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Interpreter of the Second Generation

Pulitzer-winner Jhumpa Lahiri talks about being "between the cracks of two cultures," her wedding in Kolkata, and ideas that shaped her new book

SANDIP ROY-CHOWDHURY, Nov 03, 2003

On a sticky August evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix.

The year is 1968 and it's hard to make a satisfying jhaal muri in an apartment in Massachusetts, no matter if it's the one thing you crave in your pregnancy. Reading the exceptional detail in her first full-length novel, The Namesake, it's easy to forget that Jhumpa Lahiri probably doesn't remember much of Bengali life in Boston or Cambridge in the late 1960s. She was born in 1967 in London and moved with her parents to the United States soon after. Unlike the Amy Tans and Chitra Divakarunis and Bharati Mukherjees with whom she is often compared, Lahiri is very much the "second-generation" writer. That's why, though The Namesake starts with Ashima in her kitchen in Central Square, its real protagonist is the son she is pregnant with—Gogol. Lahiri was in San Francisco recently talking about Gogol, the Pulitzer, and the sounds of Bengali.

After winning the Pulitzer for your first collection of short stories Interpreter of Maladies, everyone has been waiting to see if you could live up to that promise and write a full-length novel. Does The Namesake feel a bit like the child star's first movie as an adult?

I tried not to think about what other people were going to think about my next book. I had already started the book when I got the Pulitzer and just stuck to the path. I knew I couldn't live up to any expectation that once you write a successful book the next one has to be as successful or more successful. As a writer I just want to grow and learn from each book.

Do you remember the moment you heard you had won the Pulitzer?

Yes, I was in my apartment. We had just come back from a short trip to Boston and I was heating up some soup for my lunch. My suitcases were still not unpacked. And the phone rang. It was 1 or 2 in the afternoon. The person who called me was from Houghton Mifflin, my publisher, but no one I knew, and she said "I need to know what year you were born." And then she asked some other fact like where I was born. I just told her. Sometimes people need some information for a reading for a flyer or something. And then she said: "You don't know why I am calling, do you?" And I said, "No, why are you calling?" And she said, "You just won the Pulitzer." And that's how I found out from a person I had never spoken to in my life.

Your given name was Nilanjana but the name that stuck was your nickname Jhumpa. Gogol, your protagonist was supposed to have a "good name" sent by his grandmother in India which gets lost in the mail. And now you spend every interview explaining this Bengali custom of a public and private name. Did you want to play with names in this book?

The whole book started with a name—Gogol. It belonged to a friend of one of my cousins in Kolkata. I was made aware of it on one of my visits there many years ago. The idea made its way to a notebook I keep of story ideas. And I just jotted

down “a boy named Gogol.” And slowly, subconsciously I was sort of meditating on the idea of names and what they mean, like the whole idea of having two names, which I didn’t really have, but so many people around me including my sister and friends did. I took it for granted in my life but knew that it was so inexplicable to other people in my life.

Another thing we take for granted is the way our parents (and many of us) were married. Gogol calls his parents’ arranged marriage “unthinkable and unremarkable.” When were you aware that that was something different about your parents?

From a very early age. In school my friends would say their parents met in college or at a high school dance. And I was always aware my parents had married in a very different way. And when people asked me: “Oh, did your parents have an arranged marriage?” in a very bewildered and mildly horrified tone of voice, I was aware it was regarded as a sort of barbaric, unthinkable concept.

There are still people who feel, oh my God, it’s such an exotic old-fashioned sort of idea and it’s hard to explain that it’s very much a living, thriving tradition. It’s a way of being married as opposed to the romantic falling in love way that also exists in India.

At the same time, these were my parents and it seemed so normal and I knew so many people whom I was close to and loved who had gotten married this way. So I felt both very protective and defensive of my parents and their tradition and also sort of worried that this might happen to me and that might not be something I wanted.

Speaking of marriage, your own wedding in Kolkata was quite a mob scene with daily newspaper articles. How was that experience?
I was totally overwhelmed by the level of attention. I just didn’t realize there would be so much interest in our wedding. I wasn’t thrilled by it. I am a very private person and felt my marriage should be a private event. I tried to resist it. But then we realized it was an avalanche and it was going to happen. So we just tried to sort of accept the attention and have as private a wedding as possible.

When your parents moved to Cambridge, MA and then to Rhode Island in the late ’60s, what was the community like?

From the stories I hear, it’s similar to the world I depict in the novel. My mother was always wandering around the streets of Harvard in Central Square pushing me in my stroller and every time she would see someone who looked Bengali there was this instant “who are you, where are you from, let’s be friends.” They sort of gathered a community that way literally from spotting each other on the streets. There were enough Bengalis to have a growing circle of friends over the years and my parents are still tied to many of those people, which I think is really remarkable.

But in the book, Gogol, as he grows older, is annoyed by the constant weekend parties with other Bengalis. He describes how his 14th birthday is just an excuse for his parents to have friends from three states visit and cook food, make sandesh out of ricotta cheese and play cards and chat while the bored kids watch television.

