

## **An Eco-Critical Perspective of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Eco-Critical perspective provides new dimension in interpreting and analyzing a literary piece. As a distinguishingly different approach, eco-critical perspective gives better awareness to literary illustration of nature, and is sensitive to interdependent that position the author, character or work in the accepted system. This approach and school of thought shifts significant focus on social relations and their interdependence to natural relationships. It views human beings as members of ecosystem. It reassures the fact that man and nature are interdependent and the various feelings and emotions human beings experience can be compared and contrasted to various changes nature undergoes. To be more precise literature has often administered the core link between contexts of nature and culture, eco-critical perspective has provided new ideas and thoughts about man's relationship to the environment. It also began to influence our critical approaches to literary texts.

### **KEYWORDS**

Eco-criticism; Ecosystem; Philosophical Understanding of Nature.

Jhumpa Lahiri, the winning novelist utilizes nature symbols in the novel *The Lowland* in distinct ways. The novel starts with the description of the symbol that is used as title i.e. Lowland. According to the oxford dictionary, low land is a sunken or depressed geological formation. This explanation has a direct relationship with the plot of the novel. Subhash Mitra and Udayan Mitra are the two brothers who lead a happy life in Tollygunge, Calcutta. There is lowland that is formed, near their house. Many a time, during their childhood, they crossed the lowland, stepping on the leaves of water hyacinth, which spread like green mats. The two brothers grew up in Calcutta, watching the lowland, the

changes it underwent, with the change of weather.

Udayan is pictured as more active and dynamic than Subhash. Udayan involves himself secretly, but actively in the up surging naxalite movement. His parents are unaware of this fact. albeit, Subhash knows all the activities of his brother and warns him. Nevertheless, there is no change in the behavior of Udayan. Both the brothers complete their Post-Graduation from different universities. Subhash gets an opportunity to pursue his Ph.D in Oceanography, in Rhode Island, and he leaves Calcutta. Meanwhile, Udayan falls in love with his friend, Manash's sister Gauri. He marries her and brings her home. Udayan

continues to associate himself with naxalite movement. The naxalite movement is taken very seriously by the police and government. They started arresting all those involved in the movement. Udayan, burns his hand during a trial to explode a bomb, and manages to be at home. The police investigate and find Udayan, guilty. He escapes, hides himself in the lowland, but finally surrenders and dies in the lowland.

The image of grass has special implications in the novel. The two brothers enter the Tolly Club secretly when they were young boys. Subhash is surprised to see the grass cut uniformly like a carpet. It was trimmed so finely, that he felt like moss when he pressed against it.

Subhash had never seen such grass, as uniform as a carpet, unfurled over sloping contours of earth. Undulating like dunes in a desert, or gentle dips and swells in a sea. It was shorn so finely on the putting green that it felt like moss when he pressed against it. The ground below was as smooth as a scalp, the grass appearing a shade lighter there. (Lahiri: 6)

For the first time Subhash has seen many egrets together in one place. They flew off when he went close to them. Egret is symbol of Audubon society, located in the United States.

Lahiri's narrative technique is unique. She uses the images of birds and animals to convey a lot of things. When the brothers were in the Tolly Club, she utilizes the symbol of Jackal. A pack of jackals sat erect. As darkness crept in, they moved in search of food. Their howling that echoed within the club, warned the brothers, that it was late and time to go home. On their successive visits to the club, Subhash collected feathers and wild almonds. He saw vultures bathing in the small ponds and spreading their wings as if to dry. He once collected an egg dropped from a Warbler's nest. He carried it home and

placed it in a terra-cota container and covered it with twigs. He dug a hole in the garden behind their house, at the foot of a mango tree, but the egg did not hatch. This incident can be analyzed to unfold the future of Subhash with Gauri. He aspired to build a strong marital relationship with her, but their relationship never bloomed and blossomed. As the egg, their relationship never hatched.

Subhash compares Tollygunge with Rhode Island. Both the places are very close to the sea level, filled with estuaries with fresh and salt water. As Tollygunge was flooded by the sea, all of Rhode Island was covered with sheets of ice. This analogy acts a morale booster to Subhash, to stay in a foreign land away from his home. As the story proceeds, Subhash marries, Udayan's wife, Gauri and relieves her from the conservative atmosphere in Tollygunge. He takes her to Rhode Island, much against the wishes of his mother. Interestingly, by the time of Udayan's death Gauri is pregnant, which Udayan is unaware of. Thus, Subhash takes the responsibility of both the mother and the growing child in her womb. Gauri gives birth to a girl named Bela. While Bela is still young, Gauri enrolls in a Philosophy course and continues her education. Though Subhash and Gauri live together, they do not share anything in true sense. Subhash learns that back home his father expired and after three months of his death, he decides to go to Tollygunge and Bela accompanies him. After spending two weeks or so, they return to Rhode Island and notice the grass in front of the house is as tall as Bela. It is a clear indication that nobody has managed to cut the grass from many days. Thinking on the same lines, Subhash enters the house, searches for Gauri, but finds a letter written in Bengali. The letter says that Gauri understood that Subhash is a better parent than her, and she is leaving Bela as her gift for all the help Subhash extended to Gauri.

