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A Geocritical Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

Amany Abdullah Abdel Aziz Eldiasty

Lecturer of English Literature, Faculty of Arts, Damietta University

amanyeldiasty@du.edu.eg

ABSTRACT

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This paper aims at investigating the role that place plays in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* from two perspectives: objective and subjective. The paper follows a spatio-temporal analysis as a method of research. Within the framework of a geocritical approach, the paper investigates such elements as geographical boundaries, space, place, movement, transgressivity and national identity. The paper argues that a spatial perspective offers important insights into an Indian/American society struggling with the tensions of immigration, diaspora, nostalgia, cultural clash, search for identity, and acculturation. Such elements are brought together through the psychological journey motif, a widespread spatial schema, which dominates the course of this novel. The paper argues 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 paper illustrates the characters' disillusion in escaping India for America since all their cultural, national, spatial, religious and social identity are repressed in their subconscious waiting to be released upon seeing their Lowland again.

Though Geocriticism is a relatively new era of critical investigation, the term "spatial turn" was introduced by Edward Soja in mid twentieth century and has recently been receiving an increasing scholarly attention in literary studies. While engaging in a geocritical reading of a written text, one should observe the manner in which the geographical landscape is portrayed, to what degree the character and the author exhibit the fictional space, to what degree this may be seen as a reflection to one's understanding of the real space and, how human characters act upon, and react to the environment, and how both authors and characters use place and space. In many ways, Geocriticism shares the concerns of Ecocriticism*. Both critical movements complement each other through their common interest in nature, landscape, place and space.

Geocriticism emerged in Europe in the works of pioneer French critics such as Henri Lefebvre and Bernard Westphal and in the works of some American ones such as Robert Jr Tally and Edward Soja. In his groundbreaking book *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre, whose thoughts establish the 'spatial turn,' believes that there are "multitude of spaces ... [such as] geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, [and] global" (8). In the nineteenth century critical consciousness, space was subordinated to time, an indication to the huge time-space compression of the industrial revolution. Foucault affirms that the nineteenth century's great obsession was "history with its themes of development, [...] crisis and cycle, the accumulation of the past, the surplus of the dead and the world threatened by cooling" (*Other Spaces* 330). The early twentieth century witnessed a dominance of temporality over spatiality but in a 1984 interview with Paul Rabinow, Foucault argued that this dominance was

becoming reversed later in the century, observing, “Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (“Space” 140).

A detailed analytical method of Geocriticism was laid out in Bernard Westphal’s 2007 groundbreaking book on the subject. While space is “a concept that encompasses the universe,” place is “a landmark upon which the eye pauses when it surveys a general sense” (4). In a sense, when one becomes familiar with a space, it becomes a place. An area for action and movement, space is the existing physical environment in which the events take place. Related to space and geocritical elements is transgressivity which, according to Westphal, is “a process that accompanies movement and motive.... Transgression corresponds to the crossing of a boundary beyond which stretches a marginal space of freedom. When it becomes a permanent principle, it turns into transgressivity” (46). As Robert Tally has noted, Geocriticism invites readers to engage in a debate about the nature and practices of spatial literature studies(3). It enables readers to reflect upon the representation of space and place, both in the imaginary universe and “in [those] zones where fiction meets reality” (“Introduction” 2). Literary texts are explored to reveal how the author has utilized real and fictional spaces to achieve particular goals.

In the light of these concerns, this paper argues that Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* follows a spatial-temporal interpretation of the postcolonial Indian American society, with particular attention to the role that place plays in this work both objectively and subjectively. It seeks to demonstrate that a spatial perspective predominates the lives of Indian characters and presents

significant insights into their lives through their mental and physical journey in America in their search for a new identity.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

Born to Bengali parents who moved to London and then to America, Jhumpa Lahiri (1967-) takes pride in her cultural heritage. Her novels have made her the main spokesperson for the Bengali community in the USA. She emphasizes that she wishes to present a real picture of the Bengali living in America, the experience of "Indian people being transplanted into a new soil" (Schillinger 1). The diasporic experience involves a sense of cultural dislocation, anxiety in the new land and nostalgia for the motherland. Based on her background and origins in Calcutta, Lahiri's *The Lowland* tells a lot about that location. Lahiri's meticulous description of the Indian lowland provides a lively almost photographic representation of childhood memories and Indian activist movements against British colonialism in the minds of the readers.

