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## The Power of Blood Ties in "Fences"

A man lives his life and evolves over time; he embodies a synthesis of all his experiences with those he meets over his lifetime. What he sees when he finally meets the son he helps bring into this world for the first time is unique to who he is and what he is. His thoughts are often of how he grew up and of the man his own father was; often he tells himself that this time it will be different and that he will be different than his own father. Nowhere are these complexities more apparent than in the lives of America-based fathers and sons who grow up in separate worlds - and all this within the shadow of the mainstream culture. *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *Fences* by August Wilson represent the growing pains of two very different families, but hold within the similar theme of the lasting, complex effects of relationships between fathers and sons.

Troy Maxson is the protagonist of the play *Fences* who is born a son to a freeman. "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States..." (US Const. amend. XIII, 1865) The story sets him as a teenager in the early 1900's; therefore, his father is at least the descendant of a slave. The play does not specify the details, but with slavery's abolition in 1865, the probability that his dad is actually a previously freed slave, as opposed to being born free, is very likely especially given Troy's story of how he left his father, "The only part of the world I knew was the forty-two acres of Mr. Lubin's land... I was through with farming... So I walked the two hundred miles to Mobile." (Wilson, pg. 916) He becomes his own man early in life due to his harsh example of a father born of a dark chapter of American history, when slavery was still a relatively recent memory. His rocky upbringing leaves him with little choice and propels him to seek a new life.

Troy's parental psychology is in many ways the product of the lingering and lasting consequences of the evils of slavery in the United States. "The only thing my daddy cared about was getting them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin. That's the only thing that mattered to him." (Wilson, pg. 914) Growing up with that sort of mentality makes Troy the father he eventually becomes later. Here, there is no better example of the care-about-nothing-else, work-hard ethic that becomes the core of how he views the world and his responsibilities as his lasting inheritance. He sees his own role as to do whatever is necessary to be the "breadwinner", and that is his only true goal in life as he comes to know it for himself; he is bound by the only means which he inherits, the sweat of his own hard labor.

He fails to be much for Lyons, his eldest son, who rebukes him, "I'm thirty-four years old. If you wanted to change me, you should have been there when I was growing up." (Wilson, pg. 898)

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With a relationship that's tenuous at best with Lyons, his tough love becomes greater with his younger son, Cory. "I don't want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get." (Wilson, pg. 909) Troy is adamant about destroying any attempt to turn sports into a career, but he makes it abundantly clear that he does have the best of intentions. He drills Cory into being a responsible young man and continues to push him to ensure that he is a good, honest, hard worker. He believes, from his experiences and who he is, that no black man will ever make it in the white world of American sports.

Similar to Troy Maxson in at least sharing in concern for his son's future success, Ashoke Ganguli is profoundly thoughtful and nurturing in Lahiri's novel. "[He] looks on from one side, his wife's suitcase in hand, smiling with his head lowered. "Gogol enters the world," [Ashoke] will eventually write..." (Lahiri, pg. 29) At the very start, at the birth of his son, Ashoke is the type of father we are more quick to recognize and accept. He is the kind of man who wears his learned nature as a scholar and professor at an esteemed university quite well. His deep intellect shines through as he names his son after a brilliant writer that ties him in with his own past: a very personal background story that he waits and hopes to eventually reveal much later to his son one day when the time is right. He sees his son as a magnificent gift that he is given from surviving a terrible accident that almost took his life. In his son, he sees the wonders of life reborn and immediately makes the connection with his choice of naming him Gogol.

Being born of a very different cultural identity, Ashoke is often cautiously apprehensive with Gogol's maturation and takes steps not to lose his deeper connections to his son. "[Ashoke and his wife, Ashima,] send him to Bengali language and culture lessons every other Saturday... For when Ashima and Ashoke close their eyes it never fails to unsettle them, that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust." (Lahiri, pg. 65) Bengali culture is important as a basis for how he raises his kids, and though he is open to them assimilating into America, he feels that if they lose connection to their heritage then they will also likely lose their familial ties to one another. Traditions, family, community, and India form the building blocks to his relationship with his children.

