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Therapeutic Waters and Wounded Bodies: Care, Grief and Blue Health in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*

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ABSTRACT

This paper interprets Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013) through the lens of Health Humanities and Blue Humanities. It argues that the novel presents water as both a source of risk and a place for repair and that care, understood as slow, daily, continuous labor, is its principal response to bodily and emotional suffering. The seasonally flooded lowland of Tollygunge is read as an unstable landscape tied to loss and fear, while the Rhode Island shoreline is examined as a therapeutic landscape where Subhash finds Steadiness. Gauri's withdrawal and Bela's growing up in silence are discussed as embodied forms of distress, not as retrospective diagnoses. Drawing on Gesler's therapeutic landscapes, the ethics of care of Tronto and Kittay, Frank's work on illness narratives, Astrida Neimanis's hydro-feminism and the oceanic thought of Mentz and DeLoughrey, the paper shows how the novel deals with healing as partial and recurrent, like a tide. It suggests that *The Lowland* provides a literary model of wellbeing that is relational, environmental, and incomplete.

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1.Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction is usually discussed in terms of migration, identity, and cultural translation. The Lowland (2013), shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award for Fiction, extends these concerns into political violence. It follows two brothers, Subhash and Udayan Mitra, who grew up beside a marshy lowland in Tollygunge, Calcutta. Udayan was drawn into the Naxalite movement and was killed by the police in front of his family, and the rest of the novel traces how his brother, his widow Gauri, and his daughter Bela live in the aftermath. Critical discussion has focused on political disillusionment, family obligation, and diaspora.

This paper takes a different route. It asks how the novel represents wellbeing: how bodies and minds are strained by loss, how they are sustained or neglected by others, and what part the physical environment, especially water, plays in that process. Two fields make this question available. The Health Humanities study illness, suffering, care, and healing through literary and cultural forms, and they extend beyond clinical settings to include grief, distress, and the daily work of looking after others. The Blue Humanities treat water as a historical, material, and imaginative force. Together, they allow a reading in which the novel's pervasive aquatic landscapes are also landscapes of health.

The central question is: How does The Lowland use water to represent vulnerability and healing, and what view of care and wellbeing emerges from its treatment of bodies, grief, and environment? The argument has three parts. First, the flooded lowland is a landscape of instability and fear, while the Rhode Island shore functions as a therapeutic landscape. Second, Gauri's withdrawal and Bela's childhood show distress carried in the body and in family silence. Third, care, particularly Subhash's, is the novel's main form of repair, and it is represented as continuous and watery rather than decisive. The study uses close reading within an interdisciplinary framework, and citations follow the MLA 9th edition.

However, there is one methodological caution. No character in The Lowland receives a clinical diagnosis, and the story is not about illness. As a result, this study avoids retrospectively labelling characters and instead discusses distress, grief, strain, and care as they are presented in the text.

Review of Literature

Identity, diaspora, and alienation. Many studies read the novel as a diasporic narrative. T. K. Pius (2014) discusses Lahiri's narrative methods and the novel's place in post-millennial Indian English writing. Prem Bahadur Khadka (2021) examines identity crisis across the novel's shifting times and places, and Bipin Bihari Dash (2022) traces alienation and cross-cultural estrangement in the characters' lives.

Politics, trauma, and memory**.** Bijetri Datta Majumder (2021) considers how the novel presents trauma and the work of remembering and forgetting in relation to the Naxalite movement. Mahananda Biswas (2024) offers a multi-theoretical study of revolutionary violence, memory, and the weight of history, in which the waterlogged lowland is a central image. Somayeh Esmaili and Behzad Pourgharib (2026) apply decolonized trauma theory and Genette's narratology, arguing that repetition, flashback, and shifting focalization represent trauma and challenge the limits of classical trauma theory.

