

**An Ecocritical
Reading of
Richard Powers' *Gain*.**

Dr. Enji Ibrahim Eldesoky

Abstract:

Ecocriticism is very clear in Richard Powers' *Gain*. Through the novel, readers know how man and nature are both abused. Ecocriticism can simply be defined as the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. Eco-critics start from the premise that humans, industry and their bad treatment of the environment are the causes of the problems of the ecosystem. Ecocriticism is about nature and how we relate to nature and how nature relates to us. The novel's main victim is Laura Bodey who is a single mother living in Lacewood, which is polluted by chemicals produced by the Clare Soap and Chemical Corporation. The main focus is concentrated on Laura's suffering from ovarian cancer. Unfortunately, Clare's company for soap and chemicals chooses Lacewood as a suitable place to prosper, turning it to a famous and a rich place. Richard Powers gives us the two stories side by side. He narrates some details about Laura, a forty-two years old woman, who is divorced and has a seventeen-year-old daughter and a twelve-year-old son. Then, he shifts to Clare's Company, telling some other specifics about its history, after that he connects between the company and the minute details of Laura's life.

Keywords:

Ecocriticism- Eco-critics- Eco-feminism- corporation- Lacewood.

المخلص:

تتجلى الحركة النقد البيئية في رواية ريتشارد باورز (المكسب)، من خلال الرواية يتعرف القارئ على علاقة الإنسان بالطبيعة وكيف تنعكس معاملة الإنسان السيئة على الإنسان نفسه. يمكن تعريف الحركة النقد البيئية على أنها دراسة العلاقة بين الإنسان والبيئة المادية، تقرر هذه الحركة أن الإنسان والصناعة ومعاملتهم السيئة للبيئة تتسبب في مشاكل جمة للنظام البيئي.

الضحية الرئيسية في الرواية هي "لورا بودي"؛ امرأة مطلقة تبلغ من العمر اثنان وأربعون عاما، ولديها ابنة عمرها سبعة عشر عاما وولد عمره اثنا عشر عاما. تعيش "لورا" في لاسوود الملوثة بالمواد الكيميائية المنبعثة من شركة كليير للصابون والمواد الكيميائية، يسلط بورز الضوء على معاناة لورا مع مرض سرطان الرحم. من سوء حظ سكان لاسوود أن تختار شركة كليير هذا المكان لتقيم عليه شركتها، وقد أحدثت بها تطورا، وجعلت منها مكانا مشهورا وغنيا، ولكنها من ناحية أخرى أصابت الناس بالسرطانات المختلفة.

وتتركز الرواية على نقطتين أساسيتين: تطورات مرض لورا، وتطورات شركة كليير. يتحدث بورز في فصلٍ عن لورا، وفي الفصل الذي يليه عن كليير، وكيف تطورت من الفشل إلى النجاح الباهر على أشلاء السكان المحيطين بها؛ ولورا هي أحدهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

السياسة البيئية - النقد البيئي - النسوية البيئية - الشركة - لاکوود

Theoretical Background:

All approaches to literary theory discuss the relationship between writers, their texts and the world they live in. In Ecocriticism, as Glotfelty assures, the world is expanded to include the ecosphere. That is to say literature does not exist isolated from the world and the entire ecology. Ecocriticism can simply be defined as “the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment . . . it takes an earth centered approach to literary studies” (xviii). It is also called ‘green culture’ studies or environmental criticism and it points out the relationship between the human culture and the physical world.

Ecocriticism began in the late 1980s in USA and in UK in the early 1990s. The founder of Ecocriticism in USA is Cheryll Glotfelty, crystalizing as a concept in 1970s. The term “Ecocriticism” is preferred in America but in Britain critics choose the term “Green Studies” instead. In USA, Ecocriticism takes its chief concepts mainly from three major 19th century writers: “Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), and Henry David Thoreau (1871-1862)” (Barry 249). The UK version of Ecocriticism depended fundamentally on the British Romanticism.

Eco-critics start from the premise that humans, industry and their bad treatment of the environment are the causes of the problems of the ecosystem. Bressler points out that ecocriticism “relates who we are as human beings to the environment” (231). In the beginning there were nature-oriented non-fiction writings that appeared in England at the hands of Gilbert White and then extended to America. Nature writings play an important role in such an urban society. Glotfelty observes that nature is not the only focus of ecocritical studies but there are some other topics like “frontier, animals, cities, specific geographical regions, rivers,

mountains, deserts, Indians, technology, garbage and the body” (xxiii).

As Ecocriticism is about nature and how we relate to it and with nature literature being as old as the English literature. Many great works dealt with nature and shed light on it, following the picaresque movement. The picaresque was supposed to construct itself mainly on an artistic appreciation of nature but what happens does not conform to the actual parks and gardens. What they tackled applied to paintings not to nature, that is to say nature needs some improvements. Byerly admits that the aesthetic view of the picaresque movement has taught us to value nature, but this is based on the norms derived from the landscape described that makes nature more elite and sublime (Glotfelty 53). Actually, “a living ecosystem, however, cannot achieve that stasis” (54). The picaresque aesthetic originated in England and prospered in America. In America, the true wilderness and landscapes were available only for the privileged few or the upper middle class.

Historically, Bressler assures, Ecocriticism can be divided into two waves: the first wave ecocriticism, dating from the mid1980s to the late 1990s, is based on 19th century works, the leader of the first wave was Lawrence Bell. The first wave ecocritics “used to highlight their chief concerns: place, setting, nature, the earth, and the spirit forces embodied in nature itself” (233). This wave concentrated on works of authors like Wordsworth (1770-1850), John Keats (1795-1821) and others.

