

Familial Representation in the Writings of Jhumpa Lahiri

Dr. Kshamata Chaudhary

Assistant Professor, English, Vardhman Mahaveer Open University, Kota, Rajasthan, India

ABSTRACT

Nilanjana Sudeshna "Jhumpa" Lahiri (born July 11, 1967) is an American author known for her short stories, novels and essays in English, and, more recently, in Italian. Her debut collection of short-stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Hemingway Award, and her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), was adapted into the popular film of the same name. Her first novel, "The Namesake", was a New York Times Notable Book, a Los Angeles Times Book Prize finalist and was made into a major motion picture. *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, while her second novel, *The Lowland* (2013), was a finalist for both the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award for Fiction. On January 22, 2015, Lahiri won the US\$50,000 DSC Prize for Literature for *The Lowland*. In these works, Lahiri explored the Indian-immigrant experience in America. In 2011, Lahiri moved to Rome, Italy and has since then published two books of essays, and in 2018, published her first novel in Italian called *Dove mi trovo* and also compiled, edited and translated the Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories which consists of 40 Italian short stories written by 40 different Italian writers. She has also translated some of her own writings and those of other authors from Italian into English. In 2014, Lahiri was awarded the National Humanities Medal. She has been a professor of creative writing at Princeton University since 2015.

KEYWORDS: *Jhumpa Lahiri, Italian, awarded, creative, author, novel, debut, writings*

INTRODUCTION

Lahiri was born in London, the daughter of Indian immigrants from the Indian state of West Bengal. Her family moved to the United States when she was three; Lahiri considers herself an American and has said, "I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been." Lahiri grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, where her father Amar Lahiri worked as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island; the protagonist in "The Third and Final Continent", the story which concludes *Interpreter of Maladies*, is modeled after him. Lahiri's mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali heritage, and her family often visited relatives in Calcutta (now Kolkata).

When Lahiri began kindergarten in Kingston, Rhode Island, her teacher decided to call her by her pet name, Jhumpa, because it was easier to pronounce than her "proper name". Lahiri recalled, "I always felt so embarrassed by my name.... You feel like you're causing someone pain just by being who you are."

Her ambivalence over her identity was the inspiration for the mixed feelings of Gogol, the protagonist of her novel *The Namesake*, over his own unusual name. In an editorial in *Newsweek*, Lahiri claims that she has "felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new." [1,2]



Jhumpa Lahiri

How to cite this paper: Dr. Kshamata Chaudhary "Familial Representation in the Writings of Jhumpa Lahiri" Published in International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470, Volume-6 | Issue-2, February 2022, pp.1437-1442, URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd49455.pdf



IJTSRD49455

Copyright © 2022 by author (s) and International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development Journal. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)



Much of her experiences growing up as a child were marked by these two sides tugging away at one other. When she became an adult, she found that she was able to be part of these two dimensions without the embarrassment and struggle that she had when she was a child. Lahiri graduated from South Kingstown High School and received her B.A. in English literature from Barnard College of Columbia University in 1989.

Lahiri then received multiple degrees from Boston University: an M.A. in English, an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, an M.A. in Comparative Literature, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. Her dissertation, completed in 1997, was entitled *Accursed Palace: The Italian palazzo on the Jacobean stage (1603–1625)*. Her principal advisers were William Carroll (English) and Hellmut Wohl (Art History). She took a fellowship at Provincetown's Fine Arts Work Center, which lasted for the next two years (1997–1998). Lahiri has taught creative writing at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of Design.

In 2001, Lahiri married Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, a journalist who was then deputy editor of *TIME Latin America*, and who is now senior editor of *TIME Latin America*. In 2012, Lahiri moved to Rome with her husband and their two children, Octavio (born 2002) and Noor (b. 2005). On July 1, 2015, Lahiri joined the Princeton University faculty as a professor of creative writing in the Lewis Center for the Arts.[3,4]

Discussion

Lahiri's early short stories faced rejection from publishers "for years". Her debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was finally released in 1999. The stories address sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants, with themes such as marital difficulties, the bereavement over a stillborn child, and the disconnection between first and second generation United States immigrants. Lahiri later wrote, "When I first started writing I was not conscious that my subject was the Indian-American experience. What drew me to my craft was the desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life." The collection was praised by American critics, but received mixed reviews in India, where reviewers were alternately enthusiastic and upset Lahiri had "not paint[ed] Indians in a more positive light." *Interpreter of Maladies* sold 600,000 copies and received the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (only the seventh time a story collection had won the award).

