CAUGHT BETWEEN CULTURES;

AUTHOR CAPTURES THE ANGST OF IMMIGRANTS' KIDS

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Body

Chronicling the lives of ***immigrants*** in "The Interpreter of Maladies" garnered her a Pulitzer Prize. But Jhumpa Lahiri, 36, born in London and raised in Rhode Island, has never been an ***immigrant*** like the characters of her books, who journey to America from small towns and big cities in India.

In her latest novel, "The Namesake" (Houghton Mifflin, $24, 291 pp.), Lahiri looks not just at the lives of ***immigrants*** but also their children -- people like her. Though she was raised in the United States, the connection to her parents' experiences of immigration is still vivid. "I inherited a sense of exile from my parents," Lahiri says.

"The Namesake," which has been on the New York Times bestseller list since September, opens with a Bengali housewife, Ashima Ganguli, pregnant and lonely in the United States, trying to re-create a favorite Indian snack out of Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts.

Lahiri didn't have to look far for her model. "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.' "

Looking back, Lahiri marvels at how her parents built a community from scratch.

Lahiri's parents belong to the urbane Bengali middle class from Calcutta, India. Her father came to the United States as an academic librarian, her mother a homemaker. Though they were successful in building a life in the United States, Lahiri says her parents, like many of their generation, "missed India tremendously and had a lot of misgivings about their lives in America."

American dream doubts

Lahiri's parents came here for a better opportunity. Though the American dream brought material success, it also left them "ambivalent and guilt-ridden about sacrificing the connections to their families in order to have a better life for themselves and their children," she says.

As the daughter of that generation, Lahiri says she feels the fault line of her parents' choice running through her being. "It was hard for me to think of myself as fully American," she says. "I thought it would be very much abetrayal of my parents and what they believed."

But in "The Namesake," her protagonist Gogol is often exasperated that his birthdays are really just an excuse for his parents' friends to gather together, gossip in Bengali and cook tons of Indian food while their bored children

watch TV. Lahiri admits she found these get-togethers "tedious and monotonous and not what I would choose to do with my weekends, every weekend."

But she realizes that for her parents, it was the one time they could let their guard down in America. She remembers how in their quiet suburban hometown, all her friends kept their doors unlocked.

"But my parents were always locking the door, locking the garage, closing the windows, locking the windows every night," she says. "I think it's just a sense of not feeling on firm ground."

There were many other ways she knew she didn't fit in. Her given name, Neelanjana, was dumped because her schoolteacher balked at the long name and she became known by her nickname Jhumpa. Her classmates would talk about how their parents met in college or at the high school dance and then ask in bewildered and horrified tones about her parents' arranged marriage. She remembers feeling both defensive and protective of her parents and their tradition and also a little worried that it might happen to her.

Lahiri's parents and their fictional prototypes would have been perfectly at home in Hayward this October when hundreds of Bengali families gathered to celebrate their biggest festival, the homecoming of the Goddess Durga. Software engineers and project managers, dressed in carefully pressed iridescent silk kurtas and saris, milled around the grounds of Chabot College, dancing before the image of the goddess while the priest chanted prayers in Sanskrit.

"I was struck by how closely some of the plot points and description matched my experiences and that of other Bengali second-generation friends," says Anirvan Chatterjee, the mastermind behind the online search engine BookFinder.com. He thinks second-generation South Asians can relate readily to Lahiri's depiction of juggling identities.

"She has a much smaller readership among first-generation ***immigrants***, though she enjoys a lot of name recognition as a Bengali 'achiever,' post-Pulitzer," he says.

Chatterjee's friend Amal Mongia, a first-generation Indian ***immigrant*** at San Francisco State University, however faults Lahiri's characters for lacking "any sense of race, class consciousness." He describes them as "elite, nouveau middle-class to upper-class" with "no hint of confronting racism."

But for the South Asian community eager for role models in America, Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer in 2000 is more important than any race-class analysis. While other Indo-American writers such as Chitra Divakaruni and Bharati Mukherjee have preceded her, Jhumpa Lahiri is the first bona fide Bengali-American literary media star. Her wedding in Calcutta to journalist Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush was a paparazzi feeding frenzy as Indian newspapers vied with one other to print the menu and the guest list.

Cultural challenges

Lahiri says she still tries to lead an ordinary life, do her own shopping and not worry about whether "The Namesake" will be as successful as "The Interpreter of Maladies," which was translated into 29 languages and also won the New Yorker Debut of the Year award. As a writer she still often hits a wall with her stories and has to abandon them for a while. And as a person she still feels "***caught between*** the cracks of two ***cultures***."

On her trips to India, her cousins and their friends look upon her as foreign and American. Back in the United States, people always ask her, "Are you Indian? When did you come here?"

But she doesn't worry much about these questions of belonging and not belonging anymore. Looking at her son, Octavio, she hopes he will not have to decide what percentage of him is Indo-American from his mother and what percentage is Guatemalan-Greek from his father. "I hope he will just understand it's neither a good thing nor a bad thing to be a little mixed up," Lahiri says.

Notes

Jhumpa Lahiri

Personal: Age 36. Lives in Brooklyn, N.Y., with her husband, Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush,

and son, Octavio.

Education: Bachelor's degree, English literature, Barnard College; master's, English, creative writing and comparative studies, Boston University; doctorate, Renaissance studies, Boston University

Awards: Pulitzer Prize (2000), PEN: Hemingway Award, American Academy of Arts & Letters Addison M. Metcalf Award, the New Yorker Debut of the Year, Guggenheim Fellowship

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PHOTO: GINO DOMENICO -- ASSOCIATED PRESS

As the daughter of parents who reluctantly left India for economic betterment, Jhumpa Lahiri feels the fault line of her parents' choice running through her being. "It was hard for me to think of myself as fully American," she says. "I thought it would be very much a betrayal of my parents and what they believed."

PHOTO: GINO DOMENICO -- ASSOCIATED PRESS

Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri, at left, has written a new bestseller.

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