The Lowland chronicles the lives of two Bengali brothers—Subhash and Udayan—belonging to the Mitra family who, at first, seem almost identical and inseparable, yet turn out to be of two different attitudes, aspirations and ideologies. They grow up in the lowland of North Calcutta in the 1950s. Their ideologies change when they come of age. While the elder brother decides to migrate to the United States, the younger rejects his brother's proposal of joining him in his pursuit, recalling the turbulent events taking place in India: "How can you walk away from what's happening? There's of all places [sic]" (30).

The Topography of the lowland (Lahiri as a cartographer)

Lahiri dedicates the first chapter to the temporal and spatial setting of the novel. She gives the geography of the place. Her description seems almost like a map of the area:

East of Tolly Club, after Deshapran, Sashmal Road splits in two. There is a small mosque. A turn leads to a quiet enclave. A warren of narrow lanes and modest middle-class homes [sic]. Once, within this enclave, there were two ponds, oblong, side by side. Behind them was a lowland spanning a few acres. 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. (3)

This depiction recalls what Lefebvre calls an "absolute space" filled up with elements of nature located at sites chosen for their intrinsic qualities (48). The novel starts with Tolly Club, one of the remaining colonial symbols in post-colonial India. To show that Indian people are "still affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day"[†](Ashcraft et al. 2), Lahiri inserts some symbols of colonial power. Many Indians, like other citizens of third world countries, already experienced the hybrid identity of post-coloniality, and those who left their homeland added a new dimension to this cultural hybridity.

Lahiri presents the main characters simultaneously with that meticulously described physical setting, inserting the lowland as an integral part of the structure of their personalities. She delineates the overlapping territories of the actual physical geography of the lowland which suggests the

mental mapping of its main characters. Readers may read the two ponds as symbolic of the two brothers as long as they are connected in one place. While the road that splits into two may refer to the two brothers after taking different paths and pursuing distinct interests in life.

So many times Subhash and Udayan had walked across the lowland. It was a shortcut to a field on the outskirts of the neighborhood, where they went to play football. Avoiding puddles, stepping over mats of hyacinth leaves that remained in place [sic]. Breathing the dank air [sic]. (3)

Both brothers live in a closely connected traditional Indian family in Calcutta. The lowland is a place that plays a central role in the presentation of events and characters since it holds their childhood memories and the choices they made together. Lahiri transforms the lowland from a space that "connotes geometric or topographical abstraction" (Buell 63) to a place that is replete with many significant references to characters. She skillfully captures the details of the physical world.

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.

National Identity vs. Search for a new Identity

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri offers a wide range of implicit models of how identity is formed since the search for identity constitutes an important leitmotif in Indian American writings. It is reconstructed in Lahiri's *The Lowland* as a way of adapting to the new host society. For example, Udayan, the younger brother is attracted to the Naxalite movement, a radical left movement that calls for equal distribution of property and income. Its name is derived from Naxalbari, a tiny village near the Indian city of Calcutta where poor serfs rose up against landlords and the police in the 1960s. This movement echoed Mao's earlier revolution in China. Udayan is involved in murdering a policeman, something which brings him to his fatal destiny. He is shot dead by the police in the lowland in front of his parents and his expectant wife, thus he is tied to the lowland forever.

Udayan's identity is formed by his association with his root culture, language and his motherland, Calcutta and the lowland in particular. He discovers his national identity through defining himself in his struggle with the Indian cause. He chooses his own way of living and marries Gauri, his friend's sister, against the will of his parents. He endangers his life by involving himself in the rebellious activities. Having much in common with Gauri, he decides to marry her secretly although the Indian tradition would assume that his parents would have chosen him a wife. Lahiri is against the brutalities exercised by the Naxalbaries in murdering the policeman because "[I]t was they who were innocent of the things he'd done"(404).

Lahiri chooses the Naxalite Movement as the backdrop of her setting. She depicts the turbulent daily life of that movement in the 1970s, the students and the system of education being strongly influenced by what took place at that time with the result of spreading "revolutionary violence [which] opposed oppression"(Lahiri 403). Udayan dipped[‡] his hand in the fresh blood of the policeman, "writing the party's initials on the wall as the blood leaked down his wrist into the crook of his arm before he ran from the scene"(Lahiri 404). Udayan's action indicates that blood-shedding is a means to gain political freedom, obtain national identity, and defeat British colonization. His connection with India has been stories heard from his parents about their ancestral land. Having heard about the Naxalite movement, he fervently joins the activists. He has been distanced and alienated emotionally by his attachment to the Naxalbari. He chooses to be an active part of that turbulent movement to solidify his national identity, proving what Edward Said describes: "Nationalism is an assertion of belonging"(Said 285).

