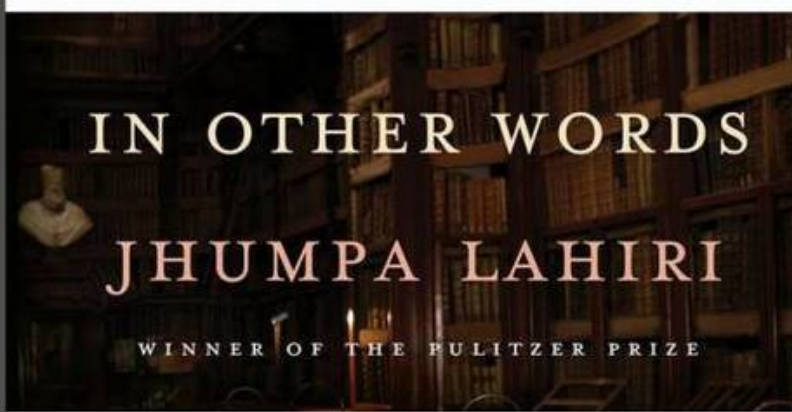


Jhumpa Lahiri, Vestal of the Italian Language. When Books and Literature Save Your Life

Mila Tenaglia (February 17, 2016)



The tale of a boundless love for the Italian language, of the irrational need and the wish to dive into the tones and colors of a culture that is not your own. “In other words,” the latest book by the Bengalese writer and Pulitzer winner Jhumpa Lahiri, was presented at the Italian Cultural Institute. During a conversation with the Institute’s Director Giorgio Van Straten and renown translator Ann Goldstein, Jhumpa Lahiri recounted her interior and artistic journey when “books and literature save your life.” It was like leaping into an unexpectedly extraordinary journal.

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“Given that I try to decipher everything through writing, may be writing in Italian is simply my way of learning the language in a more, profound, more stimulating way”. With these words, the director of the Italian Cultural Institute, [Giorgio Van Straten](#) [3], introduced the presentation of [Jhumpa Lahiri](#) [4]’s book “In other words.” He then immediately added: “I want to point out that the event is going to be in Italian, because we are going to talk about the author’s relationship with and her love for the Italian language.”

The audience, consisting of academics, translators, journalists but also by avid readers, was enraptured by each and every word. Even those who had to listen to the simultaneous interpretation



while following the book, were totally taken by both the sound of the words and the luminous yet serious face of Jhumpa Lahiri.

“[In Other Words](#) [5]” is a metaphor of the Bengalese writer's life and a challenge with herself over a love at first sight that cannot be explained: her love for the Italian language. “I live in a constant contradiction, an irrationality that is unexplainable. I simply feel an overwhelming longing to be part of this language in all its nuances. This book is both proof and evidence of my desire to belong,” Jhumpa Lahiri confessed to the audience at the Cultural Institute.

It's like living situated in-between a linguistic boundary that is both painful and hazy yet necessary to writing. On one hand there is her native language, Bengalese, the jargon of her childhood, on the other, there is English, the vocabulary of her studies and her beginnings as writer. Then, Italian followed.

It's now legitimate to ask: why a Latin language? Why writing in an idiom that is not the now universally used English.

“Rome is the city that invigorated my relationship with these three languages and Italian has given me freedom and happiness while making my life lighter. The Eternal City has made me feel at home for the first time. I experience a sense of belonging and of rebirth that I have not felt in any other city.”

Jhumpa Lahiri is the caretaker of the language and she just loves to protect its words. Just like a vestal in a sacred temple. Maybe because she was raised by a father who was a librarian in a “temple of books.” She indeed admitted that this had a major impact on her literary life. “Everything else is just a mess,” the author joked, “but this is life.”

The issue of freedom must also be addressed in regards to translations: when translating, how important is it to remain faithful to the original text? Ann Goldstein, the translator of [Elena Ferrante](#) [7]'s books, another literary phenomenon that has taken over the US, told the audience how the American publishing market is changing. “There are other languages and cultures that this country needs to get to know. When translating, it's important to convey the same passion that's in the original language, even though it is not easy.”

“I'm not listening to what the Law says,” Jhumpa Lahiri said with piercing irony, “I want to be free to express myself the way I want to.” To prove this, she quoted the chapter titled Impossibility:

“if it were possible to bridge the distance between me and Italian, I would stop writing in that language.”

The Director of [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimó](#) [8], [Stefano Albertini](#) [9], was sitting in the audience close to us of i-Italy. He was visibly moved by Lahiri's words: “Because of my job, I deal with the Italian language every single day, but hearing that for some people this relationship with a language can become a love story is just marvelous, it's pure poetry,” he confessed.

“In Other Words,” lies in the distance, the difference and the strength of a writer who is still finding herself hovering between the metaphor of fleeing and the sense of belonging to a country such as Italy.

The appointment with Jhumpa Lahiri is one of a cycle promoted by the [Italian Cultural Institute](#) [10] that focuses on foreign writers who are connected to Italy.

For further information [>>>](#) [11]

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