While Subhash is in the second year of his Ph.D, he visits the beach at the foot of the campus. He finds a woman walking with a child and jet-black dog. He learns her name to be Holly. He becomes very close to her and shares intimate relationship with her. Holly knew a lot about the sea birds and explains Subhash how to distinguish buffle heads and pintails, gulls and terns. She asks about the birds in India, and Subhash describes those birds that she never saw. Mynas, that nested in the walls of buildings and kokils that sang throughout the city at the start of spring.

Subhash and Holly together spent a rainy night. After Subhash experienced embarrassment and exhilaration, the rain stopped. The sound of the rain drops from the leaves of the tree, spread over the roof of her house, sounded like occasional burst of applauds. The next day morning Subhash notices, the bright sky and a calm ocean. The bright sky and calm ocean represent his state of mind. He satiated his biological desires and feels quite happy, and the sea of thoughts he had regarding Holly are cleared.

Udayan writes a letter to his brother and informs him about the arrival of a sparrow into the room the two brothers shared.

A sparrow got into the house today, into the room we used to share. The shutters were open, it must have hopped in through the bars. I found it flapping around. And I thought of you, thinking how much this nuisance would have excited you. It was as if you'd come back. Of course it flew away as soon as I walked in. (Lahiri: 80).

This is a perfect implication of a paradoxical situation that happened in their lives. Udayan walked out of Gauri's life and Subhash entered.

The third autumn in Rhode Island started with leaves falling down, and subsequently, Subhash thinking of Durga

Pujo in Calcutta. He did not receive the Dusserah gifts, but received a telegram, saying Udayan lost his life. The advent of autumn can be compared to the sad phase in Subhash's life and also in the lives of their family members.

Police search for Udayan. Knowing this, Udayan, informs his wife, Gauri that he would hide behind the water hyacinth, in the flood water of the lowland, in case the neighborhood is raided to curb naxalite movement. The lowland is a symbol that is used to show the growing phase and togetherness of the two brothers, as well the death of the younger one. It is the place where two brothers played, and grew together. Udayan uses the same place to hide and finally leaves his last breath.

Subhash leaves to Calcutta after he receives a telegram from his parents "Udayan killed. Come back if you can." (Lahiri: 83) He goes to Calcutta and he walks past through the two ponds, and notices the scattered clumps of water hyacinth in the lowland, a completely opposite picture of what he saw when he was young, when two brothers were together.

On the day when Subhash voyages to Rhode Island along with Gauri, a heavy fog accumulates on the VIP Road, making it impenetrable. The driver slowed down, stopped, unable to continue. Gauri is desperate to sail through the fog and leave Calcutta behind her. The darkness the fog created can be compared to Subhash's future. After Gauri leaves him and 12 year old Bela to work in California, his future and his daughter's future also become dark for few months.

After Gauri reached Rhode Island, she saw a calendar on the kitchen wall, with a photograph of rocky island, with a light house. She noticed St. Patrick's Day highlighted in the calendar. Twentieth of March is officially celebrated as the first day of spring, the day when Udayan was born. Spring is the season that gives life.

Udayan has given life to both Gauri and her daughter, Bela.

Gauri and Subhash visit an ocean on one weekend. Gauri thinks great of Subhash for helping her, and accepting all her responsibilities. While walking on the fine sand, she looks back at the footprints that they imprinted on the sand. She saw them washed away by the tide. Very soon, in the novel, it is understood that their relationship also vanishes permanently exactly as it happened to their foot prints on the sand.

The image of rain is connected with many interesting turns the story takes. The first time Subhash spends time with Holly, there was a heavy rain. When Gauri experiences contractions, Subhash drives her to a nearby hospital. While on their way, a heavy summer rain forces Subhash to slowdown, unable to see more than a few feet in front of him, through the window, in spite of the windshield wipers cleaning back and forth. Gauri imagines the car spinning out of control, running into the opposite lane of oncoming cars. Gauri recollects the fog on their way to the

airport, the night she was leaving Calcutta. But now, part of her body wants the car to stop, and the other part of the body wanted the pregnancy simply to continue.

The name of their daughter 'Bela' is named after a flower that talked about for a span of time, a portion of the day. *Shakal bela* meant morning; *bikel bela*, afternoon. *Ratrir bela* was night.

Thus the novel is replete with images of nature that convey the writer's perception, the plot of the novel more vividly. Udayan Mitra, is named after the sun. Sun is treated as giver of life, and receives nothing in return. Udayan also gave love to Gauri, germinated the seed named 'Bela', but received nothing in return.

As part of conclusion, it may be noted that the novel is a true example for eco-critical perspective, with highly symbolic nature images. Jhumpa Lahiri, has made the reading of the novel interesting and memorable with appealing nature symbols, with out of the ordinary plot line coupled with lucid explanation.

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