WRITERS MOSAIC

Jhumpa Lahiri in conversation with Franklin Nelson

Jhumpa Lahiri is a novelist, essayist, translator and the Millicent C. McIntosh Professor of English at Barnard College (Columbia University). In the spring of 2025, Lahiri was the Weidenfeld Visiting Professor of European Comparative Literature at St Anne's College, University of Oxford. Lahiri's four lectures – entitled 'Imperfect Speakers: Understanding Exophonic Women' – look at the lives and work of women who adopt the practice of writing in a language that is not their mother tongue. This interview took place at St Anne's College, on a windy but warm day between the third and final lectures. *The New Yorker* story that Lahiri refers to in the interview was published in June 2025.

Franklin Nelson: You've been in Oxford for the past few weeks as this year's Weidenfeld Lecturer, speaking to the title "Imperfect Speakers': Understanding Exophonic Women'. You gave your final lecture earlier this week. Would you tell me about the series of lectures: what inspired them, what was your aim in them, and how do you think they were received?

Jhumpa Lahiri: The lectures are based on a course I teach currently at Barnard College in New York – a new course, I think maybe the only course of its kind, but certainly one of the few that is trying to explore this question of exophony. That is, the act of crossing linguistic borders for a writer, what that means and why people do it. In my course, I focus specifically on women writers, to move away from names most people think of – Beckett, Nabokov, Conrad – and open up the question of what it means for a woman to write and to do this as well.

I've taught the course twice at Barnard now. It's a semester-long course, so when I received the invitation to give these lectures, I thought it might be a new challenge to take some of the raw material of that course and craft a quartet of lectures. The lectures are kind of a distillation of the course. At Barnard, the lectures I give are not written. I have a pile of notes and the students do readings, so we're responding much more to the texts and close readings and citations, and the class evolves that way, whereas here the presentation is more formal. It was an interesting challenge to take a broad swathe of thinking and choose these four blocks.

But in these lectures, which isn't true of the Barnard class, Ovid is serving as an ongoing point of reference from week to week. That has a little bit to do – well, a lot to do – with the fact that I've been working for four years now on a translation of

The Metamorphoses from Latin to English with a former colleague of mine at Princeton, Yelena Baraz. I think because that work has now entered so deeply, sedimented so deeply inside of me, Ovid becomes a prism for practically everything. But what I am interested in is looking at exophony as a kind of metamorphosis, if you will. What are the stakes and what is the actual phenomenon of it?

As we know from Ovid, no metamorphosis is clean and complete. There are always traces of the former identity in communication with, in dialogue with the new identity, and I think that pertains very much to what happens when writers decide to change language, either by learning a new language or going back to a language that they had growing up. So, the Oxford lectures are coming out of the Barnard course but also paired with this Ovidian component, really looking across time and culture to link questions of: what is language? What is one language compared to another language? What is a mother tongue? What is native? What is foreign? Looking, I hope, with fresh eyes on these oppositions and binaries and trying to get to a new angle with which to look at things.

Franklin Nelson: The lectures are dealing with the question of language and its value perhaps in a more objective way, but for you language is very subjective. This year marks 10 years since your essay in *The New Yorker* magazine in which you said you would write –

Jhumpa Lahiri: Is it 10 years already?! Okay.

FN: Yes, in which you said you would write only in Italian. Do you have any reflections on that decade of committing to Italian? How has it shaped you, your work and your thinking?

JL: It was a decade, and it's a new decade, and I think I have perspective on the whole experience. I don't really talk about myself in the lectures. I focus on other authors and their history and examples and their work. But once in a while I do shed a little bit of light from own experiences. I went into it [the decade] sort of starry-eyed and disoriented but in a kind of thrilled way, to see what was out there, exploring something so radically different. Now I feel that I'm in a new phase, yet again, a more clear-eyed phase about what it means to try to shift into another language on a whole host of levels.

