



INTERVIEW

"It Was Just A Natural, Very Exciting Decision"

Pulitzer winner Jhumpa Lahiri in conversation with Sheela Reddy some days before her wedding

SHEELA REDDY

JHUMPA Lahiri emerges out of a cluster of relatives rather like a flower out of a cactus plant: slightly exotic and totally incongruous. There seems no connection between the very Indian relatives who encircle her as she enters a Calcutta bookstore and the pale, blonde-streaked, slender-necked, elegantly-skirted, grave-eyed Pulitzer-winning writer from New York. There is a father, who could still pass off for a babu at the post office although he left a job there 40 years ago for better prospects abroad, a sari-clad mother who hovers watchfully over the 33-year-old daughter she raised in Rhode Island but within the confines of "invisible walls intended to keep American influence at bay". There are several uncles from the Calcutta she loves and has been returning to since her infant days every two years, one of them armed with a camera, and another carrying Jhumpa's shawl as if it were another award. The "invisible walls" have stretched recently to include a Latino from the United States, Alberto Vourvoulis, a sub-editor with Time magazine, who Jhumpa will wed on January 15 in a traditional three-day ceremony that the nri Lahiris and their daughter have been dreaming of for years. Is it part of that "continuous struggle", as Jhumpa puts it, "on my parents' behalf to keep afloat familiar traditions"? Jhumpa laughs, suddenly banishing the tension that is knotting up the slender muscles of her face and neck, "I'd like to think of my marriage to Alberto as no struggle at all." Drawing close to him, pointing to a photograph of Amitabh Bachchan, one suddenly gets the feeling that she has discovered for herself the role she loves most. Jhumpa, lover of tradition, jazz, blues, rock and roll, James Joyce, *Midnight's Children*, Rabindranath Tagore, Virginia Woolf, Ashapura Devi, *Jane Eyre*, classical Indian music, Calcutta and New York, is home at last: interpreting India to her American fiance. Her debut work of fiction, *Interpreter of Maladies*, is into its 14th edition and has sold 200,000 copies in the US alone. Excerpts from an interview:

"I never felt fully one way or the other (Indian or American). I'm grateful that my identity was never clear."

"Writing weighs me down, with or without a prize. The prize was for this book. To write a novel I have to orient myself."

Why did you decide to get married in Calcutta? Has it anything to do with your anxiety to preserve the world and traditions of your parents?

Before I answer that, I would like to say straight off that I want to talk more about my work and less about my personal life. My reasons for coming to get married in Calcutta are complicated and it's very hard to put it into a sentence. People ask me why. To me, it just felt like a very natural and exciting decision. I wanted Alberto to visit India and see Calcutta. All my life I have been coming

here and I feel very tied to the city in many ways. But we are planning to have another big reception in New York where we have friends, and my parents too.

You once said you felt you were American, Indian, Indian-American, nri and abcd (American Born

Confused Desi). But is there any one category that you identify more with than any other?

What I think I said was that I don't see myself as any of these categories but other people perceive me as either one or the other of those things. I don't feel any affinity to any of those labels.

So if you are not any of those things, where do you feel you belong?

I feel partly American, but I have an ambiguous relation with both America and India, the only two countries I really know. I never feel fully one way or the other.

Is that an asset for you as a writer, this ambiguity, or is it your biggest disadvantage?

It has been a great advantage. I feel very grateful for the way I was brought up. I did not realise it then but as I grew older and started writing and realised the material that was there was very strong, I felt very grateful that my life was complicated and that my identity was never clear but put me in a position that was always questioned.

Do you think the fact that India is the flavour of the moment has anything to do with your choice of subject or your winning the Pulitzer prize?

I don't know... I am very happy that my book has been well-received and am very humbled by all the attention. And it is exciting to see other Indian writers also receiving recognition internationally but I would hate to think it was because of (laughs)...you know...about anyone's book.

But would it have been possible for you to write the way you do if writers like Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth had not made it fashionable?

Oh I think so, yes. I wrote before I read either of those writers. And I wrote about whatever I thought was worth writing about—I wrote about Indians, I wrote about Indians in America, whatever. When I was younger, I wrote about fairies. I was always writing. I don't think that Indian writers necessarily gave me the cue.

In my understanding, it was Amy Tan who was one of the first writers in the United States to make

writing about the immigrant experience closer to the mainstream, and not be marginalised as an "ethnic writer".

But I didn't think of any of that when I wrote. When I write, I don't really think of how it's going to be received. I just work on it for myself, I wasn't thinking of winning any awards.

The Pulitzer came as a great surprise to you, didn't it?