In 2003, Lahiri published her first novel, *The Namesake*. The theme and plot of this story was influenced in part by a family story she heard

growing up. Her father's cousin was involved in a train wreck and was only saved when the workers saw a beam of light reflected off of a watch he was wearing. Similarly, the protagonist's father in *The Namesake* was rescued because his peers recognized the books that he read by Russian author Nikolai Gogol. The father and his wife emigrated to the United States as young adults. After this life-changing experience, he named his son Gogol and his daughter Sonali. Together the two children grow up in a culture with different mannerisms and customs that clash with what their parents have taught them. A film adaptation of *The Namesake* was released in March 2007, directed by Mira Nair and starring Kal Penn as Gogol and Bollywood stars Tabu and Irrfan Khan as his parents. Lahiri herself made a cameo as "Aunt Jhumpa".

Lahiri's second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, was released on April 1, 2008. Upon its publication, *Unaccustomed Earth* achieved the rare distinction of debuting at number 1 on *The New York Times* best seller list. *New York Times* Book Review editor, Dwight Garner, stated, "It's hard to remember the last genuinely serious, well-written work of fiction—particularly a book of stories—that leapt straight to No. 1; it's a powerful demonstration of Lahiri's newfound commercial clout." Lahiri has also had a distinguished relationship with *The New Yorker* magazine in which she has published a number of her short stories, mostly fiction, and a few non-fiction including *The Long Way Home*; *Cooking Lessons*, a story about the importance of food in Lahiri's relationship with her mother. Since 2005, Lahiri has been a vice president of the PEN American Center, an organization designed to promote friendship and intellectual cooperation among writers.

In February 2010, she was appointed a member of the Committee on the Arts and Humanities, along with five others. In September 2013, her novel *The Lowland* was placed on the shortlist for the Man Booker Prize, which ultimately went to *The Luminaries* by Eleanor Catton. The following month it was also long-listed for the National Book Award for Fiction, and revealed to be a finalist on October 16, 2013. However, on November 20, 2013, it lost out for that award to James McBride and his novel *The Good Lord Bird*. In December 2015, Lahiri published a non-fiction essay called "Teach Yourself Italian" in *The New Yorker* about her experience learning Italian. In the essay she declared that she is now only writing in Italian, and the essay itself was translated from Italian to English. That same year, she published her first book in Italian, *In altre parole*, in which she wrote her book about her experience learning the

language; an English translation by Ann Goldstein titled *In Other Words* was published in 2016. Lahiri was judged as the winner of the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature 2015 for her book *The Lowland* (Vintage Books/ Random House, India) at the Zee Jaipur Literature Festival for which she entered Limca Book of Records. In 2017, Lahiri received the Pen/Malamud award for excellence in the short story. The award was established by the family of Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Bernard Malamud to honor excellence in the art of short fiction.[5,6]

In 2018, Lahiri published the short story "The Boundary" in *The New Yorker*. The story explores the life of two families and the contrasting features between them. In 2018, Lahiri published her first novel in Italian, *Dove mi trovo* (2018). In 2019, she compiled, edited and translated the Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories which consists of 40 Italian short stories written by 40 different Italian writers.

Lahiri's writing is characterized by her "plain" language and her characters, often Indian immigrants to America who must navigate between the cultural values of their homeland and their adopted home. Lahiri's fiction is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. Lahiri examines her characters' struggles, anxieties, and biases to chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behavior. Until *Unaccustomed Earth*, she focused mostly on first-generation Indian American immigrants and their struggle to raise a family in a country very different from theirs. Her stories describe their efforts to keep their children acquainted with Indian culture and traditions and to keep them close even after they have grown up in order to hang onto the Indian tradition of a joint family, in which the parents, their children and the children's families live under the same roof. *Unaccustomed Earth* departs from this earlier original ethos, as Lahiri's characters embark on new stages of development. These stories scrutinize the fate of the second and third generations. As succeeding generations become increasingly assimilated into American culture and are comfortable in constructing perspectives outside of their country of origin, Lahiri's fiction shifts to the needs of the individual. She shows how later generations depart from the constraints of their immigrant parents, who are often devoted to their community and their responsibility to other immigrants. Lahiri worked on the third season of the HBO television program *In Treatment*. That season featured a character named Sunil, a widower who moves to the United States from India and

struggles with grief and with culture shock. Although she is credited as a writer on these episodes, her role was more as a consultant on how a Bengali man might perceive Brooklyn

Results

The Namesake (2003) is the debut novel by American author Jhumpa Lahiri. It was originally published in *The New Yorker* and was later expanded to a full-length novel. It explores many of the same emotional and cultural themes as Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. The novel moves between events in Calcutta, Boston, and New York City, and examines the nuances involved with being caught between two conflicting cultures with distinct religious, social, and ideological differences.[7,8]

Interpreter of Maladies is a book collection of nine short stories by American author of Indian origin Jhumpa Lahiri published in 1999. It won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award in the year 2000 and has sold over 15 million copies worldwide. It was also chosen as *The New Yorker's* Best Debut of the Year and is on Oprah Winfrey's Top Ten Book List. The stories are about the lives of Indians and Indian Americans who are caught between their roots and the "New World".

