

Separation as the Emergence of a New and Independent Self: A Psychological Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *A Temporary Matter*

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Jhumpa Lahiri's writing is characterized by her "plain" language and her characters—often Indian immigrants to America—navigate between the cultural values of their homeland and the host society (Wikipedia, *Lahiri's Works and Style*). Her art in characterization reminds us of John Ralston Saul's fiction in which the protagonists—normally from British and Canadian origins—travel to Asian countries and create fabulous stories in their search for identities in diaspora. Lahiri's fiction is, to some extent, autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experiences as well as those of her family and friends in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. In her fiction, she examines her characters' struggles, anxieties, and biases to chronicle

the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behavior. Until *Unaccustomed Earth*, she focused mostly on first-generation Indian American immigrants and their struggle to raise a family in a country very different from theirs. Lahiri's stories describe their efforts to keep their children acquainted with Indian culture and traditions and to keep them close even after they have grown up in order to hang on to the Indian tradition of a joint family, in which the parents, their children and the children's families live under the same roof (Smith 2011). Based on Nicole Smith's analysis, this article tries to explore the psychological effects of living in diaspora on the marital relation between Shoba and Shukumar in Jhumpa Lahiri's *A*

Temporary Matter in her collection of *Interpreter of Maladies*.

Told from the third-person perspective of the husband, the story deals with the disintegrating relationship of an Indian couple—Shoba and Shukumar. Their stillborn child has created distance between the two of them, and Shukumar observes as Shoba transforms from the attentive wife into someone more aloof and self-absorbed (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*). In his analysis of the story, Nicole Smith believes that 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 revolves around very important life events such as the death of a child or the end of a once happy marriage, the narrative is mostly centered on the little things in life. The change in the couple’s relationship can be seen through the routines in life such as; dinner plans and dentist appointments, but what seems small or like a “temporary matter” is actually something important and complex. The title, Smith believes, 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. On the other hand, this is an ironical situation in which the only rays of light shine to the desperate life of Shoba and Shukumar. For the writer, the most important is “the little things in life” and this story seems to sum up that sentiment perfectly. Although the couple in “A Temporary Matter” by Jhumpa Lahiri has experienced great pain and this is made evident in the first several paragraphs of the story, there is little talk between them. Instead of addressing the pain directly, the narrator, Shukumar, discusses the changes he feels by talking about the “little things in life” such as his wife’s habits and his feelings about his work. For instance, even though it is clear that the couple is not feeling the same way they used to and feeling as though things have changed, this is only truly visible through the little observations Shukumar makes. In one of the important quotes; “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 hadn’t left the house at all that day, or the day before.” While this may seem like an average and everyday observation, it masks a much deeper feeling. He is growing depressed and does not care about himself the way he used to. He can sit indoors and not want to go outside and is letting himself go, yet this is not as simple as it may at first seem (Smith 2011).

The fact is, at this point in the short story, he is finally realizing that there is something terrible and sad that is happening between him and the love of his life, yet he is at a loss when it comes to knowing what to do about it. The fact that his teeth are not clean masks his lack of concern about things that used to affect him deeply—things he used to care about. The reader knows he is a conscientious man, especially when one of his greatest admissions to his wife is that he cheated on an exam in college. As the story moves the reader perceives how both he and his wife were and how far they have grown apart and moved away from things that used to be important to them. Although the title is “A Temporary Matter” none of these things seem temporary for people who are as steady in their lives as these two.

As mentioned earlier, throughout “A Temporary Matter” the little things seem to mask even the most important events in Shoba and Shukumar’s lives. Interestingly, even when Shukumar talks about the day his wife went into labor, a very important event for any couple, his memory focuses only on images and “little” things. For instance, when he thinks of the day he left Shoba alone before she had the child, he doesn’t remember that she was beautiful or happy, but only small things. He says, “Each time he thought of that moment, the last moment he saw Shoba pregnant, it was

the cab he remembered most, a station wagon, painted red with blue lettering. It was cavernous compared to their own car. Although Shukumar was six feet tall, with hands too big ever to rest comfortably in the pockets of his jeans, he felt dwarfed in the back seat.” In some ways, even though this might seem callous, this is usually how we realistically remember events from our lives. Important events do not happen in our memories as sequential narratives, but in a series of random feelings, senses, and observations. In this way, the story is narrated realistically and the story tells us that it is the little things, the small, seemingly inconsequential memories that form our realities and memories.

The personal memories of myself while living in India to pursue my postgraduate studies, confirms such a situation. What we might call as “homesickness” is the opportunity to recall the trivial memories we had with our families at home. The situation gets harder when the ability to remember these memories fades away by the routine life in the host society. At this moment, a completely different “self” emerges and the situation gets harder if it cannot sustain the characteristics of the “real self”. At this point, the important realities in life seem trivial and the trivial things may bother the new self. This happens again in the story when Shoba speaks her confession and says; “You went

to answer the telephone in the other room. It was your mother, and I figured it would be a long call. I wanted to know if you'd promoted me from the margins of your newspaper." Instead of looking for clues about her future husband or finding something of earth-shattering importance, she looks to see if she is making up the little details of Shukumar's life. Again, it is clear that the little things mask the greater realities while living in diaspora.

As mentioned earlier, the power outage is a "temporary matter" and something that is not a great life event, and thus it cannot trump all of the little things that have been signaling a problem with the couple's marriage. In an article entitled "Psychological and Emotional Aspects of Divorce," O'Connell Corcoran recounts the psychological reasons and motivations of women for initiating divorce. Based on the statistics in the United States, she states that women initiate divorce twice as often as men and after divorce, women experience less stress and better adjustment in general than do men. The reasons for this are that (1) women are more likely to notice marital problems and to feel relief when such problems end, (2) women are more likely than men to rely on social support systems and help from others, and (3) women are more likely to experience an increase in self-esteem when they divorce and add new roles to their

lives (O'Connell Corcoran, *Psychological and Emotional Aspects of Divorce*, 1997).

Tracing the above-mentioned reasons in Shoba's decision to leave Shukumar, clarifies her motivations and the reason why she has been looking for an apartment and had found one. In fact, she is looking for a permanent relief from the stresses caused by the stillborn child and "the trivial information" on his physical appearance provided by her husband.

On the whole, "a temporary matter" may seem temporary to the husband and not for the wife who "notices marital problems". Small things to Shukumar are the excuses to pass the time in the temporary darkness, but for Shoba the same trivial truths are the building blocks of her motivation to lose interest in her married life (Smith 2011). And as O'Connell's study reveals, Shoba is "more likely to experience an increase in self-esteem" by her decision to leave Shukumar (1997). Therefore, the new "diaspora identity" along with a search for a new and independent self turns "a temporary matter" to a serious decision and a permanent situation in the life of Shoba and Shukumar.

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