Jhumpa Lahiri

BY LESLIE SHEN

Early in Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel, *The Namesake* (2003), Ashima lies in a hospital bed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, awaiting the birth of her first child. In pain, among strangers, and unsure of what's to come, she longs to find companionship with the other soon-to-be mothers. "But she has gathered," Indian-American author Lahiri writes, "that Americans ... in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand-holding on the street and lying on top of each other on the Cambridge Common, prefer their privacy."

So it is that Lahiri, with words that strip us bare before we've built defenses, binds cultural difference, displacement, and alienation into one understated moment of profound vulnerability. Rather than manufacturing pathos, she offers a transparent view into her characters' fragilities. When we learn that Ashima, a Bengali immigrant, is "terrified to raise a child in a country ... where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare," the obvious reaction—empathy—catches us unawares, almost as if, in this age of literary gimmicks, we had forgotten fiction could create that.

The Namesake chronicles parenthood, a boy's coming-of-age, and the affection and bitterness of being part of a family while searching for oneself—themes that, a decade later, live on in Lahiri's second novel *The Lowland*, released in September 2013. *The Lowland* (reviewed on page 40) is a saga of two brothers divided by their paths in life but connected by love and duty across political and geographical distances. It's a mature, perceptive work by a shrewd writer who, at 46, is already an old hand, though her first major publication happened in her 30s.

From her debut story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), which won the Pulitzer Prize, to *The Namesake*, then to a second book of stories, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), and now *The Lowland*, Lahiri continues to disarm with her refreshing frankness. In Lahiri's books, one finds neither twee meanderings nor absurdist affectation—nothing but honest, austere writing about families, love and loss, and identity, assimilation, and belonging. Despite her accolades and *New York Times* best sellers, Lahiri remarked that there is still skepticism toward her work, namely toward her tendency to write about Bengali Americans. "'Is that all you've got in there?' I get asked the question all the time," she said. "Does John Updike get asked this question? Does Alice Munro? It's the ethnic thing, that's what it is. And my answer is always, yes, I will continue to write about this world" (*New York* magazine, 03/27/08).

Born to Bengali immigrants in London and raised in Rhode Island, Lahiri takes a pragmatic approach to thinking about the kinds of stories that are often labeled "ethnic" or "immigrant fiction." "If certain books are to be termed immigrant fiction, what do we call the rest? Native fiction?" Lahiri asked. "Given the history of the United States, all American fiction could be classified as immigrant fiction" (*New York Times Book Review*, 09/08/13). Yet her themes of marital discord, assimilation, and the clash between generations are universal, "immigrant" or not.

Still, Lahiri cites that sense of marginalization, of not fitting into dominant American narratives, as reasons why she writes and why it took her so long to start writing in adulthood. In college, she said, "my insecurity was systemic, and preemptive, insuring that, before anyone else had the opportunity, I had already rejected myself. ... How could I want to be a writer, to articulate what was within me, when I did not wish to be myself?" (*New Yorker*, 06/13/11). Assuming she would earn a Ph.D. and teach literature, she graduated from Barnard College and enrolled in the English graduate program at Boston University. On a lark, she applied to the creative writing program the following year and was accepted.

That was in 1992—the start of Lahiri's realization that, she wrote in the *New Yorker*, she wanted "to prove something to my parents: that I understood, on my own terms, in my own words, in a limited but precise way, the world they came from." At 30, Lahiri penned a story about a

PHOTO: MARCO DELOGU

Bengali woman the Lahiris befriended when Jhumpa was a child. The woman and her husband had been expecting a baby, and the tragedy of the eventual stillbirth was what Lahiri recalled, after all those years, in order to write "A Temporary Matter," the leading story in *Interpreter of Maladies*. The rest of her remarkable career is, as they say, history.

Interpreter of Maladies (1999)

✦ PULITZER PRIZE FOR FICTION
✦ PEN/HEMINGWAY AWARD FOR DEBUT FICTION BOOK

The breakthrough book that made Lahiri a celebrity didn't do away with her humility, recalls Sean Flynn, a former editor at *Boston* magazine, where Lahiri once interned. He quotes her as having said, after she learned she had won the Pulitzer, "It's just one book. Nine stories. It's just such a gargantuan honor for nine little stories" (*Esquire*, 10/01/2000). Most had been published previously in the *New Yorker* and other magazines.

