Lahiri Jhumpa

The winner of a Pulitzer Prize for her collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), Jhumpa Lahiri, whose distinctive, wry, deceptively spare, and empathetic literary voice has been acclaimed by critics and readers alike, also wrote the best-selling novel *The Namesake* (2003). Lahiri's varied motifs include miscommunication, loss, troubled relationships, a sense of otherness, and the eternal quest for self-identity and self-acceptance.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1967 in London, England, to Bengali immigrant parents from Calcutta. Her mother is a teacher who has a master's degree in literature, and her father worked as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island, not far from South Kingston, the small New England town where the Lahiris moved when Jhumpa was three and where she was raised. She frequently traveled to Calcutta with her parents and younger sister for long visits that would have a profound effect on her later work.

Lahiri recalls creating stories and mini-novels from the time she was seven, sometimes in collaboration with her best friend during recess. Although she wrote for her high school newspaper, she had stopped writing fiction by the time she went to college. She graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in English literature from New York City's Barnard College but was rejected from several graduate English programs. While waiting to reapply, Lahiri worked as a research assistant in a nonprofit organization in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and learned how to use a computer; it became her tool for writing more serious fiction when she was not working. Eventually she earned master's degrees in English, creative writing, and comparative literature and the arts before obtaining a Ph.D. in Renaissance studies, all at Boston University.

Although she had the credentials to become a professor of literature, she recognized that her true calling was creative writing. The year after she finished her doctoral dissertation, Lahiri was accepted as a fellow in writing at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts. "That changed everything," she said in an interview. "It was something of a miracle. In seven months I got an agent, sold a book, and had a story published in the *New Yorker*. I've been extremely lucky." In 1999 Lahiri was named by the *New Yorker* as one of the 20 best writers under the age of 40.

In 1999 the title story, "Interpreter of Maladies," was selected for an O. Henry award and included in *The Best American Short Stories*. According to Lahiri, it had to be the title story of the collection because "it best expresses, thematically, the predicament of the heart of the book—the dilemma, the difficulty, and often the impossibility of communicating emotional pain and affliction to others, as well as expressing it to ourselves." That is why being a writer, she says, also can mean being an interpreter, in the attempt to articulate those emotions. "Lahiri is one of the finest short-story writers I've read," commented her contemporary Amy Tan, while *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani praised Lahiri's "uncommon elegance and poise. With *Interpreter of Maladies* she has made a precocious debut."

The author, who became an American citizen when she was 18, represents a new generation of Indian writers who have opted for more subtle, sensual, and finely crafted traditional fiction over magical realism, with its emphasis on sensational effects and exaggerated characters and circumstances. Although Lahiri's work has sometimes been described by Indian scholars as "diaspora fiction" and by American critics as "immigrant fiction," and many of her characters are immigrants, expatriates, and first-generation Americans, "her real subject is miscommunication," contends Paul Brians in *Modern South Asian Literature in English* (2003). "The relationships in her stories are a series of missed connections."
Mostly set in America and written from a second-generation Indian American point of view, Lahiri explains that her work "is less a response to her parents' cultural nostalgia and more an attempt to forge her own amalgamated domain." Some book reviewers have grouped Lahiri with so-called classic American authors, such as Ernest Hemingway, rather than so-called ethnic writers such as Amy Tan. Nonetheless, in an interview with her publisher, Lahiri observed that identity is always a difficult issue, "especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously. ... The feeling that there was no single place to which I fully belonged bothered me growing up. It bothers me less now."

In January 2001 Lahiri, a soft-spoken, well-coiffed, attractive woman with large expressive eyes, married Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, a Guatemalan Greek journalist, in a traditional two-hour Hindu ceremony held in Calcutta. The paparazzi staked out the Pulitzer Prize winner's wedding, climbing on top of neighboring rooftops with their cameras. Somehow Lahiri, desperate for privacy, managed to keep them away from the wedding.

In 2002 Lahiri received a Guggenheim Fellowship. A year later The Namesake, her best-selling debut novel, which focuses on the children of immigrants rather than their first-generation parents, was released. Lahiri's amusing, defiant, conflicted characters were "Calcutta-born New England transplants and other American-born children who might have crossed paths with the uprooted Bengalis of her short stories," wrote Sheila Benson in the Seattle Weekly. Lahiri describes The Namesake as, essentially, "a story about life in the United States. ... The terrain is very much the terrain of my own life—New England and New York, with Calcutta always hovering in the background." In her review of The Namesake, Teresa Wilz of the Washington Post asserted that "It is the complications of being a hyphenated American that informs Lahiri's work, the same challenges that face Gogol, the American-born protagonist in this coming-of-age tale." A film, The Namesake, adapted from Lahiri's novel, was released in 2007.

Lahiri's second short story collection, Unaccustomed Earth (2008), has been published in 30 countries and won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. Two years later Lahiri was named a member of President Obama's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. The author's most recent novel, The Lowland (2013), 16 years in the making, was a National Book Award for Fiction finalist and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. The Lowland focuses on many of the themes -- the Indian diaspora, the dislocation felt by many immigrants, the myriad ways families both nurture and suffocate -- familiar to readers of Lahiri's previous fiction," writes John O'Rourke in BU Today. "But it is a departure in many ways as well -- a story about a real political movement (India's 1960s Maoist Naxalite uprising) and its far-reaching consequences for one family. It is sweeping in its ambition...."

Lahiri has taught creative writing at Boston University, where she was also a visiting lecturer in 2014, and at the Rhode Island School of Design. She lived in Brooklyn, New York, before moving to Rome with her husband and two children, where she immersed herself in Italian and wrote a series of essays, in Italian, about the experience of learning to read and write in a foreign language. Although reluctant to leave Rome, Lahiri accepted a position as a professor of creative writing at Princeton University in September 2015. When asked about writing, Jhumpa Lahiri replied that "surely it is a magical thing for a handful of words, artfully arranged, to stop time. To conjure a place, a person, a situation...To affect us and alter us, as profoundly as real people and things do."

Further Information


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