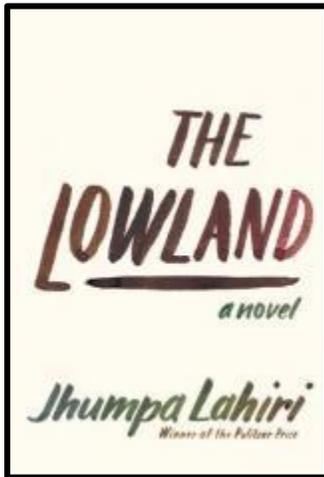


The Lowland



By Jhumpa Lahiri

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About the Book

Born just 15 months apart, Subhash and Udayan Mitra are inseparable brothers, one often mistaken for the other in the Calcutta neighborhood where they grow up. But they are also opposites, with gravely different futures ahead. It is the 1960s, and Udayan --- charismatic and impulsive --- finds himself drawn to the Naxalite movement, a rebellion waged to eradicate inequity and poverty; he will give everything, risk all, for what he believes. Subhash, the dutiful son, does not share his brother's political passion; he leaves home to pursue a life of scientific research in a quiet, coastal corner of America.

But when Subhash learns what happened to his brother in the lowland outside their family's home, he goes back to India, hoping to pick up the pieces of a shattered family, and to heal the wounds Udayan left behind --- including those seared in the heart of his brother's wife.

Masterly suspenseful, sweeping, piercingly intimate, *THE LOWLAND* is a work of great beauty and complex emotion; an engrossing family saga and a story steeped in history that spans generations and geographies with seamless authenticity. It is Jhumpa Lahiri at the height of her considerable powers.

Discussion Questions

1. "Udayan was the one brave enough to ask them for autographs...He was blind to self-constraints, like an animal incapable of perceiving certain colors. But Subhash strove to minimize his existence, as other animals merged with bark or blades of grass" (p. 11). How do the differences between the boys both strengthen and strain the tie between them?
2. Does Subhash's decision to make it "his mission to obey (his parents), given that it wasn't possible to surprise or impress them. That was what Udayan did" (p. 11) follow a pattern common among siblings? What part do their parents play in fostering the roles each boy assumes?

3. What does Udayan's reaction to Subhash's decision to go to America (p. 30) and Subhash's admission that he wanted to leave Calcutta "not only for the sake of his education but also . . . to take a step Udayan never would" (p. 40) convey about the balance between admiration and envy, support and competition, that underlies their relationship? Do you think that Udayan is manipulative, or does Subhash misread him (p. 31)?

4. What aspects of the immigrant experience are captured in Subhash's first impressions of Rhode Island (p. 34)? How do his feelings about school and about his roommate, Richard, bring to light both his pleasure and his uncertainties about his new independence? In what ways does Udayan's letter add to his ambivalence about the choice he has made (p. 47)?

5. What does Subhash's affair with Holly convey about his transition to life in America (pp. 65-83)? What does it reveal about his emotional ties to his old life and family?

6. Why does the author describe the courtship and marriage of Udayan and Gauri from Gauri's perspective (pp. 51-61)? To what extent does Gauri's independence, rare for women in India, influence their decision to marry?

7. How do the descriptions of Calcutta (pp. 88-90, 91-2) and Subhash's first glimpse of his parents (p. 91) capture the complex feelings Subhash experiences on returning home? How do the brothers' parents' expectations and beliefs shape their treatment of Gauri?

8. What emotions lie behind his mother's reaction to Gauri's pregnancy (p. 114)? Is it understandable in light of Gauri's behavior and manner? Is Subhash right to believe that the only way to help the child is to take Gauri away (p. 115)? What other motivation might he have for marrying his brother's widow?

9. From the start, Gauri and Subhash react differently to Bela and to parenthood. Gauri thinks, "Bela was her child and Udayan's; that Subhash, for all his helpfulness, for the role he'd deftly assumed, was simply playing a part. I'm her mother . . . I don't have to try as hard" (p. 146). Although Subhash has a close, loving relationship with his daughter, he is troubled by his marriage: "Almost five years ago they had begun their journey as husband and wife, but he was still waiting to arrive somewhere with her. A place where he would no longer question the result of what they'd done" (p. 159). What is the source of the underlying uneasiness of their marriage? To what extent are they haunted by their attachments to Udayan? What other factors make Gauri feel resentful and trapped? Is Subhash partially responsible for her unhappiness? How does Subhash's insistence on hiding the truth from Bela influence Gauri's behavior and the choices she makes?