Unaccustomed Earth is a collection of short stories from American author Jhumpa Lahiri. It is her second collection of stories, following *Interpreter of Maladies* (which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction). As with much of Lahiri's work, *Unaccustomed Earth* considers the lives of Indian American characters and how they deal with their mixed cultural environment. The book was Lahiri's first to top *The New York Times* Best Seller list, where it debuted at #1

Jhumpa Lahiri's third novel is the triumphant culmination of her 20-year love affair with Italian, an obsession that led her to move to Rome with her family almost 10 years ago. She renounced all reading in English and began to write only Italian. Published in Italy in 2018 as *Dove mi trovo* – "Where I find myself" or "Where am I?" – it is her first novel written in Italian. Now she has translated it into English under the title *Whereabouts*.

The story follows an unnamed woman around an unnamed city over the course of a year, each chapter an espresso shot of regret and loneliness. In the second chapter, "On the Street", the narrator bumps into a man, the husband of a friend, whom she "might have been involved with, maybe shared a life with": they go into a lingerie shop because she needs to buy a pair of tights, leading the reader to think we have

begun a particular kind of story. But many of these streets lead nowhere. The chapters relate different relationships or connections: a visit to her mother; a daily chat with a barista; a fleeting encounter. The novel asks: “How does a city become a relationship in and of itself for the female protagonist?” she says now. This is a book about belonging and not belonging, place and displacement – questions of identity that Lahiri has explored throughout her fiction, whether set in New England, Calcutta or now (we guess) Rome. Following a year of enforced isolation for so many, not least in Italy, this “portrait of a woman in a sort of urban solitude”, as she describes the novel, has assumed an unexpectedly timely resonance.

Today Lahiri is at home in New Jersey: “*Mi trovo Princeton*,” she says. She returned to teach at the university in 2015, while maintaining a long-distance relationship with Rome. “I had two sets of keys. I had this other life, in this other place,” she explains, until coronavirus struck last year; her son was still in school in Rome at the time. On the shelves behind her, the only visible title is a book facing outwards with “ITALIAN” in large print. Her previous book, *In Other Words*, was her first written in Italian (translated by Ann Goldstein, Elena Ferrante’s translator) – “a sort of linguistic autobiography”, it is a passionate account of her “pilgrimage” to Rome and quest to conquer the language. At the end she confesses to a slight embarrassment at having written such a personal book “of love, of suffering”, and I suspect she feels similarly about giving interviews (which, along with reviews, she never reads). She is as thoughtful and composed as you’d expect from reading her fiction, with the same quiet humour it might be easy to miss.[9,10]

Implications

“I’m the least experimental writer,” Lahiri told New York Times magazine in 2008 when her

second collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, went straight to No 1 on the US bestseller lists, prompting Time magazine to declare a changing of the guard in US fiction. “The idea of trying things just for the sake of pushing the envelope, that’s never really interested me.” And it is true that her elegantly melancholy short stories – her first collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the Pulitzer in 2000 when she was 33 – belong to the realist tradition. Eschewing the showy irony of many of her American peers, or the lush prose and epic sweep typical of Anglo-Indian fiction at the time, she depicted the everyday lives of (often middle-class) Asian-American immigrants with the same compassionate scrutiny and moral complexity that distinguishes the