The older brother, Subhash, is an entirely different character who is passive and not interested in politics. When he pursues a PhD in Oceanography in the USA, the Lowland becomes irrelevant to him. Yet, as a dutiful son, he returns to his motherland from graduate school in the United States to console his parents and to honor his only brother's death. There, confronted with Gauri, who is badly treated by his grieving parents, Subhash proposes to her and brings her to Rhode Island in the USA. Here, their relationship to the Lowland seems to end. Though America has been a great attraction for the youngsters to achieve their educational dreams and economic aspirations, it has also been a "melting pot" where the immigrants lose their roots and origins. Even so, Indian emigrants still often struggle to overcome the tensions of diaspora and cultural clash in the host culture

because they still remember places they left behind. Though Subhash tries hard to inflect the US space with his imaginary Indian space, Gauri becomes part of the other vibrant community.

The search for identity is situated within the negating tropes of assimilation. At first, Gauri's past memories of the Lowland does not allow her to fully integrate not only in an intimate relationship with Subhash but also in the cultural milieu of the USA. Though she used to be attracted to traditional practices and indigenous things, she displays no Indian native values. For her, India means marrying Udayan, an activist with an Indian national identity, whom she loves dearly almost all her life. A girl from North Calcutta, Gauri leaves behind her all the ancient manners and attractions. Instead, she receives new ones from the New Land. She tries to adapt to the new weather in Rhodes Island through comparing it to the air heavy with humidity back in Calcutta: "She had grown up in such weather. But here, where just months ago it was cold enough for her to see her breath when she walked outside, it came as a shock, as something almost unnatural [sic]" (Lahiri 169). She wants to get rid of her haunting past, her natural beauty which Udayan used to admire. She strives to define herself through her studies.

Gauri undergoes a tense and turbulent process of identity formation which mirrors the confusion she feels regarding her husband's death during the Naxalite movement. Travelling to the States has been her refuge. Asserting herself academically in a foreign space is for the sake of escaping her dark memories of her motherland. The memories of her past life haunt her while she lives with her new husband, Subhash. Unwilling to let her child know how her father died, Gauri pacifies herself internally: "this was the place where she could put things behind her. Where her child would be born, ignorant and safe"

(148). Her intellectual and academic pursuits are her only means of escape from that past. She prefers to study since her grandfather, a professor of Sanskrit, "died with a book on his chest, who'd inspired her to study what she did." (69).

Transgressivity

Gauri's transgressive gaze is directed towards an emancipatory horizon, that is the US. Gauri's journey to the States allows her a spacious room for liberation. Her long hidden guilt about her role in Udayan's fateful actions in Calcutta still haunts her. Yet, in America she contrasts her safe present with the fearful past in her place of origin. "But she was in a place where no one was afraid to walk about, where drunken students stumbled laughing down a hill, back to their dormitories at all hours of the night. At the top of the hill was the campus police station. But there were no curfews or lockdowns" (148).

Gauri consciously takes alternative pathways. She destroys her Indian clothes, exemplified in the iron bangles and the sari. Such things she used to wear while living with Udayan and his traditional Bengali family. She assumes a new striking look:

She knew that there weren't too many women who looked like her on the campus. Most of the other Indian women wore saris. But in spite of her jeans and boots and belted cardigan, or perhaps because of them, Gauri knew she stood out. (Lahiri 204)

Applying Gordon's words to Gauri as one of a minority group arriving on the scene, she strives to culturally assimilate with the new space (77). Yet, the cruel memories of Udayan's murder haunt her. She is still connected to the Lowland, the place which witnessed her husband's merciless murder. It is this

depressing image that shapes her life in the United States with dark and gloomy shades of unhappiness, dissatisfaction and ambiguity. Lahiri leads her readers into Gauri's stream of consciousness which enables her to move in time and place to an earlier scene in Gauri's life in Calcutta.

[T]he love she'd once felt for Udayan refused to reconstitute itself. Instead, there was a growing numbness that inhabited her, that impaired her (...). Anger at him for dying when he might have lived [sic]. For bringing her happiness, and then taking it away[sic]. For trusting her, only to betray her[sic]. For believing in sacrifice, only to be selfish in the end[sic].
(Lahiri 195)

Gauri's fragmented language indicates her fragmented soul. She becomes weary of her past. She decides to go after her dream. She finds solace in studying philosophy and ignores her daughter. She uses customs, popular culture, and religion in innovative ways to assert herself in the new public space. She leaves all the ancient manners behind her and receives new ones from the new mode of life she embraces and the promising position she gets. She becomes an American by being received in international conferences. In this way, she moves from the margins of the host culture to the center. Moreover, she transgresses against established Indian norms through developing a short homosexual relation with a candidate who was seeking to revise her dissertation.

