

Dear AP Literature Students,

Summer 2020

“Try to remember it always . . . Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go.”

Gogol’s father says this to him when he is young, after they have walked together to the end of a long breakwater by the sea. Of course his father is simply referencing the walk he and his son have just taken, but his simple words resonate more deeply for a much different, much more symbolic journey.

That journey will be our focus this August as you return from summer having read Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, a contemporary novel that follows the Ganguli family as Ashoke and Ashima leave their native India to settle in the United States and rear their children, Gogol and Sonia. While the novel’s central pre-occupation is how Gogol deals with straddling two cultures, Mr. Eshoff and I believe the work is timely for many seniors at this phase of your lives. Rather than elaborating here, we ask that you read with that idea in mind—how you relate to the novel’s central concerns, even though your life experience and heritage may be quite different from the Ganguli family’s.

Second, this letter will offer some advice concerning what motifs we will be studying, and we have also enclosed your first homework assignment, due upon your arrival the first day of class.

## Reading Guide:

**First**, you are not expected to make yourself an expert on Bengali culture. Though Mr. Eshoff and I have read the book repeatedly and done some research each summer, he and I will not be able to master all the intricacies of that culture, either. If you find a term or custom especially puzzling, to the point where you can’t figure out what’s going on in the reading, then stop and look it up. Otherwise, use close-reading skills to determine if a term is a reference to food or a holiday or a piece of clothing, etc.

What we would ask that you pay attention to:

- What is the character arc of Ashima (Gogol’s mother)?
- What customs from India do Ashima and Ashoke hold onto throughout the novel? What customs do they ease up on?
- How does Gogol feel about his name and heritage at the start of the novel? The middle of the novel? The back end of the novel?
- How does Gogol seem to define what it means to be American?
- By the end of the novel, how does Gogol feel about his cultural heritage? His family?

**Second**, motifs to keep an eye out for:

- Trains are important in the novel, so pay attention when the characters are on them—look both for the plot and what might symbolically be going on.
- Houses and homes are important in the novel, as well.
- As said above, you will not be able to track all the food mentioned, but there are some scenes in the novel where the meals are important, even if you don’t know what they are.
- Clothing, oddly enough, can play a significant role in the novel.
- Speculate as to why Gogol’s chosen profession is important to the novel.

### Third: themes to think about

- What does it mean to operate with a dual-heritage? How does Gogol do it? Can you honor both at once? Must you choose between them?
- What are the expectations placed upon Gogol and his sister Sonia? Which ones are fair and which ones seem unfair? What are their reactions to those expectations?
- What comprises a successful relationship vs. an unsuccessful one in the novel?

### Two more very important things:

Please do not assume, when we return to class, that all students of Indian descent will understand Bengali culture, and do not assume that all students whose parents come from other countries automatically have the same kind of family as the Gangulis. This novel has the potential to generate some really good discussions, but don't assume international students or first-generation American students will relate on all levels to this book.

**Last**, Lahiri is a secular author writing from a secular mindset. She does not share the Christian morals given in scripture that Jesus would have us live by (and, by extension, as we seek to honor Christ here, Valley Christian). There are mature elements in this novel, and we expect AP Literature seniors who are about to go off to college—many to secular schools—to handle such elements with maturity. We will not superimpose Christianity upon the novel, but we will be examining the story through the lens of Christ when we discuss it. If you have concerns about the more secular elements of the novel, please feel free to contact me over the summer so I can talk through them with you. I can assign you an alternate summer reading work of comparable length if you are concerned about exposure to non-Christian elements.

As we end this unintentionally long missive, one last advisory is that there will be an opening assessment of some sort (knowledge check and/or reading quiz) during the first few days of class. You are expected to read the novel in its entirety and complete the assignment due the first day of class. If you have extenuating circumstances that get in the way of your reading of the novel, it is better to contact me (Mrs. Wilson: [julwilson@vcs.net](mailto:julwilson@vcs.net)) ahead of time. Do not assume you can ask for permission after the fact; it is better to let me/us know ahead of time.

Since we don't know class assignments yet, I am asking for all communication to go through me if you have questions or concerns. If you know Mr. Eshoff from last year's AP Language class, please feel free to CC him or add him to the email.

Regards,



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First homework assignment: next page

## Due the first day of class: What's in a Name?

Use this link to go to the assignment:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/IXU\\_4rYOpUsG2zz\\_hVRUEMIVeMcoB5WgS6sJSxQcT0UM/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/IXU_4rYOpUsG2zz_hVRUEMIVeMcoB5WgS6sJSxQcT0UM/edit?usp=sharing)

Notes on the assignment linked above:

- You will not be able to type into the document until you make your own copy.
- Please follow directions.
- Email [julwilson@vcs.net](mailto:julwilson@vcs.net) if you have questions. If you know Mr. Eshoff, CC him on the assignment if you want to.