

## Book Review

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Keeping in view the motto of *Crossings* being dedicated to generate discussions on cultural interfacing, I've included in this Book Review section my commentary on a review, published in the *London Review of Books*, of a book by Naipaul, and two reviews by myself, one on Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, and another on Shirshendu's travelogue on his tour of America.

### 1. V. S. Naipaul discussed in the *London Review of Books*

The 1<sup>st</sup> November 2007 issue of *London Review of Books* has published a review by Sanjay Subrahmanyam on V. S. Naipaul's recently published book, *A Writer's People: Ways of Looking and Feeling*, under the caustic title "Where Does He Come From?"

Claiming that Naipaul's major problem is his lack of self-awareness, Subrahmanyam approaches each of the five essays contained in the book with a view to showing that Naipaul's hatred of India or whatever it is arises from the same anglophile attitude shown by Nirad C. Chaudhury about half a century ago in his book *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, a book that Naipaul discusses in detail in his final essay. Subrahmanyam's comment is scathing: "A book [Chaudhury's] that is as full of certainty as Naipaul's can have no place in it for self-reflection." The first essay, says Subrahmanyam, shows Naipaul's evident lack of self-reflection because when he refers back to his Caribbean childhood Naipaul takes a swipe at another Caribbean Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott, who used to call Naipaul as "Nightfall." The second essay, "An English Way of Looking" is an essay of ingratitude, because, says Subrahmanyam, Naipaul portrays a very harsh profile of the English novelist Anthony Powell, whom Naipaul first met in Oxford, befriended, and through his help became known as a writer in the English speaking world. But when Powell died in 2000 at the age of 94, Naipaul was requested by an editor to write about him. And, Naipaul, as Subrahmanyam tells us, wrote in his characteristic way that his friendship with Powell had lasted that long because he had never examined his work before. When he "began to read Powell, he 'was appalled . . . There was no narrative skill, perhaps even no thought for narrative.'" In the third essay, "Looking and Not Seeing: The Indian Way," which forms the staple part of the book, Naipaul does a comparative study between Gandhi, who sees, and Munshi Rahman Khan (1874-1972), a poet and India scholar who lived in Surinam, who, according to Naipaul, looks but does not see. In Naipaul's eye a man is emancipated only when he has adopted a modern western life, and Gandhi, who transformed himself from a simple village layman into a sage, could do it because he studied law at Oxford and practiced in South Africa. For Naipaul,

says Subrahmanyam, expatriation was “the key to seeing.” Munshi Rahman Khan, who published two excellent collection of poems, *Doha Shikhavali* (‘A Didactic Collection of Couplets’, 1953) and *Jnan Prakash* (‘The Light of Knowledge’, 1954), and worked for Hindu-Muslim harmony, is castigated by Naipaul as “a narrow-minded, semi-literate character.” Naipaul also expresses his surprise that he could speak Hindi which, he says, is a language for Hindus. Subrahmanyam is also unhappy with Naipaul for using ‘we’ to denote the Indians, because Naipaul’s interaction with the Gangetic plain is flawed by the fact that his knowledge of Hindi is very rudimentary.

So, where does Naipaul come from? That is, where does his origin lie in? Subrahmanyam says that Naipaul’s forefathers were Brahmins who migrated to the Caribbean in the 19<sup>th</sup> century just after the uprising of 1857-8. They largely cultivated a culture, which may be known as neo-Hinduism, in which there are marked envy for the West and its superiority, suspicion for Islam, and contempt for everything that is Indian. Naipaul mentions his mother turning bilious when she found an Indian woman stirring her tea “with a grubby finger.” “It was into this expatriate culture,” says Subrahmanyam, “that Naipaul was born.”

But still Naipaul’s book should be read, says Subrahmanyam, “together with those of Munshi Rahman Khan for a deeper understanding of the Indian diaspora and its ways of looking, feeling and suffering.”

