



# in other WORLDS

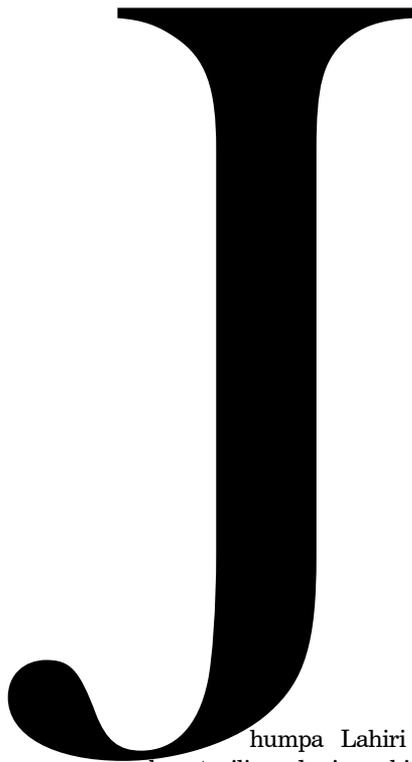
By launching herself into a new language with her Italian autobiographical book, the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer JHUMPA LAHIRI has given us her most ambitious creation yet—a new universe of possibilities. By ANINDITA GHOSE

*Photographed by* BIKRAMJIT BOSE

**LIFE AND TRAVELS**

Lahiri at Kolkata's Indian Coffee House, which she has fond memories of visiting as a child





Jhumpa Lahiri has hitched her trailing dupion skirt above her calves as we weave our way through one of the busy arteries off Kolkata's College Street. We are headed to Indian Coffee House, where the characters of her last novel, *The Lowland*, most likely consumed copious amounts of black coffee, cigarettes and Mao.

Outside Presidency College, bookstalls crammed with titles in Bengali and English, and some in French and Russian, spill over on the pavement we are marching through. The one-way road switched directions just a few minutes ago, and the traffic police wouldn't let our car go through. Having already braved an hour's ride from Taj Bengal to this chaotic pocket of north Kolkata, it was Lahiri's suggestion to walk despite the all-silk ensemble designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee has dressed her in for our photo shoot.

Later, Lahiri will tell me how intense the experience of being in College Street was; of being in those winding lanes that have remained frozen in time. Her mother's family home was (and remains) only a few lanes away, and she has vivid memories of browsing these stalls on visits back from the United States. The sights and sounds were incredible for her as a little girl growing up in the relatively sterile world of Rhode Island, where her parents live. "There was no point of connection. I'd visit a place like College Street and then go back to Rhode Island—not a big city like New York—

where there was nothing remotely like this," she remembers.

Although I can see her books in the stalls we cross, no one recognises her. Lahiri is fluent in Bengali but speaks with an American cadence. She is a for-eigner, an outsider, to the booksellers, waiters and students we encounter. "I've always had this feeling wherever I go. Of not feeling fully part of things, not fully accepted, not fully inside of something. Identity has been such an explosive territory for me... so hard, so painful at times," she says, as we fall upon the Indian thaali she's ordered back in her room at the Taj.

Like her prose, Lahiri speaks in soft, measured sentences. She is articulating a universal conundrum as a child of immigrant parents, and yet her strug-

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gle seems singular. "My parents' relationship with Kolkata is so strong. Growing up, the absence of Kolkata was always present in our lives," she says. Her divided identity gave her a sense of insecurity, always making her feel deficient.

This dichotomy has been the fodder for much of her fiction. Leaving India, and accepting America, wasn't her choice to make and yet she's had to grapple with its consequences all her life. Which is why, three years ago, Lahiri made some choices of her own. She decided to gamble her literary celebrity, move to Rome, and write a book in Italian.

"Language and identity are so fundamentally intertwined. You peel back all the layers in terms of what we wear, and what we eat, and all the things that mark us, and in the end what we have are our words. At 45, for me to say I'm going to create another identity is a very wilful act... there's an emotional, psychological dimension to this that I wasn't aware of when I started," admits Lahiri, who

now sees Italian as having formed a triangle with the two faraway points in her life—"it created a shape, created meaning," she writes in the book, which is a tender autobiographical account of her tryst with the language.

Published last year, *In Altre Parole* (Guanda) is her fifth book. It is small and delicate, divided into 23 chapters, each no longer than the weekly column that she had originally envisioned them as for the Italian news magazine *Internazionale*.

Her "linguistic pilgrimage" was also a way to change course. In the months before moving to Italy with husband Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, senior editor of *Time* Latin America, and children Octavio (13) and Noor (10), she was looking for another direction for her writing.