It’s true I was always of two minds. On one hand I found these get-togethers tedious and monotonous and not what I would choose to do with my weekends every weekend. It was very clear it was very much about the parents and their need to really relax on the weekends. When you are a foreigner and still getting used to the culture, you are walking a fine line. The parties on the weekend allowed them to forget all that and just speak in Bengali and eat food and celebrate in a way that they weren’t allowed to on a daily basis.

Once my parents moved to Rhode Island they were still crossing state borders to attend these parties—it was a huge priority in their lives, especially for my mother who was more isolated since she didn’t work for a long time.

At one point Gogol goes home and his father starts talking to Manhattanites about how you have to be careful where you park in their quiet suburban towns and Gogol is irritated by his parents’ “perpetual fear of disaster.” For me that was a telling moment of how immigrants, no matter how long they live here, never quite feel safe.

Yes, absolutely. I have observed that with my parents. Here is one of the things that tipped me off early. None of my friends’ parents locked their doors. We grew up in a safe town, a sleepy neighborhood, and I’d go to my friends’ homes and their front doors were open and back doors were open. My parents were always locking the door, locking the garage, closing the windows, locking the windows every night, and I think it’s just a sense of not feeling on firm ground. And you want to feel protected somehow.

Why have you said you inherited a sense of exile from your parents?

I think that I never feel fully part of the world I was brought up in. My parents were always very resistant in many ways to living in America and missed India so much and had a lot of misgivings about their lives here. It was hard for me to think of myself as fully American. I thought it would be very much a betrayal of my parents and what they believed and who they are. My parents feel less foreign now than they did 30 years ago but they still feel like outsiders.

How then did you feel when you experienced your parents on trips to India? How were they transformed? Gogol is amazed as his mother roams around Kolkata with ease, shopping at New Market, going to films with her friends.

My parents turned into different people. It was like those weekend parties, but even more. It was truly a transformation. They were so much more relaxed, so much more at ease and I felt there was happiness that they were deprived of in their normal lives and that they could finally connect to. When I think of it now and I try to imagine what it would be like to see my parents and my sister once every two or three years, I am amazed at what my parents dealt with.

When I was growing up, the separation felt so great, so insurmountable. There was no e-mail. Phone lines were dreadful and so expensive, and every call from India was bad news. The world seemed so much more vast and so much more difficult to navigate.

But does that put a weird pressure on people like you, the second generation, to see your parents so palpably happy in India and realizing that in some ways they gave up this happiness for a better life for you?

This was one of the things that really separated me from my parents. I could try to sympathize, empathize the best that I could, but the fact of the matter is that my connection to India will never be what my parents' is. I always feel I both belong and don't belong there. But the older I've gotten the more I realize I do belong more to America than India just because I have spent so much more of my life here.

But I have often wondered why did my parents really come here. So many of these Bengali immigrants don't really come to America for a life and death situation. Most of them have not escaped excruciating war, poverty, or political persecution that many other immigrants have experienced. Not to say their experiences were not painful, but my parents were so ambivalent and so guilt-ridden about coming here. That's because they came essentially for opportunity and a better life. But my parents could easily have stayed in Kolkata and raised a family and had a nice home. Coming to America was a choice to have a better life for themselves and their children, thereby sacrificing connections to their families.

But though you now feel more American than Indian, are you surprised that the first stories you wrote were set in India? I read you wrote your first novel when you were seven. Was that set in India?

(Laughs) I called them novels but they weren't very long. They were just stories about girls having various adventures in boarding schools. Some of them were with supernatural powers.

The first stories I wrote from Interpreter of Maladies were set in India. But before that I wrote many other stories I was not happy with. Maybe it was the distance that allowed me to write about India. Often, for a writer the hardest things to write about are the things that are closest because you have to be objective. It's a greater challenge for me to tell a story like the one in The Namesake.

Your work is so tied to ethnicity and roots. Yet your husband is Guatemalan-born of Greek heritage. What do you think of roots and knowing where you come from when you look at your son?

I have never felt a strong affiliation with any nation or ethnic group. I always felt between the cracks of two cultures. So much of it was about where I was and who was viewing me. When I went to Calcutta my relatives would think of me so much as American. A foreigner. In America it's always, you are Indian, when did you come here.

I hope for my son that it will be something he may be confused about for a time but that he will accept it and just understand that this is what can happen and it's neither a good thing nor a bad thing to be a little mixed up.

But you have held on to your roots. Though you never grew up in Kolkata, you have retained your mother tongue—Bengali.

I don't know, but it must be hardwired. When I first saw my son I didn't say: "How cute!" It just came out in Bengali. That's the language of tenderness for me.

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Amazing writer! So inspiring, I can't wait for her next work.	

Dennis Hidalgo	Apr 11, 2006 13:07:59
Thank you for being a voice not only to your Indian American community, but to other immigrants and 1st and 2nd generation Americans as well. Thanks.	