

Namesake – Novel and Film , A Comparison

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Abstract

It has been observed that in the film adaptation of any novel the director does take the main story as a basis of the film, but makes his, own necessary changes needed for the smooth revelation of the story. This paper tries to draw a comparison between The Namesake, a novel and a story Jhumpa Lahiri's 2003 novel is a portrait of the immigrant experience of Ganguli family. It follows their life story in traditional environment of India through their arrival in Massachusetts in the late 1960s and their difficult melding into an American way of life. It was adapted into a screenplay by Sooni Taraporevala and the 2006 film starring Kal Penn, Irfan Khan and Tabu was directed by Mira Nair. This paper would like to focus on answering some of the following important questions which arises.

- How did the film of the Namesake use flashbacks? Was there a corollary to this technique in the novel?*
- Location is obviously important in the story of the namesake. Did it change the story very much to move the American sections from the Boston area to New York?*
- For director Nair, “the heart” of the book stemmed from the loss of a parent. Was this the heart of the book?*
- So much of the book involves an internal monologue. Is that sufficiently captured in the film?*
- How much the book and movie focus on the issue of identity crisis and to what extent movie has done the justification.*

Key Words: Immigrant, Film, Novel, Comparison

I used to teach Jane Austen, and in a way doing what I do now is a bit like doing those lectures in which I say ‘This is the way I see it . Don’t you see it like that?’[Now, as a filmmaker]I have got millions of dollars worth of visual aids and actors to prove my point

Interview, Andrew Davies

Cinema since the silent era has been an audio – visual medium that depends on engaging exactly two of its audiences five senses as if they were sufficient to constitute the sensory envelop of an entire world. In novels, we often come to know characters best not through what they say , but through what they are thinking or what is said about them in the narration . A narrator mediates the meaning of what we read through his or her point of view: a coming of age story reads much differently if we hear about what happens from the point of view of the person going up than if we learn about it from that person’s mother ,sister or teacher . But in film, the narrator largely disappears. Sometimes a narrator’s perspective is kept through the use of a voice –ones, but generally the director, cast and crew must rely on the other tools of film to reproduce what was felt, thought, and discussed on the page.

The Namesake , novel by Jhumpa Lahiri , opens with Ashima standing in the kitchen of a central square apartment helping herself with her favorite rice krispies preparation. She is in an advanced state of pregnancy, admitted to Mount Auburn Hospital. The Namesake begins by recounting the emotional struggles of an Indian husband and wife trying to make a new life in America. Ashima Ganguli the pregnant wife wrestles with an intense longing to be with her family and to share the experience of child birth with her mother and father.

The first chapter of the novel deals with very small details of the maternity floor .Ashima is asked to remove her murshidabad silk sari and to have a cotton gown. She is embarrassed with the shortness of the gown. A nurse helps her in folding up sari though she ends with no proper way. This same episode forms an exact scene in movie. In the same chapter, we came to know about the first meeting of Ashima and her husband Ashoke . It was arranged at Ashima’s parents house.

Before entering the sitting room , Ashima had paused in the corridor . She could hear her mother saying , “She is fond of cooking , and she can knit extremely well . Within a week she finished this cardigan I am wearing.” Ashima smiled , amused by her mother’s salesmanship; it had taken her the better part of a year to finish the cardigan , and still her mother had to do the sleeves .(Lahiri,7-8)

Through movie we know just half truth; we see Ashima smiling but don’t know the reason of her amusement. We can say that a movie depends on prescribed, unalterable visual and verbal performances in a way literary text don’t.

Glancing on the floor where visitors customarily removed there slippers , she noticed , besides two sets of chappals, a pair of men’s shoes that were not like any she’d ever seen on the streets and trams and buses of Calcutta , or even in the windows of Bata. ...She saw the

size , eight and half , and the initials U.S.A. And as her mother continued to sing her praises , Ashima, unable to resist a sudden and overwhelming urge, stepped into the shoes at her feet. (Lahiri,8)

As we move through the pages , we come to know more about the life Ashok and Ashima share eight thousands miles away from India in Cambridge . Ashoke is very much fastidious about his clothing

Their first argument had been over a sweater she'd shrunk in the washing machine .As soon as he comes home from the university the first thing he does is hang up his shirt and trousers, donning a pair of drawstring pajamas and a pullover if it's cold. (Lahiri 10)

