



Voices from the Gaps

Jhumpa Lahiri

“

Sanjeev felt knots forming at the back of his neck. He felt dizzy. He needed to lie down. He walked toward the bedroom, but stopped short when he saw Twinkle’s shoes facing him in the doorway. He thought of her slipping them on her feet. But instead of feeling irritated, as he had ever since they moved into the house together, he felt a pang of anticipation at the thought of her rushing unsteadily down the winding staircase in them, scratching the floor a bit in her path. The pang intensified as he thought of her running to the bathroom to brighten her lipstick, and eventually rushing to get people their coats, and finally rushing to the cherry-wood table when the last guest had left, to begin opening their housewarming presents. It was the same pang he used to feel before they were married, when he would hang up the phone after one of their conversations, or when he would drive back from the airport, wondering which ascending plane in the sky was hers.

— “This Blessed House,” *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1967
- * Parents emigrated to England from India
- * Wrote *Interpreter of Maladies*

Biography

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London, England in 1967. She is the daughter of parents who emigrated from India. She was then raised in Rhode Island where her father worked as a librarian and her mother as a teacher. Lahiri received a B.A in English Literature at Barnard College , and later received her M.A in English, Creative writing, and Comparative Studies in Literature and the Arts, as well as a Ph.D in Renaissance Studies from Boston University.

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Jhumpa Lahiri

Biography continued

Her debut work, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won several awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. Her second publication, *The Namesake*, was her first novel and spent several weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. In addition to receiving the 2000 Pulitzer Prize, she has also received a PEN/Hemingway Award, an O. Henry Award, *The New Yorker's* best debut of the year award, and an Addison Metcalf award from the American academy of arts and letters. Her books have also been recognized as the *New York Times* Notable Book, *Publishers Weekly* Best Books of the Year, a New England book show selection, *Los Angeles Times* best book, and *Los Angeles Times* book prize Finalist. Currently, Lahiri lives in New York City with her husband and son and is working hard on her second novel.

It all started in 1999 when Jhumpa Lahiri quietly exploded onto the literary scene and it appears her short career has shown no signs of slowing down. Readers seem to be mesmerized by Jhumpa Lahiri's writing, and their curiosity brings her audience together. As author Jaydeep Sarangi explains, "Jhumpa Lahiri's stories are the gateways into the large submerged territory of 'cross-culturalism.' It is a metaphor to share cultures . . . something that will allow them/us to share, instead of dividing, what is on either side" (117). As a popular young writer of Indian background, Lahiri is a sort of representative figure for non-immigrant Americans who do not fully understand what it means to straddle the line between two cultures.

Author Judith Caesar reasons that, "Americans can learn about themselves and create a richer system of values as a result of encountering the other foreign customs and ways of thinking of the Indian characters -sometimes without even fully realizing what they have come to understand or the opportunity they have missed" (90). But in some ways Lahiri herself struggles to understand Indian culture. In an interview with *India-West*, Lahiri admits: "I'm lucky that I'm between two worlds . . . I don't really know what a distinct South Asian identity means. I don't think about that when I write, I just try to bring a person to life" (Tsering B1). And that is exactly what she does through her characters. Writer Nalini Iyer feels, "Lahiri's strength as a story teller is characterization. The people she creates are real, alive, complicated, and individual. She never descends into stereotypes nor does she engage in grand generalizations about social and political relationships. Instead, she sweeps her reader through a range of emotions and experiences and lets her characters speak for themselves" (7). All these factors are what add to Lahiri's popularity. Her poignant attitude is what draws her readers in and keeps them wanting more. Interestingly, with all the energy and intrigue her cultural status brings, she conveys it in a real way that her audience can learn from and understand.



Jhumpa Lahiri

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One of the main reasons for Lahiri's success as a writer is because she writes for herself. She doesn't have critics or peers in mind when writing; she just writes. As critic David Lynn points out, "Notice that these ambitions aren't to be fashionable or trendy. She seems to have no interest in emerging as the next Ann Beattie or Raymond Carver or Don DeLillo" (161). As much as Lahiri doesn't think about becoming the next big thing, she already is. She is a bona fide star, and fans and critics alike are eagerly awaiting what Lahiri dreams up next.

It is difficult to compare Jhumpa Lahiri's work to many other Indian or Indian-American authors, such as Shubodh Ghosh and Bharati Mukherjee. One finds that it is very difficult to describe their similarities due to Lahiri's broad subject matter. The conflicts her characters face, such as struggles with interpersonal relationships and stress of daily existence, are universal themes to which almost anyone can relate.

Lahiri is able to demonstrate her point in writing by merely mentioning the issue that a character is facing. This is a technique that is present in much of her writing. For instance, she does not make an explicit connection with religion in her short story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine." In the story, Mr. Pirzada, a Muslim man from Dacca, in what was then East Pakistan, comes to stay with ten year old Lilia's family, who is Hindu. Lahiri mentions Lilia praying for Mr. Pirzada while eating each piece of candy that she receives from him, but not in the context of any particular religion. In fact, Lilia is never taught to pray; instead she comes up with her own method of praying. Lahiri leaves the religious aspect of this story vague, granting the reader, if he wishes, an opportunity to place into the story his own idea of religion. This also gives the reader a sense of connection to be able to finish or contribute to a story they are reading.



