



Environmentalism in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

Dr Gaurav Mishra

Assistant Professor in English, Mahadev P.G. College, Bariyasanpur, Varanasi

Date of Submission: 14-12-2023

Date of Acceptance: 29-12-2023

Abstract: The present reading of *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri has focused on studying the element of environmental awareness presented in the novel. It dwells upon the pathetic condition of the polluted city of Calcutta. This study reads the selected novel with an ecocritical perspective.

Keywords: environmentalism, pollution, ecocriticism.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* was first published in 2013. The novel was a commercial success. *The Guardian* expressed that in *The Lowland*, "the personal and political are beautifully balanced". The story depicts the upsurging Naxalite movement in West Bengal. Subhash Mitra and Udayan Mitra, the two brothers, brought up in Tollygunge in Calcutta, study in the university. They found the then-communist movement engrossing. Between the two brothers, Subhash realises the risks of getting involved with the communists; he walks away from the movement and leaves Calcutta for further studies in the USA.

Udayan is quite involved in communist politics in the interim. His detention is the result of his involvement with the communists. In the lowland behind his parents' house, he is shot and killed by the cops. After Udayan passes away, his young wife Gauri is left to live a miserable life as a pregnant woman. After this terrible loss in his family, Subhash returns and sees Gauri's pitiful state. To fulfil his obligation to the unborn child growing inside his brother's wife's womb, he chooses to marry Gauri and brings her to Rhode Island, USA. The parents of Subhash and Udayan, however, still reside in Tollygunge.

Upon their arrival in the United States, Subhash and Gauri decide to uphold Subhash's paternity. Gauri, though, does not think her second marriage is fulfilling. She continues to be upset, so in an attempt to escape the hardships of an unhappy marriage, she decides to seek a doctorate. Bela, their daughter, grows closer to Subhash in the interim. Bela is repeatedly neglected by Gauri as she prioritizes her research. Bela is therefore

mostly taken care of by Subhash. Subhash loses his father when Bela is just seven years old. Gauri does not accompany him to Calcutta, but he does bring Bela. Rather, they spend some time with Bela's grandma and Subhash's mother, Bijoli.

Gauri has moved to California and has left Subhash and Bela behind after a few days when they return to Rhode Island. She assures Subhash in a letter that he would be a good father and that Bela should be raised by him alone. Bela experiences psychological effects from her separation from Gauri, but eventually, she comes to terms with it. Later, in an attempt to distract herself, Bela participates in club activities and devotes a lot of time to raising awareness of environmental conservation.

As an adult, Bela decides to live in the country and starts working with farmers. She is content with her life and has a daughter as well. Later, Gauri expresses remorse for not spending more time with her daughter Bela. Subhash eventually finds contentment in his married life when he marries Elise, his neighbour. In the epilogue, Bela joyfully settles down with a farmer with her daughter.

"A classic story of family and ideology at odds, love and risk closely twined," according to *Vogue*, is *The Lowland*. Nevertheless, the plot is ecologically informed in addition to taking these unexpected turns. *The Lowland* is a striking representation of the current ecological catastrophe. The story raises important questions about the unethical actions that harm the environment multiple times.

The story is set in Rhode Island, USA, and Calcutta, India (now known as Kolkata). 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. Lahiri paints the natural world of the city in these words:

Long ago, when they had first come to Tollygunge, the water had been clean. Subhash and Udayan had cooled off in the ponds on hot days. Poor people had bathed. After the rains, the floodwater turned the lowland into a pretty place filled with wading birds, clear enough to reflect moonlight (Lahiri 215-216).