Mira Nair's *The Namesake* (2006) begins with a train crash. The year is 1974, and Ashoke Ganguli (Irfan Khan), an aspiring engineer and avid reader of Russian literature, is traveling from Calcutta to Jamshedpur to visit his grandfather. He never reaches that destination. While he is absorbed in the sartorial travails of Akaky Akakievich, Nikolai Gogol's unfortunate protagonist, the train derails, abruptly altering the course of Ashoke's life. Until now, he has sought to see the world merely through reading - to "travel without moving an inch," as his grandfather had put it. But after the wreck, he decides to heed the advice of a fellow passenger, Mr. Ghosh, who, only moments before the crash, urges him to leave home and travel outside of himself. The opening catastrophe, which becomes the film's primal scene, leads Ashoke, and later his arranged-marriage bride Ashima (Tabu), away from the familiar and familial Bengali life to the chilly, alien world of New York.

In the very first chapter, the most important incident, of Ashok's life has been revealed to us, which changed his life. In novel it is October 20, 1961, Ashok was travelling on the 83 UP Howrah- Ranchi express to visit his grandparents for the holidays. The following page deal with the conversation he had with one of the companion, which had a great impact on him.

A friendly , potbellied , middle -aged Bengali businessman wearing a suit and tie , by the name of Ghosh .Ghosh told Ashoke that he had recently returned to India after spending two years in England on a job voucher , but that he had come back home because his wife was inconsolably miserable abroad . Ghosh spoke reverently of England. (Lahiri 15)

"Seen much of this world?" Ghosh asked Ashoke ...

"Once to Delhi," Ashoke replied. "And lately once a year to Jamshedpur."

"Not this world ." Ghosh said , " England, America."

"Have you considered going there?"

Ashoke said, "My grandfather always says that's what books are for , " Ashoke said , using the opportunity to open the volume in his hands . " To travel without moving an inch." (Lahiri16)

The movie under the same title is a 2006 film which was released in the United States on March 9, 2007. It was directed and produced by Mira Nair. Sooni Taraporevala adapted it to screenplay. Following were the casts , Tabu as Ashima Ganguli , Irfan Khan as Ashoke Ganguli , Kal Penn as Gogol , Sahira Nair as Sonia Ganguli , Jacinda Barrett as Maxine Ratcliffe and Zuleikha Robinson as Moushumi Mazoomdar. The film is about 122 minutes.

Sometimes filmmakers make change to highlight new themes, emphasize different traits in a character or even try to solve problems they perceive in the original work. Sooni Taraporevala also took much liberty , though not much work has been done with dialogue writing , as they seems to be taken exactly the lines from the book wherever necessary. But the first 21 minutes of the movie consist of the incidents described in just the first chapter of the novel.

The second chapter deals with the birth of a baby boy. We can see the changing expression of the actor in the movie, we can analyze he is happy or is he sad, but we don't hear the exact thought in his mind. As far as novel is concerned we are very much aware of the thought process which we can read, we are very sure why is he laughing.

When he looks back to the child , the eyes are open , staring up at him , unblinking , as dark as the hair on its head . The face is transformed; Ashoke has never seen a more perfect thing . He imagines himself as a dark , grainy , blurry presence . As a father to his son . Again he thinks of the night he was nearly killed , the memory of those hours that have forever marked him flickering and fading in his mind . Being rescued from that shattered train had been the first miracle of his life . But here , now , reposing in his arms, weighing next to nothing but changing everything , is the second.(Lahiri 24)

Next page lingers on the letter which contains one name for a girl, one for a boy. Sent by Ashima's grandmother from India, that never reached. Later on Mr. Wilcox complier of hospitals , birth certificates discloses them that the baby cannot be released from the hospital without a birth certificate.

"We are waiting for a letter ," Ashoke says, explaining the situation in detail.

"I see ," Mr. Wilcox says again . "That is unfortunate . I'm afraid your only alternate is to have the certificate read 'Baby Boy Ganguli'. You will of course , be required to amend the permanent record when a name is decided upon."

Ashima looks at Ashoke expectantly . "Is that what we should do?"

