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## Ecocritical Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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With rife in anthropocentric approach and unprecedented technological developments, ecosystem of the mother earth has been confronting the catastrophic consequences, finally reflecting a great threat to the very life itself. So the quintessential need of the hour is to make the generations aware of its disastrous outcome. Being a sensitive writer, the Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri seems to acknowledge her responsibility as an eco- fighter in her latest novel *The Lowland* (2013). Written in the backdrop of Naxalite Movement with equally poignant diasporic reverberations and historical narratives, the novel still effectively manages to echo the environmental concerns. With a natural setting, the novel starts with a mud-spattered place and ends with a metaphorical monsoon in the damp lowland of Bengal, meanwhile urging for the ecological awareness through the reflection of cataclysmic changes in the nature. Though almost all the characters are depicted deeply concerned with the surrounding nature and its negative changes but Bela, the daughter of radical Gauri is especially chosen by Lahiri as a mouthpiece for environmental conservation. Lahiri, through this novel, highlights the need for sustainable development, the burning issue of the day in large scale debates; by voicing her ecological consciousness.

The term 'Ecocriticism' was first used by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978) which, later was revived by Cheryll Glotfelty in a 1989 conference. It aims at environmental praxis through appliance of ecology on literary works. Gerrad defines it as, "An earth-centered approach to the study of texts" (1). Cheryll Glotfelty defines, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between Literature and physical environment" (XVIII). Unlike other literary theories, it encompasses human as well as nonhuman perspective and considerations. Ecocriticism is a blanket term as under the big tent of environmental literature is included- nature writing , deep ecology, the ecology of sites, ecofeminism, the literature of toxicity, environmental justice, bioregionalism, the lives of animals, eco theory, unheard voices and the reinterpretation of canonical works from past (Love, 5 ). It highlights how the nature is represented in a literary work, the exploitations inflicted upon

it and its consequent changes in human culture and reciprocal relationship between culture and nature. Following the same ecocritical bent, the present paper aims at probing this brilliant piece of writing with environmental interconnections, which can best serve as a literary endeavour for the desired ecological praxis, at least at the level of creating awareness.

Overlapping the four generations, the plot of the novel moves from Tollygunge (Kolkata) to Rhode Island, U.S. (the places the novelist herself belongs to) making it a bildungsroman, through the growth of the character, Subhash Mitra. Though Lahiri gives it a political touch by depicting the revolutionary extremities of naxalism from its advent in West Bengal to its long lasting devastating repercussions on families associated with it, however she has beautifully amalgamated the political unrest of the century and environmental degradation.

The novel starts with childhood of two brothers Udayan Mitra and Subhash Mitra. From the very beginning, Udayan, the dynamic rebel starts showing his revolutionary zeal which leads him to extremities of naxalism and finally to death. Subhash, the studious and passive one, supports Udayan's pregnant wife Gauri by marrying her and taking her to Rhode Island. In course of time Gauri resumes her study and gives birth to a daughter Bela. Meanwhile she starts feeling suffocated and gradually turns into a masochistic sadist. Withdrawing even the filial relationship she alone escapes to California. Later Bela becomes an unwed mother and Subhash marries to another lady in his old days. The novel ends with flashback narrative of Udayan's encounter with police. Parallel with this main plot, runs the narrative which highlights the presentation of nature in various forms, its devastations, its celebration, its metaphoric tendency, minatory tone and above all its endorsers' plea for an ecocentric approach towards the ecosystems. All such efforts collectively come under the tenet of ecocriticism.

At the very outset the pleasant natural setting of *The Lowland* presents a balanced and harmonious symbiosis, symbolizing love and harmony between brothers. Wilderness of two ponds, flooded during monsoon is depicted:

After the monsoon the ponds would rise so that the embankment built between them could not be seen. The lowland also filled with rain, three or four feet deep, the water remaining for a portion of the year. The flooded plain was thick with water hyacinth. The

floating weed grew aggressively. Its leaves caused the surface to appear solid. Green in contrast to the blue of the sky. (1)

But soon the binary nature/ culture emerge when she talks about the immigrant birds, “In autumn egrets arrived, their white feathers darkened by the city’s soot. . .” (1) The so called cultured city is causing the darkness in the feathers of bird. And after Udayan’s death; the loss of love is reflected with loss of natural wilderness, in the altered scenario. When Bijoli, his mother views the same setting she finds, “The field is no longer empty. A block of new houses sits on it now, their rooftops crowded with television antennas” (182). Poor huts are now replaced by modernized houses and the watery ponds are also no more unaffected. The water which earlier was clean enough to serve as a bathing site is no more clean. Earlier the flooded lowland used to be filled with ‘wading birds, clear enough to reflect moonlight’ but now the water is ‘reduced to a dull green well in the center’, reminding the military activities (179). The ponds and the lowland behind them are clogged with garbage to the extent that Bijoli is determined to clean the memorial of his dead son out of his maternal love. She is well aware of the fact that she can’t remove the garbage but still she is strong-minded. Lahiri depicts through Bijoli, how polluting the watery regions, garbage is dumped into it:

With bare hands she sorts through the empty bottles of detol, sunsilk shampoo. Things rats don’t eat, that crows don’t bother to carry away. Cigarette packets tossed in by strangers. A bloodied sanitary pad. Heaps of dirtied banana leaves, stained with food. Soiled paper napkins bearing a catrerer’s name, and broken vessels from which guests have sipped their filtered water and tea. Garlands of dead flowers, used for decorating the entryway of a house. (189-190)

Lahiri highlights another illegal practice of turning water into land. She says:

People have always tossed refuse into these bodies of water. But now the accumulation is deliberate. An illegal practice taking place in ponds, in paddy fields, all over Calcutta. They are being plugged up by promoters so that the city’s swampy land turns solid, so that new sectors can be established, new homes built. New generations bred. (179)

Not only water is polluted but the life force air is also contaminated. Lahiri portrays the air and noise pollution when Subhash and Bela pay a visit to Kolkata on ‘congested roads’:

In the taxis they sat in traffic, pollution filling her chest, coating the skin of her arms with a fine dark grit. She heard the clanging of trams and the beeping of car horns, the bells of colorful rickshaws pulled by hand. Rumbling buses with conductors thumping their sides, reciting their routes, hollering for passengers to get on. (206)

When Subhash returns to Calcutta, he is disturbed to see ‘the stink of algae, of open drains’, mildews, gutters and immediately he notices, “the tree that had spared its dark branches and leaves over the original roof was gone” (90). The loss of his brother is marked by the spontaneous loss of flora of his home. Now the lowland appeared to him as a ‘mudflat after the tide’ (91). Now ironically, with the calm lowland the fanatic Udayan is also calm! The dense water hyacinths that Udayan had trusted as his savior during his escape are now reduced to some scattered clumps (93). These were the hyacinths which at the death day of Udayan were surfacing the water like ‘moth eaten cloak’ as if nature has revealed its minatory form so as to warn the humans of future calamities (102). Gradually the once wild ponds and the lowland along with its hyacinths start losing its very existence. Finally when Gauri visits Kolkata, its noteworthy how the landscape is transformed completely. As she walks towards the ponds, surprisingly she finds:

Both ponds were gone. New homes filled up an area that had once been watery, open. Walking a bit farther, she saw that the lowland was also gone. That sparsely populated tract was now indistinguishable from the rest of the neighborhood, and on it more homes had been built. Scooters parked in front of doorways, laundry hung out to dry. (320)

Thus Lahiri delineates how steadily the nature is exploited in name of modernization. Toynbee, a prominent ecocritic warns that such irrational use of resources can make the biosphere uninhabitable, “If the human population of the globe does not now take prompt and vigorous concerted action to check the pollution and the spoliation that are being inflicted on the biosphere by shortsighted human greed”(9). This indifference toward nature brings terrible changes not only in external world only but in the interiors of the human too. As nature keeps a reciprocal relationship, it produces detachment when met with detachment. And it is quite evident by the changed behaviour of Kolkata’s people. With the devastating external nature, the internal human nature is also devastated. As Bijoli finds:

The neighborhood's boundaries have been expanding; she no longer has a sense of where things begin and end. Once she could have knocked on their doors and been recognized, welcomed, treated to a cup of tea. She would have been handed an invitation to the wedding, beseeched to attend. But there are new homes now, new people who prefer their televisions, who never talk to her. (190)

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. The novelist depicts how the displaced refugees from Dhaka, from Rahshahi and from Chittagong assimilated in Calcutta near 'garbage heaps in unhygienic conditions' and she finds, "they were the reason the Adi Ganga, on the banks of which the Tolly club stood, was now a sewer canal for southwest Calcutta" (5). Soon the text conveys the extinction of the river through a past tense, "Adi Ganga once flowed, where the British had once sailed boats to the delta" (5).

Along with depiction of extinction of river, another danger to biodiversity of that ecosystem, the terrible deforestation is also portrayed. Robert Harrison has aptly said in his book *Forest: The Shadow of Civilization* that imperialism has always brought with it deforestation and the consuming of natural resources (87) and While communicating the history of Tollygunge it is revealed, "The English started clearing the waterlogged jungle, laying down streets"(13). Although Major Tolly, after whom the region is named Tollygunge, preserved a portion of Adiganga but it was not an ecocentric step rather it was sheer greed as he did it so as to enable shipping trade between Calcutta and East Bengal. This kind of shallow environmentalism is bluntly criticized by deep ecologists who advocate preservation of nature for its intrinsic value instead of instrumental one which is characterized by consumerist and utilitarian tendencies.