As transgressivity often accompanies a turn toward a new trajectory (Westphall 46), Guari discovers a newly unexpected and unpredicted pathway. Having a divided identity and feeling fragmented, Guari leaves her young daughter with her uncle, now her stepfather, seeking a career in California College to build herself once again a new identity. She wants to establish

herself as an intellectual in the new space. Unlike many other Indian women, Gauri struggles to create her scholarly personal identity. She frequents conferences to maintain visibility and status. She seeks to make a lasting mark on her host space through establishing herself an academic career. But this vision is not real; rather it is an imagined delusion. She ends up alone, regretting her mistakes at the age of sixty-five when it was too late.

Different Spaces

In *The Lowland*, Lahiri illustrates the experiences of Bengali intellectuals in their journey for America, and their difficult adjustment to the US space and the importance of their place of origin as a part of their identity. Lahiri crosses the borders of place and time. Raised in Rhode Island, she moves the events of the novel from India to America across successive generations as she herself never feels fully Indian nor does she feel fully American. Relocating Indians to the US space means removing the protective shield of the known Indian place. This produces a feeling of insecurity merged with alienation in the new space. Subhash, for instance, tries to hold onto the past and revise history. He is torn between what he should traditionally do and what he shouldn't do. His commitment to the Mitra family means diasporic ties to his motherland and an interest in the Indian culture. His national identification with Calcutta creates complications for his attachments to the displaced space. At first, he was ill at ease at Rhode Island, but he eventually learned to live away from his family members. He maintains a safe distance through leading a diasporic life in America. Subhash's diasporic ties denote cultural and social commitment to his Indian place over that US space of the host land. Feeling nostalgic, he does not break his ties with his ancestral homeland. Though

living abroad, Subhash keeps in touch with his younger brother. He spends several decades in America and he attempts to make a compromise there with his Indian traditions and values. Yet, in order to prosper he has to move with the requirements of the New Land.

Feeling culturally dislocated, Subhash has to adapt to the so-called mainstream culture if he is to reside in America. In fact, he hardly makes a reasonable adjustment to the social values of the New Land which are utterly different from those with which he is familiar back in his motherland. He chooses to spatially isolate himself in a rural area of Rhode Island, trying to find a similarity between the beaches of Rhode Island and the lowland surrounding his native land, Calcutta. According to him, "Both places were close to sea level, with estuaries where fresh and salt water combined" (42). After he marries Gauri, both feel isolated in this New Land. Only once after his marriage does Subhash return to Calcutta with Bela, Gauri's daughter, when his father died. Gauri refuses to accompany them to India as her travel will remind her of her awful past life back there. She claims that she has to finish her thesis in USA. Gauri wishes to fit in culturally and socially to the host land. She becomes fluent in American culture norms with an Indian accent.

During his displacement, Subhash never forgets the Lowland which was a home to him and his brother. It was a place of security and intimacy for both. Subhash's acculturation process goes very slowly. From Lahiri's perspective,

[T]he difference was so extreme that he could not accommodate the two places together in his mind. In this

enormous new country, there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside. There was nothing to link them; he was the sole link. (Lahiri 41)

Though Calcutta and Rhode Island have little in common, Subhash has to find similarities to mitigate his anxiety. He compares the topography of both places: “Certain physical aspects of Rhode Island ... corresponded roughly to those of Calcutta” (41). Both places have “mountains to the north, an ocean to the east, the majority of land to the south and west” (41). Both are surrounded by sea (48). Though Subhash voluntarily travels to and is welcome in the New Land, he does experience pangs of cultural dislocation from his homeland as do most first generation immigrants. He is still connected with Calcutta; it is inseparable from his identity and his history. He suffers diasporic experiences while pursuing his dreams in the new space because his past place is part of him.

Journey for America

Gauri's journey is a way of salvation to escape the painful reality that carries indelibly printed memories in her mind. It is a metaphor of the stages of the human cycle. It is an internalized immigration of the self. Expressing her ardent desire to escape:

She'd wanted to leave Tollygunge. To forget everything her life had been [sic]. In the back of her mind she told herself she could come one day to love him, out of gratitude if nothing else. ...

She left Tollygunge, where she had never felt welcome, where she had gone only for Udayan. (150-151).