Friction inevitably ensues when two worlds collide, as cultural differences and resulting issues have a way of sneaking themselves into the lives and relationships of fathers and sons. "I don't get it. Why did you have to give me a pet name in the first place? What's the point? ...it's not even a Bengali name... How could you guys name me after someone so strange?" (Lahiri, pgs. 99-100) Ashoke is still waiting for the right moment when he feels that Gogol is ready to know his deeply personal reasons and connection to the name. "Then change it... In America anything is possible. Do as you wish." (Lahiri, pg. 100) Instead of telling outright why his name means so much to himself, Ashoke shows his persevering patience in his fathering style and also positively reinforces his son's continuance of assimilation into American ways and values

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above his own feelings. This is a trait that sets him far apart from Troy Maxson; Ashoke acquiesces to his son's wishes whereas Troy dictates his exact demands.

Much can be said about Ashoke's cultured Bengali ways: even though he is kind, caring, and relatively nurturing, Ashoke remains steadfast in his characteristic reservation about personal expression of emotions. It becomes difficult to finally tell Gogol of his name's importance. "[He] is not the type to admit such things, to speak openly of his desires, his moods, his needs... "I want to tell you something... It's about your name..." He tells him about the night that had nearly taken his life, and the book that saved his life, and about the year afterward, when he'd been unable to move." (Lahiri, pgs. 122-123) So in truth, Ashoke's waiting for the right time did not solely depend on whether or not Gogol was ready to know, but is more profoundly a reflection of his own long buildup of his collective state of readiness; his feelings on this deep personal matter, much like the original intention of the Bengali utterance of pet names, are so immensely private in meaning that he could not express himself until he was absolutely ready. Ashoke finally releases his legacy and loving connection to his son as he views him, a cherished gift and blessing.

It is often said that we don't fully appreciate those we love and their meaning and message until we lose them. "His father had always been particular about turning off the radio. In fact, there is no sign of his father in the car... [Gogol] shuts off the radio, drives in silence through the cold, bleak afternoon, through the flat, charmless town... wondering if this route is the same one his father had taken when he drove himself to the hospital." (Lahiri, pgs. 173-174) Gogol feels the connection to his father now suddenly and irrevocably cut from his existence, the silence in his father's rental car now oddly deafening to his soul and being. He remembers the little things his dad used to do and how he did them, and the absence of those things in the car is the realization of the fact that he is no more.

The absence of his father finally triggers his complete understanding. "*The Short Stories of Nikolai Gogol*. "For Gogol Ganguli," "The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name" ...He wonders if he will be married again one day, if he will ever have a child to name... the book he had once forsaken, has abandoned until now. Until moments ago it was destined to disappear from his life altogether, but he has salvaged it by chance, as his father was pulled from a crushed train forty years ago... For now, he starts to read." (Lahiri, pgs. 288-291) The impact of his father is now in his full recognition. Forever the deep intellect of his parent transcends all boundaries, as his own namesake entwines with the life and memory of Ashoke. He comes to see his life as his father had already seen it all along, in a sense, as though written long before he was even born.

Troy Maxson as a father, like Ashoke Ganguli, burns a lasting legacy into his kids and especially in his son Cory. "The whole time I was growing up ... living in this house ... Papa was like a

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shadow that followed you everywhere... That shadow digging in your flesh. Trying to crawl in. Trying to live through you... I'm just saying I've got to find a way to get rid of that shadow, Mama." (Wilson, pg. 939) After seeing his half-sister Raynell and talking to his mother, Cory finally comes to terms with what his father really meant for him; for all Troy was and wasn't, through his harshness and forcefulness, through his dictations, he too transcends the past and Cory realizes that he meant the best for him and his future. He finally allows himself to go to the funeral with his family.

The everlasting importance and effects of the love found in father-son relationships supersede even death in depth, scope, magnitude, gravity and reach; common love is often kept hidden, private, and convoluted in the context of culturally-enforced notions of masculine psychology and its masking of feelings, desires, wants and needs. Maybe such complexities can best be summed up by sayings that, though simpler than *Fences* and *The Namesake*, can at times ring just as true. Love conquers all things; the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

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