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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Between Roots and Wings: Nature as a Mirror of Growth in Lahiri's Fiction

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Abstract

This paper explores nature and the relationship between self-development and nature in the works of Lahiri through an ecocritical and postcolonial theoretical lens. It explores the way natural components poetically mirror the emotional and psychological paths opening up and a timeless tension between 'roots' and 'wings', between cultural belonging and self-identity. Building on the scholarship of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, the researcher contextualizes Lahiri's stories between ecological and postcolonial frameworks. It unveils issues of displacement, companionability, and environmental atonement. These results illustrate that Lahiri's depiction of nature cannot be separated from forms of self-exploration and cultural contestation, cementing the integral contribution of ecological agency in forming identity. This study thus adds to the discussion of environment and identity in contemporary studies of literature, demonstrating Lahiri's ability to prompt her readers into a consideration of the mutuality of self and nature.

Keywords: Personal Growth, Environmental Consciousness Cultural Heritage, Identity, Displacement, Belonging

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri (1967), born in London and grew up in the United States, daughter of Bengali immigrants, was born in London and grew up in the United States is a leading contemporary Indian American author, whose beautiful writing capturing the immigrant experience and identity has had a major impact on the world of literature. Her works raise the voice about the difficulties of living and shifting between cultures, embodying the emotional, psychological and cultural negotiation her characters experience. Many of Lahiri's stories deal with characters who struggle to reconcile their cultural heritage with their experience of life in a foreign world. Lahiri's subtle representational strategies of characters traversing both cultural and geographical borders, as well as her attention to natural settings, create an enticing space for investigation through the lens of ecocritical and postcolonial approaches. In this paper, the researcher contends that nature plays a crucial metaphorical and literal space in the fiction of Lahiri, echoing and facilitating her characters' struggles for self-actualisation and cultural negotiation in the diasporic experience and highlighting the complex interconnection between its ecological and cultural facets.

Nature playing an important role in the development of identity and the self is a recurring theme in Lahiri's writing. The seasons, landscapes, and environmental elements in them are responsive mirrors to the inner lives of her characters, internalized realities allowing pause and self-reflection, including past reliving, and future making. Appropriately, nature serves as a literal and figurative transformation that emphasizes the interconnectedness of the human experience with the ecological landscape. The garden, the season, the landscape, these are two things — it points to duality, it is cultural, it is a reflection of the cultural grounding and a shelter of personal freedom. Ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment, the encoded human-nature interactions present in texts as well as their correlation to humanitarian and environmental concerns occurring throughout the real world. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue critically engaging with the ecological dimensions of literature to understand the interplay between human experience and the natural world. On the other hand, postcolonial theory takes aim at the cultural, political, and historical inheritance of colonialism, emphasizing displacement, hybridity, and identity negotiation.

Literature Review

Kamlesh Dangwal's *Diasporic Consciousness: A Study of Identity Crisis in Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth* explores the cultural frictions between immigrant parents and their US born offspring and touching on loss, memory, identity, nostalgia, and hybridity. This paper discusses the nuances of diaspora, such as uprootedness, assimilation, and inter-generational tension between tradition and modernity. Similarly, Eleonora Natalia Ravizza's *Lahiri's Narratives of Self-Translation as Dynamic Encounters with the Other* analyses Lahiri's work, *In Altre Parole*, describing language as a domain of exile and reunion, re-configuring ideas of self and non-self. The article *De Dove mi Trovo a Whereabouts: Lahiri e a Autotradução* focuses on her Italian novel *Dove mi Trovo* and its English rendition exploring Lahiri's self-

translation practice, emphasizing her unconventional approach and personal reflections on the translation process. V. Vijaylaxmi investigates the lingering psychological impact of colonialism, arguing that despite physical independence, colonial ideologies continue to shape identities across generations in *Colonial Consciousness in Lahiri's 'The Third and Final Continent*. The paper, *Mapping Identity: A Psychogeographical Exploration of Urban Spaces in Lahiri's "The Third and Final Continent"* by Dr M. Bhavithra examines the protagonist's navigation through Calcutta, London, and Boston, traversing time and space, revealing the intersections of geography, migration, and identity. Dr. Neelam Mor's *A Study of Emotional and Cultural Longing of India in Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies* analyses Lahiri's remarkable depiction of diasporic consciousness, emphasizing the tension between cultural roots and the challenges of assimilation. addressing the cultural tension between immigrant parents and their American-born children, as well as other tropes of identity, nostalgia and hybridity. The piece grapples with the complexities of diaspora — rootlessness, assimilation, negotiating between tradition and modernity from one generation to the next.

