

A Temporary Matter: A Permanent Truth



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ABSTRACT

A Temporary Matter is a story about grief and the secrets people keep from one another. Husband and wife Shukumar and Shoba are reeling from the loss of their child six months earlier. They avoid each other and their friends, Shoba filling her time with work and Shukumar procrastinating in finishing his dissertation. A deus-ex-machina in the form of systematic power outages allows for intimacy between the couple not achieved since the death of their son.

The importance of communication within marriage is a prevalent theme in 'Interpreter of Maladies' has convincingly shown subtle psychology of expatriate Indians. The first story of the collection 'A Temporary Matter' reveals permanent truth about the marriage in particular and human relationship in general. It is a story about grief and the secrets people keep from one another.

The story opens with the arrival of Shobha at the end of a workday. Her husband, Shukumar is cooking a dinner. Shobha reads a notice from the electricity department, informing that the electricity will be turned off from 08 p.m. to 09 p.m. for five days for the repairing work. The story is confined to those five days when there will be no electricity for an hour. The temporary close down of electricity gives much needed opportunity to Shobha and Shukumar for coming together after the busy schedules of the day. In the darkness, they decided to play a game of telling each other one story, usually a secret one, from his or her own past life. Shukumar welcomed this power cut for an hour, as darkness could bring them closer despite differences in their relationship. In the darkness they could share their experiences frankly. When they shared their bitter past in the darkness, it looks romantic as it is seen through the window of present. However, in the morning of the fifth day, they were informed that there would be no power cut on that evening as the work of repairing was completed before its scheduled time. This information disappointed Shukumar. In spite of electricity, he kept the room dark from eight p.m. and waited for the game. After their dinner Shobha

switched on the light and announced that she decided to live in separate apartment. She also told that she was fed up of the game and now she needed some time alone. This decision shocked Shukumar. He thought of telling her the secret he has kept away from her. The secret was that she had given birth to a dead male child which he has kept from her as it might have shocked her then. Shukumar told her the secret:

"..... our baby was a boy
.....
His skin was more red than
brown. He had
Black hair on his head. He
weighted almost
five pounds.. His fingers culed
shut, just
like yours in the night" (22)

Shobha, under a great shock, turned the light off. She came back to the table and set down. After a moment Shukumar joined her. The story ends with the words: "They wept together, for the things they now knew." (22)

The fact that this short story is called "A Temporary Matter" is interesting on two levels. First of all, although the main action of the short story "A Temporary Matter" by Jhumpa Lahiri revolves around very important life events such as the death of the child or the end of a once happy marriage, the narrative is mostly centered around the little things in life. The title is also interesting because it is almost a summary of "A Temporary Matter" by Jhumpa Lahiri because it seems as

though the power outage might bring the couple closer together yet it is only a temporary matter, or a temporary respite to the pain the couple is feeling and is a brief moment in which they can reflect on what has changed between them. Shobha and Shukumar, expatriate, Bengalis had met four years ago at Lecture Hall in Cambridge where a group of Bengali poets were giving a recital. The incident of the loss of their only child at birth time has badly affected their life style as well as their attitude towards each other. Lahiri has cleverly deal with the emotion or psychology of grief and has shown how the people often suffer the loss of a loved one and how it becomes more difficult in the case of expatriate who are living their lives in an alien land without having adequate and integrated family support which most often prove useful in facing such difficult situation of human life. The story takes place six months after the stillbirth of Shobha and Shukumar's first child. Both of them could not overcome their grief.

Through the portrayal of their reaction of 'Grief,' Lahiri has shown a subtle psychology of human nature. The tragic incident resulted in the lack of communication in their marriage. Shukumar has withdrawn from the world and rarely leaves the house. He stays in bed half the day and unable to make any progress in the work of dissertation. In fact, he is gradually sinking into inaction. On the other hand Shobha stays away from house as much as she can. She was putting an extra hours at work and taking an extra projects. Shobha used to be an attentive housekeeper and expert cook, but the house seems to remind her of the loss of child.

According to Shukumar, she treats the house as if it was hotel and would eat cereal for dinner if he did not cook. Both of them did not attend any social functions after the tragic incidents. People who suffer a loss of their dear ones always experience such sort of phase in their lives when they do not able to live normal life. 'Grief' causes sadness and it badly affects all positive emotions. Things become much more difficult when some one didn't find any support system which can be useful to overcome such tragic incidents. It is one of the dilemmas often faced by expatriates while staying away from their families and relatives.

Another psychological trait highlighted by this story is that of alienation caused by the tragic incident. The grief has led them not only to withdraw from normal and routine life but they had become experts at avoiding each other and found that they had nothing much to converse about. Shobha leaves for work early each morning, returns late and often brings extra work to occupy her evenings and weekends. When Shobha is at home, Shukumar retreats to his computer and pretends to work on his dissertation. He has put the computer in the nursery room as he knows Shobha avoids that room. She comes in briefly each evening to say goodnight Shukumar does not like even this brief communication as it has done only out of a sense of obligation. The tragic incident and the way they are reacting it has put their marriage in a great strain. Shobha and Shukumar do not attempt to comfort or support each other. They do not make any effort to share their grief. Each withdraws and alienates from the relationship and they endure their grief as if they were two strangers in a boarding house.

Here, we can also consider the difference between Indian and American attitude towards marriage is responsible for lack of communication and alienation in their married life. For Indians, marriage is a union of two families based on belief, devotion and sacrifice for each other. On the other hand, for Americans individual freedom is much more important than integrated family. Under the influence of American culture, for Shukumar and Shobha, marriage becomes a temporary matter.

The insecurity and uncertainty in the relationship of Indian couple living in American reflects exactly the unstable life in exile. Under the influence of Western concept of marriage Shukumar and Shobha could not cope with the loss of their first born baby. They reacted individually to this tragic incident, instead of sharing the grief, which according to Indian philosophy, is the base of any human relationship.

The title 'A Temporary Matter' can be considered as a comment on the nature of marriages in the West. It is only after the announcement of power cut they find an opportunity to sit together. They begin to share their past, their acts

of omission and commission and little lies. The weekend communication channel restored their relation. The exchange of confession had improved sinking relationship of Shobha and Shukumar and on the fourth night:

"they walked carefully upstairs to bed, feeling together for the final step with their feet before the landing and making love with a desperation they had forgotten.

She wept without sound." (19)

Lahiri has beautifully portrayed the sudden intimacy in the relationship. The hearing of the secret about their male child touches Shobha and

she feels a sense of belonging once again. Lack of such sense resulted in emotional exile. While dealing with geographical displacement, Lahiri has brilliantly reflected emotional exile through her short stories. The title of "A Temporary Matter" by Jhumpa Lahiri is certainly ironic. Lahiri's objective in opening her collection with "A Temporary Matter" is to start from nothing; the story is clearly about a failed relationship. By starting with a defeat, Lahiri seems to foretell that her stories will be about the hardships of communication and relationships, but that each has the possibility of success.

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