"I don't recommend it," Mr. Wilcox says. " You will have to appear before a judge , pay a fee. The red tape is endless."(Lahiri,27)

"Hello, Gogol," he whispers, leaning over his son's haughty face, his tightly bundled body. "Gogol," he repeats, satisfied. The baby turns his head with an expression of extreme concentration and yawns.

Ashima approves, aware that the name stands not only for her son's life, but her husband's. She knows the story of the accident, a story she first heard with polite sympathy, but the thought of which now, now especially, makes her blood go cold. There are nights when she has been woken by her husband's muffled screams, times they have ridden the subway together and the rhythm of the wheels on the tracks makes him suddenly pensive, aloof. (Lahiri 29)

Ashima wrestles with an intensive longing to be with her family and to share the experience of childbirth with her parents. Not only this she is worried about the upbringing of Gogol. Her complaints to Ashoke

"I won't," she insists thickly looking neither at the baby nor at him. She pulls back a bit of the curtain, and then lets it fall. "Not here. Not like this."

"What are you saying, Ashima?"

"I'm saying hurry up and finish your degree." And then, impulsively, admitting it for the first time: "I'm saying I don't want to raise Gogol alone in this country. It's not right. I want to go back." (Lahiri 33)

Ashima's love for family for instance, influences her to create a close knit web of immigrant friends. This group practices Indian customs, speaks 'the Bengali language, and in many respects, become a substitutes family for the vast collection of relatives back in India. In February, when Gogol is six months old, Ashima and Ashoke organized his rice ceremony. By this time they know enough people. On the other hand in movie it is Sonia not Gogol whose rice ceremony is depicted though in the same manner as it is given for Gogol in novel.

To predict his future path in life, Gogol is offered a plate holding a clump of cold Cambridge soil dug up from the backyard, a ballpoint pen, and a dollar bill, to see if he will be a landowner, a scholar, or businessman. . . "Put your money in his hand!" someone in the groups calls out. "An American boy must be rich!"

"No!" his father protests. "The pen. Gogol, take the pen."... (Lahiri, 40)

The formal organization of time and space in each version of the Namesake, for example, determines its engagement with a historically specific "life World" in which the events of the text transpire. The novel begins in 1968 and ends in 2000, while the film begins in 1977 and ends in 2004. The shift in time relocates the historical and social contents in which the story of Gogol parents, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli, unfold. The novel and film also take place in two different spaces, shifting from Cambridge to town outside Boston. This also had been one of the troubling issues with Ashima "For Ashima, migrating to the suburbs feels more drastic, more distressing than the move from Calcutta to Cambridge had been" (Lahiri 49).

In novel when Gogol turns five, Ashima got to know that, someone is going to come to call Gogol dada. While in movie Gogol is four and Sonia is about a year. It is in September of 1973, the first day of Kindergarten for Gogol. A long description of the conversation between

Ashoke and Mrs Lapidus , regarding the name in registration form for Google is given in novel though it is omitted from the screen .Just the following seen is depicted in movie.

At the end of his first day he is sent home with a letter to his parents from Mrs. Lapidus , folded and stapled to a string around his neck , explaining that due to their son's preference he will be known as Gogol at school . What about the Parent's preference? Ashima and Ashoke wonder, shaking their heads.(Lahiri 60)

In 1982, it was Gogol's Fourteenth birthday, when he met Moushumi first. This is the first time in life when his father gave him a birthday present.

"I ordered it from the bookstore, just for you," his father says, his voice raised in order to be heard over the music. "It's difficult to find in hardcover these days. It's a British publication, a very small press. It took four months to arrive. I hope you like it."... "Thanks, Baba," Gogol says , eager to return to his lyrics .(Lajiri 74-75)

His father still stands there seeing the resemblance. Wanting to tell him why he was named Gogol

"I feel special kinship with Gogol ," Ashoke says, "more than with any other writer . Do you know why ? "

"You like his stories."

"Apart from that . He spent most of his adult life outside his homeland. Like me."

Gogol nods. " Right."

"And there is another reason." The music ends there is silence. But then Gogol flips the record, turning the volume up on "Revolution1."

"Whats that?"gogol says . a bit impatiently....Today, his son's birthday , is a day to honor life , not brushes with death .And so for now , Ashoke decides to keep the explanation of his son's name to himself .'No other reason. Good Night," he says to Gogol (Lahiri78)

The same incident in movie takes place with a growing year in Gogols life It is after his graduation. May be according to Mira Nair Gogols need to be more matured to understand this.

