

Women on the Other Side

Week 2: *The Namesake* (US/India 2006)

Directed by Mira Nair
Produced by Lydia Dean Pilcher and Mira Nair for Fox Searchlight, Cine Mosaic, Entertainment Farm, Mirabai Films, UTV Motion Pictures
Written by Sooni Taraporevala and Mira Nair from the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri
Original Music by Nitin Sawhney
Cinematography by Frederick Elmes
Film Editing by Allyson C. Johnson
Casting by Loveleen Tandan and Cindy Tolan
Production Design by Stephanie Carroll
Art Direction by Suttirat Anne Larlarb
Costume Design by Arjun Bhasin
Sound Design by Ed Novick
Runtime: 122 min

Leading players

Irrfan Khan	<i>Ashoke Ganguli</i>
Kal Penn	<i>Gogol Ganguli</i>
Tabu	<i>Ashima Ganguli</i>
Sahira Nair	<i>Sonia Ganguli</i>
Zuleikha Robinson	<i>Moushumi Mazumdar</i>
Glenn Headly	<i>Lydia Ratliff</i>
Daniel Gerroll	<i>Gerald Ratliff</i>
Jacinda Barrett	<i>Maxine Ratliff</i>

The Namesake is the work of a woman who has developed a successful career as a director working in the independent sector, but able to attract star actors and to gain international recognition and with it wide distribution. *The Namesake* represents both a cross-cultural, 'hybridising' form of cinema and a traditional style of storytelling which might be considered as 'typical' for women's cinema.

Mira Nair

Born into a middle class family in the North Indian state of Orissa, Mira Nair attended university in Delhi and then won a scholarship to Harvard. After early experience in street theatre, she began directing documentaries in her early thirties, but first came to international attention with *Salaam Bombay* in 1988, a documentary-drama about streetchildren in Bombay, funded by public and private investors in India, Channel 4 in the UK and a French production company. This film won prizes around the world. In 1991 she made *Mississippi Masala*, about an inter-racial affair between the daughter of East African Indian immigrants (played by Sarita Choudhury) and an African-American man in the Southern US (played by Denzil Washington). After some

less successful films (including *The Perez Family* in 1995), she finally had a major hit with *Monsoon Wedding* in 2001, which married the conventions of very different forms of cinema – the loose visual style of European and American Independent Cinema with the intensity of Indian art cinema and the exuberance of Bollywood.



In 2004, she directed Reese Witherspoon in an adaptation of *Vanity Fair* and after *The Namesake* she is due to direct Johnny Depp in a mainstream feature set in Mumbai (*Shantaram* 2008). Like many successful directors outside Hollywood, Mira Nair has her own production company, Mirabai Films.

Tabu and Irrfan Khan as Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli

The family saga

Four of Mira Nair's films fall into what might be described as the genre of the family melodrama or family saga. The 'saga' concept fits *The Namesake* in that it tells the story of a family over many years – long enough for the marriage of the principals and for their children to grow up (the other films have shorter time-spans, although they do refer to earlier events).

The Namesake is adapted from a novel by Jhumpa Lahiri and adapted by Sooni Taraporevala (also an Indian-born woman who went on to Harvard) and Mira Nair. When the 'woman's picture' was a staple of mainstream Hollywood in the 1940s (during the war, women comprised a larger than usual proportion of the audience), melodramas based on bestsellers by women writers were the big earners for the major stars such as Bette Davis, e.g. in *Now, Voyager* (1942) based on a novel by Olive Higgins Prouty (whose earlier novel, *Stella Dallas* was the basis for films in 1925 and 1937 (with Barbara Stanwyck).

Family-based stories are as popular in India as they are in Europe and North America, China and Japan. What we might expect, however, is that female directors would be more attracted to family stories which focus largely upon the mother daughter relationship. Indeed, women tend to be the central characters in melodramas of all kinds, whether they are the 'suffering women' of Japanese Cinema or the more active heroines of melodramas such as those of Rainer Werner Fassbinder or more recently Pedro Almodóvar (two gay men, continuing a long tradition of gay men presenting 'strong women').