It was completely out of the loop. I had no idea, I didn't even know when the prize was announced. I was sitting at home, warming a soup in the kitchen for my lunch. My book had been out for a year at that time, and had received a couple of prizes—from The New Yorker and the Pen-Hemingway award for a first book. I had gone to Boston to accept that prize (Pen) on Sunday. My family went, we all went, I got this prize, it was all very exciting. And I felt very...sort of, sated with all this attention. We returned to New York, and on Monday I was at home, having just got back from Boston, warming my lunch, when my publisher called and said that the press had been calling and they wanted some information about when I was born or something like that. I didn't understand why she was asking me this, and I thought maybe she was referring to the previous award and because I'd just got back from there someone wants to write about it. But I must have sounded very befuddled, because she said, "You don't know what I am referring to, do you?" And I said, 'No, I don't'. And then she told me. It was very funny, because I had just been with my American editor the day before celebrating the other award, and that day everyone was away at a sales conference, so nobody was in their normal station at their desks. So the person who called me was an assistant who happened to be manning the phone. It wasn't even the editor who called me and said guess what, just a person who I didn't know, asking this strange question...and then she told me.

What did you feel?



I felt...just sort of...levelled by the enormous weight of it. You know, I realised that something unexpected, whether it is good news or bad news, creates—in me, at least, it created—somehow a feeling of utter disbelief and wanting to ascertain in this obsessive way that it was true. And I think this happens sometimes when you receive bad news—you say, is it really true, is it true? But this time it was good news but it was just so...I don't know, it just seemed so strange...this voice on the phone saying that I'd won this prize.

Do you feel in any way burdened by what you call "the enormous weight of it"? Especially while writing your next book, a novel?

(Laughs) Well, writing weighs me down, with or without a prize. It's a burdened thing to do, for me. I try not to think about it in my daily life, and I definitely don't think about it when I work. This prize was given for this book, it's not a prize for the other book, and it doesn't mean anything beyond this book to me.

But criticism, especially from India, that your work was stereotypical, tries to woo western audience with Indian exotica, etc, seems to have affected you more deeply...

Yes, I did feel that the harshest criticism of my work came from India. I was surprised, a little hurt. I felt attacked for something beyond the writing. Attacked for who I was, and why I was. And it pressed all my buttons about feeling that I could never satisfy expectations for being an Indian. That was what saddened me. But then I just stopped reading it.

Has it really scared you from writing about India?

No, when I wrote that about playing it safe by never writing about India or Indians again, I hope I was being sarcastic. I can't imagine shutting off any topic to write about, especially not India! You know, a country I do feel I have every right to write about in any way I'd like to. And if I offend critics, that's a chance I am going to take.

Some western critics have found your writing imbued with middle-class angst and your characters too self-absorbed.

I think a sense of belonging and a place to live is a vital emotional need, and if that struggle to belong makes my characters seem self-absorbed, I'd say my characters are human.

So is your novel about India too?

I don't want to really talk about specifics, but it has to do in a way with India, I'll say that. In its current shape it has to do with Indians living in the United States and in part, their abiding relationship with India.

Is it more difficult to write than short stories?

It's more difficult in the sense because I've never done this before. I remember when I began writing my short stories, it took me a while to even understand how this machine operated. So when writing a novel I have to begin to orient myself. But because it is on a larger scale, I think the process takes that much longer. And also because there is so much going on in my life just now. This book came along, and I didn't really expect it to take up so much of my time.

And now your marriage as well? Or were you planning to get married before you got the Pulitzer?

No, we got engaged after the Pulitzer.

You went to a lot of creative writing workshops, and some critics say your writing is a little self-conscious for that reason. How useful was your workshop experience?

I just went to one creative writing programme, and it was just for one year. I wouldn't call it excessive at all. I think I did less than a lot of writers. These programmes are one way for people who are interested in writing to get their feet wet and see if this is really something they can spend their life doing. So few people can, and so many people want to. I think what a creative writing programme affords is a taste of what it really means to devote yourself to the craft of writing. For me, it was useful because for the first time I felt encouragement from a group of people whom I admired. I felt inspired. I felt validation for this thing I had done secretly all my life. It enabled me to feel more confident in my desire to write.

You began writing when you were seven...

Yes, I began writing during school recess one day along with a friend. We passed this notebook back and forth, writing down stories. But when I was younger, writing was only one of the ways I expressed my creativity—I drew, I acted, I wrote, I did a myriad things. Children are so highly creative. But writing is the only thing that survived.

Do you intend to come to India more often—to get to know it better?

I don't feel I need to get to know it better (laughs). It's not a topic for me in that way. It's just a place I carry inside of me, sometimes it is around me, and sometimes it is not around me. But I've been coming here all my life, I spent long stretches of time here, and it will never be unfamiliar to me. I don't think I'll ever be able to forget India, so that I have to come back to refresh my imagination.

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