Gauri is scarred with memories of a painful past with her husband Udayan, and she attempts to abandon that scarred self by leaving physically for another new and more bright space. This is a transitional imagined journey. The only thread that unites the true historical journey with the transitional imagined journey is the place that witnesses everything, the Lowland. Her only path of salvation is to marry her brother-in-law after the murder of her husband so that she can leave with him. She does not love her new partner; she does not choose with whom she can leave.

The many trials and tribulations of their journey help to purge the burdens of the past. In the case of Gauri, her burdens include her guilt at taking part of murdering a policeman when she was married to Udayan who assigned her some part of that act:

These missions were small joints in a larger structure. No details overlooked. She'd been linked into a chain she could not see. It was like performing in a brief play, with fellow actors who never identified themselves, simple lines and actions that were scripted, controlled. She wondered exactly how she was contributing, who might be watching her. She asked Udayan but he would not tell her, saying this was how she was being most useful. Saying it was better for her not to know. (Lahiri 350)

Gauri reaches an epiphany; she realizes the futility of her past endeavours during her journey. Her husband used her to collect pieces of information on a policeman the Naxalites intend to murder. During her journey she reproaches herself that she was involved in one way or another in murdering the father of a six-year-old boy. Yet her love for Udayan haunts her. She has conflicting feelings: "Anger at him for dying when he might have

lived[sic]. For bringing her happiness, and then taking it away [sic]. For trusting her, only to betray her[sic]. For believing in sacrifice, only to be selfish in the end [sic]"(Lahiri 195).

In their journey to America, Subhash and Gauri' identities are adjusted through conflicts between two different cultural backgrounds. Immigrants can rarely easily adopt the new space. They cannot blend in with the other Americans. It is this slow assimilation of the first-generation immigrants into the US space that Lahiri portrays with great sympathy and understanding. She has largely focused on the problems and tribulations of life that her characters face during their adjustment in the new environment. They are unable to lose their cultural identity and hence feel nostalgic for their origins.

In their challenging literal and metaphorical journeys, each member of the Mitra family is bound to a certain place. Endowing space with real events that took place in front of the characters' eyes, Lahiri roots the characters' Indian culture in the physical world, underlining the Lowland "a sense of place," in the main characters' childhood, during their youth, before the Naxalite rebellion, during the in-cold-blooded murder and even after more than four decades passing. Each character has a subjective and emotional attachment to the Lowland. Such a place witnesses Indian characters' childhood memories and their youth's painful events; it encapsulates and denotes a long personal and national history that will never end by its demographic features. Though the place changes physically after a span of almost four decades, the characters still internalize the Lowland's cultural, national, spatial, political, religious and social identity. Even though some Mitra characters leave India for America as a means of escaping their trauma in Calcutta- hoping to have a rebirth in America- all the previous impressions

are repressed in their subconscious, haunting them at intervals and waiting to be released upon seeing the Lowland again.

Subjective representation of the Lowland: Self & place

The Lowland acts as a character that assimilates the murder of the revolutionary Udayan. The space used to be wild in its topography, yet after the murder of Udayan, it becomes calm since Udayan does not exist anymore. Udayan's mother, Bijoli, frequents the Lowland every day and puts "a few marigold tops and jasmine"(214), a symbol of cruelty of his murder and grief over him, on Udayan's memorial; it is a small stone tablet that his party comrades establish as an acknowledgement of his sacrifice. Yet, much to her astonishment and extreme anger, the old woman notices that "the field is no longer empty"(Lahiri 182). The Indian neighborhood abuses and transgresses the Lowland through their social spatial practices. It is gradually filled with garbage:

Bijoli watches as the two ponds in front of the house, and the tract of the lowland behind them, are clogged with waste. Old clothes, rags, newspapers[sic]. Empty packets of Mother Dairy [sic]. Jars of Horlicks, tins of Bournvita and talcum powder [sic]...The heap forms a thickening bank around the water's edge. (213)

The Lowland becomes a dumping site for the neighbors' waste, something which has devastating effects on Bijoli. Neighbors are careless, detached and indifferent to the natural scenery. They forget what took place to Udayan a time ago in that abused place, the Lowland. For her, the Lowland still carries the shockingly ever-present memory of her son being caught amid the water hyacinths and shot in front of her eyes. The Lowland carries these

social and psychological memories to Bijoli. Though Udayan can never really be brought back to life, she does need to feel his presence. As she goes to the Lowland daily, Bijoli still imagines her son coming into the view in her inner mind, approaching the house after a long day. His "ghost does lurk inside the house and around it"(215). Words disappear and Lahiri employs a non-verbal narration that arouses one's feelings. The Lowland as a place is heard; it speaks out and echoes its memories of the murdered son. Sometimes there is a self-verbal discourse. Bijoli "talks to herself, to no one, tired of waiting. She waits for Udayan to appear amid the water hyacinths and walk toward her" (227). The mother is pitiful since she is denied honouring "his bullet-ridden corpse"(215). Here, the place proves to be a powerful entity that gives Bijoli the therapeutical energy to go on with her life.