By analyzing two stories and one novel, the study offers new perspectives on Lahiri's portrayal of desire both emotional and cultural in the experience of diasporas. Although previous scholarship has offered significant contributions to the understanding of Lahiri's diasporic narratives, a noticeable absence is the critical lens through which ecological and spatial themes can be used to navigate and negotiate the bridge between cultural heritage and the evolution of self. Future study could examine how nature and landscapes in Lahiri's works enhance themes of hybridity, migration, and belonging. An exploration of her written canon in this context would enrich comprehension of her artistry and elaborate a more nuanced analysis of the relationships between environment, identity, and the diasporic experience.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology, utilizing close textual analysis of selected works by Lahiri, including *The Third and Final Continent* from the short stories collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), the title story, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) and *Whereabouts* (2021) to explore the symbolic role of nature in shaping characters' identity and transformation. This study examines how landscapes and environments serve both as metaphors for the emotional and cultural transitions of the immigrant experience and as sites of displacement, according to hybrid and belonging. It also incorporates secondary academic sources such as critical essays and articles to situate Lahiri's work in the larger literary and cultural discussions around themes such as identity and personal development in relation to natural imagery, creating a more comprehensive analysis of the different interactions between these elements.

Discussion

Lahiri uses the natural world as a mirror throughout her narratives reflecting emotional, psychological and cultural journeys of her characters. *The Third and Final Continent* is the story of the protagonist's migration from Calcutta to London and finally to Boston, a physical

journey that mirrors the character's profound emotional and cultural transformation. At first, the protagonist's relationship with Boston is one of alienation. As Lahiri presents Mrs. Croft, embodying rigid social norms, highlights this cultural divide: ""Lock up!" she commanded. She shouted even though I stood only a few feet away. "Fasten the chain and firmly press that button on the knob! This is the first thing you shall do when you enter, is that clear?"" (178). This vividly portrays the cultural distance he must traverse. This is the imposition of a 'colonial spatial order' that Huggan and Tiffin discuss in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010) where rules and expectations are foreign to the migrant. Colonial spatial orders are imbued with boundary and hierarchy, and they seek to order and contain the movements of people and resources (12).

The narrator's relationship with Mala becomes a bridge that creates what the authors term an "environmental hybridity." She offers him a crucial cultural bridge, allowing him to link his Indian roots to his American present. He is 'negotiating' the Charles River that has a 'rippling' surface — as well as his own internal turmoil, in constant flux and levelling to that speechless place of acceptance, tolerance and learning to live with it. Lahiri depicts peaceful evenings along the river, "In the evenings we walked to the Charles River to watch sailboats drift across the water, or had ice cream cones in Harvard Yard" (196) which mark his tentative immersion into the rhythms of his new life. Based on Huggan and Tiffin's elements, the protagonist's involuntary movement through the backdrop exemplifies various stages of environmental displacement. The contrast between the organized space of Boston and the wilderness of Bengal reveals the colonial order being imposed over a land that did not originally adhere to the same division of space. Huggan and Tiffin add that this is not a simple question of physical relocation, but the breaking of once-familial relations with place and the institution of yet-more-familiar, often alien geographical orders (6). This displacement is evident in the protagonist's initial alienation. But with the passage of time, he drifts between his native tie to the land and the foreign ground of being home, constructing a hybrid identity that blurs and assimilates both worlds. The protagonist learns to make his home in this new space, all the while refusing to erase his past entirely. The river's steady flow embodies this negotiation, a balancing act between 'roots' and 'wings.'

The unwavering flow of the river, an echo of his journey, plays carefully alongside his past, and future. It turns into a 'site of negotiation,' embodying the 'transformative power of nature.' As Huggan and Tiffin might say, rather than a mere setting, the river is an agent in the protagonist's journey, a liminal space in which he negotiates identity. Flowing of the river signifies flowing of time and the flowing of the protagonist's life. Huggan and Tiffin mention a migrant's ability to re-establish a sense of place and belonging in their new environment when they speak of "reterritorialization that it involves "the process by which migrants re-establish a sense of place and belonging in their new environment" (87). As Henry David Thoreau writes, "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads," suggesting that the protagonist finds a sense of transcendence in the river's presence (203). By the end of the story,

Boston's beauty and opportunities are not lost on him, and he has successfully weathered the pitfalls of both displacement and hybridity.