Interestingly, you speak of the *New Yorker* piece, here in Oxford I'm writing a new story for *The New Yorker*, and it's the first story I've written in English in 16 years, maybe more. So that too is exciting, to realise that the pendulum can keep shifting back and forth. There was a period, of course, where I maintained a very strict discipline of mostly reading in Italian, and then that reading in Italian led to the writing in Italian. And then, what happens? I move back to the United States, I start

teaching at Princeton, I start teaching in English again. I have to engage with works in English in order to communicate with my students. I do sometimes teach in Italian as well but the opportunities are more limited, so in order to reach a broader number of students I've had to sink back into this English sea. And then the Ovid translation has been, needless to say, transformative, because in working out of Latin, to which Italian is very close, I read Latin with an Italian wiring of my brain. That's been really stimulating for me, but that said, the end result is an American publication for Modern Library, and they are awaiting an English – rather, an American English – version of *The Metamorphoses*.

I think of language as a centre of gravity, or at least I thought in the beginning of those 10 years that my linguistic centre of gravity had shifted, along with all sorts of other centres of gravity: physical, geographical, cultural. But now it goes back and forth depending on what's happening. So it is interesting to give these lectures thinking about exophony. In a way I feel that I'm in the middle of another crossing, but it's not really a crossing back. It's just another crossing – I hope a crossing forward – into English, but it's a new kind of English. My relationship to English is very different now, because of this chapter.

FN: You talk about having a better or different understanding, on various levels, of what it means to encounter a new language. Have you come to see that there are

limits to the extent to which you can do so? And, on returning to English, are there particular ways in which you see English literature – or literature in English – differently?

JL: I see everything in a new way. I'm certainly more aware of the linguistic variety within English, so Old English, Anglo-Saxon, works in the medieval period. I have this book by Robert Henryson in my bag that I'm curious to go back to; it's something I read years ago in graduate school. This comes a lot from understanding Italian and the impact of all of the dialects on the literary culture and the culture at large. I think about writers in English like Joyce or Woolf for whom language was to be bent and challenged. I think about the limits of exophonic practice and question why some writers are welcomed more, others less. I think about my own case. I think the key to writing is just to follow the source of inspiration, whether that's happening in one language or another. I think a lot of the writers that I talk about in the lectures have helped me to open up the question of the 'either/or'.

When I decided to move into Italian and spoke about it, suddenly there was a spotlight of: 'Now she's going to switch into this'. Nothing is forever, right? But then people are like: 'Oh, it's only going to last for a little while'. There's just a lot of speculation from the outside, which I try to tune out. Etel Adnan, whom I cited in one of my lectures, said that wherever she was, she wrote in that language. So I

thought: Okay, one can shift, one can shift within a given moment, perhaps even within the work.

I've been much more curious about writers who tried to have bilingual or even trilingual elements within a specific work, and that really gets me thinking about the limits of publishing, the limits of literary creation. I've been working on this text that is coming out in two languages, so sometimes I write it in Italian and other times in English. When I talk about it, people say: 'Yes, but what language will it really be in?' Because when something emerges, it has to be either one or the other. I think this is a really interesting question. It pinpoints the issue of how there are all of these people in the world who have mixed linguistic backgrounds, who could potentially write taking strands from two or three or more languages into a work and make it coherent to themselves. If I have a line in Bengali and a line in Italian and a line in English and a line in French or some other language I know, this would make sense to me, but perhaps not to you or another person. This question fascinates me, because writers write for themselves and also communicate something, but this multilingual aspect within a work really pushes that question. Does it become a Poundian project where there are these citations here and there, mixed into a work, and people have to just go with it? Is this relegated more to the realm of poetry, and why is it more difficult in prose? When is it more acceptable or less? When do people want translations or explanations? When can people allow for gaps in comprehension?

FN: You said in an interview a few years ago that 'some people uproot themselves in order to find themselves', and you have said before how you felt like an outsider in a lot of places.

JL: All the places, all the places.

FN: Have you found yourself in this past decade, or have you arrived at a better understanding of where you might be?

JL: There are no more illusions. I've stripped myself of the inherited needs to have a place of my own, to call a place my own, to feel connected to any one place. There were three places in my life growing up, at least emotionally. There was the UK, there was London where I was born, which I didn't know as an infant because when we left I was too young. But then – I'm actually writing about this right now – we came back to London when I was a child. We lived here for a few months, and it felt just so imbued with meaning, the mere fact that I had been born here. I looked for myself and looked for some kind of acceptance and of course I never found it. I was also raised by parents who were born into British India, so they had absorbed all sorts of vocabulary, cultural and otherwise: tea drinking and so on. There were all of these things about the way we were raised that were inherently coming from that experience. That colonial legacy was still part of my upbringing.