Why Rome, I ask. Why not Milan, where it might have been easier for her children to attend school? "It was not a rational thing. I visited Rome 12 years ago and within a few days of being there I knew I had to live there." Lahiri indicates there was a force propelling her. "One thing led to another and each step was a bit more extreme. Nobody questioned me when I was learning Italian in America. It's all well and good to learn a foreign language... it's good for your brain or whatever. I thought so too. At first I didn't understand why I was growing so dedicated to learning a new language and then moving [first for a year and then staying on for three] and having a full life there..." she says, having since understood that it was perhaps because a new language enabled her to make new connections, to build a life that was entirely her creation. "This is a language that my parents don't understand, so from a familial point of view it is sort of like saying this is my life over here. And for whatever reason, I needed to do that," she says.

## A LOVER'S DISCOURSE

The leap of faith was by no means easy. The book starts with the metaphor of crossing a lake and how Lahiri swam around its circumference for years without picking up the courage to make the crossing. For 20 years, she says, she studied Italian as if she were swimming at the edge of the lake, >

Silk shirt, printed dupion skirt, both **Sabyasachi**.  
Necklace, earrings; both **Amrapali**. Bangles, **Sabyasachi**. Shoes, **Christian Louboutin for Sabyasachi**



always next to her dominant language, English. Always hugging that shore. “You can’t float without the possibility of drowning,” she writes. “To know a new language you have to leave the shore. Without a life vest.” The book is full of metaphors that suggest it was a Sisyphean task. There’s the other analogy of her climbing a mountain; a literary act of survival.

*In Altre Parole* is a text that bares its author, displaying all her vulnerabilities in the open. It’s a little bit like seeing Roger Federer learning to ride a bicycle—you don’t want to watch a graceful man like him fall. It is indulgent in parts—she compares her exercise to Henri Matisse’s later-life experiments with *gouaches découpés*—and on occasion, even melodramatic (“I am exiled even from the definition of exile”). But for those familiar and fond of Lahiri’s work, otherwise so pulled back and restrained, it is a treat. For here she lets loose the floodgates. She is like a Madonna in love.

Lahiri’s affair with Italy goes back to a 1994 trip she made to Florence with her sister. She was 27, studying Renaissance architecture at Boston University. The book has a running theme of her relationship with the language. At one point, she declares: “It’s like a person met one day by chance, with whom I immediately feel a connection... What I feel is something physical, inexplicable. It stirs an indiscreet, absurd longing. An exquisite tension. Love at first sight.” But she speaks equally of its frustrations, how she cannot fully immerse herself, how it doesn’t love her back. Essentially, she speaks of an unrequited love; the kind that spawns poetry. There are similes to fragile Venetian bridges, to the nymph Daphne’s metamorphosis into a laurel tree in Ovid’s great Latin epic *Metamorphoses*. It is a personal book of aphorisms; an ode to the language and the city of Rome. The intensity of its prose is likely to encourage even the most passive reader to fall in love. Her relationship with the language is, at first, almost illicit—the diary she maintains in Italian is a secret. She writes of the language like a man; like a rugged, experienced lover who doesn’t have patience for frivolities: “I’m drawn to Italian and at the same

time intimidated. It remains a mystery, beloved, impassive. Faced with my emotion it has no reaction.”

But like with any grand love, it comes with a destruction of the ego. Lahiri confesses she is ashamed of her terrible, embarrassing Italian, full of mistakes. She equates her writing in Italian to unsalted bread. It works, but the usual flavour is missing.

## CREATIVE DESTRUCTION

The prolific Portuguese poet and writer Fernando Pessoa wasn’t content writing under his own name. He’d dreamed up approximately 75 others. These were not *noms de plume*, but what he called heteronyms. His different names had their own biographies and writing styles. Why did Pessoa write as other people? It enabled him as a writer to go beyond the confines of his self. He had once explained it say-

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ing: “I break my soul into pieces.”

Lahiri thinks perhaps that is what she is doing by writing in Italian. “It’s not possible to become another writer, but it might be possible to become two,” she writes in a chapter titled “The Metamorphosis’.

“It all feels very creative... you have to break things apart to make new things. Destruction and creation, they are connected, and you have to be willing to do both,” she muses. “I think it’s partly because I saw how my mother suffered because she was so rigid and faithful to the way she was brought up... I wanted to break free of that.”

