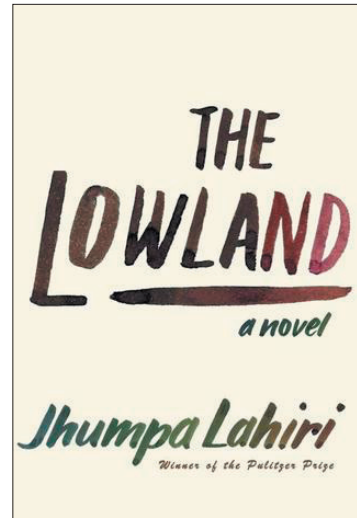


## Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

*Review by Ramlal Agarwal*

**B**ORN OF INDIAN PARENTS IN LONDON and settled in America, Jhumpa Lahiri came into the spotlight with her debut book of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*. It established her as a writer to be reckoned with and won her the prestigious Pulitzer Award and many other awards. Only a few writers have had such distinction. Then came *The Namesake*, *The Unusual Earth*, and *The Lowland* sustained her reputation as a best-seller writer. *The Lowland* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the Baileys Women's Prize for fiction. Her latest novel, *Whereabouts*, was originally written in Italian and translated into English by herself. She has also published a collection of essays called *Translating Myself*. The novel *The Lowland* is about a woman haunted by her past. The past permeates her entire being to the point where she is completely unaware of her surroundings. The present passes her by. She is indifferent to the two most important people in her life—her husband Subhash and her daughter Bela.



She takes to the American way of life, going out with friends, attending classes, writing a dissertation, and even procuring a teaching job at Columbia University. However, all this doesn't make a dent in her self-absorption and doesn't cure her of her trauma. The dazzle of American life means nothing to her. She remains separate from her milieu. Therefore, it is necessary to understand her past to understand her present condition.

Subhash and Udayan are brothers just fifteen months apart. They are inseparable from each other and spent their childhood together. They, like other children, fall prey to curiosity and a desire to explore what is forbidden. The Lowland of Tollygunge, where they grew up, is a marshy area with a predominantly Muslim population. However, it had a fine golf club reserved for the English. The two brothers are tempted to peep into it, and they devise a way of transgressing its precincts. They demonstrate an exceptional level of intelligence early on. Subhash shows a predilection for chemistry and Udayan for physics. They join different institutions of study. Subhash goes to Jadavpur to study chemical engineering, and Udayan goes to Presidency for physics. At home, Udayan comes up with an ingenious instrument for communicating with his brother: a sort of telephone. He also assembles a short-wave radio to know what is happening in the outside world.

There was total companionship and camaraderie between them. With the passage of time, Subhash travels to America, to Rhode Island, to complete his dissertation on a generous scholarship, while Udayan works as a tutor and falls in love with a girl named Gauri, who is studying philosophy at the Presidency, and marries her. His parents celebrate the marriage in traditional Bengali style, and Udayan and Gauri find happiness in each other.

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While Subhash gets away from the seething problems of Indian society, Udayan gets deeply immersed in them, particularly the problem of the landless villagers of Naxalbari, a village in the adjoining district of Darjeeling. The villagers are in revolt against their feudal lords and want to do away with them. Udayan identifies himself with them. As time passed, Udayan's involvement in the Naxalite movement intensified. He started remaining absent from home for days, and Gauri got used to waiting for him to return.

One day, the police raided Udayan's house, seized some incriminating papers, and arrested him. They took him in their van, and after taking him some distance, they released him and let him go. Gauri and her in-laws got to the terrace and watched Subhash being taken away. When Subhash was some distance away, a policeman fired three shots at him, and Subhash collapsed. Gauri witnessed Udayan being killed in a phony encounter. It shocked her to the core. She had become a widow at the age of twenty-three. A widow in India ceases to be a human being and is treated like a pariah, shut up within four walls, and served coarse, bland food. When Subhash visits India, he is tormented by the condition of Gauri and proposes to marry her and be the father of her unborn baby. Subhash meets with opposition to his proposal, but ultimately it is accepted rather reluctantly. Thus, Subhash and Gauri are back on Rode Island. Though Gauri submits to the routine of married life, she feels unable to connect with Subhash in any real sense. In order to divert her mind from the tragedy that had overtaken Gauri, Subhash encourages her to pursue the studies in philosophy she had undertaken at Presidency College in India. Gauri starts attending philosophy classes. She impresses her teacher, who encourages her to pursue higher studies and write a dissertation and helps her find a guide. She succeeds, becomes a teacher at the University of California, and starts living alone. She forsakes her daughter and her self-sacrificing husband. She lives in an open, all-inclusive society free from moral constraints. But none of this can make up for her trauma. When she visits her husband to settle her affairs, her daughter, Bela, denies her and condemns her for her insensitivity. But that doesn't stop Gauri from paying a visit to the site where Udayan was shot dead.

The Lowland is unlike Lahiri's previous novel, *The Namesake*. *The Namesake* was a forward-looking novel, whereas *The Lowland* is a backward-looking novel. In *Namesake*, the heroine Ashima is able to take in diverse experiences, personal tragedy, and the tumultuous lives of her children, but in *The Lowland*, the heroine Gauri is hooked on to the memory of her husband's death and unable to accept the love she is offered and perform her duties as a mother.

This aspect of her personality separates her from the rest of the novel and its milieu. Jhumpa Lahiri's latest novel, *Whereabouts*, also deals with restless, ill-at-ease, distraught, and disgusted women who are unable to connect with the world around them.

This is surprising, coming as it does from a writer who is known to champion the causes of assimilation, acceptance, tolerance, and hope. But the dark, dank aspect of life also needs to be explored, and Jhumpa Lahiri does just that.