After more than four decades, the Lowland becomes lost as a space, due to the construction of some large buildings. Yet, these new physical changes do not mean losing a place. A space turns out to have "a sense of place"(Agnew 5) in only one case: when it succeeds in being part of the identity of the characters and that of the nation. The Lowland witnesses the murder of a member of the Indian Mitra family since their youngest son was involved in killing a policeman in the Naxalite movement. The colonizers justify their actions, including their brutal violence against Udayan, an activist who resists all symbols of colonial rule in Calcutta and is involved in a rebellion launched to uproot poverty and inequality. The Lowland remains a symbol of the abuse and violence of the British on the Indian people.

First-generation immigrants can still return to Calcutta sometimes either to get married to an Indian girl of their parents' choice or to visit their relatives on occasions of paying condolences and the like. They can still have

contacts with their native land. They still carry their valid Indian passports. Subhash's first visit to Calcutta was to console his parents soon after the murder of his brother. Upon his arrival, he saw: "The walls of the film studios, the Tolly Club, were covered with slogans. Make 1970s the decade of liberation. Rifles bring freedom, and freedom is comin."(106). He spots symbols of the British colonization of India such as the Tolly Club, built on an Indian soil. On the other hand, he feels nostalgic for his old days with his brother:

This was the enclosure where he and Udayan had played as children. Where they had drawn and practiced sums with bits of coal or broken clay... Now that he was close, part of him wanted to return to the taxiHe wanted to tell the driver to take him somewhere else (Lahiri 107).

Subhash reaches a real geographical place; it is a place he desires and fears. Feeling tormented, he cannot bear seeing the place where he and Udayan had grown up without his brother. "The lowland, looking to him like a mudflat after the tide"(108). The place is personified and given a human characteristic feature, namely, sight. The place is dark and small as if it mourns the violent death of Udayan. Moreover, Subash "was assaulted by the sour, septic smell of his ... childhood. The smell of standing water [sic]. The stink of algae, of open drains[sic] " (106). These smells evoke memories from the past. All characteristic features of the place have shown up in front of Subhash. The lowland is 'seen, heard, smelled, imagined, loved, hated, feared and revered' (Buell 63). After the murder of his brother Subhash feels that their house is unwelcoming. "There was more space to withdraw to, to sleep in, to be alone in, But no place had been designed to gather together, no furniture to accommodate guests"(112). Lahiri emphasizes the two terms: space and place.

The death of Udayan dispersed the whole family; they are left lonely and no one wants to communicate with the other. To Subhash, the place-the home-means his brother and their memories together and now it is empty of him. There is no place for social gathering that can hold memories. In Subhash's second visit to Calcutta, he accompanies Bela, the daughter of his murdered brother, to see his dying mother. Upon their arrival to the Lowland, Subhash sees

The two ponds across the lane would overflow and become one. Behind the ponds, excess rain would collect in the lowland, the water rising for a time as light as Bela's shoulders. (Lahiri 229)

In Subhash's narration, he refers to certain recognizable and named places. It is quite clear that "the two ponds... become one" metaphorically indicates Subhash after his brother's death; he stands alone. Though Bela rejoices in Calcutta, her grandmother Bijoli thinks that "[s]he's not made to survive here" (Lahiri 232).

Feeling fragmented and dejected after meeting her daughter, Gauri returns to Calcutta (now Kulkuta on the map) after 40 years and it is her national identity that holds her together. The Lowland succeeds in being part of the identity of the Mitra family.

She came to the house in which she was once destined to grow old with Udayan. The home in which she had conceived Bela, in which Bela might have been raised [sic]... She walked past the house, across the lane, and over toward the two ponds. She had forgotten no detail. The color and shape of the ponds clear in her mind [sic]. But the details were no longer there. Both

ponds were gone. New homes filled up an area that had once been watery, open. (382)

Lahiri indicates that Gauri has already lost the two brothers now since "both ponds were gone". She still has a photographic shot of the place in her memory.