But then when we moved to the United States, there was always a contrast: the British way of doing things was opposed to the American way of doing things, and the American way of doing things was much more foreign and strange and not as appealing because it was somehow farther away from India, even though the reality of that history was problematic. So there was this London mythology, if you will, and then there was the United States, in which I was actually mostly raised physically, and then there was India, where we always going back, and an India that hovered, at least in the domestic sphere, wherever we were. There were these three places, and for so much of my life, I was sort of searching for where, which. Now with the move to Italy, the move into Italian, and the fact that I continue to move back and forth – I spend half the year in Italy now, and the other half in the United States – I realise I'm never really in one place. This helps to loosen ties in a productive way, and to understand that all of these ties are illusions in the end for all of us.

FN: You've said you want people to think more of how we are just passing through.

JL: We are, and I think so much of the human endeavour is to pretend that we're not, and establish ourselves and our presence in places, and leave a mark: the project of having children, leaving traces of ourselves through them, our likes and dislikes, our languages, our accents. I ended last week's lecture citing the

description of the island of Delos in the ancient world, and how originally it was a drifting island until it became, thanks to various mythological adventures, a stable one. That's how I think of myself now, always as a kind of unstable island, part of some sort of archipelago but different ones. I've never had a relationship to any kind of mainland in my soul.

FN: That's interesting. At the start of the year I interviewed Caryl Phillips. He grew up in Yorkshire, having come to Britain as a baby with his parents from the Caribbean, and he spoke about growing up in place where everybody knew everyone's aunties and uncles. He grew up with none of that and felt quite out of place. But he now sees the migrant condition, where one is not tied to any one place, as the superior condition, if you like, to being fixed in one spot.

JL: The migrant condition is superior intellectually and I think it can be also be emotionally. I agree with Phillips. At least for me, though, when I was younger and I noticed how my friends would go to their grandmother's house for the weekend or have Sunday lunch. I was so aware that we had no blood relatives in the entire United States when I was growing up. That's a very sobering thought, right? Absolutely no one we were related to by blood. Of course, my parents remarkably created an equivalent alternative family through their social activity and congregating with other Bengalis. I called all of them my aunt or uncle, and a kind of

familial kinship was the result, and in fact many of those aunts and uncles know me much better than the ones I'm actually related to back in Kolkata. But in any case, I did suffer from that lack of belonging very much, and I think it comes out in much of the work.

I also think my mother in particular really suffered from her sense of distance from India, her sense of being adrift, in exile, whatever the terms we want to use. It was so difficult for her to be apart, and so I absorbed all of that from her as well. A part of me, as a child, thought it was really important to belong to a place and a part of me also thought, I don't want to belong to any place because God forbid, if you can't be there, this will only result in suffering. I'm not a practising Buddhist but I think the idea of detachment from place is something I've learned over time. It is inevitable that we are attracted to certain places, the need to feel, to be well in a place. I don't think I'm so nomadic as to be able to sort of put myself anywhere on earth and feel at home. But maybe that's the highest calling. I don't know, I haven't gotten there yet.

FN: You've spoken before about how all your books 'are about identity'. But the way you've written identity has changed quite markedly in recent years, including not assigning names to characters because of the implications that readers might bring

to what they are reading. How do you think your writing of identity has changed over time, and what have you learned along the way?

JL: One of the things I've learned is that even when I took the names away, and this was principally in the Italian work, people still made assumptions that struck me. So, for example, calling someone an Italian character as opposed to not an Italian character based on what was happening to them in this story. In *Roman Stories*, many of them are about more recent immigrants to Italy, so it struck me that some people would say, 'Oh well, you write in this story about non-Italians'. Even that leads to a question: when do they become Italian exactly? What is the moment of transformation? This goes back to Ovid. What is the moment that the girl becomes the tree? Ovid is slowing down, again and again in the poem, that moment. He himself is saying, 'This is what's happening'. In real life there's a moment when someone says to themselves, 'I think I really feel more at home in this country than the one I was born and raised in', or not. But it's so much more subtle and drawn out, it can take years. So I was fascinated with people's assumptions with the naming, also because, as the author, I am always somehow absorbed into the reading of so many of the things I write. I suppose this is inevitable, but all the characters in *Roman Stories*, from my point of view, were Roman because they live in Rome. Sure, a few are palpably tourists and just passing through, but the vast majority I would call Roman because they're living in Rome, sleeping, waking up

