

## Week 15 Lecture: *The Namesake* and Final Thoughts

### Introduction:

Welcome to the end of the semester. I'm both impressed and satisfied that we have made it this far. I know I've asked for a lot from you all this semester, but I hope that, in the end, you feel accomplished with what we have covered and the work you have done. Your lecture for the final week will come in two parts: first, a discussion of the final novel, followed by some overall ideas to wrap up our semester. Remember, in the DB this week I'm asking you for final comments and thoughts, so don't take my words as definitive. **I think that, by the end of the course, you have earned the right to speak your mind: so don't hold back.**

Quickly, a note on our author. Jhumpa Lahiri has published several bestselling novels in the last decade, including *The Namesake*. While *The Book of Daniel*, for instance, is mainly read by college students, Lahiri's novels reach a broad audience. If you liked *The Namesake*, I highly recommend her collection of stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, which earned her the Pulitzer Prize in 2000.



It is impressive that, at such a young age, Lahiri has captivated audiences with her works. As the photo on the novel captures, she has a striking gaze, pictured [here](#). The picture to the right comes from a brief [biography page](#), if you are interested (from Emory University).



While most of her work to date deals with the complications and confusions of a heritage that is both American and Indian, this focus allows her to show an America that is different from previous, American-born authors.

### ***The Namesake: A Final Look at America from the Outside In***

The final novel of our semester, coming during the crushing tide of final tests and work for other classes, acts as a twist of sorts, bringing us back to the idea of what America looks like to those seeing it with fresh eyes. Ashima and Ashoke's story, which becomes Gogol's story, allows us to see those American values that, in previous weeks, we may have lost sight of, such as the idea of a work ethic and the ability to become successful through personal diligence and focus. Their story isn't one of failure, **but of success**, which should help remove us from the dreary and painful works of the last few weeks. Let's take a look, then, at America as they see it.

As a preview of how they see and perceive, take a moment to think about the POV of this novel. Each chapter or section takes us into the mind of a different character, showing their thoughts. Interestingly, while Ashoke and even Mou get chapters of their own, Ashima and Gogol dominate this novel, bringing us through their experiences with this country and the battle between two cultures. Why these characters? Probably because, from an artistic perspective, they have the most to bring to the table, a fact that adds depth to the novel.

For Ashima's part, she is able to show us a version of America and assimilation through fresh eyes. Early in the novel, she complains of this "exotic" place she has come to reside in, and gives us "her first real glimpse of America: Leafless trees with ice-covered branches. Dog urine and excrement embedded in the snowbanks. Not a soul on the street" (30). The contrast that her perspective provides between Calcutta and New England allow us to see our country as a foreigner might see it, a cold and lonely place. When Gogol is born, as she "strokes and suckles

and studies her son, she can't help but pity him. She has never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived" (25). But deprived of what? For her, his life is deprived of the family, the traditions, and the way of life that she cherishes, since he can never fully understand her world.

Throughout the novel, we are privileged to experience with her the evolving experience of becoming a part of this other place. Unless you have had the experience of moving to a new place, it can be hard to understand the thoughts and feelings of one who has, which is what a novel can do for us: teach us about the experiences of others. Through subtle details and insertions of her opinion, we slowly learn to see the world through her eyes. We also learn that, for her, the most important part of life is family, a theme we are more familiar with this semester. Thus, even as we learn about the challenges she faces as an immigrant, we hopefully connect with her experiences as part of an evolving and changing family unit.

Through this lens of family, the novel slowly transitions to Gogol's POV, allowing us to experience the life of a first-generation American. With Gogol, we are right back to the struggle of the individual for **an identity**, in his case painfully shown through his struggle with his name. Throughout the novel, we learn of Gogol's struggles to settle on a name and an identity. He constantly hears people talking about names, thinking about names, complaining about names, which goes to show that an individual can find his or her obsession everywhere. Gogol's struggle to live in two worlds is focused through his name, since that name makes him decide which side he is on. Once he transforms into Nikhil, he notices that in some ways he has become a different person and created a mess for himself: "'I'm Nikhil now,' Gogol says, suddenly depressed by how many more times he will have to say this, asking people to remember, reminding them to forget, feeling as if an errata slip were perpetually pinned to his chest" (119). This struggle for

identity is part of the American experience and, for Gogol, it is the part that gives him the most trouble.

Beyond names, we get a glimpse of growing up as constantly different from others, which mostly seems a big deal when facing the prospect of relationships. The Max versus Mou conundrum later in the novel brings his conflict into stark view: he can choose the American girl who loves him, but who he rejects out of guilt and lack of acceptance, or the Bengali girl who he loves, but who rejects him for her own conflicted reasons. Watching Gogol struggle through life, the novel constantly shows us, in a realistic way, his angst and uncertainty as he finds his way in the world, documenting his trials and successes.

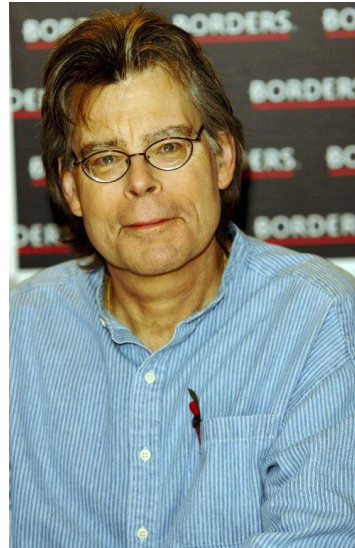
Ultimately, while this novel has much to say about America, it also has much to say about trauma and loss, concepts integral to the family. Near the end of the novel, Gogol shares this thought: “In so many ways, his family’s life feels like a string of accidents, unforeseen, unintended, one incident begetting another. It had started with his father’s train wreck, paralyzing him at first, later inspiring him to move as far as possible, to make a new life on the other side of the world. [...] Things that should never have happened, that seemed out of place and wrong, these were what prevailed, what endured, in the end” (286-287). I’ll end the section of this lecture on the novel by pointing out how it took a number of accidents, painful moments, and separations for this family to embrace their new life. While these traumatic events are painful and haunting (the train wreck, the death of his father, his divorce), they are also intrinsic to his experience and to making Gogol the man he comes to be.