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Lahiri is also able to draw her readers into the story not only through her detail but also by making them feel the emotional, physical, and mental needs of the characters. All nine of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* focus on the characters' inability to communicate with people who are important in their lives. She continues her story by plotting her "... motif of exclusion, loneliness, and search for fulfillment" (Mandal 18) as the central issue. Another impressive aspect of Lahiri's writing is her ability to write in the voices of both genders. On writing from the male perspective, Lahiri says, in an interview in the Houghton Mifflin Books online "Reader's Guide" for *The Namesake*, "It was an exhilarating and liberating thing to do . . . It's a challenge, as well. I always have to ask myself, would a man think this? do this?" This method of narration gives her the ability to balance the gender representation in her book.

Both *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake* contain themes of conflict in relationships between couples, families, and friends. Through these relationships she explores ideas of isolation and identity, both personal and cultural. The characters in both works frequently encounter crises of identity, which are tied to their inability to reconcile their American identity with their Indian identity. Particularly in the short fiction of *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri often leaves these crises unresolved. As a result, her work gives us a rather bleak outlook on the future of her characters. We might imagine that this reflects some of Lahiri's concerns about their real-life analogues. She often correlates her characters' cultural isolation with extreme personal isolation, suggesting that the cultural isolation causes the personal. The instances in which this cultural isolation are resolved or avoided are generally accompanied by a similar resolution or avoidance of personal isolation.

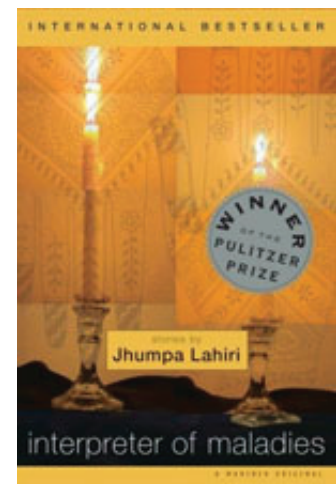
Lahiri's first book, *Interpreter of Maladies* consists of three stories previously published in the *New Yorker*, plus six previously unpublished works. The stories all draw upon different aspects of Lahiri's Indian background. Every one of the stories is affected in some way or another by India. Some of the stories take place in India; others involve the lives of Indian immigrants in the United States. The bulk of the stories, though, are about second generation Indian-Americans, like Lahiri herself.



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Perhaps the most interesting twist on the relationships between the American-born Indian characters and India comes in the story after which this collection is titled. “Interpreter of Maladies” is about an American-born Indian couple, Mr. and Mrs. Das, who are on vacation in India with their two children, Ronny and Bobby. None of the family seems to be the least bit interested in India, except for Mrs. Das, who strikes up a conversation with Mr. Kapasi, their tour guide. Much of the plot involves the sexual tension that builds between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das. She learns that he speaks many languages, and works at a hospital as translator between doctors and patients who do not always speak the same language. Due to this job, Mrs. Das describes him as an “interpreter of maladies.” When they reach their destination, Mrs. Das stays behind in the car briefly with Mr. Kapasi while her husband and children explore the historic site they are touring. It is at this moment that Mrs. Das reveals to Mr. Kapasi that one of her children is the result of an extramarital affair, a fact that she says she has never revealed to anyone before. When Mr. Kapasi offers up his “interpretation” of this as a factor in her family’s “maladies,” she gets angry at him and storms away from the car to rejoin her family.



The common thread throughout the stories in this collection is the same sort of “malady” that the Das family suffers. Nearly all of the characters are defined by isolation of some form or another: husbands are isolated from wives; immigrants are isolated from their families and their homes; children are isolated from their parents; and people are isolated from the communities in which they live. In their isolation, these characters feel that they are missing something vital to their identities. It is this missing “something” that defines them. It seems that few characters in these stories have any idea of who they are or where they are going in life. Lahiri's characters defy simple explanations of what their problems are; frequently we are given only a brief glimpse into their lives, a look at one key moment that somehow defines their lack of self-understanding.



Jhumpa Lahiri

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In the collection's closing story, "The Third and Final Continent," we meet one of the few characters who are well-adjusted and happy. He is the narrator of the story, and remains unnamed throughout. He tells us of his immigration first to Great Britain and then to the United States, focusing on the six-week period from his arrival in America until the arrival of his wife, who he has married in an arranged ceremony in India. He has left her behind while her documents for her immigration to America are arranged, so that he may prepare a home for them to live in when she arrives. Although he remains in the United States, the narrator does not let himself lose his Indian identity in the effort to become American. Lahiri seems to be suggesting at the close of her book that this loss of Indian identity is at the root of the isolation so many of the other characters experience. The narrator expresses his intention not to let his own son experience this loss: "we drive to Cambridge to visit him, or bring him home for a weekend, so that he can eat rice with us with his hands, and speak in Bengali, things we sometimes worry he will no longer do after we die" (197). This moment of concern by a first generation immigrant for his son is unique in the collection.

