

A Biographical Sketch of Jhumpa Lahiri

November 7, 2023

By Catherine LaCroix with liberal copying from the internet – no claim to copyright

[www.randomhouse.com/kvpa/jhumpalahiri/]

Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri was born July 11, 1967 in London. Her parents were from the Indian state of West Bengal.

Her family moved to the United States in 1970, when she was three. Lahiri grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island, where her father Amar Lahiri worked as a librarian at the University of Rhode Island. Lahiri's mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali heritage, and her family often visited relatives in Calcutta (now Kolkata).

In 1970, there were about 51,000 Indian immigrants in the entire United States, and presumably very few in Rhode Island. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/18/books/review/jhumpa-lahiri-and-me.html?searchResultPosition=2> We can assume that Lahiri felt “foreign” throughout her childhood. In an article in Newsweek, Lahiri said that she has “felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new.”

When Lahiri began kindergarten, her teacher decided to call her by her familiar name Jhumpa because it was easier to pronounce than her more formal given names. Lahiri recalled, “I always felt so embarrassed by my name.... You feel like you're causing someone pain just by being who you are.”

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 earned advanced 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 titled “Accursed Palace: The Italian palazzo on the Jacobean stage (1603–1625)”. Lahiri taught creative writing at Boston University and later at 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 its senior editor. In 2012, Lahiri moved to Rome with her husband and their two children, Octavio (born 2002) and Noor (b. 2005).

In 2015, Lahiri joined the Princeton University faculty as a professor of creative writing, where she stayed until 2022. In 2022, she became the Millicent C. McIntosh Professor of English and Director of Creative Writing at her alma mater, Barnard College of Columbia University.

Lahiri’s debut collection of short-stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN/Hemingway Award. The collection received mixed reviews in India, where reviewers were alternately enthusiastic and upset Lahiri had “not paint[ed] Indians in a more positive light.”

Her first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), was a New York Times Notable Book, a Los Angeles Times Book Prize finalist and was made into a major motion picture in 2007. The film was directed by Mira Nair and

starred Kal Penn as Gogol and Bollywood stars Tabu and Irrfan Khan as his parents. Lahiri herself made a cameo as "Aunt Jhumpa".

Her next work *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. In 2014, Lahiri was awarded the National Humanities Medal. On January 22, 2015, Lahiri won the DSC Prize for Literature for *The Lowland*.

After moving to Rome in 2012, Lahiri published two books of essays, and in 2018, published her first novel in Italian called *Dove mi trovo*. She 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 translated some of her own writings and those of other authors from Italian into English. 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.

In 2022, Lahiri published a new short story collection under the title *Racconi Romani* (Roman stories), the title being a nod to a book by Alberto Moravia of the same name. Its English translation is slated to appear in October 2023, which explains a recent upswing in articles about Lahiri in the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*.

She has published short stories and nonfiction in *The New Yorker*. 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.

When Lahiri began writing, there was not a robust representation of Indian Americans in literature. Lahiri has written, "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."

With regard to tonight's novel, *The Namesake*, we can see how the theme and plot was influenced by her own experience. In particular, when growing up she heard a family story in which her father's cousin was involved in a train wreck and was only saved when the workers saw light reflected off of a watch he was wearing.

In summary: Lahiri is a pathbreaking, prolific, talented, and celebrated author. In an article in the *NY Times*, another Indian author, Vauhini Vara, reflected on the extent to which Lahiri's work created the template for all other Indian American authors.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/18/books/review/jhumpa-lahiri-and-me.html?searchResultPosition=2> Early in Vara's career, she assumed that being an Indian American author meant writing about saris, chai, and arranged marriages, and she realized that this expectation came from Lahiri's original works. Recently, she has broken free of those expectations, and learned to write about characters in a way that doesn't make their ethnic identity the center of their lives. And she has noticed that Lahiri herself has escaped from these confines.