They move to India, for a long vacation of eight months, in the year after his fourteenth birthday. As soon as they return from India Gogol join his junior year in high school. While watching movie we find that, Gogol insist on changing his name to Nikhil. With a new name he move to New York, lives there with Maxine and Ratcliff family, working as an architect. The issue of his changing name to Nikhil arises in novel in different manner. It was after attending Mr Lawson classes he feels to change it.

It is in the sixth chapter of the book, year 1994. Gogol lives in New York he has graduated from the architecture program at Columbia. It is in this Chapter we are introduced to Maxine . This chapter deals with all the details, that how Gogol was introduced to Ratcliff family and how he became part of their family.

Finally the truth behind the name of Gogol is revealed to him by Ashoke yet in two different manners in book and movie, though it occurred in totally different time and place. While Gogol traveled by train back home to see his family on Thanksgiving his train was delayed because a man committed suicide by jumping in front of it. Hearing of his son's experience Ashoke feels compelled to tell Gogol the story of his near death experience. Ashoke tells Gogol how his name derived from this crash. This is a new insight for Gogol because he finally knows where his name came from and what the relevance of his name is. This allows Gogol to begin to accept his pet name and even appreciate it.

And as they sit together in the car, his father revisits a field 209 kilometer from Howrah. With his fingers lightly grasping the bottom of the steering wheel, his gaze directed through the windshield to the garage door, he tells Gogol the story of the train he'd ridden twenty – eight years ago, in October 1961, on his way to visit his grandfather in Jamshedpur. He tells him about the night that had nearly taken his life, and the book that had saved him, and about the year afterward, when he'd been unable to move. (Lahiri 123)

In movie, it was before Ashoke was living for his semester in Ohio. Gogol visited them with Maxine. The story Ashoke told in movie was about the year 1974. Flashback is used in the movie to show the accident and how he survived. Whereas this has been mentioned in book, in very first chapter. We don't find any connectivity, or the reason, in the movie when he is disclosing the fact, at that point of time. We could conclude that was the last interaction between Gogol and Ashoke, so it became necessary to put the whole episode there.

"Gogol asks him. "Do I remind you of that night?"

Not at all," his father says eventually, one hand going to his ribs, a habitual gesture that has baffled Gogol until now. "You remind me of everything that followed." (Lahiri 124)

As the story moves further in the novel we came to know that Ashima started to live on her own, as Ashoke moved to Ohio for his semester. Ashima is now going to live a different kind of life which she never had lived earlier. "Now that there is no one to feed or entertain or talk to for weeks at a time. At forty -eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind." (Lahiri, 161) The way in which, the news of Ashoke's death fall on them is shown in the same manner in movie and novel both. This is his father's death which has changed a lot in Gogol. He has his own regrets.

He is terrified to see his mother, more than he had been to see his father's body in the morgue. He knows now the guilt that his parents carried inside, at being able to do nothing when their parents had died in India, of arriving weeks, sometimes months later, when there was nothing left to do. (Lahiri 179)

Moushumi Mazoomdar, reenters the novel and movie after an year of Ashokes death .Gogol and Moushumi were asked to see each other by their families, Which lead to their marriage, finally, making both the families happy .But after a year's marriage Moushumi realizes thatGogol is not the kind of man she ever wanted to marry. And develops an extra marital affair, which was not known to Gogol for a long time .Novel devoted a long section to Moushumi Giogol relationship, their falling in love, their living together and their detachment. Whereas ,movie on the other hand captures a small part of it.

The Novel ends with the year 2000. Most of the last chapter has been dedicated to Ashima. At last Ashima decides to spend six months in India and six months in States, justifying her name as it mean with 'no boundaries'. "True to her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere."(Lahiri, 276)

The book ends with Gogol reading Gogol, though the same thing happens in the movie, the only difference is of time and space .It is year 2004, Gogol has boarded a train, like his father in the beginning, going off to see the world and find his own way. "Things that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end" (287). Gogol realizes that everything that has happened to him, from the botched naming attempt at his birth, to his father's death, was meaningful. In the end, the very thing that Gogol was running away from becomes the cornerstone of his life. In fact, even if Gogol never knew it, it always was.

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