every day in Rome, working in Rome, making a life in Rome, contributing to the well-being of Rome. That to me makes them a Roman, whether that's on their passport or their papers I don't really care. But I don't know if that was how the book was really read, because we live in a moment where there is tragically so much at stake in terms of who is admitted where and who can live where, and documents and papers are all so terribly crucial for placing people and allowing people to live in places. Just in these recent weeks here in Oxford, upstairs in the library, I've been working on this story and suddenly there are names again, and they are Bengali names because I'm working on something coming out of another part of my past, and because I'm writing it in English it felt more natural to put in the names.

I think taking the names away, for me, was a very freeing experiment. I wanted to test the reader: do you think this character is Italian is not? Because the question of who is Italian is so, so charged and has a lot to do with race and how race is determined. I think that's true in a lot of Europe, less in the United States and Latin America, which is a much more racially diverse area.

FN: On the question of Europe, your title here in Oxford is Weidenfeld Lecturer in European Literature, and you've spoken about how Brexit meant you in effect ceased to be a European citizen. What is the status, as it were, of European literature right now? Britain's relationship to it has, I suppose, changed at least

nominally in recent years, but even then we don't really talk about 'British literature'. Does European literature have a particular offering that marks it out from other continental or national traditions?

JL: I think Europe is, in its own way, a really healthy crossroads. I don't like the term 'melting pot', but I think there is lots of diversity, and what is considered French literature because of France's colonial past, as with India and Britain and who gets to be a British writer or a writer of the British commonwealth – all these things create a lot of rich diversity in that category of European literature. That is the optimistic, positive, exciting reading, from my point of view, of European literature today. Then there is also the kneejerk 'This is European' response, and the basic sort of Western, foundational energy of what European literature once represented, going back to these ancient literatures. The problem is really with these categories and labels. I think it's a danger for literature in particular.

I'm the child of a librarian, and my father worked for years as a cataloguer. His job, and the job of all of his colleagues, was to classify. What is this book about? Who wrote this book? I was always so interested in the little subheads. Even with my first book, I have the card, which says: 'Indians in the US, immigrant life'. And I thought, 'Okay, this is the taxonomy, this is the way it's being catalogued.' That, too, is its own fascinating reality. But then I ask myself, and I talked about this in one of the

lectures: I, Jhumpa Lahiri, write a book in Italian. Where does the Italian bookseller put it in the store? Do they put it under 'foreign novels' or in the 'regular' section, because the bookstore also needs to maintain some order.

Ovid's poem begins with this fundamental question of the need to put down borders to arrive at coherence. He, like so many others, is drawing on that foundational myth that says everything begins in chaos: no night, no day, no difference between sea and land. So they all have to be demarcated, and that gesture of demarcation brings spatial coherence. I think we are hardwired to think, to believe: 'I am from here, you are from there'. All of these different ways that we need to distinguish to create order – to feel safe, to distinguish ourselves from the other, lies at the root of xenophobia. This discourse is one that I've been reflecting on really all my life, but it's been reinforced by all this time spent with Ovid. When you go back to literature, there's an analogous way to think about what European literature is. Who is going to set down the borderline between European literature and a so-called other literature?

I've experienced this also now because I've done some of my own translation work. Authors who translate themselves find the border is inside of themselves, so then people will say, 'Did you really write the book, or is just a translation, which means it's not really a book you wrote?'. I hadn't really thought about it, but it's true: all of

the writers I discuss in the lectures have some link to Europe. Europe is a breeding ground for exophony, which is exciting to think about as a contrast to that sclerotic Old World reputation that some people defend. To take some of the writers I'm looking at, Leonora Carrington was born in Britain but then wrote in French and Spanish, and then Etel Adnan, who was born in Beirut but lived so long in France and wrote in French. Rosmarie Waldrop, who was born in Germany but writes in English and is also a translator of Edmond Jabès, who was born in Egypt but wrote in French. Yoko Tawada, who is Japanese but writes in German as well as Japanese. They all tick the European box.