### **Final Thoughts on the Course**

How does one define American literature? Where, at the end of this course, do we stand in relation to a definition of “Americanness” that emerges?



Can we simply define it in a montage of people and ideas, as pictured [here](#)? Or should we look to Steven King, named America's favorite author, pictured [below](#)?



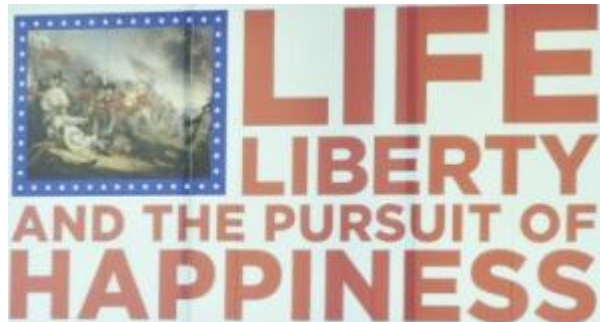
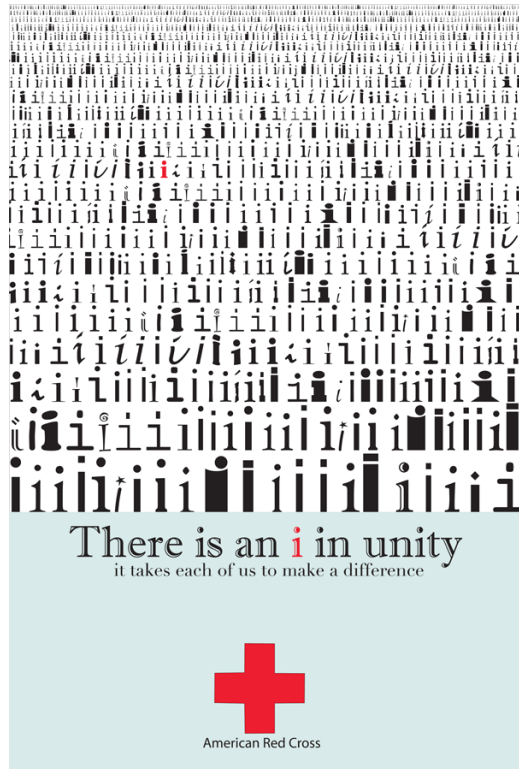
The problem we have, just like in any discussion of America itself, is how to take something so complex, vast, confusion, and ever-changing and turn it into something intelligible. What I hope we can agree upon, after completing the final novel, is that as attitudes and thoughts change, they stay the same. Things seem to work in a cyclical nature, with the same ideals and values coming up again and again.

While cyclical is one interpretation, we should still note **the linear narrative** that emerges in this course: the narrative of America “coming of age,” just as Daniel does in his book. Through the readings, we experienced early America, full of energy and ideals, followed by the many conflicts the country has gone through in the past few decades, **aging** with every war, amendment, struggle, and victory. The fascination with the American experiment of building a nation from scratch has always in part been a fascination with the success of such a nation. As we aged, however, becoming the world power that we are today, the literature of this

country has also grown and changed, taking on new depth and considering different aspects of the problems people face.

Think about the second half of our course: our focus on the individual and his or her standing against the world is fundamental to the American experience, since this is the country where an individual can come to blossom and achieve.

While the Red Cross may [claim](#) that there is an “i in unity,” there is an “I” that is intrinsic to the American experience, with the promise made to every individual, even if the promise is difficult to keep. Here they are, pictured [below](#).



What is interesting about considering the story of American literature as a “coming of age” story is that we don’t know where in our maturing we currently stand. For all we know, America could still be in its infancy or standing on death’s door. More likely, if we had to guess, we would say we are past the awkward teen years but not yet near the golden ages (though this could just be my interpretation): not a child but not fully grown. I make this claim, at least from a literary perspective, because authors, like Lahiri, can continue to reinvigorate American literature, bringing new ways to perception to old problems and allowing us to see the values of America in new and interesting ways.

Instead of belaboring my comments, I'll head towards a close. In this course, I hope you have had a chance to consider and be challenged by the various techniques, strategies, characters, and themes that American authors have used over the centuries to describe and define this place. For our purposes, it was the experience of the literature itself that should have allowed you to consider the questions this course poses: what is American literature? What is "Americanness"? How does this literature relate to the country that has give it life and provided the 'stuff' that has made up these works? I hope that, in the end, you have come to your own conclusions about the trajectory of the readings, the ideas that pass from generation to generation of authors, and how ideas at the end of the course are still similar, if evolved, from the same concepts at the start of the semester.

Ultimately, the goal of this course is to make you more confident as a reader of any literature, even though our focus has been on America. I trust that, in the future, you will have more skills and abilities when you face a work of literature, though I hope this confidence translates into "reading" movies and TV shows as well. Think about the techniques we have covered: setting, POV, character, plot, theme, symbolism. These same ways of looking at works of literature should be useful in other aspects of life when looking at something critically. Overall, I hope that you walk away with a stronger sense of the concerns, issues, and struggles that are part of the American identity and the plight of the individual to live in the world. Good luck in your future endeavors and with future reading experiences.