10. How does the portrait of the brothers' mother, Bijoli, enhance the novel's exploration of the repercussions of the family tragedy (pp. 179-89)? What effect does his visit to Calcutta and its many reminders of Udayan have on Subhash—as a son, a brother, and a father?

11. After Gauri the family, what does Bela rely on to make sense of the situation and to create a life for herself? Is her reclusiveness natural, given her family history, although much of it is unknown to her? In what ways do her decisions about her education and her work represent her need to separate and distinguish herself from her parents?

12. Why, despite his pride in Bela and his confidence in her affection, does Subhash feel “threatened, convinced that . . . Udayan’s influence was greater” (p. 225)? How might Bela’s life have been different had Udayan raised her?

13. The novel presents many kinds of parents—present and absent, supportive and reluctant. What questions does the novel raise about the challenges and real meaning of being a parent?

14. What do you find most striking or surprising about Gauri’s reflections on her life (p. 231-40)? “She had married Subhash, she had abandoned Bela. She had generated alternative versions of herself, she had insisted at brutal cost on these conversations. Layering her life only to strip it bare, only to be alone in the end” (p. 240). Is this an accurate and just self-assessment, or is Gauri too hard on herself—and if so, why?

15. Despite his accomplishments and relative contentment, Subhash remains in the grip of the deception that has dominated his life: “He was still too weak to tell Bela what she deserved to know. Still pretending to be her father . . . The need to tell her hung over him, terrified him. It was the greatest unfinished business of his life” (p. 251-52). Why does Bela’s pregnancy move him to reveal the truth? Were you surprised by Bela’s reaction? How does learning about Udayan and the story of her parents’ marriage change her feelings about herself? Why does she forgive Subhash and direct her anger toward Gauri?

16. The keeping of secrets plays a large part in the novel, from the facts of Bela’s parentage to Gauri’s long-hidden guilt about her role in Udayan’s fateful actions. To what extent are the continued deceptions fed by the love and sense of loyalty Gauri and Subhash feel toward Udayan even years after his death? Do they also serve Gauri’s and Subhash’s self-interest?

17. The details of the family’s history emerge through various retellings set in different times and seen from different perspectives. Why do you think Lahiri chose to tell the story in this way? How does this method increase the power of the narrative? Do your opinions of and sympathies for the characters change as more information is revealed?

18. Before reading *The Lowland*, were you aware of the Naxalite movement? (The group remains active: on May 25, 2013, Naxaliteinsurgents attacked a convoy of Indian National Congress leaders, causing the deaths of at least twenty-seven people.) What insights does Lahiri offer into the development of radical political groups? What role does history play in the creation of the Naxalite movement and, by extension, other uprisings around the world? What parallels do you see between the events described in the novel and recent activities in the Egypt and other countries torn by internal dissension and violence?

19. In an interview, Lahiri said, “As Udayan’s creator, I don’t condone what he does. On the other hand, I understand the frustration he feels, his sense of injustice, and his impulse to change society” (NewYorker.com, June 3, 2013) Does the novel help you see more clearly the reasons for destruction and deaths revolutionary forces perpetrate to attain their goals? How do you feel about Udayan after reading the novel’s last chapter?



UNKNOWN TERRITORY: AN INTERVIEW WITH JHUMPA LAHIRI

POSTED BY [CRESSIDA LEYSHON](#)

As taken from the New Yorker | October 2013

This week, Jhumpa Lahiri’s latest novel, “The Lowland,” was chosen as a finalist for the National Book Award in fiction. The book ([which was excerpted in the magazine](#)), is about two brothers in post-Independence India, Subhash and Udayan, who are inseparable as children but whose lives take markedly different paths as they reach their twenties. Udayan, the younger and more adventurous of the brothers, becomes a committed follower of the revolutionary Naxalite movement in Calcutta, while the cautious and diligent

Subhash leaves India to pursue graduate studies in Rhode Island. Udayan’s involvement with the Naxalite uprising leads to his death, shattering his family and isolating his young wife, Gauri, who is pregnant with his child. The novel explores the ways in which Udayan’s death transforms the lives of those he left behind—Udayan, Gauri, and Bela, the daughter he never knew. I recently talked to Jhumpa about the novel, and the reading and writing she’s been doing since she finished the book—particularly her experiments with Italian. An edited transcript of our conversation follows.

The novel moves between Calcutta and New England—Rhode Island, specifically, where you grew up. Calcutta has been a backdrop for much of your fiction in the past, as has New England. What’s it like to describe your childhood home?