The second wave of Ecocriticism comes with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which focuses on environmental problems that humans cause because of using insecticides. She comes to prove that these dangers cause more serious problems than radiation itself. This wave does not follow the first wave which concentrate on Romantic

writers and descriptions of nature. Instead, they highlight “the present- day environmental concerns” (Bressler 233). The second wave eco-critics do not neglect the first wave’s concerns that is why “it is often difficult to declare a particular eco-critic to be solely a first wave or a second wave” (234). It appeared in America first in the mid of 1980s then extended to Great Britain in the early 1990s.

Actually, Bressler assures that Ecocriticism does not suffer from theoretical disputes or fighting on certain perspectives; on the contrary, “there exists no single, dominant methodology by which eco-critics analyze texts” (235). Eco-critics can analyze a text through different angles according to his personal interests. For example, one critic can approach textual analysis through shedding light on the beauty of nature and how it appears in the text by analyzing texts of Romantic writers like Wordsworth or Emerson. Another critic may admit that such natural writing is politically directed, with this critic seeking to discover the ways of protecting the nature or the place the characters live in, through the text. Nonetheless, a third critic may shed light on another aspect; that is “urban nature” and the bad consequences of the industrial system, with these practices having enabled “ecocriticism’s assumptions and beliefs to crystallize into ever-expanding areas of study” (236).

One of the aspects of ecocriticism is eco-feminism which shows the relation between the oppression of women and nature. Ecofeminists believe that the ill-treatment of women is linked to the degradation of nature one way or another. In other words, light is shed on the relation between “the oppression of women and the domination of nature” (Glotfelty xxiv). As men control women, the humans dominate natural objects and other races. Thus, eco-critics can “bring to the foreground the many unjust scenarios of race, class and gender as pictured not only in texts but in society as a whole” (236).

Ecocriticism hopes to achieve a change in our treatment of nature and each other. This comes after turning “literary analysis into political action in the real world” (238). This has a lot to do with solving problems of races degradation, “trying to prove the point that, as land is traded, people are degraded, moved to and from regions as mere chattel in an invidious property system” (Glotfelty 81).

It is important to highlight that Ecocriticism as a theory has little of its own, borrowing some thoughts and beliefs from different schools which sometimes seem to contradict each other. That is to say it is not sophisticated like other philosophical theories, having only one topic to handle which is environment, how it affects us, and we affect it.

William Rueckert is the first one to coin the term “Ecocriticism” in 1978. Mar, on the other hand, after writing *The Machine in the Garden*, began to write books which shed light on ecological ideas. After that, many books followed which threw more light on ecological ideas like Frederick O. Wage’s collection *Teaching Environmental Literature*. Under the umbrella of environmental literature many terms are coined such as “nature writing, deep ecology, the ecology of cities, ecofeminism, the literature of toxicity, environmental justice, bioregionalism, the lives of animals, the revaluation of place, interdisciplinarity, eco-theory . . . the reinterpretation of canonical works from the past” (Love 5).

Ecocriticism has the ability to highlight the study of values if there is an ecological maxim that “everything is related to everything else” (Love 7). Practical Ecocriticism means “human connection with nature and the rest of organic life . . . nature interacts with cultural influences in shaping human attitudes and behaviour” (8).

Ecocriticism can practically mean the relation between the literary texts and what happens in nature; it “invites us to see how world and texts are connected, how they meet and

eventually combine . . . it means to examine how literary creations mirror the ecologies of the “outside world” or how they culturally respond to the crises affecting these ecologies” (Lovino 1,2). On the other hand, Love observes that teaching and studying literature should have a connection to natural conditions of the world and without this insight, this study should be shortsighted. That is why, if we are after describing and criticizing a full human world, we have to adopt ecocriticism.

Richard Powers, a contemporary American novelist, was born in Illinois and his father was a headmaster. His father worked in Thailand for four years; he was eleven at the time and this was important to shape his character. He studied English literature at Illinois University. His father died of cancer when he was 21. He got his M.A degree and decided to go to Boston where he worked as a freelance programmer.

Ecocriticism is very clear in Powers’ novel, *Gain*. Sutherland observes that Powers was inspired with this story by the death of five of his close friends who died of cancer:

Gain is more deeply felt than anything else Powers has written . . . It derives strength (and a welcome simplicity) from its reconnection with the mainstream of American naturalism and the narratives’ embarrassed pathos (355).

It seems that Powers has got the inspiration for his novels from scientific and environmental research. The novel’s main victim is Laura Bodey, who is a single mother. She lives in Lacewood which is polluted with chemicals produced by the Clare Soap and Chemical Corporation. The main attention is concentrated on Laura’s suffering with ovarian cancer. Powers “takes one of the most difficult issues of our time and humanizes it. The issue is corporate culpability. We all know that better living chemistry has its own price and its consequences, but who is to pay? (Clark).

Powers starts the novel with a touching sentence, “when the sun came out in Lacewood you could live” (*Gain* 1). Unfortunately, Clare’s company for soap and chemicals chooses Lacewood as a suitable place to prosper, turning it to a famous and a rich place. Richard Powers gives us the two stories side by side. He narrates some details about Laura, forty-two years old woman who is divorced and has a seventeen-year-old daughter and a twelve-year-old son. Then, he shifts to Clare’s Company telling some other specifics about its history; after that he connects between the company and the minute details of Laura's life.

There is a historical dimension in the novel which depicts the development of Clare’s corporation and how it changed from an ordinary company for soap and candles to a corporation that produces everything, soap, candles, fertilizers, artificial cheeses and pharmaceuticals; thus, “this historical narrative, which is temporally continuous but broken into discrete several-page chunks, is interwoven with that of Laura Bodey” (Williams 3). Powers goes on smoothly narrating the details of Laura’s daily life : her love for gardening and her treatment with her children. Then comes her diagnosis of cancer which is caused by the environmental pollution and harmful chemicals of Clare’s company. In the second part of the novel Laura’s story surpasses that of Clare’s brothers as it portrays “brilliantly if painfully . . . the horrific effects of chemotherapy, which ravages those around Laura, as well as her body and mind” (4).