The Third and Final Continent follows a character who takes his time adjusting to a new urban environment to call home but *Unaccustomed Earth* however is much more about pride of culture ripped from the disembarkation when the new surroundings are indifferent to personal wants and thoughts. While the protagonist in the previous story learns the ways of the city, Ruma and her father face the issue of maintaining traditions at home. The garden, in this context, serves as a powerful symbol of rootedness and resistance, much like the Charles River in the previous narrative, but with a crucial difference. Where the river signified adaptation to a new environment, the garden embodies a deliberate attempt to maintain a connection to the past. Lahiri's description, "He spent his days on his knees in the garden, caring for its roots and trimming what was dead. His hands were scarred from the thorns which he wrought, but he wore them like badges of honour as if to signal his worth" (29-30) evinces the garden as site of cultural resistance. The garden becomes a space where, from a postcolonial ecocritical standpoint, as hypothesized by Huggan and Tiffin, the father works to preserve his cultural integrity amidst the encroaching presence of the West. As Huggan and Tiffin argue, reterritorializing, a part of his past, Ruma's father attempts to preserve his old landscape and culture. For Ruma, though, the garden represents a tension between her father's old-world values and her newfound independence in America. Her detachment mirrors a wider disconnection from her cultural roots, emphasizing the generational and cultural gulf. Some of these tensions are found in post-colonial literature which as Huggan and Tiffin claim, inherit different clashes between generations, each of which possesses its own relationship to both past and present (112).

Following her mother's death, Ruma's father sets out on an organized but emotionally removed journey, sending postcards indicative of his estrangement from his daughter (Lahiri 117, 119). His odyssey is a way of conquering space without genuine connection, reflecting the overabundance of space that the generation before him cannot come to terms with (121). The past is cast off even as it is preserved: he sells his home without consulting his children, washing away material connection (125) alongside his other efforts to preserve cultural legacy through gardening. This tension discarding the traces of the dead body yet retaining traditions embodies his negotiation with loss and memory. Ruma comments on his growing assimilation, noting that, unlike her mother's unequivocally Indian bearing, her father is fit into the background (127–128). This fluidity of identity highlights the modes of the diasporic experience, in which nature whether it is expressed in a garden or through travel functions both as an anchor to the past and a space for transformation, "He had pared down his possessions and sold the house where Ruma and her younger brother Romi had spent their childhood, informing them only after he and the buyer went into contract" (6). This act of erasure stands in opposition to his desire to preserve (through the garden and his travel) and suggests the ways in which he wrestles with loss and memory. Her father had in his old age 'the degree to which

her father resembled an American in his old age,' Lahiri writes. 'With his grey hair and fair skin he could have been practically from anywhere' which proves very much the point of how identity is fluid in postcolonial contexts (10).

The internal monologue, "How freeing it was, these days, to travel alone, with only a single suitcase to check. "He had never visited the Pacific Northwest, never appreciated the staggering breadth of his adopted land" (7), reveals the father's newly obtained sense of freedom. Lahiri notes "Those returns to India had been a fact of life for him, and for all their Indian friends in America' (132), highlighting the shared experience of diaspora. Ruma's father saying, "Your delphiniums need watering" (16), highlights his continued connection to gardening. His attentiveness is further illustrated when he says to his daughter,

> Let me water your delphiniums. They won't survive another day." He took the kettle from her hands and filled it at the sink. Then he carried it, slowly and carefully, through the kitchen door outside, taking oddly small steps…. She stood by the window and watched her father water the flowers, his head bent, his eyebrows raised. She listened to the sound of the water hitting the earth in a forceful, steady stream (17).

The familiar rhythms of the garden, with its life-giving arc of planting, growth and renewals, become a metaphor for the possibility of reconciliation between father and daughter. This allows bridges of understanding and connection to be built, even when cultural and generational differences are significant. The garden, then, is both a site of cultural anchoring and a site of potential transformation, where food culture is both protected and preserved, whereas the river is a site of integration, not preservation.

Like the stories *The Third and Final Continent* and *Unaccustomed Earth* the novel, *Whereabouts* adds to themes of dislocation and cultural negotiation, but with a unique emphasis on the interrelationship between nature and identity. Unlike the protagonist's outward odyssey and Ruma's familial engagement with roots, the unnamed narrator in *Whereabouts* sets off on an inward journey of self-awareness in the confines of an unnamed Italian city. If the Charles River and the garden provided physical and tangible instances of negotiation across cultural and social divides in earlier fictions, nature in *Whereabouts* serves almost as a reflection of the narrator's inner being. *Minneapolis Star Tribune* noted, "Without artifice, Lahiri's elegant phrases throughout the book reveal as much about her character as they do about the author's understanding of her environment and the people who inhabit it" (*Whereabouts*). The river, a recurring presence, represents her transience and quest for meaning, but not as a ground of direct cultural conflict: but, rather, a register of her own restless detachment.