When I think of the case of Rhode Island, it’s interesting, this time around, because I feel as though I’ve written about Rhode Island in a kind of disguised way previously. I’ve overtly set some of my books and stories in Massachusetts, which is a place I also know and I’ve lived in, but I never really referred to Rhode Island specifically, I believe, until this book. And I don’t know why. Maybe I felt awkward about naming the place where I grew up—feeling, I don’t know, strange about it in some way. Massachusetts provided a convenient shield for a while. I set “The Namesake” outside Boston, for example, and even some of the stories in the first book, “Interpreter of Maladies,” while I picture them in my head in Rhode Island, I don’t say that they are, so the setting could be Connecticut, it could be Massachusetts, it could be Rhode Island. But this is the first novel where I really felt that I wanted to write about Rhode Island. I

wrote a piece some years ago for an anthology called “State by State” that was edited by Sean Wilsey and Matt Weiland. I think it was at a point where I was just beginning to get into the writing of “The Lowland.” Having written that essay, having confronted for the first time this fact of my life—that I had been raised in Rhode Island, a place I never really knew, an experience I never fully came to terms with in some ways—helped me, and I thought, O.K., I would like to set this book in Rhode Island, consciously, and name it as such. So I did, and I think that it liberated me in some way to really think about it and write about it and remember it in a fuller way.

The physical landscape—the coastline of the state, in particular—is important for Subhash. Did you start looking at Rhode Island and thinking about it with Subhash’s perspective in mind?

I did, in fact. I started driving to the campus where he would have studied, where he had studied. I would drive out there, I would pretend I was him. I would walk along the little beach. I would look at what he would see. Part of getting to know his character was, on my visits to Rhode Island, thinking about what his day-to-day life would have been like. The church, for example, near the beach, really struck me, and I thought, Well, this is something he would see.

Udayan is deeply involved with the Naxalite movement in Calcutta in the nineteen-sixties. How much time did it take you to draw your own picture of that period, either by reading about it or by talking to people who’d lived through it? Did you start writing those sections of the novel early on, and then fill in details, or did you feel that you had to understand that history completely before you started to write?

No. I wanted to understand that history completely and digest it before I started to write. And I felt that I couldn’t, and it was frustrating for a long time. I borrowed these two books from the library, from my father, and I think I had them out for seven years. Periodically I would read them, and I would take notes, and I would put them away. And then I would reread them, and I would take the notes, and I would put them away. And I felt that I had to keep doing this over a period of many years, and I always did feel insecure. I thought, Am I really understanding this? Am I really getting this? Is this really how it might have been?

And I think for me the key part of the process was, at a certain point, pretty much three-quarters of the way into the writing, I went to Calcutta. I’d been speaking to people all the way along, “Oh, tell me what it was like, what were those years like, what was happening?” I was asking friends of my parents here, who hadn’t yet moved to the United States at the time, who remembered those years, but when I went back to Calcutta and I talked to people more specifically, wanting to know more about the movement—why it had happened, how it had happened—that seemed to unlock something. Suddenly I felt that all of the notes I had taken made sense.

The final key moment was when, suddenly, I was able to write the novel without feeling as though I needed the crutch of all the research and all of the books, and I felt that the characters were strong enough and their motivations had become more or less solid for me and satisfying for me to just go deeper with them, knowing that this was part of who they were and part of their world. And that was the final phase. The initial phase was a lot of research, but it remained opaque, and then slowly the research, the history, became more clear to me, and the clearer it became, the less I felt that I needed it.

In “The Lowland” there are times when your writing is quite different than it’s been in the past. The sentences are sometimes shorter and more clipped—you use more sentence fragments, for example, than you’ve done previously—and there’s a greater sense of urgency in the voice. Was this something that you were aware of as you were writing?

I think a little bit. I had been wanting to write in a slightly different way with this book. I didn't want the book to feel heavy, because I felt that the book was heavy—I mean that the story was heavy, the material was heavy, the situation, the circumstances, all of this was very weighty. And I didn't want the writing to feel heavy. I just wanted to say what I needed to say in the sparest way that I could. I wanted to have some sort of lightness. So I was trying to pare back even more than I normally try. The earlier drafts did feel heavier and clunkier and not satisfying, because I just felt there was so much information, there was so much history, the emotions of the book—everything that was going on. It just felt very burdened and I wanted to free the book up in some way.

One of the subclassifications that the Library of Congress uses for “The Lowland,” along with “Brothers” and “Naxalite Movement,” is “Triangles (interpersonal relations).” In the novel, the main triangle, of course, is the one that forms between Subhash; his brother, Udayan—or the memory of Udayan; and his widow, Gauri. But there are various other such relationships in the book (between Subhash, Gauri, and her daughter, Bela, say). What does this process of triangulation give you as a novelist?