As it is clear, the two plots take opposite directions, with the Clare’s corporation building its gain , power and fame on the tragedy of Laura and the environment. The growth and success of Clare’s company is based on the tragedies of Laura and the environment. This corporation simply and tragically “causes her (Laura’s) cancer as well as the ecological catalyst that turns Laura’s cells to rogue cancerous ones” (4). Williams mentions that

the Clare plot is one of bustling and entertaining ascent, Laura's a tragic and moving descent . . . the two plots also take opposite but mirrored charges, the Clare plot one of growth through taming nature, its resources and processes, Laura's one of wane through untamed, unnatural growth, succumbing to manmade forces. (4)

Jaffe observes that there are a lot of things affecting the human's future and life because of unknown things. These threats are invisible including "toxins, radiation, co2, inflation, invisible enemies next door"(6). These threats affect the environment as well as the human body. Powers does not allow direct dramatic confrontation between Laura and Clare and this implies that "no such confrontation could resolve the novel's central conflict" (Brooks 442).

Lal assumes that there is a similarity between the presence of the harmful chemicals in the environment and the cancer cells in the human body. They both grow quickly and are difficult to fight. Fighting the "polluting industry is even harder, due to the manipulative powers of corporate giants . . . Lacewood with its Clare Corporation emerges as the microcosm of all highly industrialized capitalist societies, while the sick body of Laura becomes the corpus that is the biosphere"(5). Powers chooses this dangerous disease to reflect what happens to our planet and all humans since the second half of the twentieth century. Thus "the novel is ultimately about the body as well as the whole corpus of the biosphere"(3). A lot of changes and suffering occurs in Laura's body as what takes place in the physical environment. While she takes care of her garden, she uses chemicals to increase the growth of plants but she is ignorant that these same chemicals which she adores and carries in her bag are killing her.

Through the text, Powers draws our attention to the problems Laura faces in taking care of her garden and the confusion occurs to the characteristics of every season due to the global warmth and so on. At the very end, Laura comes to realize that she is the main cause of what happens to her, being the one who is responsible for her own dilemma.

Heinz Ickstadt points out that Powers grounds his fiction in history and experience and at the same time explores contemporary science and technology. In *Gain*, he narrates the history of Clare's fictional company since the seventeenth century, starting from a small family business until it is a global corporation. On the other hand, he tells a history of another family whose protagonist, Laura, is a divorced mother with two children, who is dying of cancer which is caused by the chemicals of the Clare's great corporation. Through the text, the reader knows how Clare is creative, achieving fame and gain, which are linked to "environmental and personal loss" (4). Vishwanathan comments that Powers "shows how science and humanities are actually related"(47). Moreover, Lynch observes that Laura's community fails to understand or manage her illness, and this is symbolized in her death.

At the beginning of her life with Don, Laura had a problem with numbers, not knowing the difference between subtraction and adding. Don used to help her with everything; he has a controlling personality, but he desires to make her happy. When she insists that she should get a job, he stands by her although he does not need money. Actually, she fails to have a job because of her problems with numbers, as a result, she decides to develop herself with numbers. She studies Maths and gets a certificate, and eventually "she graduated in the top third of her group" (42).

Doctors tell Laura that there is a cyst in her womb which is like a little ball of water. She has to do a small operation; they will make a tiny incision to take it out; they hardly have

to use a scalpel. She asks her kids to go and stay with their father for some time, “Guys. Please. I’m going in next Tuesday. You’ll just go stay with your father.”(33).

Laura and Don fail to give their kids, Ellen and Tim, consistency; it is really difficult to discipline them when they live between their father and mother. Ellen is very aggressive with everyone even with her father and mother. As a matter of fact, her father, Don, is unable to know any pieces of information about Laura’s surgery from Ellen. When Don asks Ellen, she just screams at him and talks to him impolitely:

“Stop harshing on me, Daddy.”

“Harshing?”

“Don’t yell at me. I didn’t do anything.”

“I’m not yelling.” Furious, because he doesn’t even know who to be angry at.” . . .

Dad. I’m gonna scream. Know what that means: ‘scream’? just leave me—”

“No, I won’t just leave you—”(40).

Tim, furthermore, is busy with computer games all the time; he has no time to answer anyone even his mother. She desires to talk to him about the games he is playing, “hey, buster. Give me the order of the battle, at least.” (30), but he answers her indifferently, “Tim twitches his shoulders. A deniable shrug”(30). Moreover, Ellen talks to her mother in a bad way; her mother brings many things from the market, and she asks Ellen to help her and put them in the cabinets:

“You could help put some of this stuff away, you know.”

“I could.”

“In the cabinets, I mean. Not your gullet.”

“What difference does it make? It all ends in the toilet, eventually.”

Laura says nothing. Nothing she can do for her daughter but limp with her.(30)

As a matter of fact, Don has a girl friend who does not fit him in age; he is forty-six and she is twenty-eight. Moreover, she cannot stand his kids; she is called Terri and she is very jealous of his ex-wife, Laura. Terri does not want him to visit her at the hospital, but he answers her, “the woman’s having an operation”(70). Actually, he cannot do what Terri asks him; the kids will need to see their mother and who will take the kids to their mother but Don. That is why he decides to take his kids and wait for Laura after the operation. Although he is her ex-husband, he is very worried about her. Dr. Jenkins is the surgeon who is responsible for the operation, so they are expecting her to tell them about Laura’s operation and what really happens to her.