She draws a parallel to something we were laughing about earlier while driving through North Kolkata, with green wood-slatted windows rising up on either sides of the road: we were

speaking about the elaborate full-course Bengali meals served for lunch. There is a particular science to navigating the meal, an unsaid rule about portioning the rice to eat first with ghee, then with the bitter mash, then dal and deep-fried vegetables, then the *torkari*, then the various kinds of fish preparations. Children brought up in Kolkata know this. But Bengali children brought up outside of Kolkata almost always make the mistake of going for the fritters or fish first. And they are duly corrected.

“If you put it all on your plate or do it backwards people think there’s something wrong with you. We’re so used to obeying rules. So when you break the rules with language, some people get really uptight,” she says. Lahiri has her share of Italian critics—the ones who’ve been questioning her vocabulary and syntax, insisting “an Italian wouldn’t say it that way.”

She confesses she has long been fascinated with writers who chose to write in other languages, from Joseph Conrad to Samuel Beckett: “I remember my professor at Columbia saying this is Beckett, he was Irish and he moved to Paris and wrote some of his most well-known works in French. And I remember thinking how incredible that was.” But while many of those authors translated themselves back to their first language, Lahiri is certain she doesn’t want to do that. “I didn’t want to improve my work or make it more sophisticated or more polished than it was,” she explains. Her book is translated by Ann Goldstein, an editor with the *New Yorker*, who has translated, among other Italian writers, the new literary sensation Elena Ferrante.

For Lahiri to attempt writing in Italian after only a few years in Rome is an ambitious, almost masochistic project. Was she open to the idea of failing? “I’m always open to that idea,” she says, with a laugh. “I think that no matter what language you are writing in, you have to be wide open to the fact that it won’t be a success in the outer world. I don’t know if I’m capable of seeing what my writing does even in English. I don’t know because I’ve never connected to it as a reader, you know. I’m just putting it together and out into the world. My nutrition is



Lahiri, 48, is presently teaching creative writing at Princeton

coming from other writers. And fortunately, they're the ones I'm having the transcendental experience with."

For the last three years, Lahiri has written only in Italian, with the exception of the introduction to the English translation of *In Altre Parole*. She doesn't know if she will continue writing exclusively in Italian—one hopes not—or whether, like Beckett, she will eventually start translating her own work and become a bilingual writer. For someone who has achieved great literary success with a Pulitzer Prize at the age of 32, a distinguished relationship with the *New Yorker*, and most recently a National Humanities Medal from President Barack Obama, there is little more to prove. In the book, Lahiri asks herself why she is at-

tracted to this imperfect, new voice: "Maybe because from the creative point of view there is nothing so dangerous as security."

### THE METAMORPHOSIS

In a short story called *The Exchange*, the first story she wrote in Italian, a woman loses her sweater in a garment store and when she goes back to get it she's given a sweater that she believes isn't hers. After a few days she realizes it was hers all along. The sweater hasn't changed. It doesn't fit her as well as it did before because she has changed.

Even as Lahiri settles back into life in the United States with a prestigious teaching assignment at Princeton—she's been awarded tenure—there's an

awareness that her time in Rome has changed her deeply. Her life was more fluid there, more relaxed. "Living in New York is one huge battle with stress. I have no time. I feel I should have done this, done that," she says. "In Rome, I felt like I was in my element. You know when you're in your element and everything is fine? My concentration was so deep, so lucid. My mind was opening up in ways that were unprecedented." Life was more spontaneous; friends she ran into at the market would come home for lunch and stay on until late in the evening.

"It grounded me, and when people are grounded there comes with it serenity... it brings perspective. My time in Rome has enabled me to appreciate things I wasn't able to appreciate before, like this trip to Kolkata, which is the first time I've come by myself to the city. It's made me understand the meaning of having a point of origin and embracing that. And not thinking that this is something I'm doing to satisfy my parents," she says.

Returning to the symbolism of the triangle, it is interesting to note that, geographically, Rome is a meeting point between India and America. To borrow from the title of one of Lahiri's own stories, for her it is perhaps 'The Third and Final Continent'.

Lahiri tells me she has not given up her apartment in Rome; the week after we meet she is scheduled to fly to Rome with her family for the Christmas break. Her euphoria is palpable. "Having the key to my apartment in Rome just sitting in my closet in Brooklyn is comforting," she says. "I never felt that in the States. I've lived there almost my entire life but when I was going back to Rhode Island or Boston or Brooklyn from a trip abroad I never felt I was going back home, whereas I'd see how my mother would react when our plane would land in Kolkata... there was a physical change in her."

While it might not have been her intention, Lahiri's journey has taken her deeper into her parents' world. She understands their longing for Kolkata now. She yearns for Rome the way they yearn for Kolkata. ■

In Other Words, *the English translation of In Altre Parole, is out on Penguin Books India this month*