Ecology and environment**.** Fewer studies approach the novel's landscape directly. B. Nagamani (2015) offers an ecocritical reading of the lowland and its plant life, and Zaid Akhter and Md. Sahidul Islam read Kolkata's transformation and environmental crisis through urban ecocriticism (2024). Jiménez Rodríguez (2025) treats water and land as symbolic poles of chaos and order, personified in Udayan and Subhash, which Bela reconciles through an ecofeminist ethic of care.

These studies show that trauma, identity, and environment have been well explored, and a few mentions water or care. In the source's reviewed water is mainly dealt with as a symbol or as part of an ecocritical reading of nature. None applies Blue Humanities concepts such as wet ontology, hydro-feminism or oceanic connection together with the Health Humanities and the idea of therapeutic landscapes. This paper fills that gap by treating water as a material setting that shapes wellbeing, and by reading care as continuous, watery labor.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Health Humanities

This study brings together two areas of criticism. The first is the Health Humanities, which use literature and the arts to understand how people experience suffering, illness, grief and care, including in everyday life and not only in hospitals. Three ideas from this field are used here. First, Arthur Frank's *The Wounded Storyteller* shows that people tell stories of suffering in different ways: some move toward recovery , some follow a quest for meaning, and some are chaotic, with no clear order or ending. Second, Rita Charon's narrative medicine argues that close, attentive reading of a story helps us notice suffering that is easily missed. Third, the ethics of care, developed by Joan Tronto and Eva Feder Kittay, treats care as real work: noticing someone's need, taking responsibility, doing the task and paying attention to how it is received. Kittay adds that all humans depend on others at some point, so care is a basic part of life and not a special case. In simple terms, this field asks how suffering is told and how people look after one another.

2.2 Therapeutic landscapes and blue space

The second idea links place and health. Wilbert Gesler used the term *therapeutic landscapes* for places that people associate with healing because of their physical features (for example, open views or the sound of water), the social life that happens there, and the meanings attached to them. Later research on *blue space*, including work by Foley and Kistemann, studies how coasts, rivers, and other water environments affect wellbeing. In simple terms, where we live and spend time can help or harm our health, and water is one such place.

2.3 Blue Humanities

The third area is the Blue Humanities, which study water, especially the sea, as an active force in history and culture rather than as a plain backdrop. Steve Mentz views the ocean as something that cannot be fully controlled, and Elizabeth DeLoughrey shows how oceans carry histories of migration and change. Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters propose *wet ontologies*, which means starting from the idea that water is fluid and always moving, so that places like marshes and coasts cannot be treated as fixed. Astrida Neimanis's *hydro-feminism* adds that human bodies are mostly water and are connected to the wider water of the world; bodies take in, hold, and pass on what flows through them, including from other people during pregnancy. Rob Nixon's *slow violence* names harm that happens gradually and out of sight, such as a pond slowly choking over years. In simple terms, water shapes places and bodies, and it does so in slow as well as sudden ways.

2.4 How the fields work together

What links them is the body in its environment. The Health Humanities ask how suffering and care are lived and told; the Blue Humanities ask how water shapes places and bodies; and the ideas of therapeutic landscapes and *hydro-feminism* show where they meet, since a watery place can affect wellbeing and a body is itself made of water. This paper calls the combined approach blue health: reading water in the novel as a setting, an image, and a material influence on suffering and healing.

This study asks three questions of the text. Where does water appear, and is it a source of risk or steadiness? How are bodies and distress shown, especially Gauri's and Bela's? And who gives care, how, and at what cost? The sections that follow answer these questions in turn.

3. The Unstable Lowland: A Landscape of Risk and Loss

The novel opens with a landscape in which land and water are in constant exchange. Two ponds lie beside a low tract that fills in the monsoon and recedes in the drier months, and the surface is covered with water

Hyacinth. The floating weeds grew aggressively in the pond. Its leaves cause the surface to appear solid" (p. 3). A wet ontology reads this as a place with a changing identity. Nothing about it is permanently dry or submerged, and the boundary between the safe ground and water shifts with the seasons. This instability gives the lowland a double health meaning: in the ordinary sense, standing water and monsoon flooding are associated with discomfort and risk in low-lying urban areas, and the lowland is a place the family must live alongside rather than control: "After the monsoon the ponds would rise so that the embankment built between them could not be seen" (p. 3).