The only moment similar to this takes place in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," when the narrator's father admonishes the American schools which do not teach his daughter anything about the current events of the Indian subcontinent, specifically the war between India and Pakistan taking place at the time the story is set. The parents in this story, however, do not appear concerned in the same way with their daughter's cultural habits. In fact, she seems very much the American child, going off to trick-or-treat with her friends on Halloween. Nonetheless, this story does share the similarity with "The Third and Final Continent" of the relative stability of its characters. Both families lack the conflict that plagues the characters in other stories, and Lahiri seems to be suggesting that this is due to the fact that these characters work to keep intact their connection with India. Though they have become American, they have not ceased to be Indian.



Jhumpa Lahiri

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There are many connections between Lahiri's work in *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*. In *Interpreter of Maladies*, six of the stories revolve around South Asian immigrants in the United States (Iyer 1999). *The Namesake* revolves around an immigrant story line as well. Three of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* deal with Indian encounters with Americans, or two cultures colliding into one another.

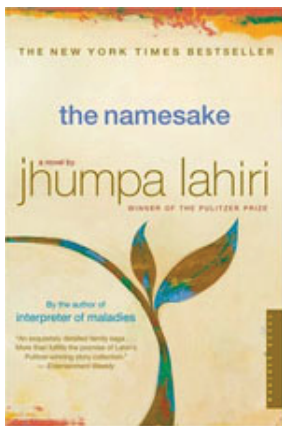
Addressing the themes of immigration, collision of cultures and the importance of names in *The Namesake*, Lahiri demonstrates how much of a struggle immigration can be. According to Dubey, "The immigrant experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station fraught with memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world" (22). This constant struggle is portrayed in *The Namesake*, as first generation immigrants and their children struggle to find their places in society. As the Ganguli parents struggle with adapting to a different culture than they are used to, their children (Gogol and Sonia) struggle with trying to respect their roots while adapting to American society.

At the beginning of *The Namesake*, the issue of names and identity is presented. As Ashima's water breaks, she calls out to Ashoke, her husband. However, she does not use his name because this would not be proper. According to Ashima, "It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do . . . a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over" (2). From this statement we are shown how important privacy to Bengali families. Bengali children are given two names: one that is a pet name, used only by family and close friends, and one that is used by the rest of society. At birth, Gogol is given a pet name as his official name because his official name, sent in a letter from his grandmother in India, gets lost in the mail. Upon entering kindergarten, Gogol is told by his family that he is to be called Nikhil, a good name, by teachers and the other children at school. Gogol rejects his proper name and wants to be called Gogol by society as well as his family. This decision made on the first day of kindergarten causes him years of distress as it was also his first attempt to reject a dual identity. The importance of a namesake and identity is brought up throughout the story and becomes a concept that is central to the novel.



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Throughout his life Gogol suffers from the uniqueness of his name. In Bengali families “. . . individual names are sacred, inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared” (28). However, Gogol spends his life living in the United States where children are often ashamed of their differences from others. During adolescence, Gogol desires to blend in and to live unnoticed. Other Americans never view him as an American, however, even though he is a native born citizen. This presents a struggle between two cultures. The Ganguli’s wish is to raise Gogol and his sister with Bengali culture and values. But, Gogol and Sonia grow up relating mostly to their peers and the surrounding culture in the United States. It is only much later in their lives that they begin to truly value their Bengali heritage and that Gogol finds the importance in his name.

When he leaves for college, Gogol rejects his identity completely and becomes Nikhil (his long lost proper name that he rejected as a child). He dreads his visits home and his return to a life where he is known as Gogol. Gogol is not just a name to him; it signifies all his discomfort to fit into two different cultures as he grew up. His father named him Gogol due to the circumstances of his survival of a train wreck during which he was reading the work of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. Being away from home at college makes it easy for Gogol to live as Nikhil in an American culture. He does so happily for many years, detaching himself from his roots and his family as much as possible.

Gogol finally learns that the answer is not to fully abandon or attempt to diminish either culture, but to mesh the two together. Gogol is not fully in tune with his identity until he realizes that it is embellished by both cultures. He does not have to be one or the other; he does not have to choose. He is made up of both, and instead of weakening his pride is strengthened by this. Though the novel wraps up with more downfalls occurring in Gogol's life, he is able to stand on his feet. He is no longer ashamed of himself or the way he has lived. He is proud of who he is and where he comes from. Most important, he is proud of his name and all that it means.



Jhumpa Lahiri

Biography continued

Jhumpa Lahiri's career has just begun, one can only imagine what creative works she will stun the public with next. In 2006, her novel *The Namesake* will be adapted into a major motion picture with highly acclaimed Indian born director Mira Nair set to direct and produce the film. Nair has directed nearly twenty films and has been nominated for a Golden Globe and an Academy Award. Lahiri will be making a small appearance in the film, adding "actress" to her already impressive list of credentials.

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