Dr. Jenkins tells the three of them, Don, Tim and Ellen, that Laura has cancer. When Don sees Laura, he could not recognize her as if the surgeons have done something to her face. They have a short talk in which he reassures her and tells her that everything in the operation went well: “Dr. Jenkins said the surgery went very well. She said they’re going to take you to this room down there at the end of the hall, where they’re going to get you set up.”(73).

The following day, the doctor comes to them to make everything clear to her. She tells them that Laura still has cancer cells, and she will need chemotherapy. When Laura hears the word “cancer”, she tries to convince herself that they may have mistaken her x-rays with somebody else. Finally, she tells herself that she is not a kid, she can deal with the situation, “all right. I can deal with this. I’m an adult.”(79). Before the operation, she knew that she had two cysts, one might be good and the other bad. She doubts that they took the

good out and left the bad but after the operation, the doctors assures that both are bad, “Mrs. Bodey, everything was bad. They’ve taken everything.”(80).

Furthermore, Laura suffers a lot; she “never imagined that pain on this scale existed”(80). Don, on the other hand, waits for the surgeon to ask her about everything related to the operation. He asks her too many questions, which reflect that Laura is in danger and he is very tense to know that. He doubts that the doctor is perfect at her work as she tells them that Laura might die very soon; the doctor tells her, “Laura. Listen. People with ovarian cancer die of ovarian cancer”(85). Laura is frightened to know that “she wants to ask, *How long do I have to live?* But words seem rude. You can’t embarrass the physician that way” (84). Laura has nothing to do but to ask Don to go home; she cannot bear his too many questions added to unbearable pain. She tells him, “Don, I appreciate what you are trying to do. But I’m not your wife”(85), and he rises quickly and calmly telling her, “You are still the mother of my children.”(86).

Dr. Archer is the doctor who is responsible for her chemotherapy; he admits to Laura that there will be severe effect on her like not wanting to eat and hearing ringing in her ears. Moreover, her memory is affected a lot by this chemotherapy and she does not remember an important event, the match of her son’s team. Before the operation, she is able to remember everything and she does not forget anything, especially if related to her kids. It is her turn to bring the goodies for Tim’s team, but she forgets. Don calls and reminds her; she goes quickly and buys a lot of candied fruit and blackberry pies for the Tim’s team.

Laura begins to worry about her hair; when she has a shower, she finds a patch of her hair falling in the drain. She is so sorrowful to see this happens; she, “sits on the side of the

tub, nursing her pain, crying as softly as she can, so neither child can hear her.”(143). She feels very sorry and asks the doctor who admits that she will lose her hair very soon, “it is going to get patchy real quick.”(44).

Furthermore, Laura wonders all the time why this happens to her and if this is genetic. She asks the doctors but nobody gives her the desired answer. Nobody in the family has this disease; she does not really know the cause. Her daughter, Ellen, on the other hand, changes a lot with her; she is much better to her mother than before the operation. Her mother is very dear to her now and she reads the magazines to find any piece of information related to her mother's disease. She underlines certain lines and hurries to her mother to tell her that the cause of her disease is toxic emissions. In other words, she wants to tell her mother that it is Clare's Plant, which causes her cancer. Ellen tells her that Lacewood is mentioned among the counties exposed to toxic emissions.

“Here,” Ellen says. “Ri-ight here”. Counties ranked by toxic discharge. Lacewood, Sewgak, Vermilion, Champaign, Iroquois. Area's top carcinogenic chemical emissions. Benzene, formaldehyde, dichlorodifluoromethane, epichlorohydrin . . . (157).

Don sends Laura the same article that upsets Ellen. As a matter of fact, Don is caring for the details of everything. He wants to know everything about Laura's problem; it is his way of thinking; that is why Laura gets bored of him; she can bear a decade of her life only. He analyzes everything, “he once spent half of January researching the perfect summer camps for the kids.” (182). Finally, “she got bored of him to take the world at face value. He wore her down.”(182). Thus, she resolves to leave him and get divorced.

Ken, her boyfriend, is the opposite of Don; he does not care about the world or what other people say. He can even watch any film or do anything whatever it is trivial. Laura falls

in love with Ken who is her kids' age when she goes back to school to complete her studies. He keeps writing sonnets to her day and night. After she discovers that she has cancer, she decides to break down with him. She admits directly, "I want you to leave me"(185). Moreover, another time she tells Ken, "Ken. Look. I can deal with cancer, or I can deal with you. But I can't deal with both."(186). He drives her home, but she decides to go down on the way and walk for a long way.

Powers describes her suffering of the treatment after she knows about her illness. In the beginning, she has hope that it is only a temporary time; every now and then she tells herself that it is a matter of time and she will be healthy again, "Oh, Ken. It won't last forever. Only three more doses" (Gain185). Then powers explains her thought in a wonderful way, "she wants only to reassure him: I won't puke forever. I'll get my strength back. My hair. My color. My self"(186).

As if he is carrying a camera in his hands to photograph her inner feelings, Powers depicts her pain, "she follows the week of the treatment with a week of vomiting, a week of debilitating nausea, and a week of mere massive fatigue, during which her chief illness consists of knowing that next week is a treatment again" (Gain 151). Her work is also affected by her illness; her boss does not want her anymore although "she has grown to be as productive as anyone . . . she does as much business with the castoffs as some agent do with the plums" (198). She tries hard to go on working and not to let her outer shape reflect anything of her disease,

She drinks those cans of Ensure so that she does not seem totally gaunt or wasted. She boosts her arsenal of headgear, trying to find some turban that will not look totally ridiculous with a two- piece suit. She even goes with a tawny wig, one that fits her without making her face seem like a plastic taxidermist's inset (199-200).