Lahiri's depiction, "Outside, there's a ferocious noise coming from the crashing of the waves and the roar of the wind: a perpetual agitation, a thundering boom that devours everything. I wonder why we find it so reassuring" (93) underscores the river as a reflection of the narrator's silent restlessness and her unwillingness to settle. That literal and metaphorical fluidity resonates with Huggan and Tiffin's critique of Western environmentalism, in which the

narrator's physical distance from her surroundings suggests an alienation characteristic of postcolonial subjects living in industrialized societies. The river, with its perpetual motion, becomes a symbol of the environmental and cultural displacement that Huggan and Tiffin associate with postcolonial experiences. Lahiri reinforces this sense of instability when the narrator observes, "We're doubled over by a sharp wind and our eyes are filled with tears. We see the church at the top of the hill, and an ancient olive tree decorated with shiny red balls, in place of a Christmas tree. The higher we climb, the more we feel the wind and the cold. We're enfolded by the wide-open space, enclosed by all that emptiness" (113). Nature's turbulence brings both chaos and comfort, and simultaneously mirroring a psyche caught between movement and stillness, belonging and estrangement.

The seasons, too, inform the narrator's meditations, growing steadily chillier over the high summer, as the harshness of winter reflects her naked self-scrutiny. Lahiri's depiction of "The trees, with their thin branches, seem to bend as if from the soft breeze that courses through the landscape" (30) suggests a quiet, almost imperceptible force shaping both the natural world and the narrator's emotional state. Just as the trees submit to the wind, the narrator, too, is imperceptibly shaped by her isolation and the burden of her life choices, playing into Lahiri's thematic investigation of passive endurance and existential contemplation. This face off with isolation is not confined to winter by any means; even in spring, a season classically linked with revival, the narrator experiences discomfort rather than rejuvenation: "In spring I suffer. The season doesn't invigorate me, I find it depleting. The new light disorients, the fulminating nature overwhelms" (14). Here the cycles of nature are not a cause for rebirth, but reminders of instability, a detachment from a permanent home or sense of belonging.

Unlike the protagonists in other books by Lahiri, who wrestle with direct familial and cultural antagonism, the narrator in *Whereabouts* turns inwards, reflecting on nature as a way to think about her fractured self. In this story the city is not also a site of manifest cultural conflict, but space for internalized dislocation and yearning, and the narrator finds a respite in nature. As she ascends a hill in winter, "enfolded by the wide-open space, enclosed by all that emptiness" (Lahiri 113), she simultaneously feels the infinite nature of her surroundings, and the distance it creates between her and reality, between her and other beings. Such descriptions highlight Lahiri's preoccupations with liminality and self-exile, as nature serves as a vehicle for reflection and dislocation.

These narratives collectively function as a rich exploration of how nature serves as a symbolic mirror, one that reflects the complex interaction of identity, displacement, and cultural negotiation which characterize the diasporic experience, a theme that Lahiri adeptly conveys. But this mirror has different functions depending on the texts. Charles River in *The Third and Final Continent* is one such transitional marker; the protagonist's relationship with it metaphorizes his gradual acclimatization to alien real estate, and operates as an index of his environmental inscrutability and 'roots' versus 'wings' negotiation as he inserts himself in postcolonial urban milieu. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the garden serves as a place of cultural

resistance and generational tension, in which nature is used as a way to be the keeping of culture against Western ethics. Here, is no adapting to a new place but rather the conscious maintenance of culture, a reclamation that reflects the various ways postcolonial subjects inhabit place. And in the novel, the natural landscape especially the river and the changing of the seasons acts like an introspective mirror for the narrator's displacement and existential longing in a modern, industrialized space. The narrator's experience shows a deep detachment, showing the effect of Western environmentalism, as Huggan and Tiffin highlight.

These narratives illuminate diversity of ways that postcolonial subjects negotiate their environmental relations through the postcolonial ecocritical lens of Huggan and Tiffin, . Lahiri's writing shows how multilayered environmental and cultural experiences reveal the complex interconnectedness of different experiences, with nature serving instead as a place of cultural anchoring and also transformative potential. These divergent representations of nature highlight its important functions in establishing identity and cultivating a comprehension of the intricacies that are part of the diasporic journey.

Conclusion

Lahiri's narratives, through the lens of postcolonial ecocriticism, reveal nature as a dynamic mirror of diasporic identity, illuminating its crucial yet subtle role in shaping characters' emotional and cultural development. Findings demonstrate varied environmental representations, from sites of cultural preservation to reflections of internalized displacement, as seen in the Charles River, the familial garden, and urban glimpses of nature. Huggan and Tiffin's theories illuminate how these environments symbolize the intricate negotiations between heritage and adaptation, highlighting the interconnectedness of physical and emotional landscapes. Ultimately, Lahiri underscores nature's vital role in shaping identity, highlighting its transformative potential within the complexities of the diasporic experience. This research opens avenues for further exploration into migration, identity, and colonial legacies, particularly examining how Lahiri bridges the personal and ecological, offering a remarkable view of land as memory and identity.

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