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The Namesake

The film “The Namesake” portrays the lives of an Indian family living in the United States. Being that the story is presented in a much more episodic format than other films, it seems to be a difficult task to determine just who, exactly, is the main character. I believe that the entire family is the main character unit, but if pressed to choose, Ashima – the mother – is the one who took on the single main role. This belief is supported by nearly each storyline in the movie and I believe that her life is depicted more solidly than the other characters. In addition to this, she seems to be the most prevalent character throughout each “episode” during the film's two-hour run.

From the beginning, (after a brief plot point with Ashoke), we are following the life of Ashima Ganguli – a newlywed woman on her journey from India to America. This sequence shows her first days in a new country, her slight wonder at various technological and societal advantages over her own country, but mostly her struggle to adjust to the cultural paradigm shift. Not once do we live inside the world of the husband trying to support his family. We do happen to see some of those elements, but it isn't in relation to Ashoke's universe. Instead, we see his struggles through the eyes of a loyal wife as she furthers her own storyline. Before Gogol is born, Ashoke is a very minor character considering his familial position.

In the following years, Gogol and his sister Sonia come into the picture. They do take on more importance in this episode, especially Gogol. But that can be summed up as the way things happen in

real life. In our own stories, once children are born, we move to the background. But Ashima, as ever, is still there. Sonia is pretty much a mirror of Gogol's character, so even though she doesn't appear much in the film, her general happiness shows that she wasn't ignored when the family was off-screen. So we can assume that she had a similar home life to that of Gogol. And as such, the children wrestle with Ashima for the central role in the film. Again, this is much like real life, so we must search for more minute details that show the mother has retained her main character status.

During Gogol's younger years, we experience the death of Ashima's father. This is a major event in her life. In fact, we can see the young Gogol not really even comprehending the situation. It is Ashima's pain that we understand as if it were our own. Again, we see how hard Ashoke works to keep his family together – he has to be the one to hear the news and deliver it to his wife, he buys everyone a plane ticket to India, and he carries Ashima through the whole ordeal. But it is *her* pain that we feel as the story unfolds in this direction.

Following this story arc, we enter into the world of Gogol's teenage years. Again, he is vying for the audience members' attention, but so is Ashoke. This is probably the most difficult time period to pin a major-character-tag on Ashima, as she falls into a more minor role. Gogol is acting up because of how much he dislikes his heritage, and Ashoke is struggling with his son's hatred of the particular heritage that he has bestowed upon him – his namesake in particular. But the one thing that the family does together during this time is visit India. Ashoke has always been an American during the film, along with Gogol and Sonia. But Ashima has always been slow to adjust to the changes their lives are witness to. She is much more Indian than the rest of her family. And being that they all make up the foremost main character as one, Ashima's yearning is what drives the family forward. Gogol will soon fall in love with architecture, but it is because they visit the Taj Mahal. They also ride a train, which is a great fear of Ashoke's. But it is his love for Ashima that ultimately drives him to go through with it. If one were to remove Ashima from the equation, the Gangulis would never have had this experience together and the rest of the film would be significantly different.

Following Gogol's graduation and the end to his teenage years, he further insulates the space between him and his family, in favor of relationships he has *created* instead of inherited or simply been stuck with. Admittedly, this is a very Gogol-centric period of the film. And when it is not focused on Gogol, Ashoke takes the helm. That is because this time is all about how Gogol hurts his parents, his father in particular. But it is only setting up for the moment when Ashima learns of Ashoke's passing. She will lose the support of her husband, but she will regain her son as he sees the veniality of his transgressions toward his parents during this time. As such, the interplay between Gogol and Ashoke in this episode bring about the necessary change for Ashima to have her family together again.

In the aftermath of Ashoke's passing, we see Gogol enter into a short-lived marriage. But we focus on how it affects Ashima after Gogol and his wife, Moushumi, separate. To me, this time period brings about the closing of Ashima's story and launches Gogol's. Now that his backstory is sufficiently developed, the son can go and live his own tale. That is one of the main reasons I feel he is not the main character of this film. He is only beginning his journey. Meanwhile, we have seen Ashima's entire life play out before our eyes, and we are still following it to the end. Our appetite is merely whetted for more of Gogol's adventures. But as viewers, we are intent on continuing along with his mother.

By the end of things, we can see that – just as in many traditional Indian families – the mother has somehow remained in the background, but taken the central role and passed it along to her children. Ashoke is very important, however, and that shows how much it truly is the entire family that the story is centralized on. But from start to finish, we follow the life of Ashima as she becomes a Ganguli, raises a family in a distant, soulfully remote country, and later returns to the cultural comfort of her homeland.