Her boss asks her to lunch, and this means that it is either bad news or a great account. He tells her in a roundabout way that she is fired for some time:

“Would you like to take a little break?” he proposes a propos of nothing.

“Break?” she asks.

“Sure. Go play. Some place warm.”

“I’ve got kids, Lindsey.”

“Bring’em. Relax somewhere. Vacation. Get better.” . . .

“You want me to stop working?”

“Just for a while. I’m not saying you should not come back later. When you feel

You like it”

“I feel like it now, Lindsey.”

“A lot of people have been upset, Laura. Upset for you of course.”

“People? What people? You mean the other agents?”

“I mean people. The people we work with. The people we work *for*”. (Gain 201)

After hearing this, Laura feels upset and desperate, to the extent that she cries. All what she cares for now is cash, how she can afford enough cash for her kids and her treatment. Her boss says that she does not help the company to be more competitive because of the changes of her shape due to her illness. She defends herself, saying that she pays a lot of money to change her style of clothes, covering her head, “We need to be more competitive . . . she begins to cry. Then harder, because of how stupid it is, to cry here . . . she can’t control herself, she sits there sobbing” (202), then she tells him “I wear these scarves. I’m spending a fortune on the damn scarves” (202).

Her boss does not care for her because, in such a capitalist society, everyone worries about his own gain. Instead of helping her, he prefers to concern himself with his interest, although she was a perfect worker one day. At the same time, he makes himself very generous by asking her to eat whatever she wants, the company will buy everything:

“Cry. It’s good for you. Not healthy to keep all that bottled up.” . . .

“What am I Supposed to do for cash?”

“We can get you a little cash. For starters.” . . . “Have whatever you want,

It is on Millennium”. (Gain 202)

Laura’s neighbour, Janine, pays her a visit, talking to her about her husband who died of cancer. Janine’s husband, Jimmy, worked for Clare for twenty-three years in the Operations and Maintenance Department. Both Laura and Janine think that Clare is the cause of their cancer:

“Your husband worked for Clare?”

“Operations and Maintenance. Twenty -three years. You know

what we means : O and M”

“No. Not really.”

“Me neither, sister.” Janine laughs, from way down.
“And Jimmy

didn’t either, really. It meant do whatever those folks told him to do.”

“And you think that working there made him sick.” . . . “I think

It’s in the air and in the water, now it’s in the ground.
Builds up in the food.

Every year a little more. You don't have to work with them. They'll come to

you. You don't even have to live in town." (215-216).

Laura discovers that she is surrounded by Clare's products in her house; she still thinks that they are nice products and she cannot get rid of them, "who's going to throw away all their health and beauty products on a may be? Hell" (216). Her journey of suffering does not end; the medicine that cures her is very expensive and insurance pays for ineffective medicines only. She talks to her doctor, Dr. Archer, about the matter:

"The customary isn't working. Don't they have to pay a treatment that works?"

"We can give you the expensive ones," Billing says. "But you'll have to pay for the difference." (226).

Laura is desperate to find a cure that makes her sleep without groaning, her daughter opens her bedroom door to ask her, "Are you alright?" . . . "Mom you were like groaning. Should I call the doctor?" . . . "I'm sorry sweetie. No. Don't do anything just . . . just shut the door" (227). At last, she decides to go to the library and read about cancer and its causes, to make sure that Clare Company is the main cause of cancer in Lacewood. She asks Marian, the librarian, "I'd like to find whatever I can about ovarian cancer." (232). She tells her about the electronic index; later, she understands what she is after and handles her a vertical file about, "Industrial By-products and Health, Lacewood and Sawgak Countries." (233). She has a talk with the librarian and concludes that what happens to her is because of environmental causes and Clare Company:

Marian is looking at her. "That's it, isn't it? What you were after?"

It is exactly what she was after. Laura fixes on Marian's gaze and takes a chance.

“Do . . . sick people come here often?” The question that no index indexes. “I mean a

lot of people come in looking for . . . ?” . . . Marian's eyes sweep upward, studying

that spot near the ceiling where the human calculator tape prints out its subtotals.

“Umm . . . every few days?” she tries. “Yes. I'd say pretty much every few

days.” (233).

Laura deduces that most of the people in Lacewood or industrial cities die of cancer. In other words, Clare company is the cause of this awful disease:

it seems a kind of epidemic ... not just the neighbor's sister-in-law's father. It's everywhere ... everybody is battling cancer. Why did she never see these people before ... A boy two years younger than Tim rests against a stack of pumpkins, his skin an eerie green.(242).

Laura finds an article written in a clipping file which is entitled, “Cancer Tracks Chemicals, Not Chance, Workers Claim”. This article refers to three workers who worked for Clare Company and ended their life with cancer. She finds these facts:

Three years ago, Roberto Santiago, Paul Meyers, and Willy Liu worked in the same production facility in Clare's Agricultural Products Division, just west of town. Roberto inspected and loaded stock. Paula operated a bagging machine. Willy cleaned the equipment that made Clare's BugBlaster seed-coating crop enhancer. They

made between 7 \$ and 9 \$ an hour. All three felt lucky to have a job. Today, Roberto has a tumor in his testicle, Paula is fighting cervical cancer, and Willy is dead.(245).

Laura realizes that she is deceived by the world she lives in; she decides to forgive her ex-husband; she feels that she should not have made all these problems with him. Don, her ex-husband, cares for her, drives her to the doctor, calls her every day:

Whatever happens from here on excites her. Now feels warm upon her face. Don leans over to her in the orange dark to tell her something . . . like some bonfire from ten years before. Like no human has ever been foolish. Like there's no such thing as forgiveness. Like there's nothing to forgive. "Have you heard the news?" he whispers. "What news?" just the idea of the news now seems a moving violation. "Lawsuit against the company. Against Clare."(247).