## **2. Jhumpa Lahiri. *The Namesake*. London: Flamingo, 2003**

Yes, Indian diaspora is the subject of this novel. Ashima, a Kolkata-born Bengali woman is married to Ashoke, also a Kolkataian Bengali, who is living in America teaching at an ivy-league university. Ashima first finds her life in Boston boring. But a son is born to her and life becomes busy. Ashoke, in his student life had met with a terrible train accident when he was going to visit his grandfather at Jamshedpur. He miraculously survived, sustaining a lifelong limping injury. He was reading at the time of the accident a collection of short stories by Nikolai Gogol, who was his favourite writer. He was particularly fond of the story, “The Overcoat.” So because of the fact that he was reading Gogol when the accident happened and his life was saved, Ashoke carried the idea that Gogol was a good omen for him. As their son was born, and the name had to be christened in three days’ time for a birth certificate according to the American law, the parents felt at a loss. One of their aunts from Kolkata, supposedly, had the privilege of sending a name for the newborn baby by a letter. The letter wasn’t coming (actually it didn’t come), so they were forced to choose a name for the boy. Gogol was the name Ashoke could choose, followed by the family title Ganguly.

As Gogol Ganguly grows up, he doesn’t like his name, and Ashoke did never explain to his son until very late why such a foreign name was given to him. Gogol changes his name legally into Nikhil, though his parents find it difficult to

call him by the new name. Gogol becomes Nikhil, but he takes to American lifestyle, disdaining the Indian values which his parents still cherish. He changes girl friends (white) one after another, goes up in his career as an architect, and never cares for the kind of distance he has unconsciously created between himself and his only sister, Sonia, and his parents. On one of his birthdays his father presents him with a volume of Gogol, which he never opens to read. Days pass—actually three decades—Ashima and Ashoke become middle-aged. Their daughter, like their son, stays away from them in San Francisco, and will soon marry Ben, a white American. Making Ashima's life further lonely, Ashoke goes to work in Cleveland, Ohio at another university where he suddenly dies, making Ashima a widow. Nikhil's marriage with Moushimi, an upstart Indian diaspora, miserably fails. She was chosen by Ashima for Gogol in order to prevent him from marrying a white American girl. Moushimi's extramarital relationship causes the divorce, and Ashima feels helpless as she thinks she has undone her son. Gogol doesn't remarry. In utter dejection Ashima then plans to spend her life each year half in India and half in America.

Before Ashima leaves for India, she has decided to sell their old house in Boston, in which she has lived for nearly forty years, and a farewell party has been arranged. Nikhil also comes. His mother asks him to check the boxes in which she has piled up the household things for disposal for good to see if he wants to retain anything from them. The party is going on downstairs, and Nikhil climbs up to his old school-day room. He pokes into one of the boxes and finds many books which he read in his young age. Then he finds "another book, never read, long forgotten" (288) which is what his father presented him with on his birthday in 1982. The book is *The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*, which he had, rather in disdain, never cared to read before. He "sits cross-legged on the bed" (289) to read it. Faintly in his mind it occurs that his retrieving the book from oblivion is similar to his father's being saved in the train accident about forty years ago.

"For Gogol Ganguli," his father wrote on the title page in red ink, and then added, "The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" (288). Gogol "turns to the first story. 'The Overcoat'" (290). But he knows his mother will soon come upstairs looking for him, and he'll have to stop reading to join the party downstairs, but "For now, he starts to read" (291).

Like Ashima, who has started journeying back to India, to her roots, Gogol also reunites spiritually with his father through the book by Gogol, and from here onward, one can assume Gogol will reattach himself with the Indian values.

*The Namesake* is an honest effort to portray the lives of Indians in America. The first generation of immigrants struggle to adjust to their new life, while retaining the Indian values, but the second generation consists of children with absolute American upbringing—schooling, eating habits, fun and pleasures and friends; having no stomach for things Indian.

*The Namesake* is written in the present tense and Lahiri's language is fluent, images and analogies are coming with a natural flair. As a side remark, I would like to mention that the novel has attracted me for the description of countless American fast food recipes served at up state American eateries.