work of her literary heroes William Trevor and Alice Munro. Her first novel, *The Namesake*, which follows the fortunes of “Gogol”, the son of Bengali immigrants, as he makes his way in New York, was made into a film by acclaimed director Mira Nair; and her second *The Lowland*, a family saga stretching from 1950s Calcutta to New England decades later, was shortlisted for the Booker prize in 2013. Although *Whereabouts* is a novel, it could be described almost as a collection of connected short stories, and so, in form at least, Lahiri is very much on home ground. She may be a traditionalist, but surely there is no bigger experiment for a writer than adopting an entirely new language? Like a 21st-century Henry James heroine, she shunned the US (the Brooklyn brownstone literary set, of which she was one of the most feted) for the old world charms of Rome, in what she describes as nothing less than an act of “literary survival”. “It is really hard to explain the forces in life that drive you to people, to places, to languages,” she says. “For me, to a language and then to a place and then to a new life, a new way of thinking, a new way of being. Those are very big things.” She has always felt she existed in “a kind of linguistic exile” long before she left for Rome. She was born in London, the daughter of Indian immigrants, and the family moved to the US when she was two. Growing up in Rhode Island (her father, like many of her characters, worked at the university), with frequent trips to Calcutta, she felt her story to be “much more complicated” than those of her school friends: “There was always ‘the other place’ and ‘the other language’ and ‘the other world’.” Bengali, which she spoke until she was four, is both her mother tongue and “a foreign language”, because she can’t read or write it: it is her parents’ language, “the language of their world”. Lahiri and her sister were educated in English, which she came to regard as a bullying “stepmother”. “Why am I fleeing? What is pursuing me? Who wants to restrain me?” she asks in *In Other Words*. “The most obvious answer is the English language.”

And yet she loved it, especially for the world of books it opened up. “I love it still,” she says now. “But at the same time, emotionally it represented this sort of impossible challenge. My relationship with English was always very much part of the desire as a child to be fully part of that world.” Paradoxically, the fact there was “not even a question of really belonging” in Italy finally freed her from being caught between two languages, “that is to say, having to choose between two ways of being, two ways of thinking”, she explains. “*In poche parole*, in few words, it has given me a true sense of belonging, fully recognising that it is ‘a sense’.”[11,12]

Written in bursts each time she returned to Rome, *Whereabouts* grew out of her “day-to-day inhabiting of that city, mostly walking through it”. It is fitting that both the novel’s inspiration and the English title suggested themselves to her in transit: the idea was “born” on a train in Italy when the author became intrigued by a middle-aged woman she saw sitting alone, “and one looks in the window and maybe one sees oneself”. The title came to her suddenly, after months of deliberation, on a flight to Rome – “whereabouts” is “an incredibly English word: it doesn’t even have Latin roots”. And it is surely no coincidence that each of the enigmatically titled chapters – “At the Trattoria”, “In Spring”, “On the Couch”, “By the Sea” – begins with a preposition (she studied “a stupendous sentence” by Alberto Moravia in order to master Italian prepositions “once and for all”). This is a novel “of oscillation and unsettledness and shadows”, she says. “I was thinking about that idea of what it means to pass through life, to always be moving.” And yet, unlike Lahiri, who describes herself as “a nomad”, her narrator has never left the city in which she was born. She is “always on the move in her world, and yet sort of stuck in her world, nervous about what’s on the other side of the border,” she explains. “The border – what does that mean today?”

Like her characters, who often “migrate, who physically cross borders, who find themselves at checkpoints”, so much of Lahiri’s own experience has been “bound up with things like green cards and naturalisation and passports and certificates”. In *Whereabouts* she wanted to imagine what it might be like for someone who has never had to consider these things, and yet who still feels restless, to show that this conflict between feelings of being “rooted and rootless” applies to everybody.[13,14]

The narrator is a contradiction in other ways, too: a professor in her late 40s, she is alone, yet with many friends and lovers; sometimes she is lonely, sometimes she is content; she envies others their intimacy and is envied for her freedom. “She’s at this crossroads. She is a woman who recognises she probably won’t become a mother; she may have other relationships but that is not going to be part of her life. How is she going to come to terms with that?” she asks. So much of writing comes out of imagining alternative lives, different paths, she believes. “So what if I didn’t have this life? What if I hadn’t met the person I did, the day I did and this happened and that happened and a child happened and then another child?” Although she is keen to stress that she is not her narrator, and her Italian adventure was very much “a family experience”, the act of travelling makes

“you feel solitude more keenly”, she says. “It touches deeper parts of you. It makes you question who you are.” The novel’s underlying sense of urgency or agitation comes from the fact that it was written in the knowledge that they would one day be leaving. “I always had the return ticket,” she recalls sadly. “Sinking into that new place, there was always something that was going to call me back to this place.”[15,16]

