



A CRISIS IN RELATIONSHIP: A THEMATIC STUDY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S THE TEMPORARY MATTER

Ahuja Sandeep

Assistant Professor in English, Lyallpur Khalsa College, Jalandhar, Punjab)

Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is regarded as one of the most powerful and talented storytellers among Indian diasporic women writers. Dynamics of relationship, problems of the immigrants in alien lands, the question of identity, alienation and loneliness, loss and grief are some of recurring themes of her short stories. Regarding the choice of themes in literary works of Jhumpa Lahiri, Priyam vada observes "Moving between events in Calcutta, Boston, and New York City, the stories examines the nuances involved with being caught between two conflicting cultures with their highly distinct religious, social, and ideological differences". The present paper explores the inner turmoil of the shattered protagonists of her story "The Temporary Matter" from her Pulitzer prize winning first short story collection of stories Interpreter Of Maladies with the subtitle "Stories of Bengal, Boston, and Beyond".

The Temporary Matter is a poignant story of a couple Shukumar and Shobha who suffer the tragedy of a stillborn child. The story captures the trauma of their souls and portrays the crisis in their conjugal relationship brought by this intense loss of their loved one. Alienation, loneliness and withdrawal characterize their relationship of this erstwhile happy couple who pass through mixed feelings of grief, despair, longing, guilt and disinterestedness.

Jhumpa Lahiri sets this story in Boston, London. Shobha and Shukumar, the protagonists, are American-born children of Indian immigrants settled in the United States long time ago. Shobha, thirty-three-year-old woman works as a proofreader. Tall and broad-shouldered, she has spent considerable time in India visiting relatives in Calcutta. Shukumar, a thirty-five-year-old tall man with a large build is a 'mediocre' student in the sixth semester of graduate class and is writing his dissertation on Agrarian revolts in India. He hasn't spent much time in India as compared to Shobha and longs for childhood stories of India.

The incidents depicted in this story take place six months after the stillbirth of their first child. Even after this long period, overwhelmed by grief, both have not tried to comfort each other; rather, there seems to be a withdrawal and alienation from the world, from each other and themselves. Both, in their unique way, seem to be trying to come to terms with the

intense grief in their own way. The loss of the loved one has badly affected their relationship and their capacity and urge to have any significant communication with each other. An inability to share their grief together draws them apart and gradually engenders a void and emotional distance in their relationship and lives.

Shukumar has withdrawn from the world and seldom leaves the house. He “...*wanted to stay in, not even leaving to get the mail, or to buy fruit or wine at the stores by the trolley stop.*” For the last couple of months, he has been at home and has cooked food for himself and Shoba. He seems to have lost interest in everything. He doesn't even remember to brush his teeth. The narrator informs us “*He ran his tongue over the tops of his teeth; he'd forgotten to brush them that morning. It wasn't the first time.*” He has retreated to his computer and pretends to work on his dissertation. He has put the computer in the room that was to be the nursery of their child because he knows that Shoba avoids that room.

Shoba, on the other hand, stays away from the house as much as she can. This tragedy has changed her habits and her relationship with her husband. Before the tragedy she wasn't this way. Shukumar envied her specificity of tasks. She could plan ahead and would always keep the house stocked with grocery. Shukumar reflects “*When she used to do the shopping, the pantry was always stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil, depending on whether they were cooking Italian or Indian. There were endless boxes of pasta in all shapes and colors, zippered sacks of basmati rice, whole sides of lambs and goats from the Muslim butchers at Haymarket, chopped up and frozen in endless plastic bags.*”

She had a knack of a perfect housewife who would stock things that would last forever. He further *reminisces* “*When friends dropped by, Shoba would throw together meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare, from things she had frozen and bottled, not cheap things in tins but peppers she had marinated herself with rosemary, and chutneys that she cooked on Sundays, stirring boiling pots of tomatoes and prunes. Her labeled mason jars lined the shelves of the kitchen, in endless sealed pyramids, enough, they'd agreed, to last for their grandchildren to taste.*”

But now things have changed and she treated the house as if it were a hotel. They both have become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible. Shoba now spends most of her time outside the house. To Shukumar, She comes in briefly each evening to wish him goodnight. Even this brief interaction initiated by her only out of a sense of obligation is resented by Shukumar. Both are undergoing an inner turmoil trying to come to terms with the tragedy in their own way but they don't communicate and share their feelings with each other.

