

ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM IN *THE LOWLAND*: AN ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* is a serious, poignant and obviously objective attempt at delineating a crucial period and turbulent time of Independent Indian history. She as a keen observer has reflected on the negative changes clearly found in the environment and the disastrous effects on nature. As a cosmopolitan writer and keen observer of the changing world, she is passionate about the environmental issues and recent degradation in the field. She draws heavily on the dire impacts on our surroundings due to indiscriminate longing for profit of the capitalists and burgeoning industries gurgling out toxic pollutants. Being extremely ecoconscious, she has outlined with fondness the eroding of the green face of the earth with the rapid occupation of the lowlands and extinction of the flora and fauna. She has even extended her mission to pave the way for the eco fighters who despite having materialistically diverse lucrative options embark on preaching on behalf of the earth and work relentlessly for the betterment of our environment.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, History, Existence and Ecoconscious.

Lahiri employs the lowland to introduce a representational plot that depicts objects, events and characters in a recognizable manner. Readers are able to join everything together in relation to one place: the lowland in Calcutta. Through her delineation of characters and fully described places, Lahiri looks at the character's mental mapping in the literary text. At the same time, she presents fully-detailed descriptions of types of Indian characters and places in Calcutta, resisting the stereotypical settings presented in colonial literature written and propagated by the colonizers. In a non-linear narrative style sliding back and forth between two different places and two different times, Lahiri employs different points of view. In each chapter, the perspective changes from one character to another. In this novel, loneliness and a sense of regret are well-depicted. As Lahiri writes, "He told himself that he was not fleeing. That he was only moving to another place. That the world was wide, full of places. But he wondered why he felt so hollow

inside” (*The Lowland* 27). The novel advances through the characters’ memories of their past lives, which is a key theme in the book. The story is set in Rhode Island, USA, and Calcutta, India. The 1970s Calcutta is shown by *The Lowland*. During the city's expansion, it faced numerous ecological challenges, including growing population, pollution, encroaching water bodies, and clearing trees to create space for buildings. However, the narrative makes clear that Calcutta was a lovely city with lovely natural environs before the city's growth efforts. The story tells how Subhash and Udayan used to play close to the lowland when they were kids. Subhash and Udayan's childhood memories of the lowland—its beauty, biodiversity, and stillness - are sharply contrasted with its transformation due to unchecked urban development. “The ponds overflowed in the monsoon, flooding the lowland, rendering it invisible” (*The Lowland* 6). This reflects what Lawrence Buell calls the “toxic discourse” of contemporary urban spaces, where “environmental degradation becomes a metaphor for moral and social decline” (Buell 4).

The novelist has very beautifully incorporated the issue of environmental degradation and its aftermath into the very texture of the novel *The Lowland*, published in 2013. Lahiri expresses throughout the book her worry about meeting the ever-increasing demands of the rapidly expanding metropolitan population. She emphasizes the fact that things were becoming worse every day in Calcutta. The story emphasizes the rapidly accelerating speed of urbanization, which has fundamentally altered the suburb of Tollygunge, in contrast to the blatantly inadequate government measures. According to the story, Tollygunge was breathtakingly beautiful and unspoiled when Subhash and Udayan first came, with the hyacinth flowers emitting a potent scent. However, everything altered as a result of the city's uncontrolled development. As Vijay Mishra notes, diasporic narratives often return compulsively to the “myth of origin,” which becomes “an emotionally charged tops that haunts the migrant psyche” (Mishra 193).

The Lowland effectively criticizes Calcutta's state as a city undergoing urbanization. It puts environmental problems like water body encroachment, inadequate waste management systems, and noise and air pollution in front and centre. Subhash leaves Calcutta and his family, especially his brother Udayan, to move to Rhode Island for doctoral research in Oceanography. Since then he feels the nostalgia about his childhood, education and the beautiful days with Udayan. After his brother’s death he marries Gauri, his brother’s widow and brings her to the American city where he lives. But she too faces the nostalgic feelings about her days with Udayan in Calcutta. When she has given birth to Bela, she leaves both Subhash and her daughter, when she is about 12.

