

Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland* (2013) — Focus Questions

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(1) Ecology & Empire—Pollution, Politics, and Power

“Their native soil turned corrosive, like salt water invading the roots of a plant.”

—Mejo Sahib’s family, after Partition, V.1

The links between environmental and political changes may be one of the most prominent symbolic chains of associations in *The Lowland*, though it may not be visible until the reader gets well into the narrative. Water hyacinths, soot-covered egrets, and dormant species on the very first page, coupled with observations about the environment that are often embedded in a political narrative (that is further enriched with global political overtones) invite a reading of the novel along eco-political lines. What connections between environmental/ecological and political changes can you observe or infer?—that is the question. What are some of the associative prompts that might lead readers to think along these lines? What, in the final analysis, does the novel say about—if you will—responsibility or culpability (ecological, political, or otherwise)? If you have read any of Lahiri’s other work, what (dis)continuities, esp. on the level of ecology & politics, can you observe? (And, in full awareness that Lahiri is an American writer but writing out of a bi-cultural context, how have Indian writers writing in English similarly delved into the links between ecology, the environment, and politics? I am thinking here, most prominently, of Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy, if you happen to be familiar with them.)

(2) Nature & Science—Two Sides of the Same Body of Water?

While *The Lowland* pays sustained attention to sustainability and the degradation of the environment, etc. it also devotes significant space to the achievements of modern science, esp. the “hard” sciences. It is not only Subhash, who makes a living as an ecologist / chemical oceanographer and is committed to the study of ecosystems; Udayan (and Gauri’s brother, Manash) as well does graduate work in physics and, at one point, even playfully “applies” scientific law to the trajectory of history: **“All over the world, students were gaining momentum, standing up to exploitative systems. It was another example of Newton’s second law of motion Force equals mass times acceleration” (II.1)** Readers learn of the path-breaking discoveries of Jagadish Chandra Bose, and there is mention of Guglielmo Marconi, among many others. On the theory that these twin discourses are not just haphazardly thrown together (even as novelists often work with the kitchen sink approach ☺), what connections can you make and what conclusions can you draw? Locate important references.

(3) Media, Messages, Signals, and the Novel

After the call for silence, after the board was clapped, they watched the director and his crew taking and retaking a single scene, perfecting a handful of lines. A day's work, devoted to a moment's entertainment.

—Subhash & Udayan in the Technicians' Studio, I.3.

Welcome to the club of thorny questions! You may have noticed the numerous references to radio, film and photography, as well as the domestic and foreign press, in *The Lowland* (and that is, in varying degrees, true of Lahiri's other fiction as well). Subhash and Udayan often walk past the Technicians' Studio (where Satyajit Ray made *Pather Panchali* ☺), and part of Udayan and Gauri's romance takes place outside of a movie theater. The Naxalites eventually hide ammunitions in studios and makeup and editing rooms, just as theaters themselves become bombing targets. At the same time, the two young men are rigging up a radio that allows them to receive signals (that is, news) from other parts of the world. And even as they tune into Radio Peking, the western press often, appears to be oblivious to what is happening in India and other parts of the non-western world. Locate important passages in *The Lowland* in which this news gap is most prominent and speculate on their import for the story. When does photography come into the picture? As well, the narrative casts people, too, as emitting and receiving signals (and may raise the question of what is the difference between signal and noise?). Moreover, *The Lowland*—and serious literary narrative, generally—locates itself within these (competing) messaging systems or discourses. What can, and often does, “literature” do, that radio, film, journalism and historical accounts cannot?

(4) The Lowdown on Narrative Form

Lahiri appears to re-think the question of narrative form in much of her recent work.

Unaccustomed Earth and *The Lowland*, in particular, seem to probe the contours of literary fiction, and along with it the connections between, as we keep saying, form and content: what kind of story is told, and how it is told in the first place. The lack of quotation marks; the fluid transition from description to interior monologue; sentence fragments drawing attention to themselves; the alternation between tenses, esp. the sudden use of the present tense; self-conscious chronological gaps and chronological dislocations (esp., but not only, with Subash's demented mother, Bijoli); multiple points of view, sometimes switching within chapters and even paragraphs—these are some of the formal hallmarks of *The Lowland*. What, in your view, would account for these stylistic features of Lahiri's recent book. How do they contribute, enhance, complicate, obfuscate (?) the telling of the tale? Locate suggestive examples.