gogol. In Ashima's case, the film focuses on her depiction as the epitome of India's ideal woman, After the figure of the goddess Saraswati.




So, her image is informed by the social construction of the mother goddess whose figure, whose image and imagination is prevalent in India. The visual specificity also concentrates mostly displaying Ashima and Gogol's identity through the cultural essence of India. The film uses Indian cultural tropes and icons as a strategy to delineate the meaning of India, the significance of India and Indian values, which form the identity and which define the characters of Gogol and Ashima. Finally, the film... presents Ashima as

the bearer of Indian culture as she transforms into a traditional singer after coming back to India.

Conclusion

- *The Namesake's* filmic adaptation shows the portrayal of India as the root of identity. The film shifts from the novel and is more inclined to embrace India as the origin of identity for Ashima and Gogol. In Ashima's case, the film focuses on her depiction as the epitome of India's ideal woman, and her image is informed by the social construction of the mother goddess in India
- The visual specificity also concentrates mostly on displaying Ashima and Gogol's identity through the cultural essence of India. The film uses Indian cultural icons as a strategy to delineate the meaning of India as the root of the identity that defines the characters of Gogol and Ashima
- The film presents Ashima as the bearer of Indian culture, as she transforms into a traditional singer after coming back to India. Consequently, Gogol, who represents the second-generation immigrants, is portrayed as more comfortable with his ancestral culture; this is different compared to the description given in the novel



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Consequently, we see that her son Gogol, who represents the second generation immigrants, is portrayed as someone that is more comfortable with his ancestral culture. This is not how Lahiri actually describes the character of Gogol in her novel. This is a little different compared to the depiction that is given in the novel. So, we see that Meera Nair is deploying her poetic freedom, her artistic license and her artistic innovation and intervention to read Jhumpa Lahiri's novel in a slightly different manner.

She retells the story of the first and second generation diaspora people in her own creative way. I would like to stop our lecture here today and let's meet in our next lecture with a discussion on a new film. Thank you.