Don urges her to take an action against Clare; he calls her three times a day. He infers that there are many workers in the company suffering from different forms of cancer. He wishes to join the lawsuit against the company as a class action, people of Lacewood vs Clare. He talks to her again and again trying to convince her telling her that nobody in the family had this disease; so the main cause is living close to Clare:

"I really think you ought to look into this case," he tells her . . . "It wouldn't kill you to take an interest in all this," Don says . . . "You're young. You had your children young. You are on the Pill. You were on the Pill," he corrects. Giving until it hurts. "You're not an immigrant. You're not an Ashkenazi. Are you? Nobody in your family has ever come near the disease" . . . "They just want you to answer a few questions," Don wheedles, "Why not let them decide whether your chart has any interest to the case." (257).

After this long speech, she decides to go to the library to read all the suitcases against Clare Company. She puts a note on the left corner of her bathroom mirror, but the problem is that she lost interest in looking at the mirror these days. She suffers from many defects in her face and skin and memory, in general. She cannot remember many things:

Her body scares her now . . . Her memory is shot; she cannot form complete thoughts. She weeps or rags at random. No one can tell how much of the changes come from the cancer, how much from the chemo, how much from the whiplash of coming off those meds, how much from having her sex organs yanked out by the roots and replaced by more pills. Whatever the cause, she no longer recognizes the scraps of person left to her .(258)

Laura totally changes from outside and inside: before cancer, she did not use to complain. She was known for her tough nature and stoicism, “her old stoicism dissolves . . . Even Don used to admire how tough she was . . . She never complained . . . she went to work on days when she couldn’t keep her eyes from crossing in agony” (260). She decides to visit the doctor as she cannot sleep because of pain. When the doctor asks her to describe the pain, she is not able to describe it:

“Describe the pain,” Dr. Archer asks her. “Is it sharp or dull? Local or general?”

“Just pain,” she says. “Bad. From the bottom of my ribs to the top of my thighs.”

“When?”

She shrugs. “All the time. My chest feels heavy. I run out of breath.”

“Does the pain wake you up?”

“How did you know? Sometimes the pain, and sometimes the ringing in my ears. The

tips of my fingers are going dead too. It's like I'm wearing mittens. I can't hold a pen

anymore. I'm always dropping things.” (260).

The symptoms of the treatment never end; the doctor gives her medicine that destroys her immune system, “they pump her with one drug to destroy and another to rebuild . . . it's just like life, this chemotherapy. The cure is even worse than the disease” (261). Through all this, Don takes the chance to drive her to the doctor. She also begins to like him again, “Don would jump at the chance to play the driver . . . why she can't let him. Lately Laura has felt an odd concern for that twenty-something twit Don's been dating” (262).

Things get worse and she cannot move without stumbling but she struggles and wishes to defeat cancer. The nausea is more severe now than when she was pregnant. Her doctor asks her to stick to mental exercises as her way of thinking and positivity can push the treatment forward. He asks her to repeat some chants like, “My whole life is still in front of me. Each breathe I take makes me stronger” (275). She wishes to recover; she dreams of living with her kids until they grow up; she tells herself, “Half of ovarian cancer can get cured. Half's a good number” (276).

Everybody celebrates Christmas but Laura does not: she does not like to go out. She prefers to wrap herself in the bed, even the three steps to the bathroom exhaust her, “she's going to no parties. Just rolling over in bed is a full morning activity . . . she can walk, but with great pain. The hospital sends a wheelchair, which she rapidly learns to need. She looks like the ghost of Christmas” (306-7).

Before cancer, Laura did not care about money but now things are different. She loses her job, health, money, rest, and

everything. She thinks how she can pay for basic things of her daughter and son. At last, she decides to let them go to Don, their father and ex-husband, although it is not easy to do this and imagine herself without money. She is very tired of thinking; she wants to rest, and this is all she cares about, “the money she sets aside to get her through spring is almost gone. She has lived so many years without worrying about cash that she can’t believe real need. She cannot bring herself to imagine being without, despite how much closer to without she has come” (309).

Her daughter and son, Ellen and Tim, try to make her happy by giving her a lot of presents in Christmas Eve, although they do not have enough cash to cover these presents. They do this to express love and care for her:

The kids—God knows where they have gotten the cash—shower her with small things. Chocolate-covered peanuts to fatten her, books on positive thinking, long spy stories, more visualization tapes. She opens them one after the other, smiling and thanking without respite. (309)

When Laura’s doctor tells her, “Don’t expose yourself to toxic chemicals at home or at work”, she starts to think of all toxic chemicals she was exposed to. At last, she discovers that everyone is surrounded with dangers and causes of cancer. She decides that it is very hard to change her habits. She has to avoid using many things like beef, chemical toothpaste, garden sprays, dandruff shampoo, cooking oils and many other items to return her back to health:

From hair spray to charred barbecued burgers. The paints and paint strippers. The hair color treatments . . . All the diet sodas, which she loved . . . cucumber and squash and baked potato. Fish, that great health food . . . garden sprays, cooking oils, cat litter. Dandruff shampoo. Art

supplies. Varnish. Deodorant. Moisturizers. Concealers.
Water. Air. The whole planet . . . life causes cancer. (323)

Moreover, Laura receives a message that is really an open message to everyone who lives in Lacewood and some other cities surrounding Clare Company. It is an article written in Sunday Post-Chronicle, which asks anyone who has an illness that he or his doctor believe it has an environmental cause to write to them. They want to sue a class action against the manufacturer of Clare, “if you have an interest in the current class action suit being lodged against the area’s largest manufacturer. If you would like to be considered for inclusion in this suit. Please respond to the following post office box no later than March 21” (323).