The Namesake ostensibly focuses on a father/son relationship and as such is a 'male-centred melodrama'. However, the female characters are not marginalised as they are in other male-centred melodramas, possibly because of the family saga focus.

The basis for production

On the DVD of the film, Mira Nair argues that she chose to adapt the novel of *The Namesake* because it spoke to her personal situation. On the one hand, she had recently suffered from the death of a loved one and she was moved by that element in the story. On the other hand she recognised her own situation in the overall idea of the story, dealing with the movement between two worlds, what she describes as the "gothic vibrancy of Bengali culture in Kolkata" and the equally dynamic world of 'Desi' culture in New York. She wanted to bring the two locations together in some way.

('Desi' is the word used within South Asian communities outside India to describe themselves, but seems to be used more in North America than in the UK. Within the film industry, 'NRI' (Non-Resident Indian) is often used to describe the diaspora communities.)

The possibilities of the story

The story concerns a couple who marry in Kolkata in the late 1970s and then move to New York because the man has a university job there. What is interesting for this course is that it is often the woman in the marriage who has the most difficulty adjusting to the move. This is particularly true for a Bengali woman who does not have experience of American customs, who lacks extended family support and does not have work contacts. (But she is an intelligent woman with many talents, not a simple village girl.) She is dependent to a certain extent on the arrival of other NRIs and the gradual establishment of a Desi community.

The other gender question arises in relation to the new generation of 'American-Asian' women, the daughters of Ashoke and Ashima's generation of migrants. The film offers us brief glimpses of Gogol's sister and rather more of Zuleikha Robinson as Moushumi. There is also the opportunity to consider the extent to which North America has changed the sense of masculinity shown by Gogol in comparison with his father.

Mira Nair and Indian Cinema

Mira Nair has a definite link to Indian Cinema, both in her representations of Indian culture, use of actors and locations and generation of Indian audiences for her films. She does sometimes refer directly to 'Bollywood' – the commercial Hindi Cinema associated with Mumbai – but in this film, the connection is directly with Bengali Cinema. There are three main forms of Indian Cinema. The largest in numbers of films produced is represented by the various 'regional cinemas' across different Indian states according to language groups. The four South Indian language cinemas in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala produce more films than the more high profile Bollywood industry. The third type

of cinema is the more art-orientated cinema, traditionally strong in West Bengal and Kerala as well as in Hindi.

Bengali Cinema encompasses both art and popular cinema. *The Namesake* pays *hommage* quite deliberately to the two great directors of Bengali art cinema, Satyajit Ray (1921-92) and Ritwik Ghatak (1925-76). In particular, Ashima's Grandmother is played by the actress who had the leading role in Ghatak's *Cloud-Capped Star* (1961), a role in which she sang, like Ashima. Bengal prides itself on its cultural roots and its railways, both featured in *The Namesake*.

One of the striking features of the film is the mixing of different acting styles. Tabu (Ashima) is from South India and is an established star of both Bollywood and South Indian cinemas. Irrfan Khan is a highly regarded actor from Independent Cinema and Bollywood and he first appeared in Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay*. He and Tabu played together in a recent version of *Macbeth* (*Maqbool*, India 2003). He is currently playing against Angelina Jolie in Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart*. Kal Penn, who plays Gogol, was born in the US and made his name in the teen comedy *Harold and Kumar Get the Munchies* (2004).

As the credits show, Mira Nair works with a consistent team of women she has worked with before. Her status within the contemporary industry allows her to attract the best talent both before and behind the camera. This allows her to be more ambitious in terms of the material she tackles.

Discussion questions for Week 3

1. How would you describe the genre or category of this film? Is 'family saga' adequate or would you want to expand the genre description?
2. Do you see this as a film that appeals more to women than men? If so, why?
3. What does the family story gain by the presentation of events over a long period and in two different cultural contexts?
4. What kinds of representations of men and masculinity are offered in the film?

Rona Murray and Roy Stafford 2/10/07