Ginni Rani states that "the pleasant natural setting of *The Lowland* presents a balanced and harmonious symbiosis, symbolizing love and harmony between brothers" (Rani 259) in her research paper, "Ecocritical Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*." The story goes on to say, nevertheless, that the situation had significantly changed years later. Day by day, the two ponds in front of their house had been losing water. The physical environment of Tollygunge has deteriorated, as demonstrated by Bela's memory of her grandmother's short stroll to the lowland's edge, where she saw nothing but filthy water and trash. Everything was jammed in them, including wastes like old garments, newspapers, empty milk packets, jars of health drinks, rags, and foil from chocolate. A mound of various waste products from the nearby homes surrounds the bodies of water. It wasn't that people didn't throw their trash there before, but the intentional disregard for all societal rules was different. In her research paper titled "Practical Ecocriticism and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland: An Analysis*," Bipasha Majumder (De) makes the following claims:

The novelist has very beautifully incorporated the issue of environmental degradation and its aftermath into the very texture of the novel. Calcutta, in which the novel is set, is depicted by Lahiri as an extremely polluted city. At the very outset, she writes: "In autumn egrets arrived, their white feathers darkened by the city's soot, waiting motionless for their prey" (3). In Calcutta, the ponds and the lowland behind them are clogged with garbage thus causing water pollution (Majumder 385-86).

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. Emerson, an American transcendentalist, concludes that people seek solace in nature, which they believe transcends all other human circumstances. He expresses:

The tempered light of the woods is like a perpetual morning, it is stimulating and heroic [...]. The incommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them [...]. These enchantments are medicinal, they sober and heal us. These are plain pleasures, kind and native to us (Emerson 4).

But according to the story, Subhash saw a very different Tollygunge when he returned to his birthplace with Bela after a few years. The natural environment was giving way to artificiality and the concrete jungle. Lahiri narrates:

As they approached the two ponds, he saw that the small home he'd left behind had been replaced by something impressive, ungainly. Some scaffolding was still in place, but the construction looked complete. He saw palm trees rising behind the house. But the mongo tree that had spread its dark branches and leaves over the original roof was gone (Lahiri 106-107).

According to the author, there has been a significant shift in how people view Tollygunge's surroundings, with more emphasis now being placed on the surface-level beauty rather than the underlying attractiveness. The hollowness of the contemporary physical changes occurring in Indian communities is symbolized by the prevalence of palm trees and the disappearance of mango trees. In an effort to give a bright and modern design with more attention to the outward elements, the interior qualities have been concealed. Despite their inability to produce fruit or offer shade during the sweltering summer, palm trees are nevertheless favored for their attractive appearance. Unlike mango trees, it does not produce as much trash due to its sparse leaves. Since there will be no need to sweep the area around the tree to remove any fallen leaves, it is appropriate for any concrete jungle. It also tells the story of how wildlife is evolving around humans in urban areas.

Ashton Nichols expands on the concept of "urbanature" in his book *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism Toward Urbanatural Roosting*. This expression implies that nature and urban life are not as different as people have long believed, in his words (Nichols XIII). He continues, saying:

Hawks are roosting on skyscrapers along Central Park East and Central Park West. Peregrine falcons are feeding on the Flatiron Building, and



owls are nesting throughout Manhattan (Yolton). Meanwhile, thousands of environmentalists are boarding carbon-gulping airplanes, flying hundreds of thousands of miles—carrying tons of petrochemical Gore-Tex—to get “back to nature” in Montana and Mauritius (Nichols XIII).

Nichols' fundamental contention is that there is an enduring connection between humans and the natural world, meaning that humans are always in contact with it. He seems to think that you may be in the middle of nature even while you're standing on a roadway in an urban area. As he puts it, "Those who adore the outdoors and say they wish they could go back there are committing a category error, according to philosophers. "There is no 'real nature' to which to return," as Tyler Stalling recently observed (Nichols XIII). Nichols seems to overlook the fact that, despite nature's presence everywhere, human activity has radically altered its form in his argument. It is important to investigate and evaluate this shift in nature's shape in order to determine whether it is preferable for all living things on Earth to continue existing. Thus, Lahiri's suggestion to increase awareness of the repressed existence of nature in urban areas is entirely reasonable.

