



OUTSIDE, LOOKING IN

Author Jhumpa Lahiri learns to juggle English, Italian and Trump

By Cary Darling

The brouhaha over immigration — with all of the shouting about “Dreamers,” deportations, walls and bad words for troubled places — strikes Jhumpa Lahiri especially hard.

The British-born, American-based Pulitzer Prize-winning author and daughter of Bengali immigrants, best known for her lauded 2003 novel “The Namesake,” which became a well-regarded 2006 film, constantly explores the alienation and dislocation that come from being society’s ethnic other.



Tabu, left, and Irrfan Khan appear in 2006’s “The Namesake,” based on the story by Lahiri. Fox Searchlight

It’s a theme that runs like a jagged California fault line through her most recent nonfiction work, “In Other Words” (2016), a chronicle of her living in Italy and learning Italian, that was published in a single volume containing English and Italian versions.

But, for her, “In Other Words” was no “Eat Pray Love” lark. She not only moved to Italy for three years but gave up speaking or writing in English completely, immersing herself in a new culture that she never felt truly at home in. No matter how proficient her linguistic skills — she became fluent — Lahiri never felt fully accepted by Italians. Often, they

Lahiri continues on G15

Jhumpa Lahiri, top, grew up in a Bengali immigrant family in a small New England town in the '70s and found it confusing trying to bridge two cultures — which is what all her fiction is about. Courtesy photo

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BOOK EVENTS

SUNDAY
Tarif Yousef-Agha: Author will discuss and sign “The Chronicles of the Syrian Revolution: The Orphan Uprising the Entire World Betrayed,” 3-5 p.m., River Oaks Bookstore, 3270 Westheimer; 713 520-0061 or riveroaksbookstore.com.

MONDAY
Jhumpa Lahiri: Alexander Parsons, director of the University of Houston Creative Writing Program, will interview the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Humanities Award on stage. The program is part of the Inprint Margaret Root

Brown Reading Series. 7:30 p.m., Cullen Performance Hall, University of Houston, 4300 University. Tickets \$5; inprintheouston.org.

TUESDAY
Will Cannady: Author will discuss and sign “Four Houses: Design for Change,” 7 p.m., Brazos

Bookstore, 2421 Bissonnet; 713-523-0701 or brazosbookstore.com.

WEDNESDAY
Raymond Caballero: Author will discuss and sign “Orozco: The Life and Death of a Mexican Revolutionary,” 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

THURSDAY
Min Jin Lee: Author will discuss and sign “Pachinko,” 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

FRIDAY
Miles Arceneaux: Author will discuss and sign “Hidden Sea,” 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

Ana Khan



Lahiri, like her characters, straddles multiple worlds



Courtesy photo

Kal Penn, left, and Sahira Nair, second from right, portray children of a displaced couple (Irrfan and Tabu Khan) in “The Namesake.”

Lahiri from page G1

would insist on speaking to her in English, largely, she presumed, because of her South Asian appearance.

“I know that if I stayed in Italy for the rest of my life,” Lahiri writes, “even if I were able to speak a polished, impeccable Italian, that wall, for me, would remain.”

So the current anti-immigrant climate, in both the U.S. and Europe, is one she finds personal and disturbing. Lahiri, who visits the University of Houston’s Cullen Hall on Monday for a reading and interview, was part of the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities. Then, she and all of her fellow committee members resigned last August after President Donald Trump’s “all sides” speech in the wake of the Charlottesville, Va., violence that claimed the life of one anti-Nazi protester.

“I fear this reflects a more general condition in the United States. I mean, Europe has this problem as well, in terms of its distrust, mistrust, fear, phobia of foreigners and of otherness,” Lahiri, 50, said in an interview by phone from Princeton, N.J. “Europe and the United States are very different places with different history, reality and politics. But I do think there are certain strains in common ... just (from) living in both places, (there’s) a similar sense of closure. That’s very worrisome to me.

“It’s very hard for me to even comment on anything that is happening right now in our government ... It’s totally surreal,” she continued. “The fact that Donald Trump was even elected, even the fact that that could happen, I don’t think I really even fully processed that ... But then again, now, Italy is holding elections in two months, and it is possible that (Silvio) Berlusconi will once again become prime minister. What can I say? The world is in a really, very strange moment right now.