Nixon's slow violence adds a second sense: the gradual choking of the ponds by hyacinth and the slow decline of the neighbourhood's ecology are forms of harm that unfold without a single dramatic event. The landscape's quiet deterioration parallels the family's emotional condition after the killing, in which strain accumulates through silence rather than through crisis alone. The lowland is also a place of early closeness. Subhash and Udayan grow up near it, and it is the setting of their shared childhood, a space where "they were inseparable... always drawn back to the edge of the lowland" (p. 7-11).

This is what makes its later role so heavy. After Udayan is shot there while his parents and his pregnant wife look on "driven from his hiding place... then the sound of the shots" (p. 111), a place of ordinary life becomes a place of injury. For the family, the landscape ceases to be neutral. It is a reminder that cannot be avoided, and it shapes how they inhabit the house and neighborhood afterward. Gesler's idea that places carry symbolic and emotional meaning applies in reverse: where a therapeutic landscape holds associations of healing, the lowland holds associations of harm. The novel thus begins by establishing water as ambivalent. The same element that nourishes the landscape also floods it, covers it, and conceals what lies beneath. Wellbeing in this world is never guaranteed by the environment; it has to be negotiated with it.

4. The Shore as Therapeutic Landscape: Subhash and Blue Space

Subhash leaves Calcutta for Rhode Island to study oceanography, and the novel places much of his adult life beside the Atlantic coast "He had come to Rhode Island to study coastal oceanography…to study the chemistry of the water, and the life it supported" (p.34). In contrast to the unstable lowland, the shore appears as a place of patience, order, and relative calm. His work involves observing tides, currents, and the behavior of water over time, an activity that rewards attention and steadiness.

Gesler's concept helps explain why this setting matters for his wellbeing. A therapeutic landscape combines physical features, social relations and symbolic meaning, and the sea functions in all three ways for Subhash. It is a physical environment of open horizon and rhythmic movement; it is a workplace in which

he has competence and a community of colleagues; and it carries the symbolic weight of continuity with the waters he left behind “Walking beside the water gave him a sense of boundary, a sense of containment. The sound of the waves beating against the shore was a steady rhythm in his daily life” (p.42). Research on blue space suggests that proximity to water can support calm and reflection, and the novel's quiet treatment of his routines is consistent with this view without turning the sea into a cure.

It is important not to overstate the healing power of the shore. Subhash carries guilt as the surviving brother who stepped into Udayan's place by marrying Gauri and bringing her to America. “He was attempting to replace his brother, to step into his shoes... carried by a sense of duty that felt indistinguishable from guilt”(p.115). The sea does not remove this burden. Instead, it offers a setting in which the burden can be held steadily and in which he can do his work of care. Mentz's view of the ocean as an agent that exceeds mastery is apt here: the sea gives Subhash no answers, but it gives him a scale against which his own troubles can be seen.

The contrast with the lowland is productive. Where the lowland is unstable and ambiguous, the shore offers a wider and steadier water. But the two are connected. DeLoughrey's insistence that oceans link places suggests that the Atlantic is continuous with the water of Subhash's youth, so that his refuge is made of the same element as his loss. Blue health in the novel is therefore not a simple opposition between harmful and healing water. It is a continuum in which the same medium can wound or steady depending on how it is encountered.

5. Gauri: Distress, the Body and Withdrawal

Gauri is the character most often judged harshly, both in the novel and by its readers. A Health Humanities approach shifts the question from judgment to attention: what does the text show about her bodily and emotional condition, and how does it present her distress?

