Jhumpa Lahiri *The Lowlands* (Knopf, 2013)

As critics point out,1 Jhumpa Lahiri’s work has long been subject to cultural criticism first (articles examining hybridity abound) and literary criticism second, an issue she seems conscious of in her latest novel, *The Lowland*. The title itself refers to a literal hybrid object: the strip of land separating two ponds – or the productive space between two binaries. Likewise, the opening scene positions two twin boys scaling a wall separating a rural town on the outskirts of Calcutta from the Tolly Club golf club, a rather overt locus of the colonizer. And, not surprisingly, the twins are punished for this transgression into the colonizer’s territory. In fact, it would be easy to argue that the entire novel is about trespassing into the colonizer’s territory and getting punished for it. But before we settle for such a convenient reading, Lahiri lowers the boom that the oppressor in this situation is not the colonizer, but the local policeman. From this, we are to understand that this is not a novel of colonial oppression. It isn’t even a story in which the colonized police each other. Largely, the punishments within *The Lowland* are enacted on and by the self, a series of intentional separations that cause either regret or resignation. Such dichotomies create a framework for both the novel’s characters as well as its structure, which sometimes results in characters that feel more ‘stock’ than Lahiri’s more memorable protagonists such as *The Namesake*’s (Mariner, 2004) Gogol or Twinkle of ‘This Blessed House’ (*Interpreter of Maladies*, Mariner, 1999). These dichotomies create a structure in which two possibilities are always plausible: we follow one trajectory, always aware of the other that might have been possible.

The twins whose punishment initiates us into the world of the novel are the first neat dichotomy: Subhash and Udayan. Subhash, quiet and cerebral, leaves India to pursue a graduate degree in the US, working his way through the traditionally established orders and hierarchies of academia. His twin, Udayan, charismatic and passionate, remains in India and becomes a co-operative of the Naxalites,2 a movement that the book later identifies as having ‘self-defeating tactics, lack of coordination, unrealistic ideology’ – all the vices and passions of young idealists.

While the characters may be somewhat stock, this isn’t the point: what we are really looking at is the split of possibilities, two trajectories diverging from the same point, each contrasting with the other.

One model for this divergence is the personal. Udayan’s death becomes a point that alters the trajectories of everyone’s lives: Subhash returns to India for the funeral and, finding Gauri – Udayan’s widow – pregnant and oppressed by her traditional in-laws, provides her an escape by marrying her and bringing her back to Rhode Island with him. It is a series of significant shifts that the narrative revisits often, reconstructing the series of events, trying to make sense of exactly how they happened.

Gauri often thinks of her husband’s death, imagining him as a young man, aging him to parallel her own aging process. In late middle age, she recalls

when she was married to Udayan, her recurring nightmare was that they had not met, that he had not come into her life. In those moments returned the conviction that she’d had before

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2 Naxalites: the far-left Maoist Communist movement of the 1970s that sought to remedy class inequality. One of their most extreme tactics involved guerrilla style warfare in Calcutta and rural areas, actively assassinating ‘class enemies’ (see Sumanta Banerjee’s *The Naxalite Uprising*).
knowing him, that she would live her life alone. She had hated those first disorienting moments after waking up in their bed in Tollygunge, inches away from him, still cloistered in an alternate world in which they had nothing to do with one another … After his death began the internal knowledge that came from remembering him, still trying to make sense of him. Of both missing and resenting him. Without that there would be nothing to haunt her. No grief. (Lahiri 6.1)

For Gauri, her present life is the ‘alternate world’ or the wrong version of history. She is always keenly aware of and keening for what she perceives as the correct version in which Udayan survives.

This understanding of personal historical trajectories is also applied to political historical events. While Gauri indulges in constructing a version of her life that contains Udayan, the novel poses the same question of the impossibly idealistic and violent Naxalite movement. Having lived through the movement and lost her husband to it, an older Gauri now converses with a young student studying the event:

Her impressions were flickering, from a lifetime ago. But they were vivid inside Dipankar [the student]. All the names, the events of those years, were at his fingertips … Dipankar had studied the movement’s self-defeating tactics, its lack of coordination, its unrealistic ideology. He’d understood, without ever having been a part of things, far better than Gauri why it had surged and failed. (Lahiri 7.1)

While it is possible to understand the Naxalite movement and Udayan himself as idealized entities and their subsequent failures and deaths as historical events, Gauri can only comprehend each as the moment when history shifted in the wrong direction, away from the intended trajectory of what should have been her life: marital bliss, an equalized India that she might never have left.

Gauri is not the only character to fixate on the past. Subhash, too, constantly questions how his brother’s death has affected his own life and identity while Bela – Udayan and Gauri’s daughter that Subhash raises as his own—considers the implications of Gauri’s actions on her own life and that of future generations.

This perpetual deconstruction is a collective wishing to revise and reconstruct one crucial moment in order to alter the current reality. Lahiri’s talent is in quietly rendering the experience of yearning and regret without sentimentality. It is also worth mentioning that not all characters are as dark as Gauri. Some are able to escape the fixed backward glance. Some are even able to construct new and productive identities located in the present reality.

Like most other historical events and persons, the symbolic lowland itself is eventually altered and obliterated. It becomes a lost thing that matters little to the rest of the world save those who lived on it and define their identities by it. For them, it is a landmark without which navigation becomes difficult, for some even impossible. The novel provides a compassionate and complex examination of identities that are defined by loss as well as the reconstruction that can – or cannot – take place after. Certainly, the reader who wants to dismiss these identities as ‘stock’ can. The reader seeking hybridity between the dichotomies will find it. And the reader who doesn’t mind mingling complex structures with occasional complex emotion will not be disappointed.

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