In the article we have to explore *The Lowland* by Lahiri from the perspective of ecocriticism. Written in the backdrop of Naxalite rebellion against poverty and equality in Calcutta in the 1950s and 1960s, the novel traces how brotherly bonds between Subhas and Udayan are broken by violent politics. From the very childhood, Udayan, the dynamic rebel shows his revolutionary zeal which leads him to the extremities of the Maoist Naxalite political movement. Subhas, in contrast, dedicates himself to personal, rather than collective, improvement. He earns a scholarship to study science in America and moves to Rhode Island. But when Udayan is shot dead by the police, he races back to Calcutta and rescues his murdered brother’s pregnant wife, Gauri, from her own diminished future as a widowed daughter-in-law. He marries her and takes her to Rhode Island where Gauri resumes her studies in Philosophy and raises her daughter Bela, but the memory of Udayan’s death has corrosive aftereffects. The ambitious narrative traces the tensions between husband and wife, and between mother and daughter. The novel ends with flashback narrative of Udayan’s death. So *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri deals with the revolutionary extremities of naxalism

in West Bengal and its long lasting repercussions on a Bengali family. However, the novelist has very beautifully incorporated the issue of environmental degradation and its aftermath in to the very texture of the novel.

There are problems they face in the land of others. That is why Subhash and Gauri never changed their nationality from Indians to Americans. This shows their state of confusion about homeland and host land. Though they had received all the facilities in America, they still do not want to be Americans. Then coming to Bela's matter, since her childhood, she follows the American way of life through her mother but because of Subhash's influence she learns the Indian culture in her feelings, love and relation. She becomes a nomad and passes her life without giving any clue of her presence, in her adulthood. She suffers from language problem in earlier years. At last Gauri visits Kolkata, a city now changed considerably, feels relieved and goes back to America. Lahiri uses complex system of the trope of memory with much intensity of interior monologue. Bijoli, the mother of Udayan and Subhash, has memory which becomes the narration of the family history and saga. The sentences become full of poetic intensity and monologue which suggest seamlessness of time, the inextricability of the past and the present, of the ancestor, history and personal trauma. Overlapping of the time and tense sequence is remarkable for the manipulation of narration in rule of Bengali sense of past and future, and for the collapse of time. It is also suggestive of continuous presence of the past yoking with the present movement of time and memory of characters as the collapse of time indicates. Bijoli's experience of the unpleasure is rooted in the memory of Udayan's death or any reference to it. She refuses to accept the reality of the situation. So, she enters a make-believe world. She is a case of traumatic neurosis whose root cause is the memory. The result of uncontrolled shock of Udayan's death is her traumatic neurosis. She could not free herself from the grip of Udayan's ghost of memory. Interestingly, the institution of law and police with its brutality is achieved in her narrative point of view. To forget her traumatic memory, she tries to forget the existence of another living son, Subhash. It was her effort to lower her tension and apprehension of same tragic event again. Udayan's death also overshadowed the intimate relationship between husband and wife. It was their part of anxiety and fear that benumbed their expressing of inner tumult. She opposed any attempt to change. In her living time she did neither allow to sell her house nor to leave the house where Udayan had lived. Her ultimate aim was to preserve the lowland and the tomb of Udayan besides the two ponds intact as a memorial stone. She became crazy when she saw the place heaped with the leftovers of a marriage party. "Who has insulted Udayan's memory this way?" (*The Lowland* 190)

Her traumatic memory made her a case of insane resulting in the loss of the mental balance. She re-enacted the previous memory again when her son was alive. It was part of her compulsion to repeat as traumatic neurosis.