In their book *Deep Ecology: Living as If Nature Matters*, Bill Devall and George Sessions write the following:

In deep ecology, we ask whether the present society fulfills basic human needs like love and security and access to nature, and, in so doing, we question our society's underlying assumptions. We ask which society, which education, which form of religion, is beneficial for all life on the planet as a whole, and then we ask further what we need to do in order to make the necessary changes (74).

From the standpoint of deep ecology, *The Lowland* also challenges the validity of modern civilization's current course. Isn't life on Earth becoming more difficult as a result of urbanization? Every living thing on the planet is entitled to existence and growth. This fight for existence by the nonhuman world is glimpsed in the novel's contest between humanity and nature. According to the novelist's writing: “In spite of the garbage the water hyacinth still grows, stubbornly rooted. The promoters who want this land will have to burn it to eradicate it or remove it with machines” (Lahiri 216).

Although it is clear that nature will not readily alter, ruthless people will stop at nothing to exploit every square inch of the planet for their own gain. The book makes fun of the idea that

people will destroy all vegetation in order to conquer every square inch of land. The book sheds light on the pitiful yet irrational attitude that humans have toward nonhuman animals. Similar to this, the unexpected presence of a turtle at a town's roadside is explained with profound meaning when viewed through the prism of deep ecology. According to what the book says: “Returning to the town, they saw a box turtle at the edge of the road. They stopped, and Subhash picked it up, studying its markings, then removing it to the grass from which it had come” (Lahiri 97). Actually, the turtle's appearance in such an unlikely location cannot be merely a coincidence; rather, it alludes to a significant plot point for the book's readers. The turtle incident appears to have been brought up on purpose by the author to emphasize how people are encroaching on other living things' environments. The turtle is a symbol of all the uprooted aquatic creatures who stray through the human world in search of a fresh, secure place to call home.

Unquestionably, the depiction of the changes that Calcutta saw represents the deteriorating environmental circumstances that many Indian towns currently face. The environmental crises in Calcutta, which sprang from the city's urbanization process in the 1970s, have not yet been addressed, it has been noted when contrasting the city's current state with the one portrayed in the book. Rather, they appear unrestrained. “According to statistics released by the Scientific and Environmental Research Institute, quoting government figures, Kolkata had a suspended particulate matter (SPM), the measure of pollution, at a steep 511 compared to Delhi's 234 and Mumbai's 322” (*Dasgupta*).

As a result, increasing urban pollution has emerged as one of India's main issues. However, we also have to acknowledge that India is the world's second most populous country. As a result, it must address the pressing need to accelerate urban home construction in order to handle the large influx of rural residents seeking jobs in cities. However, regrettably, based on the notion of the modernization of the West, the expansion of urban housing facilities has been made possible by encroaching on regions that are essential to the ecosystem and water conservation, both of which are vital to the well-being of the city people. In light of these ironic circumstances, Helen Tiffin and Graham Huggan contend:

Perhaps the most extreme form of this view is that development is little more than a myth propagated by the West that, under the guise of assisted modernisation, re-establishes the very rift



(social, political, economic) between First and Third worlds that it claims to want heal (Huggan 28).

The novelist makes insinuations that contemporary methods of housing cannot be beneficial for the long-term growth of Indian cities. The developed world has enough undeveloped land in relation to its population. In other words, compared to India, their social and geographic circumstances are very different. India must so devise domestic strategies to address its issues. It is not a good idea for India to develop its cities while ignoring its rural in order to prevent environmental degradation. The book gives readers an idea of what happens when these tactics are used. It describes how dishonest builders illegally converted every marsh into solid land so that new homes and structures could be constructed there. According to Lahiri, the circumstances are as follows:

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 (Lahiri 215).

A peek of the modernized Calcutta's growing air and noise pollution may also be found in the story. Bela finds the contaminated air of Calcutta uncomfortable when Subhash takes her shopping. Lahiri describes: "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 colourful rickshaws pulled by hand" (Lahiri 249).