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. (Lahiri 382-383)

Being in her place of birth and seeing the demographic area of the Lowland again which ceases to exist, Gauri is forcefully reminded with all her past life, since the Lowland embodies her sociopolitical reservoir. She feels shaken since she is "unprepared for the landscape to be so altered. For there to be no trace of that [horribly tragic] evening [of her husband's murder] forty autumns ago"[sic] (383). The "spirit" of the Lowland persists in defiance of time, conveying "the individuality or uniqueness of a place" (Alexander 39). Though the Lowland as a space undergoes a radically physical change, "it is humanly meaningful through personal attachment, social relation and physiographic distinctiveness" (Buell 145). Therefore, this place serves as a technical tool of purging her long kept hidden secrets of being guilty of murdering a policeman because the place reflects upon Gauri's psyche. She is also reminded of her extended family that is why the place serves as a way for "social connectedness"(Pal 49). After that long age, Gauri feels solidarity with the place which witnesses her husband's brutal murder, now that she means nothing to her only daughter.

Lahiri ends the novel with a flashback indicating the few hours before, during and after the murder of Udayan in the Lowland. She employs a non-chronological order; there is a disparity between the order in which events are presented in the discourse and the events which are reported in the story. She uses "anachrony" or what Mieke Bal termed "chronological deviation"(86). There are repeated references to Udayan's murder, yet readers do not know whatever exactly happened during that awful day. It is as if the chapter mirrors and narrates an inner journey down the memory lane featuring events taken place almost forty years ago. Though Gauri evades remembering what happened in this remarkable place, it comes out vividly in the last chapter of the novel, indicating that the past can never be eradicated as it is part of one's identity. After Udayan's murder, the space is altered and it loses its natural scenery. The present time of the Lowland includes a past that flows. Examining the impact of time on the character's perception of space is another aspect of Geocriticism. Yet, it is destined to remain incomplete. The topography of the Lowland has drastic changes: "The wild ponds...start losing its very existence"(102), something that indicates that the wild Udayan becomes calm and that he is no longer there.

On the other hand, the novel shows an apparent assimilation of children represented in Bela, "a rebel with a tattoo on her ankle." Unlike her mother, Gauri's daughter seems indifferent to her past and she develops a relationship with an American colleague. As a second-generation immigrant, Bela lives in the "melting pot" where social, psychological, political, geographical, and personal ideologies of the past and the present in the homeland and the host land affect one another. Bela acts in a way that pleases her with disregard to the Indian traditions. Though Lahiri presents the novel from various

perspectives, the most important scenes are presented from Bela's perspective as a young hyphenated female narrator who is attempting to understand something which happened perhaps before her life time. Realizing that the man who fathers her is not her real father, she undergoes a trauma, whereby a negative change takes place, and she rejects Subhash. According to her teachers:

She no longer seemed connected to the other students....

In the cafeteria, at the lunch table, she sat alone. She hadn't signed up for any clubs. After school she had been seen walking by herself. (Lahiri 258).

Her teachers suggest that Bela see a psychologist. She has many relationships with several men to eschew questions regarding her national belonging. Though she is the offspring of two loving Indian parents, she lives with two unloving ones. After a time, she overcomes the crisis. In college, she majors in environmental science. She leaves her step-father, and lives on her own. She discovers her new identity through

working as an environmental apprentice in the field, [p]utting in irrigation lines, weeding and harvesting, cleaning out animal pens, [p]acking crates to sell vegetables,[and] weighing them for customers on the side of the road. (265)

She gives birth to an illicit child and chooses single motherhood. She is acculturated and assimilated to the American core culture. Apparently, she does not feel alienated since she is born American, and her only culture lies in American society.

Gauri's actions are responsible for the downfall of almost four generations in one family. She travels to America while pregnant with Udayan's baby in search of happiness and true identity. Almost four decades

passed, Gauri is getting old and weak. When Gauri happens to see her almost 40-year-old daughter, Bela rejects her, falsely telling her little Meghna that her grandmother is already dead. Bela's first encounter with her mother after 25 years of utter absence is cruelly insulting:

How dare you set foot in this house... Why have you come here.... Get out. Go back to whatever it was that was more important ...I can't stand the sight of you...I can't bear listening to anything you have to say....I've known for years about Udayan....I know who I am... You're as dead to me as he is. The only difference is that you left me by choice (374-375 Ellipses are mine).