“It’s odd because I think the three places that I have connections to, the three parts of the world that I feel like my spirit resides — in India, in Italy and in the United States — the governments of all three of those places right now are just so problematic on so many levels,” she said. “In terms of just the level of intolerance and the



Houghton Mifflin

Jhumpa Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize for her debut story collection.

discourse of hatred and of this idea of closure and just going against the grain of everything that I believe in and that I am, and all of the progress that one likes to think has been made historically.”

The Italian way

If Lahiri’s earlier feelings of cultural disconnection were involuntary — her parents brought her to the U.S. when she was 2 — the author went to Italy of her own accord after becoming enamored of the country during a 1994 post-collegiate trip to Florence.

Nearly two decades later, Lahiri — a wife and a mother of two by then — finally summoned the courage to remove

Jhumpa Lahiri

Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series
When: 7:30 p.m. Monday
Where: Cullen Auditorium, University of Houston, 4300 University
Information: \$5; 713-521-2026, inprintheouston.org

her English-language safety net by relocating to and diving deep into the culture she had fallen in love with. It came after she had proved herself a master of English, nabbing the Pulitzer Prize for her 1999 short-story collection, “Interpreter of Maladies,” as well as general acclaim for another set of short stories, “Unaccustomed Earth” (2008).

Though she still maintains a residence in Italy, she’s back on American soil these days, teaching creative writing at Princeton while readjusting and reevaluating her relationships to both languages.

“I have much more of a day-to-day life in English again. I teach and so forth,” she said. “I have become a translator from Italian, so I’ve started working again in that sense, creatively in English, though not with my own work, translating somebody else’s work.

“I would add that the anxiety I had at that point about my connection to Italian being so precarious and the worry that it would abandon me if I left, that has subsided to a great degree ... I feel like I now have two very

On writing

Why do I write? To investigate the mystery of existence. To tolerate myself. To get closer to everything that is outside of me.

If I want to understand what moves me, what confuses me, what pains me — everything that makes me react, in short — I have to put it into words. Writing is my only way of absorbing and organizing life. Otherwise it would terrify me, it would upset me too much.

What passes without being put into words, without being transformed and, in a certain sense, purified by the crucible of writing, has no meaning for me. Only words that endure seem real. They have a power, a value superior to us.

Given that I try to decipher everything through writing, maybe writing in Italian is simply my way of learning the language in a more profound, more stimulating way.

Ever since I was a child, I’ve belonged only to my words. I don’t have a country, a specific culture. If I didn’t write, if I didn’t work with words, I wouldn’t feel that I’m present on the earth.

Jhumpa Lahiri, “In Other Words”

active linguistic lives side by side. Every day I’m speaking Italian and English, and I’m writing in Italian and English.”

But, she admits, there’s still an underlying unease.

“I don’t think I feel ever fully at home in any language,” she said. “That’s kind of what the book was about, describing that condition of feeling always somehow outside of a language for different reasons, whether

it’s English or Italian or Bengali, my first language, just always having a relationship that is somehow puzzling or problematic or challenging, and never being able to identify fully with anything, with any one form of linguistic identity.”

The next novel

English-speaking fans of Lahiri’s work have been wondering when they’re going to get more fiction from her. After all, her second novel, “The Lowland,” was published five years ago. The wait might not be too much longer.

“I just finished a novel that I wrote in Italian, and that’s going to be published this year in Italy,” she said. “I now have to decide whether or not I’m going to translate the novel myself or whether I will again turn to somebody else to do this for me.

“I did just translate a short story myself that I wrote in Italian and that’s coming out in the New Yorker. That’s sort of a first step ... of this journey in that I’m working in Italian and now I’m moving back into English as a translator of myself. This is yet another iteration of what I’m experimenting with here. So we’ll see.

“It was an interesting challenge, needless to say, to translate this short story, which was very short. I mean, we’re talking 10 or 12 pages. So I have to think about whether I want to experience that feeling for a longer project. It’s not a very long novel, but it’s longer than 12 pages,” she said. “I have to think about this slowly.”

Lahiri says that this novel will deal with the outsider themes that have always animated her work, but readers should get ready for some surprises as well.

“It’s both a total departure and a distillation of what I’ve been writing about from the beginning,” she reflected. “It’s tonally very different. It has a different flavor, a different palate and sensibility.

“The way that I’m looking at the question is different,” she continued, “but I think that deep down, I’m looking at the same question of what it means to be in a place or not in a place, this idea of dislocation, both emotional and geographical, which has been my theme, my central theme from the beginning of my life as a writer.”

cary.darling@chron.com