The Lowland focuses on the state of the city's waste management systems in addition to depicting the depravity of the natural world and rising pollution in Calcutta. If urbanization alters the environment, then the primary cause of rising urban pollution is a lack of waste management systems. In actuality, India faces significant challenges in trash management. Siddiqui notes the appalling situation of waste management systems in India and says:

Municipalities, which are responsible for the management of municipal solid waste in developing countries like India, are facing many problems in providing effective and dynamic system to the society. They mostly fail in such things due to lack of appropriate collection system, lack of technical expertise and insufficient financial resources (Siddiqui 126).

It is a reality that large trash inflows into Indian cities are an unpleasant but typical occurrence. In these words, *The Lowland* skillfully paints this picture:

Each day it diminishes: a little less water to see through the terrace grille. Bijoli watches as the two ponds in front of the house, and the tract of lowland behind them, are clogged with waste (Lahiri 215).

The story describes how the lowlands are too painful for them to endure. Because the lowland was associated with the final recollections of Bijoli's younger son, "she sorts through the empty bottles of Dettol and Sunsilks shampoo with bare hands." Things that crows don't bother carrying away, that rats don't consume. Strangers passing by tossing in cigarette packages. A sanitary pad covered in blood. In fact, the novel aims to raise awareness of the fact that the majority of waste originating from residential properties consists of inorganic materials. *The Lowland* makes the point that while nature has a special way of breaking down different materials to sustain the elements that keep life on Earth alive, it is limited to breaking down organic materials.

To conclude, Jhumpa Lahiri in *The Lowland* highlights Calcutta's diminishing natural resources. According to the study, Lahiri purposefully portrayed the negative effects of unchecked and unregulated development in Calcutta. In essence, the description aims to make readers of the novels aware of the continuous, primarily man-centric ecological changes. *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. Without a doubt, the book raises awareness regarding environmental problems prevailing in urbanising India.

Works Cited

- [1]. Dasgupta, Abhijit. "Most-polluted Kolkata kills 2.5 times more than Delhi; Vadodara safest." *India Today*, 7 January 2009, indiatoday.in/web_exclusive/story/most-polluted-kolkata-kills-2.5-times-more-thandelhivadodara-safest-36754-2009-01-07. Accessed on 3 November 2020.
- [2]. Devall, Bill and George Sessions. *Deep Ecology: Living as If Nature Matters*. Gibbs M. Smith Inc, 1985.
- [3]. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Critical Edition of the Major*



- Works, edited by Richard Poirier, Oxford University Press, 1990.
- [4]. Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Lowland*. Penguin Random House India, 2013.
- [5]. Majumder (De), Bipasha. "Practical Ecocriticism' and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*: An Analysis." *IJELLH*, vol. 4, no. 5, 2016, pp. 383-390.
- [6]. Nichols, Ashton. *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism Toward Urbanatural Roosting*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- [7]. Rani, Ginni. "Ecocritical Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, pp. 258-265.
- [8]. Siddiqui, Mohd Arshad. "Municipal solid waste management in India-Status and Challenges: An overview." *International Journal of Biology Research*, researchgate.net/publication/335564640_Municipal_solid_waste_management_in_India-Status_and_Challenges_An_overview/link/5d6d2bd992851c8538871310/download. Accessed on 31 January 2021.
- [9]. The Guardian. [the-guardian.com/books/2013/sep/07/jhumpa-lahiri-the-lowland-review#:~:text=The%20Lowland%20is%20a%20sweeping,in%20West%20Bengal%20in%201967](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/07/jhumpa-lahiri-the-lowland-review#:~:text=The%20Lowland%20is%20a%20sweeping,in%20West%20Bengal%20in%201967). Accessed on 21 January 2021.
- [10]. Vogue. [vogue.com/article/a-fine-balance-marriage-and-duty-collide-in-jhumpa-lahiris-family-saga-the-lowland](https://www.vogue.com/article/a-fine-balance-marriage-and-duty-collide-in-jhumpa-lahiris-family-saga-the-lowland). Accessed on 22 January 2021.