Bela's words are like bullets that silence her mother. Though Americanized, Bela seems to question the values of her Indian parents. She is deeply pained by her mother's actions. Finally, Gauri decides to go back to Calcutta to see her brother. Despite the turbulent events in India, "[t]he Indian passport she continued to carry, the citizenship she'd never renounced, enabled her, the following morning to board another plane" (378). Much to her bewilderment, she finds no trace of what happened to Udayan in the lowland in North Calcutta forty autumns ago. She realizes the falsity of her whole life:

Scarcely two years of her life, begun as a wife, concluded as a widow, an expectant mother, an accomplice in a crime. It had seemed reasonable, what Udayan had asked of her. What he'd told her: that they wanted a policeman out of the way. Depending on one's interpretation, it had not even been a lie. (Lahiri 383)

She secretly acknowledges her role in the crime during the Naxal movement. "She was the sole accuser, the sole guardian of her guilt. [She was]

protected by Udayan, overlooked by the investigator, [and] taken away by Subhash" (383). According to her, she is "sentenced in the very act of being forgotten, punished by means of her release"(383). She ends up being furious at learning that her dead husband has implicated her in a crime. Bela's hostile response upon seeing her long-absent mother forces the latter to visit Calcutta after four decades. Seeing the Lowland, she purges all her past hidden guilt of being involved in killing a policeman. In Calcutta, she is socially connected again with her brother.

It is through the newly born grandchildren that compromise and reconciliation between generations will be achieved in the host land. Meghna, Bela's daughter, wants to see Gauri again. In a letter sent to Gauri without salutation, Bela tells her: "Meghna asks about you. Maybe she senses something, I don't know. It's too soon to tell her the story now....If she wants to know you, and to have a relationship with you, I'm willing to facilitate that. This is about her, not about me. You've already taught me not to need you." (Lahiri 389).

In conclusion, this paper has illustrated that a spatial perspective helps to illuminate Indian American society as represented in *The Lowland*. The author Lahiri has clearly highlighted the topography of two places: India and America. Such places are brought together through the psychological journey motif for the main characters. She creates an accurate topography of Calcutta, especially the Lowland. She presents a real picture of typical Bengali characters to emphasize the importance of one's place. She brings the essence of one's place into full focus, illustrating its role in the psychology of each character. Though first-generation immigrants try hard to acculturate to the new land, they hardly shed their differences and assimilate with the host

society members since they are always haunted by their place and are genetically tied to it. The paper shows that a return of the immigrant characters to their motherland and their place is highly desirable as it is a necessary part of their diaspora.

The paper argues that though place changes physically; it still bears the same nostalgic and traumatic effect on the main characters since it encapsulates their history and their national identity. Depending on the observer, the Lowland varies in its perspective. Lahiri brings out different point of views allowing diverse perspectives to flesh out and to overcome the limiting images of a given place. The place reflects the self and performs a significant function for each character. For instance, for Bijoli, the Lowland acts as a therapeutical tool to relieve her psychological wounds after the murder of her son. For Subhash, the Lowland is a reservoir holding the childhood memories he shared with his brother and their choices together; such memories reverberate temporally across the lowland and haunt him while he is in Rhode Island. For Gauri, the place both acts as a technical tool of purging her long kept hidden secrets of being indirectly involved in murdering a policeman, and as a social reconnectedness to her brother. Though second generation children of immigrant parents turn Americanized, and seemingly adopt the cultural norms of the host land, they never feel fully satisfied as they are genetically connected to their Indian origins. Therefore, the Lowland forms an individualized terrain for each character that relates the history of British colonization of the Indian nation. The paper shows that it is place that unites all the characters and connects their past with their present. It retells the Indian nation's history, and its struggle against the colonial British. The characters' dream of escaping India for America proves an illusion, since all

their cultural, national, spatial, religious and social identity are repressed in their subconscious waiting to be released upon seeing the Lowland again.

Endnotes:

* For Further discussion on this topic, see *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping territories in Environmental and Spatial Literary Studies*. Edited by Robert Tally & Chritine Battista, Plagrave Macmillan, 2016.

† Postcolonial fiction has great affinity with the two concepts of place, space. In *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature*, Bill Ashcroft et al. assert the importance of reclaiming places in postcolonial literary works. While the experience of colonial people is 'more temporal', postcolonial indigenous people live in a 'more spatial' manner, since the latter seek to reclaim their spaces and places.

‡ This action is reminiscent of a scene entitled "The Wine Shop" in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* when one of the revolutionaries and poor residents of St. Antonine dipped his finger in some mud made red with the dropped wine and wrote on the wall five big letters BLOOD—an indication that the French are soon going to break up a bloody revolution to get rid of injustice and despotism.

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