THE STORIES: In "A Temporary Matter," a husband and wife acknowledge poignant truths about each other and themselves in the wake of a tragedy that leaves them childless. In "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," news of violence in East Pakistan in 1971 brings about a chance friendship in New England between a man separated from his children and a family praying for peace. The title story examines a vacationing American family through the eyes of an Indian tour guide. Delicate relationships between lovers, acquaintances, and friends become fluid as people change, spouses fall in and out of love, and near strangers share serendipitous sympathy.

"As is natural for a young writer, Lahiri spends some of her time exploring the terrain staked out by her literary precursors. ... But none of her stories are apprentice work. Lahiri revises these scenarios with unexpected twists, and to each she brings her distinctive insight into the ways that human affections both sustain and defy the cultural forms that try to enclose them." CALEB CRAIN, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 7/11/1999

The Namesake (2003)

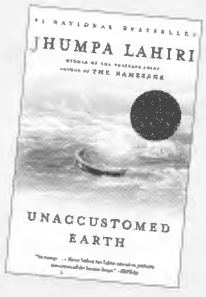
The Namesake's protagonist, Gogol, was inspired by Lahiri's ambivalence over her own name (Jhumpa is her pen name; she was born Nilanjana Sudeshna). Of the 2006 movie adaptation of the novel, Lahiri said that "[director Mira Nair] put a lot of these little things in the film that are very personal to me and my family, like having us appear in there for a split second and using a painting of my grandfather's—things that only make sense for five or six people in the world. Mira seemed to have really absorbed the book, and that was really powerful" (*Bookforum*, Apr/May 2008).

THE STORY: Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli have their first child after moving from India to Massachusetts. They name him Nikhil, but a twist of fate causes their son to be addressed in school, and eventually everywhere, as "Gogol." The nickname has deep personal meaning for Ashoke, but the couple never meant it to be used outside the family. Growing up as Gogol, the boy begins to chafe at the attention his name draws, as well as at its literary legacy, the emotional importance of which his father doesn't explain. Stranded between life with his family and life as a young American, Gogol learns the power of names in shaping identity.

"[Lahiri] has a talent—magical, sly, cumulative—that most writers would kill for. Peer closely at any single sentence, and nothing about it stands out. But step back and look at the whole and you're knocked out." JULIE MYERSON, *GUARDIAN* (UK), 1/16/2004

Unaccustomed Earth (2008)

✦ FRANK O'CONNOR INTERNATIONAL SHORT STORY AWARD
✦ *NEW YORK TIMES* #1 BEST SELLER
✦ *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW* BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR



Lahiri took the title of her second story collection from one of Nathaniel Hawthorne's writings, in which a paragraph ends, "My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth." In *Unaccustomed Earth* Lahiri continues to develop her story-writing prowess in a collection graced by the same tasteful, precise prose and compassionate yet unsentimental observation seen in *Interpreter of Maladies*.

THE STORIES: In "Hell-Heaven," an MIT student homesick for Calcutta befriends a Bengali wife who welcomes him into her family while, perhaps, falling in love with him. In "Hema and Kaushik," childhood friends meet many years later and discover an inexplicable, compelling bond. The characters of the title story ponder the meaning of loneliness and fulfillment as they struggle with the trade-offs between career and family, with forming bonds that span generations, and with finding romance after losing a loved one. (★★★★ July/Aug 2008)

"[Lahiri] shows that the place to which you feel the strongest attachment isn't necessarily the country you're tied to by blood or birth: it's the place that allows you to become yourself. This place, she quietly indicates, may not lie on any map." LIESL SCHILLINGER, *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*, 4/06/08

"As in all her fiction, Lahiri's prose here is deceptively simple, its mechanics invisible, as she enters into her characters' innermost journeys." LISA FUGARD, *LOS ANGELES TIMES*, 03/30/08 ■