She is a philosophy student, married to Udayan against convention, who sees him killed while she is pregnant with his child (She had witnessed it. From the roof, looking down into the courtyard. It was etched into her mind, an unmovable fixture of her past” (p.132). She had witnessed it. From the roof, looking down into the courtyard. It was etched into her mind, an unmovable fixture of her past. After moving to Rhode Island she avoids speaking of him, finds the maternal role difficult, and turns to philosophy as a space of abstraction. Eventually she leaves her husband and young daughter for a teaching post in California “Isolation offered its own form of companionship: the reliable silence of her rooms, the steadfast tranquillity of the evenings... She had no wish to overcome It” (p.165). Without suggesting a diagnosis, one can say that

the novel presents a pattern of withdrawal and constriction that follows a profound loss, and that it shows her body as a site where this loss is held.

Neimanis's *hydro-feminism* offers a precise vocabulary. If bodies are bodies of water that exchange with others, Gauri's pregnancy at the moment of Udayan's death means that she carries the dead man's future in a literal, fluid sense. Her struggle with motherhood can be read as a strain of being the medium through which another life and another history pass: “While pregnant she had felt capable. But now Gauri was aware of how the slightest oversight on her part could cause Bela to be destroyed” (p.182). Frank's categories are helpful here. Gauri's story is closer to what he calls chaos narrative than to restitution: it has no neat arc of recovery, and it is hard for her to tell. The novel does not give her a clear voice for this suffering, and part of its realism lies in leaving it largely untold.

The novel does not romanticize or condemn her flight. Her absence harms Bela, and the narrative holds this fact steady. However, by presenting her distress as embodied and unspoken, it asks readers to see the person behind the failure of care. Her later return to Calcutta, to a neighborhood changed from the one she left, offers contact with the past without resolution: Walking a bit farther, she saw that the lowland was also gone... transformed now into a dense grid of housing” (p.278). For Gauri, repair is neither complete nor denied.

6. Care, Bela and the Ethics of Continuous Labour

Tronto’s ethics of care frames care as a ongoing practice: noticing a need, taking responsibility, and doing the daily work. The novel’s most sustained example is Subhash’s raising of Bela. Having taken on a child who is not biologically his, he feeds, protects, and attends to her through years of ordinary routine: “He was the one who fed her, who changed her, who bathed her, who put her to sleep... Every aspect of her life was his responsibility” (p. 154). The novel treats this labour quietly, aligning with Kittay’s emphasis on dependency as a basic human condition.

This care takes a watery form, continuous and fluid, built through shared meals and daily presence. Neimanis’s *hydro-feminism* suggests that kinship is made through such sustained exchange rather than blood alone. Yet care in the novel is not flawless. Subhash’s decision to withhold the truth of Bela’s biological father carries deep risk, shaping her unease as she grows: “He had lied to her. He had concealed the most fundamental truth of her existence, creating a void that she had felt without knowing what it was” (p. 221). This highlights how caring choices, made under strain, can wound as well as protect.

Bela's adult life reflects her complex upbringing. Her turn toward agricultural work expresses a search for grounding: "She preferred to work with her hands, to spend her days outdoors, turning soil, planting seeds, bringing order to neglected plots of earth" (p. 243). When she becomes a mother to Meghna, she shapes her care with greater openness: "She wanted Meghna to grow up without secrets, without the burden of things unsaid that had defined her own youth" (p. 268). Thus, care passes between generations as water passes between bodies, carrying its flaws while retaining the capacity for renewal.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that *The Lowland* represents wellbeing through water and care. The flooded lowland is an unstable landscape of risk and loss, in which slow ecological decline mirrors the family's emotional strain. The Rhode Island shore functions as a therapeutic landscape that steadies Subhash without curing him. Gauri's withdrawal and Bela's childhood show distress carried in the body and in family silence, and Subhash's raising of Bela presents care as continuous, imperfect labour. The novel's treatment of recovery is tidal: partial, recurrent and never concluded.

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