One problem in the structuring of the plot is that though the title of the novel is indicative of the identity crisis of the diaspora, the vindication, however, of that crisis through the construction of a story in which Gogol, the Russian novelist, appears as a symbol of good omen for the miraculous survival of Ashoke in the train accident, and for which his name is given to the Gogol of the novel, doesn't quite become convincing as the novel is a thoroughly down-to-earth quotidian fiction having no scope for supernaturalism or such metaphysical themes to develop. Unless we are ready to see certain kind of mysterious or occult relation between the book and Gogol/Nikhil's life, we don't see how the Russian writer mattered in the life of the novel. The linkage is weak, and even not improved by the fact that the Gogol of the novel is finally sitting down to read Gogol, the writer.

Writer Gogol's life and the nature of death he had, have all been described by Lahiri, but, somehow, they don't relate to the basic story of the Ganguly family—the crisis of blending into a foreign culture. The failure appears to me to be similar to the problem readers face with Somerset Maugham's novel *Of Human Bondage* whose protagonist, Philip Carey was born with a club foot, but the disability, in spite of the author's attempt, didn't integrate with the goings on of the plot. Thematically, Philip Carey's club foot has no footing in his development as Philip Carey. Similarly, Gogol, the writer's episodic relevance to the novel's theme is at best irrelevant.

### **3. Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay. *Anchaler Chaya*. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 2007**

*Anchaler Chaya* (The Shade of the Saree's Border) contains two novels and one travelogue by Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay. The novels are *Anchaler Chaya* and *Drishyapot* (Scenes), and the travelogue is named as *Nagna Bhalobasar Jatra* (A Journey of Bare Love), which narrates Shirshendu's experiences of his first trip to America.

Read side by side with Lahiri's novel, Shirshendu's travelogue gives wonderful feedback to some of the questions raised in the novel regarding diaspora. The basic concerns of the Indian diaspora, and for that reason diaspora from other countries too, is the gap between the first generation and the second generation of immigrants. And, Shirshendu, coming to attend a literary conference of expatriate Bengalees, finds himself everywhere in the midst of a discussion on this question.

The Brooklyn-resident Jamini Mukherjee tells him that the Bengalee diaspora can't adapt themselves to American mainstream life, and as a result they remain like aliens (235), while there are others who think that the children shouldn't be allowed to take to the American lifestyle. Shirshendu's own opinion is that Bengalees should retain their cultures without clashing with the American culture (235). He cites the example of many other expatriate groups from India—the Gujrati, the Marathies, etc.—who are doing the same thing.

Shirshendu also comes across young Indian diaspora students whose English is impeccable, but who have decided to speak in Bengali among themselves.

Another discovery for Shirshendu is women like Neela, who were cheated by their Bengalee-American husbands and forced to make their lives anew. Neela was married by her immigrant husband in Kolkata. After she was brought to U. S., she discovered that her husband was already married to an American white woman, and she was being used as a maid servant. When some Bengalee activists working on such fraud cases came to know about her, they rescued her, and it then came to light that the American wife was given to understand that a helper was to come from India to baby-sit their daughter.

Neela didn't give up but worked her way through to become self-dependent. Shirshendu, at one stage of their conversation, receives a lot of flak from Neela for writing in favour of a situation that encourages male dominance over the female.

Shirshendu's observations about American lifestyle in relation to how the Indian diaspora are dealing with it are insightful and thought-provoking, and his unreserved praise for American technological development, as reflected in their city buildings and streets, parks and shopping malls is objectively generous, and so is his noticing the fact that the Americans develop their cities without harming the beauty of nature. Shirshendu's appreciation of the American blending between man-made things and nature is, we know, what has been materialized by architect Frank Lloyd Wright through his creation of the Guggenheim Museum at New York, a must-see by any first time visitor, which, unfortunately, was not included on the list by Shirshendu's friends in America for him to see.