FN: How do you teach writing at Barnard? Unlike a lot of people who teach writing, you yourself took postgraduate degrees. Does that inform your approach?

JL: I try to teach writing in very tangential ways. I mainly teach literature courses, but when I have taught writing courses I've really tried to focus on reading as the gateway – as the only way – to understand what writing is. I saw myself as a conduit, saying to students: 'Let's read this book and talk about it, and maybe that will make you excited'. Even with the course on exophony, one of the satisfying consequences at the end is that students are allowed, if they wish, to write an exophonic text. They have to write in another language they know somewhat well and then translate themselves back into English. That experiment is so eye-opening to them: some

realise they really cannot express themselves to their satisfaction in French or Spanish, and for others it's a breakthrough. But mostly I think it's important to teach students how to read slowly, carefully, for a lifetime. As long as I'm in this business of being an educator, and given my limited body of knowledge, that's what I can teach them.

Ideally a writer works for the rest of their life, and I am very wary of what's happening in the US, if I may say so, in terms of the proliferation of creative writing departments and programmes, and people seeking fast tracks to publication. I have students who come to see me and ask, 'Tell me about your writing career, how did it start?' I immediately say: 'I'm willing to talk to you if you take that 'career' word out. If you want to talk about writing and how I came to writing and became a writer, which was a very long, slow path full of twists and turns and mostly doubt, I can talk to you about that.'

FN: If writing is not a career, what is it for you?

JL: It's a form of survival. It's a way of living and surviving life, that's what it has always been for me. It's the thing I found to hold on to, but so much of it is intertwined with the act of reading. So, if someone asks me, what gave you that rope to hang onto in the sea, the rope would be this intertwined rope of reading and writing, and the

writing that grows out of the reading. Honestly, if someone said 'You can never write again', as long as I could keep reading I think I would be okay. If someone said 'Jhumpa, you can write but you can't read any more', that would have a very short shelf life for me.

FN: You teach at Barnard, and you previously taught at Princeton. Both Columbia and Princeton, along with many other higher education institutions, have come under attack from the Trump administration, and others have enforced strict policies on campus in relation to students' ability to protest. What is the future for universities in the US?

JL: I don't know what's going to happen to higher education, period, at this point, especially in the United States, given what's going on politically. Many of the major points of reference in American education are now hindered by the government and accused of all sorts of wrongdoing. Where this will leave us, I don't know. I think there have been paroxysms in recent decades about what the whole project even is, and now what people can say.

Nine people, pro-Palestinian protesters, were arrested yesterday on Barnard's campus for the first time in the history of the college. It's shocking, it's alarming. Really it makes me weep. I did very little last night apart from ask my husband who

has Instagram to show me what was happening at the institution where I teach, where I studied and where my daughter is now a student. An institution, along with Columbia, that historically represented the ability for young people and faculty to safely protest policies, whether it was apartheid or gentrification. Something's changed. We are living in a new age. Ovid talks about the Golden Age and the Iron Age. I feel very distinctly that we are living in a new age. I was at college a long time ago. I graduated in 1989. There were protests all the time on campus for South Africa. Buildings were barricaded, there were human chains, people were very, very vocal. Nobody said, 'You're disturbing studies'. There's a new standard, and there is the Palestinian exception, and that's what we're seeing.

The question of attention span is also concerning pedagogically. Students come having read less, but I do think they are still hungry; they want to read carefully. Students want to understand what literature is doing. Maybe I'm naïve, but my sense is that when in class we break down a couple of lines in a text to trace the meaning of a word in a novel or look at some lines of poetry, the ones who thrill to it continue to thrill. That's why I think it's so important to keep teaching and to keep working with young people, because the rope I found was thanks to so many of my professors. Collectively, they created this place, if you will, and I think it's important to keep doing that in spite of the challenges. What is the alternative? That we're all scrolling on our phones and all knowledge flattens. That's really terrifying. Literary

knowledge is one of the places where one can really go into the nooks and crannies of language, exploring exceptions to the rules. This is all very important to keep alive. But, that said, we are in a new age, and I'm bracing myself because there's more to come.