For the first time, she starts to build her thinking on facts. She has doubts that what happens to her is due to living close to Clare Company; her doubts are assured now. Don has talked to her many times about the matter, but she did not like the idea. It is her chance now to participate in this class action; why not and everyone is harmed because of Clare. She clips the letter out of the magazine and puts it on the fridge so she can think of the matter. After that she gets sick of looking at it again and again, so she decides to change it to another place, then to many other places. At last, she puts it on the dining room table.

In the following day, Don comes to do something, in the house, which his kids can not do. They have a long speech about this matter and Laura is very angry. She does not like to be part of the class action. According to her, she does not like to profit from cancer, “cancer is not something that I really want to profit from.” . . . “It’s not a question of profiting, Lo. Do you want to just stand aside and let them profit, while everybody else picks up the tab?” (324). On the other hand, Don thinks that she should have some kind of compensation and she thinks that nothing can compensate her. He tells her,

“I just think you should deserve some answer. Somebody owing up. Some compensation” (325).

At last, he tells her that she should think of her kids, “It’s not just you,” he confides. “You have to think of the kids.” “The kids?” (326). When he tells her these words, she changes her mind totally. Her kids are the most precious thing in her life and She is ready to fight or even steal for them. She forgets the harsh conversation with Don and does not even remember why it happened. Instead, she tells him, “Don. Don. What difference does it make now?” (327).

Her body suffers more now, a day after another. When she walks for few steps, she stumbles. The second floor is too difficult for her to ascend; it is “like another country” (332). She likes reading, which is her favourite hobby. She decides to read some of the books she gets from Marian, the librarian. She gets some books about cancer and its causes but, unfortunately, she does not understand a word. She thinks that “she’d have had to start ten years before getting sick, just to know what hit her” (333).

One day she wants to go out for a walk although it is not easy to do this. She asks her kids, Tim and Ellen, to take her out to a historical place, choosing The Riverton Mansion. Ellen can drive her but Laura refuses as she decides to walk; it is good for her stamina. Ellen tells her that she can wheel her, but she disagrees. She determines to walk slowly, and she takes one child under each arm. Ellen walks beside her as if baby steps. Laura waits until Ellen reassures her to go on or not, “Go on Honey . . . I’m fine” (333).

The place she resolves to visit is a historical one; it has different departments, with each department telling the visitors about the history of something. They find an old mechanical corrugator, old radio gear. Then they find a department about Clare collection and she stops to read everything about them

and how they develop themselves and achieve gain and fame in thirty-six years. She thinks again of the class action and to what extent they might succeed.

She vows to boycott all Clare products, but she fails since she finds her house full of Clare products, in the cabinet, on the floor, her shower, under the sink, on the stove, on the shelves, in the garage and in the garden, “her vow is hopeless. Too many to purge them all. Every hour of her life depends on more corporations than she can count. And any spray she might use to bomb the bugs would have to be Clare’s, too” (345).

Laura speculates again and again about who made them produce all these things. It is as if cancer is in the air she smells. They know very well how to achieve gain and interfere in every minute detail in everyone’s life. But she comes to herself and admits that she buys these products by choice; no one compels her to collect them from the shopping centers. Is she right to sue a class action against Clare while she buys their products with a will?, “she brought them in, by choice, toted them in a shopping bag. And she’d do it all over again, given the choice. Would have to” (346).

Dr Archer decides to operate a surgery for her, which may help her. After the surgery ends, Don is astonished to find cancer penetrating her abdomen. The scans of her operation reveal that there are two new nodules, one on her liver and another under her armpit. Don is very angry and tells Dr Jenkins that it is a surgical fault. Dr Archer comes to Laura and tells her that they can start a new operation:

“There is a shadow on her liver and another one under her armpit.”

Don Lays into her. “This is the fault of the surgery, isn’t it?”

“Mr. Bodey, surgery did not cause—”

“The knife spread the cells around. How else could they have gotten—”

“Mr. Bodey, I know you’re upset.”

“Upset? Why? Just because what you’re calling her treatment had practically killed

her? And for what? What did all the torture do for her but speed up her—” (359).

Marian, the librarian, sends Laura some books about positivity and how positive attitude can fight any disease. Everyone around her endeavors to support her; Ellen lets her watch comedy films only, Dr. Jenkins cannot mention the word “death” to her, and Don does not help her to sell her car. Nevertheless, Laura is very honest with herself and she cannot deceive herself, feeling that she will die soon. Many things, she resolves to do many things secretly; she desires to leave everything settled for their kids. She takes the plastic three ring binder she used to put her kids’ schedules inside and labels it “Funeral”. She can deal with everything and whatever happens except that she cannot leave them without a mother.

Moreover, her garden is very precious to her, wishing to plant again. She believes that if she is able to plant it again, she will be all right, “If she could just get the soil ready again, sink her hand in wrist deep, she might still be all right” (361). There are twelve feet only, between her and the garden but she cannot move. She walks some steps and looks from the window; she glances at her daughter wearing her boots and gloves to achieve her mother’s wish. Ellen asks her mother, “Am I doing it right?”; Laura answers her, “Yes. Perfect.” (362).

The hospital sends Laura a bill for the chemotherapy before they finish the treatment. Her insurance does not cover the overnight drip as it is not regarded as an essential service.

She tells Don, "What do I do? . . . I can't afford this" (362). He asks her to contest them by telling the firm that handles the class action against Clare since they want to talk to her. The scientists search for all types of cancer and know her records of ovarian cancer. They prove that her cancer is caused by their products, their pesticides. He points out their discoveries in detail:

The theory is that certain ring-shaped molecules . . . ones with chlorine in them, get taken up into the tissue of women. The body turns them into something called xenoestrogen, which very long-lasting. These fake estrogens somehow trick the body, signal the reproductive system to start massive cell division. There's a new study out (363).