She waits for Udayan to appear amid the water hyacinth and walk toward her. It is safe now, she tells him. The police have gone. No one will take you away. Come quickly to the house.....she waits, certain that he is there, that he hears what she tells him. (190)

Memory for her became violent and trauma. "She'd been converted permanently by Udayan's death". (212)

Subhash and Gauri could neither leave their memories behind them nor liberate from the past by running away from home. They always felt rootlessness as they neither changed in America completely nor the memories of their past lives in India freed them from their grip against the changing of the world. Their belonging to India is the memory but they deliberately tried to forget, which they could not, which led them to self-denial of their belonging. The more they tried to go away from their home to forget the memory and family history, the more they were haunted by the past and its memory, which in turn led them to the sense of isolation with their persistent trapping of the awareness of the tumult they left behind. The narration of public history is given from perspective of a woman's memoir adding the female voice to standard historicising. The Bengal famine is viewed from the impact on woman body. India being going to a sovereign nation is suggested in Bijoli's achieving motherhood. The mother of Subhash and Udayan allegorically represents India being the mother of the people of India. The prospective of Bijoli being pregnant is the prospective of India as grown up nation.

Calcutta, in which the novel is set, is depicted by Lahiri as an extremely polluted city. In Calcutta, the ponds and the lowland behind them are clogged with garbage thus causing water pollution. Apart from water pollution, air pollution and noise pollution taking place in the present day world are also portrayed by Lahiri in this novel. Lahiri highlights the danger of deforestation taking place in modernizing and industrialising Calcutta which represents today's world under the looming threat of capitalist development. Significantly enough, Lahiri's latest novel is oriented toward not only making her readers aware of the imminent catastrophe as a result of environmental degradation but also inciting them to social and political action. She has created two characters namely Subhas and Bela to protest against environmental exploitation. They are projected by the novelist as representatives of those few sensible men who still love nature and work for its preservation.

The lowland, a flat plain between two ponds in the Calcutta neighborhood of Tollygunge, is a symbol of the distance, both emotional and physical, between Subhash and Udayan who are themselves symbolized by the two ponds on either side. At the very outset the pleasant natural setting of *The Lowland* presents a balanced and harmonious symbiosis, symbolizing love and harmony between brothers. The brothers are closely linked to the lowland throughout their lives. As children, they traverse the lowland often on the way to the field beyond, where they play soccer with their friends. Overgrown with water hyacinth, the lowland eventually becomes the place where Udayan unsuccessfully attempts to hide from the police when they conduct a search for him. During the rainy season, the ponds overflow, flooding the lowland and rendering it invisible. As the novel progresses, the flooding and draining of the lowland becomes symbolic of the shifting emotional distance between the two brothers and the other tangential relationships in their lives. In *The Lowland*, immigrants' cultural assimilation is addressed against the backdrop of political events. One of the novel's main protagonists, Subhash Mitra, is from a middle-class Bengali family from Tollygunge, Calcutta, and he immigrated to the United States to finish his doctoral studies. Subhash's love for his younger brother, parents, and Calcutta eventually waned once he moved to the United States. He initially demonstrates his resistance to assimilating into American cultural norms. He also expresses his thoughts of longing for Tollygunge, the lowland, and Calcutta in general. As he writes his letter to Udayan, he expresses these sentiments of nostalgia:

As strange as it sounds, when the sky is overcast, when the clouds are low, something about the coastal landscape here, the water and the

grass, the smell of bacteria when I visit the mudflats, takes me home. I think of the lowland, of paddy fields (39).

The novel emphasizes the fact that though the place of origin undergoes many physical changes, it still bears the same nostalgic and traumatic effect on the main characters since it encapsulates their history and their national identity. Not only does place perform a significant function for each character, but it also connects their past with their present through retelling the story of the British colonization of the Indian nation. *The Lowland* is a powerful exploration of loss and redemption, love and sacrifice. It delves into the intricate web of human relationships, showcasing the ways in which our past shapes our present, and the struggle to reconcile our identities with the legacies we inherit. Through the lives of Subhash, Gauri, and Bela, Jhumpa Lahiri crafts a moving narrative that resonates with the complexities of the human experience, leaving us with a deeper understanding of the enduring bonds that tie us to our past and shape our future.

Thus Lahiri delineates how steadily the nature is exploited in name of modernization. The novel also talks about the environmental injustice where poor have to face the pollution done by the rich, which further intensifies the process of environmental degradation. Along with depiction of extinction of river, another danger to biodiversity of that ecosystem, the terrible deforestation is also portrayed. The novel provides a vibrant ecocritical bent which as per growing exploitation of nature and its constant cries for desired attention, is the most required subject of literary ventures.

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