Conclusions

The past year has been “an incredibly intense time”, as she has watched the pandemic unfold in two homes – Italy and the US. But it has also been one of the most productive: she has just finished a collection, *Roman Stories*, again written in Italian, which include some inspired by the Bengali immigrants she met in Rome; she is putting together a book of essays on translation (she recently translated the novels of her friend Domenico Starnone, Italy’s “finest living writer”); and perhaps most remarkably, her first book of poetry – in Italian – will be published in June. She has never written a poem in English before and “maybe never will”, she says. Just as she would never have written *Whereabouts* in English, she thinks writing in Italian made poetry possible. “When I first started writing in English I felt like an interloper. When I first started writing in Italian I felt like an interloper. When I was writing the poems I felt like an interloper. But maybe that’s not a bad thing.”[17,18]

Lahiri hopes to return to Rome this summer, as her daughter is due to start high school there in September. Each time they visit she can’t wait to get out into the piazza, “to have that first coffee and see all those people, who are so happy that we are back”, she says with passion. “There’s this life that is happening right on your doorstep that is always changing and always kind of the same. I miss that.” She keeps in touch with friends she made among the many immigrants from Bangladesh living in Rome. “It’s the one place in the world where I speak English, Italian and Bengali on a daily basis.” This “little triangle” of language is part of the magic of the city for her, she says, “and it is waiting for me in the piazza.”[19,20]

References

- [1] Minzesheimer, Bob. "For Pulitzer winner Lahiri, a novel approach", *USA Today*, August 19, 2003. Retrieved on 2008-04-13.
- [2] *January 23, Press Trust of India; January 23, 2017UPDATED; Ist, 2017 15:00. "Jhumpa explores importance of book jackets in new work". India Today. Retrieved November 25, 2021.*

- [3] *Delhi January 23, India Today in New; January 23, 2015 UPDATED; Ist, 2015 15:57. "Indian-American Author Jhumpa Lahiri won DSC Prize for 2015". India Today. Retrieved November 25, 2021.*
- [4] *Gutting, Elizabeth Ward. "Jhumpa Lahiri: 2014 National Humanities Medal". National Endowment for the Humanities. Retrieved August 17, 2018.*
- [5] *"Jhumpa Lahiri: Professor of Creative Writing". Lewis Center for the Arts, Princeton University. Retrieved August 17, 2018.*
- [6] Flynn, Gillian. "Passage To India: First-time author Jhumpa Lahiri nabs a Pulitzer," Entertainment Weekly, April 28, 2000. Retrieved on 2008-04-13.
- [7] Aguiar, Arun. "One on One With Jhumpa Lahiri", Pifmagazine.com, July 28, 1999. Retrieved on 2008-04-13.
- [8] Anastas, Benjamin. "Books: Inspiring Adaptation" Archived June 22, 2008, at the Wayback Machine, *Men's Vogue*, March 2007. Retrieved on April 13, 2008.
- [9] *PM, Newsweek Staff On 3/5/06 at 7:00 (March 5, 2006). "My Two Lives". Newsweek. Retrieved December 4, 2018.*
- [10] "Pulitzer Prize awarded to Barnard alumna Jhumpa Lahiri '89; Katherine Boo '88 cited in public service award to The Washington Post" Archived February 24, 2004, at the Wayback Machine, Barnard Campus News, April 11, 2000. Retrieved on 2008-04-13.
- [11] ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (304346550)
- [12] Spinks, John. "A Writer's Room", T: The New York Times Style Magazine, August 25, 2013.
- [13] *Pierce, Sheila (May 22, 2015). "Why Pulitzer Prize-winner Jhumpa Lahiri quit the US for Italy". Financial Times. Retrieved June 20, 2021.*
- [14] *Saxon, Jamie (September 4, 2015). "Author Jhumpa Lahiri awarded National Humanities Medal". Research at Princeton, Princeton University. Retrieved May 15, 2017.*
- [15] Arun Aguiar (August 1, 1999). "Interview with Jhumpa Lahiri". *Pif Magazine!* Retrieved September 4, 2015.
- [16] Lahiri, Jhumpa. "My Two Lives", Newsweek, March 6, 2006. Retrieved on 2008-04-13.
- [17] Wiltz, Teresa. "The Writer Who Began With a Hyphen: Jhumpa Lahiri, Between Two Cultures", The Washington Post, October 8, 2003. Retrieved on 2008-04-15.
- [18] Farnsworth, Elizabeth. "Pulitzer Prize Winner-Fiction", PBS News Hour, April 12, 2000. Retrieved on 2008-04-15.
- [19] *Austen, Benjamin (September–October 2003). "In The Shadow of Gogol". New Leader. 86: 31–32.*
- [20] Garner, Dwight. "Jhumpa Lahiri, With a Bullet" *The New York Times Paper Cuts* blog, April 10, 2008. Retrieved on 2008-04-12.