All the people, who have diseases because of Clare, ask them for money. Don urges Laura to do like them as there are proofs now that her ovarian cancer is caused by estrogen which exists in their products, and they cause ovarian cancer especially. She comes again to herself and thinks the opposite way; she remembers how Clare helps her and changes her life for the better. Sometimes she thinks that she should sue them and get every penny from them and cut them into pieces. The hospital sends Laura a nurse to care for her as a kind of apology. Firstly, they send her a frightening nurse called Maria, then a good one named Catherine.

Day after another, Laura suffers from more symptoms; she has a sciatica in her leg that makes her unable to walk. Her left arm cannot roll the wheelchair anymore, so the hospital sends her a hospital bed that is motor controlled. This means that she sits in bed all the time, for she can raise its head and then lower the head and sleep. On the other hand, Ellen sits beside her and amuses her with tales about her high school. Also, Tim asks her if she wants him to look up anything for her on the computer.

Laura becomes weaker and weaker; she cannot move up or down from the bed to sit in her wheelchair; so the hospital sends her a device that aids her to load and unload from the bed. Don comes to help her and put her carefully on the wheelchair; she cannot even talk easily:

By the time they get her staked out in the corner, ready for a chat, talking has become too great an effort. The words don't catch anymore. They slide out of her throat on little bubbles of phlegm. Don tries not to make her repeat anything, although she knows he's not catching all she says. (376)

In addition, Laura cannot eat easily, and she exerts a great effort to do so. Don is lifting her up and down from the bed. She feels pain all day and night and bites her pillow at night so as not to wake up anybody at night although the pain is more severe now. Don attempts to make her happy, admitting that Clare has offered them a settlement, a significant sum. She does not desire to know how much the sum is, as she contemplates that no sum can compensate for her health and the pain she feels now. She is highly grateful to Don and thanks him for everything:

she looks at this man, his diligent dispatches. He wants her to be happy. Has worked for this. Lobbied. She wants to be happy for him. The survivors always have the hardest row. "Thank you," she tries. "For everything." (379).

Tim, Laura's son, comes back from school and finds his mother unable to breathe. Really, this happens because she has dreamed of a funeral and a burial. He does not know what to do and calls his dad who is at work. Don sends her an ambulance which takes her to hospital. They stand around her bed as guards, with Tim saying that the nurse should have

been there. Laura comments by saying that he has done the right thing, and she is unable to talk:

The boy is shaken now that the immediate danger has passed. "She was fine when we left this morning. The stupid nurse was supposed to be there at . . ."

"Hush sweetie," Laura croaks. "You did everything right." He must lean against her to hear." (389)

On the other hand, Dr. Archer asks them to keep a closer eye on her for a few days. The doctors increase the dose of morphine to her because she feels pain everywhere in her body. This morphine makes her unable to eat or does anything. Her kids come to her every day, sit beside her and read their schoolwork to her. She stays at hospital for twelve days; she reaches the end of the free emergency hospitalization after which she should pay 50 percent of the cost. On the same day, the last hours in her life, she was smiling. Ellen tells herself that her mother is smiling to her, "A smile, Ellen tells herself, for the rest of her life. Mother, glad for me." (392). Don, on the other hand, sits alone with her, telling her, "Lo, La. I love you" (393).

Many people attend Laura's funeral, with Don meeting her best friend, Hannah, and marries her for seven years. On the other hand, Ellen studies botany at Sawgak, she falls in love with Tom whose main his hope is to make her happy. She keeps her sum of the settlement and never touches it. Tim studies computer science and falls in love with two fake women, with the first one toying with him for two months before graduation. The other one is a married woman who uses him only to hurt her husband.

Don is really a great man, helping his wife and serving her even after he is separated from her. Moreover, he cares for his kids. Laura, on the other hand, is very successful in her work and, at once, her life changes upside down, and matters get from worse to the worst. She loses everything including

her work, money and health but she still has a caring family. Her kids love her so much and do everything to make her happy and care about her. Laura is a great mother who adores her kids, not caring about her pain and suffering from cancer.. She is busy thinking about nothing but her kids and how they will live after her death without a mother. She agrees to participate in a class action against Clare although she is not very convinced of the idea. Simply, she is sure that nothing can compensate her, but she seeks to get as much money as she can for her kids.

Laura gives up her beliefs of Clare although she has admitted before that Clare is a successful company producing a lot of useful products.. This company cares about gain and profit only. Their products are not safe, but this bitter fact makes no difference to them. Most of the people who live in Lacewood and the nearby cities suffer from different kinds of cancer. Clare's products are nothing but a curse to people and to the environment around them. Edward Powers highlights the fact that everything affecting the environment has its impact mainly on man. The novel is a cry against harmful chemicals and unsafe products. Thus, ecocriticism is clear through the novel, illustrating bad effects on both man and nature. One day Lacewood was a green county with a fresh and healthy air. Unfortunately, it has changed to be a curse on people who live there because a man decides to achieve gain, fame and money. Man, nature and environment suffer a lot. Laura is a symbol of every man who lives in modern life surrounded by dangerous and toxic chemicals.

Powers aims at wakening up the conscience of the national and international corporations, as if drawing their attention to how they destroy the life of other people in cold blood. They use toxic chemicals and produce dangerous products in the name of development, turning a blind eye towards the results and how most people will suffer. They

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Dr. Enji Ibrahim Eldesoky

make themselves very generous by giving the victims a settlement, which is nothing compared with the harms brought about by the chemicals. Nothing can but how they compensate Laura for her life which has been destroyed by cancer, torture of chemotherapy and at last, and final loss of her life and family.

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