Lahiri has tried to touch the whole gamut of ecocriticism. If she conveys the environmental dilapidation in a minatory tone, she also celebrates awaked nature endorsers. If deforestation has haunted the Tollygunge then there is reforestation too by importing trees from foreign. Universities are commencing Agriculture Schools. Colleges are surrounded by 'greenhouses, orchards, fields of corn' along with 'lush pastures of scientifically cultivated grass, routinely irrigated and fertilized and trimmed' (34).

Although Lahiri has fore grounded the nature endorsings of an eco- fighter woman Bela, but still she manages to escape the charge of essentialism by portraying the harmonious

relationship between nature and a male too. Subhash's love for nature is depicted quite early in the novel. In his childhood he was fond of collecting feathers, and almonds, watching 'vultures bathing in the puddles, spreading their wings to dry' (7).once he tried to save an egg which was dropped from a warbler's nest and later he preserved it in roots of mango tree, when it was not hatched (7-8).He used to help his father in planting Dahliyas, enjoy watching flickering sunlight and cupping frogs in his hands (10). His research area - chemical oceanography is also ecocentric where he has to study the impact of chemicals in oceans.

Later in U.S, in his nostalgic mood he finds a comparison between the sound of his mother's sewing machine and a hemming bird. "A bird in his yard in Rhode Island , its call a rapid stopping and starting, mimicked the sound of it" (251). East-West encounter is beautifully portrayed through natural imagery when Subhash is reminiscent of kitchen ingredients, "Vivid hues of cayenne and turmeric and ginger" in the autumn leaves. In fact it was the similar ecosystems which provided him a link during his displacement from his native place Calcutta to migrated place Rhode Island. Though both the places are dissimilar but still he locates certain physical aspects of Calcutta corresponding to Rhode Island, "Mountains to the north, an ocean to the east, the majority of the land to the south and the west" (34). Besides both the places were near estuaries, both made out of eroding of sea and glaciers respectively. Egrets are replaced with crickets and church with mosque. In a letter to Udayan he feels forced to tell, "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"(44). Thus nature is the be all and end all of his life. He is emotionally involved with nature to the extent that he feels like a 'helpless lover' (45) when he is unable to see a mesmerizing heron. It is the sailing in a boat that he feels the ontological anxieties. The distance from shore reminds him of his displaced state and the fathom of the sea reflects to him his inestimable future.

All the major events of his life are accompanied by nature as if nature too is acknowledging and reciprocating her love. His first physical encounter with Holly is accompanied by rain which he feels like 'sporadic bursts of applause' (73). Later during Bela's birth too, it was raining. His transitory relationship with holly is marked with another natural metaphor. Holly 's parting with Subhash is foreshadowed by a box turtle whom Subhash picked



from road, studied for a while and removed it to grass. “It was as if she’d picked them up and put them off the precarious path they were on, just as he’d removed the turtle from the road the day before”(81).

And through the character of Bela, Lahiri seems to emerge on the forefront so as to convey an ecocentric message for all the earth dwellers. Even in her childhood Bela is extremely sensitive towards nature, she is so empathetic towards the tiny earthworms that she denies stepping on them and doesn’t want to move to school bus. She can’t even bear the sight and does “shut her eyes tightly” (169). During her schooling she joins nature studies club and studies about seals and butterflies. Further she campaigns for recycling of bottles and for raising the wages by seeking signatures. She works as an agriculture apprentice and is depicted engaged in nature endorsing like watering the plants , maintaining beehives, raising goats or chickens, packing and selling veggies. Unlike her parents who were devoted to research, she prefers Environmental Science. In her senior theses she studies the dreadful effects of pesticide runoff in a local river (221). She criticizes Subhash for throwing out vegetable scraps and preaches him on composting them. Once she brings plywood and nails from market and builds a storage bin in his backyard, performing to him how to turn the heap as it cooled (224). She is not only an environmentalist but an Ecological Marxist too, as she believes in the egalitarian system and promotes peasants’ farms rather than supermarkets so as to enable the equal distribution of wealth. ‘What we consume, is what we support’ is her belief and through her ‘pragmatic simplicity’ she is dedicated towards ‘bettering of world’ (224). Thus like a crusader she seems to have absorbed the ideals of ecocriticism and deep ecology.

Thus 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. Hawthorne Deming rightly reminds, “ If we reported each year’s progress not in terms of fiscal loss and gain but in terms of the earth’s biological and cultural loss and gain , we would have a more accurate assessment of human success”(qtd. in Love,14). So there is a vital need to aware the masses of environmental preservation so as to maintain its sustainability for present as well as coming generations, only then the mother earth can be saved and Literature, being a mirror is aptly reflecting this emergent need.



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