

**WINNER, LEVEL 3****Akash Kar****Grade 11****Saratoga High School****Saratoga****NATIONAL WINNER***The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri**Dear Ms. Jhumpa Lahiri,**

For a few magical hours, I had the opportunity to sit in front of a mirror, and reflect on my past, my present, my future, my family, and my heritage. No, I did not literally sit in the bathroom on a chair, but I read your personally touching novel *The Namesake*. The book moved me to tears at points, thinking of how Gogol struggles to follow his culture, over his own personal desires; how Ashima must keep her culture alive as she assimilates to life in the United States; and how Moushumi has to lie to her parents in order to study in the field she chooses, changing majors while attending a prestigious university. I see these struggles happening on a day to day basis in my life, and reading this book gave me an opportunity to look at them from an outside perspective and allow me to reflect on what truly is important in life.

The struggles of Ashima to adapt to American society, freshly migrated from India, relates to the struggles of my mother to find her way when first moving to the states—struggling to keep aspects of her Indian heritage alive with resources available to her. An instance that sticks out was how Ashima makes an Indian snack—traditionally found on roadside carts—from ingredients such as Planter’s Peanuts. This imagery reminded me of the countless times my family has tried to maintain our culture with what she has available—from small changes, such as using Christmas lights for *Diwali*, to major ones, such as foregoing certain *Poojas*, simply because a contained fire was not permitted in certain areas, similar to the situation of the flameless wedding of Gogol and Moushumi.

The thing that speaks to me most, however, is the struggle Gogol has—choosing his culture over his identity. I empathize with Gogol’s struggles, as I am going through similar struggles myself being a homosexual Indian in a predominantly anti-gay culture. Gogol struggles with his love for Maxine—struggles which can be rooted to the lack of acceptance to interracial marriages in his culture. Although notions about interracial marriage begin to change in Gogol’s culture—a culture that I share with Gogol—he breaks up with Maxine. Eventually he marries Moushumi—a young woman struggling with her own identity—but their marriage quickly falls apart. I was dealing with similar issues as Gogol, deciding whether cultural beliefs trump personal choices. Gogol hears stories of failed interracial marriages throughout his childhood, just as I had to live through the provoked suicides of two very close cousins—both of whom were homosexual. I may never be able to convince my family that there is nothing wrong with being gay—and understandably so. They

have been tormented with the deaths of two of their nephews—boys they considered their own sons. If, and when, I fall in love with and marry another man, I am unsure about whether or not my parents will be present at the wedding, whether or not I can invite members of the Indian community, and whether or not I can ever show my face at Indian social events afterwards. These thoughts—and many more—pulled me into a deep depression from which I suffered for over a year. My parents had no idea about the cause of my depression—they just feared that the same that happened to my cousins would happen to me. I was able to overcome the depression; however I still was not able to figure out where my life was headed and what decisions I would make.

This is how your book saved my life.

Reading your book—looking at my situation, my circumstances, and my family from an outside point of view, allowed me to really think about what was important to me. Gogol made the mistake of not going with his heart and letting Maxine go, and in the end, not only was his heart broken, but Ashima's as well. Ashima did not care about the ethnicity of Gogol's partner nearly as much as the fact that Gogol had someone to spend the rest of his life with. Even though my parents may not ever approve of my orientation, I can say that from this novel, I understand that when all is done, they just want me to do well in life, and that they do truly care for me. No conversation, movie, event, or story has shaped my thoughts—my life—as much as your novel has. For that, my family thanks you. For that, my future thanks you. For that, I thank you.

***Dhanyabaad.***

***Akash Kar***

*When Akash is asked about his biggest passion, he cannot decide—with good reason. He dedicates numerous hours weekly towards various public health organizations—particularly his own creation, a non-profit dedicated to suicide prevention. In addition, he is immensely involved in his school's music department, fulfilling numerous roles as a student leader, and participating in the California All State Orchestra for the past two years. Akash intends to pursue a career in public health, hopefully accomplishing his lofty goal of eliminating adolescent suicides across the nation. Akash is especially thankful for his amazing friends, teachers, administrators, and parents.*