Well, I was told many years ago, when I was studying writing at B.U., that triangles are very helpful in building a story, because the triangle is a stable thing, but it's not a square. There's something about it that creates drama. But I was definitely aware of a series of triangles, absolutely, and they do play out throughout the book. I think they're wonderful in terms of creating tension. I think so much of literature, so many novels and stories, have that tension, of two people wanting something, and what is the thing they want, or who is the person they want? It can go in so many different directions. I often think the novel is, among other things, very much about what a family is, and what a family means. Though a family can be any number of people, it has to consist of three people if you think of a family having at least two generations. So that's another essential element I'm exploring.

The excerpt we published in the Summer Fiction Issue ends when Subhash asks Gauri, who is pregnant with Udayan's child, if she'll move to Rhode Island with him. Anything could happen in America, and one scenario is that Gauri and Subhash could find some kind of happiness together. How conscious were you of that possibility and did you always know that the reality would be far more complicated?

I always knew. I mean, I always knew, even as they were cooking up this solution that felt urgent to them at the time, that it would be in some sense a mistake, but at the same time not a mistake. It was something that felt necessary, but something that wouldn't necessarily solve the problem. And I think a lot of life looks this way, where you do something, and you know that it's not quite the best thing to do but you do it anyway because there is something about it that feels necessary in the moment. So I was working with that, but it never interested me to give them a happy ending. It never crossed my mind that this would be anything other than a very, very complicated, problematic development.

Did you know how their married life would play out in Rhode Island, or was that something you understood as you were writing?

Not exactly. I knew they would have the child—that the child would be born. I didn't know exactly how that would affect them both. I think the sharp divide that Gauri and Subhash feel toward the child took me some time to understand. Who would feel what and how. One way the plot could have gone was, well, Gauri has the baby and she's enamored of the child because it's the child of her lost husband whom she loves, and the child is fulfilling to her, and Subhash is shunted to the side, or whatever. That

could have been one of the ways, right? But as I started working with what happened once the child was born, I was just trying to follow them, and so then I went in another direction.

Gauri is the person who feels the death of Udayan the most deeply, and she seems to have least to replace him with. The child, Bela, doesn't really form a substitution for his loss. And while her work forms some kind of replacement, it's a somewhat barren one. She has the most tragic trajectory in the novel, and yet at the end there's a glimmer of hope for her, too. There's a point at which her story could have been truly bleak—did you ever think of making her take that final step?

The full on? The final leap?

Yes.

I thought about it. I did. I thought about the novel having a grimmer ending than it does, but then I thought, you know, no. I felt that the book had had enough death; it had enough loss. And, in a way, more than that, for those are more writerly things, I thought about Bela. As I became more interested in Bela's character and in developing her as a person, when I started to think about her more, and who she would really be, and how she would feel, and the way she was raised, and all of the secrets and lies and things that happened to her, I just felt, My God, then I'm going to end the book with this other burden that she will carry around her whole life. O.K., her father's a violent revolutionary, God knows what he's done. He's dead—he's been executed. Meanwhile, the mother ends her life. It just seemed too much to me and I felt that I wanted to protect her. And I felt that Gauri had been through enough. I didn't want to resolve anything for her, but I wanted to leave it as a half-open door of perhaps.

You've spent the last year in Rome immersing yourself in Italian literature and culture, and I wondered if you've been working on any new fiction, and whether you can feel Italian seeping into your writing in any way?

Well, it's seeped in literally, in that all the writing I have done this year has been in Italian, so I've just been in this crazy, reckless, experimental phase of writing in a different language. And I don't know why I'm doing this. I don't know what it means. I don't know where it will end up, or if it will ever even end up as anything. All I know is that I got to Rome a year ago, and within a few days the diary that I had been keeping for years of years of my life in the English language suddenly shifted into Italian, which was a language I had studied for many years. I started out very quickly describing what I was seeing, and what we were doing, and keeping my little account of the days in Italian. I still study the language; I still make lots of mistakes. I'm fluent but I'm limited, obviously. I'm flawed, and I still have many, many things to learn, and in a way I felt that writing in the language was another way for me to learn the language. This may be crazy, because so many people believe that you have to really learn the language and then writing would be the last thing, the last frontier. But in my case sometimes I feel more confident when I'm writing in Italian than when I'm speaking Italian, because at least in writing I can pause, and I can figure things out, and I can reconstruct things, whereas when I'm speaking, I'll say something and I'll think in my head, Oh, I flubbed a tense, or I used the wrong word, or whatever, but it's too late because I've already said the thing in whatever way it comes out.