This situation changes when the electricity department announces a power cut for five days to repair the lines that had gone down due to a snowstorm.

“The notice informed them that it was a temporary matter: for five days their electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at eight P.M. A line had gone down in the last snowstorm, and the repairmen were going to take advantage of the milder evenings to set it right.”

That same night, Shukumar prepares dinner while Shoba takes a shower. During the blackout, Shukumar ends up sticking the birthday candles he could find in the soil of a pot of ivy. While taking dinner Shoba is reminded of a rice ceremony of a child who cried incessantly, that she attended in India in the dark. Reminded of their dead child who could not have the rice ceremony, both feel uncomfortable and reluctant to talk to each other. To break the ice, Shoba suggests a game of telling each other secrets they had never shared with each other before. She begins with a confession and tells Shukumar that when she was alone in his apartment the first time, she looked in his address book to see if he had written her name in it.

Shukumar then tells about the day they had dinner at a restaurant and he forgot to tip the waiter as he was lost in thought that he might marry Shoba. So, he later came back all the way back to the restaurant just to leave a tip for the waiter. As they have started to communicate with each other, the next night both of them seem eager and much comfortable to start their night together. Shukumar is afraid that she may reveal something like she's had an affair or share her dislike of him for still being a student at the age of thirty five or blame her for not being there when she lost her child. Instead, Shoba tells him that she lied to him one night when his mom had visited and that she stayed out late with her girlfriend Gillean for a drink. On the other hand, Shukumar, reveals that he cheated on his Oriental Civilization exam in college.

During the power cuts they begin to talk to each other again, confess and talk about things they have never revealed to each other earlier and the little ways they had hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves. On the third night after their confessions, they come so close that they make love to each other with a desperation that they had forgotten. With every passing day they seem to share things from the deeper recesses of their mind and appear to move closer to each other. Ironically, then on the fourth day, Shoba shockingly reveals that she's moving out as she has been looking for an apartment and found one on Beacon Hill. She also conveys that the death of their child was nobody's fault and that she needed some time alone. Shukumar realizes that the game was her way of telling him this

information and she has been trying to tell him this all along. He is relieved at this but also sickened by the thought that all these days she had been preparing to live without him.

Shoba had never known the sex of their baby and had wanted it to be a surprise as is clear from the narrators comments, "*Later, those few times they talked about what had happened, she said at least they'd been spared that knowledge. In a way she almost took pride in her decision, for it enabled her to seek refuge in a mystery.*" But little does she know that Shukumar had actually arrived at the hospital in time to hold their dead baby boy before he was cremated. Shukumar had vowed never to tell Shoba about it.

He then describes to her what their baby boy looked like. "Our baby was a boy," he said. "His skin was more red than brown. He had black hair on his head. He weighed almost five pounds. His fingers were curled shut, just like yours in the night." Shoba's face gets contorted with sorrow at hearing this truth which he had hid from her because he loved her back then. She comes to know that her husband has held her son in his hands before it was cremated. The doubt about the absence of Shukumar during the worst crisis of her life is dispelled and their faith in each other is restored. Shoba reacts by turning off the lights and crying with Shukumar joining for the knowledge now they have gained. His revelation brings them together in a flood of tears.

What begins as an inconvenience in the form of power cut helps them see each other in better light. In darkness they could see into each other and reveal and share their deep emotions which so far they have kept to themselves. As A.J. Sebastian comments "Her stories, thereby, provide a powerful healing touch to immigrants caught in alienation, exile and isolation." Here in this story too sharing reestablishes the lost connection between them and restores their faith in each other. The coldness and isolation proves to be a temporary matter and they eventually cry and mourn together the loss of their son. What has fallen apart has been reconstructed. This story, like many other stories of Jhumpa Lahiri, ends on a positive note with a hope and reassertion of their faith in each other.

Notes and References

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