But what I think I find really freeing about this strange, experimental, whatever-you-want-to-call-it phase is that I love the freedom of writing in an imperfect way. I feel what I felt as a child, when I was first learning how to write stories, when I was first writing stories, and I was first experiencing that pleasure of putting sentences on paper and the excitement that it would give me. I think as an adult I do still feel that excitement, but it's different. Writing in another language is humbling. It's so hard. How I

explain it to people is that I feel as though I've tied my right hand behind my back on purpose and I'm writing with my left hand, and I recognize how much sloppier it is, how much more awkward it is, how much more out of control it is in a way. But I also love doing without so much. I feel that when I describe something in Italian I just have a very limited amount of resources. My toolbox is small. And I only have a certain amount of vocabulary. I have the grammar and I can make it all work in that way, but it's much simpler as a result. It's not the same process of writing in English, where I could choose from one of twenty-five different words to describe how the sky looks to me. I can't do that in Italian. I might have two or three words. So it feels more direct, in a way, the process, because there's a strange purity about it, even though it's so imperfect.

Are you writing stories in Italian, too?

Well, I wrote one thing that I would call a story with a beginning and a middle and an end, and then I've written a bunch of four-, five-page descriptions of a character or a moment.

Does it feel as though the characters change in any way when you think about them in Italian. Or are they the same people, with the same motivations?

That's what so wild about it. I showed the one story I wrote to some of my Italian friends, who've read me in English, and they all said the same thing, which is you sound like a different writer in a way. All I know is that I wrote the story—and it's a very strange, odd story that I know I would never have written in English. And that's what I find so exciting about it. It's just discovering this whole other room. I don't know if you ever have this dream—I think it's a classic dream—that you have a house and suddenly there's that other room behind the kitchen. You have twenty-five more square feet in your life, you know, and it's sort of the equivalent of that dream, but it's come true, because now I do have access to that room and it's amazing. It's like turning my back on the language that I've known and counted on and expressed myself in all my life, to suddenly have this other space, and I do feel that the things I write sound different.

It's made me think a lot about language in general. I think that if a writer writes in more than one language, you really recognize how specific and complex a language is. They're just different entities. They're just completely different. They sound different, they feel different, they are different at their essence, even though they can mean the same thing—you can translate something and mean the same thing, but it's so specific the way a language works. The thing about this right now in my life as a writer, I feel a certain awe for language in general, for what it is, what it does, and I think this writing experimentation has brought a lot of that to the fore.

Can you imagine doing the kind of research trips you did to Calcutta or Rhode Island for the novel, and making your notes in Italian?

Would I write in Italian if I went to Calcutta? I don't think I would. The strange thing is, I've been back in America now for a month. I'd filled up my notebook in Rome, and I ran out and bought a new notebook before I left for the U.S., and I thought, O.K., I'm going to continue this, I'm going to write at least a few sentences in Italian every day. But I haven't written a single sentence. And I know that when I return to Rome it will come back, but I just feel that I can't access it here, and it's been a very weird source of frustration, because right now I feel that I'm in love with this language and immersed in it, and willingly, consciously in a state of linguistic exile, and part of the reason this ended up happening and I started spontaneously writing in Italian is that I have really not read anything in English for over a year, and I think for me, because writing has always been an almost instinctive response to the act of reading,

it's inevitable. I've been reading and reading and reading and reading in Italian, and so the reading of it is going into my brain, and I'm thinking about it, and I'm reading the sentences and absorbing this new language, new vocabulary, new rhythms, new ways of saying things, and given how much I'm devoted to reading in Italian, I feel that writing in English would be completely schizophrenic and unsatisfying. I feel that when I stop—whenever that will be I don't know—but when I stop and begin to incorporate reading in English again into my Italian diet, as it were, then my writing will probably shift back. I wrote a piece for the *New York Times* a while ago about sentences, explaining that when I would read as a child, I would just want to copy what I was reading in my own way, and that was my way of responding to what I was reading, and I feel that that's happening again in my life now. So it's been very interesting. And I just want to be open about it. I don't really want to think about it too much. It just feels exciting and strange and as though I'm in an unknown territory and I'm just enjoying it for what it is. And whatever it ends up being, however it ends up informing whatever I do in a formal way down the line, I don't want to control it any way. I don't have any specific expectations.