

## **Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter": A Novel Illustration of Diasporic Fiction**

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### **Abstract**

Almost all the works in the field of diaspora deal with the problems of the immigrants-their conflicts, loneliness, identity crisis, etc.; there are few works which talk beyond these stereotyped issues. In other words, no diasporic work portrays the lived experiences of diasporic bodies as individuals, as people with their very human dilemmas. The present paper deals with this novel subject through the first story of Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer-Prize winning collection *Interpreter of Maladies* i.e., "A Temporary Matter", and tries to show how Shoba and Shukumar, the fictional characters, are estranged from each other after their baby is stillborn, and are apparently unable to overcome this tragic event and mend their relationship.

**Key Words: Diaspora, Immigrants, identity, dilemma, stillborn.**

Based on the life of an Indian-American couple living next to the Lahiris in the early 1970s, "A Temporary Matter" is not only the first story in Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer-Prize winning collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, but also the first short story Lahiri wrote as an adult. Shoba and Shukumar, the fictional characters, are estranged from each other after their baby is stillborn, and are apparently unable to overcome this tragic event and mend their relationship. Vijay Mishra argues that this story "touches so delicately on an emotional register often overlooked in theorizations about diaspora: the lived experiences of diasporic bodies as individuals, as people with their very human dilemmas" (191-92).

The story debuts with Shukumar, the male character whose point of view filters the third person narration, finding a notice which informs them about a 'temporary matter': for five days the electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at eight P.M. The situation is not permanent, but it is out of their hands, and Shoba and Shukumar have to wait 'in the dark' for the

repairmen to fix the line that went down during the last snowstorm. The couple has lived in this house in Boston for three years. Shoba is thirty-three, and she goes to the gym to stay fit, but otherwise has neglected her look after having given birth to a dead baby six months before. Shukumar, too, has neglected his look, not having shaved in a few days and not having brushed his teeth the day in which the story begins. Signs of carelessness and neglect on both sides evoke a period of mourning for their lost child, but also a relationship which itself has been neglected and is on the verge of falling to pieces altogether.

At thirty-five, Shukumar is still a student, working on the final chapters of his dissertation on agrarian revolts in India. Lately he has been working at home while his wife has been spending more and more time away from the house: "The more Shoba stayed out, the more she began putting in extra hours at work and taking on additional projects, the more 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" (*IOM* 2). In September, while he was away attending an academic conference in Baltimore, she went into labor three weeks before she was due. He had not wanted to go, but she had insisted it was important for him to make contacts as he would be entering the job market the following year. Now Shukumar is stuck in the house, and perhaps this seclusion is a self-administered punishment for not having been by her side when she gave birth. Each time he recalls the morning he left for Baltimore, the last moment he saw Shoba pregnant, it is the cab he remembers most, a station wagon, painted red with blue lettering. Although Shukumar is tall, he remembers feeling dwarfed in the back seat and imagining a day when he and his wife would need a station wagon of their own to carry their children. Ironically, this is the first time he actually welcomes the idea of becoming a father. Upon his return to Boston, however, he finds Shoba asleep in hospital room, the tragedy having already happened.

Now she is never at home anymore, already gone to her office downtown by the time he wakes up, busy searching for typographical errors in textbooks. He, on the other hand, has not gone out in a week, but lies in bed until lunchtime, gazing absently at his side of the closet which Shoba always leaves partly open. Though he has the spring semester off to round up his thesis, he feels no drive to work. Instead, Shukumar meditates about the way in which he and his wife have become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house (meant for three), spending as much time on separate floors as possible. Interestingly, as she works more, he works

less, as she buries herself in files in order to forget about the trauma, he locks himself up in the house but is unable to work. Both are grieving, but in different ways.

Despite the fact that the obstetrician told Shoba her hips “were made for childbearing” (*IOM* 7) and gave assurances that there is nothing to indicate she will not be able to have children in the future, the ways in which the husband and the wife have been using the space of the house indicate that neither actually wants to have another baby. Thus, they spend practically all their time in separate rooms. Every night before going upstairs to bed, Shoba comes into his study. She rests her hands on his shoulders for a few minutes and this is “the one time in the day she sought him out, and yet he’d come to dread it. He knew it was something she forced herself to do” (*IOM* 8). She, too, dreads coming into his study because they had prepared the room for the baby. However, in January he sets up his desk there deliberately, “partly because the room soothed him, and partly because it was a place Shoba avoided” (*IOM* 8). When she does come in, she looks:

the walls of the room, which they had decorated together last summer with a border of marching ducks and rabbits playing trumpets and drums. By the end of August there was a cherry crib under the window, a white changing table with mint-green knobs, and a rocking chair with checkered cushions. Shukumar had disassembled it all before bringing Shoba back from the hospital, scraping off the rabbits and ducks with a spatula. For some reason the room did not haunt him the way it haunted Shoba. (*IOM* 8)

So the former nursery haunts her because it is filled with the child’s ghost. It becomes the most important room in the house, representing a space they decorated together and they should have shared with joy. But he had disassembled it alone before she returned from the hospital, thus exerting some of his bereavement. Although the physical evidence has been erased, Shoba still cannot get over the fact that the room was initially meant for their baby. She has to make tremendous efforts to even walk into the room, all too aware of the child’s absence. Maybe she even thinks it is a sacrilege on his behalf to have gotten rid of ‘the rabbits and ducks’ so soon. Shukumar transformed the former nursery into his home office, yet he too is haunted in a way by the baby’s ghost and is rarely able to write a single line.

Before the dramatic event they were a happy couple, well-adjusted to America, preparing to welcome a new member into the family while successfully combining elements from the Indian culture (food, entertaining, rituals) with parts from the Western one (living in a suburban house, having middle-class jobs). Shoba “was the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad” (*IOM 6*), a woman who blended the American and Indian cultures extremely well. On the one hand she had a satisfying career, while also taking good care of her appearance, on the other hand she ran the household like an Indian matriarch, always stacking the pantry with countless boxes of pasta, sacks of basmati rice, or plastic bags of lamb and goat meat, as well as extra bottles of olive and corn oil she needed when cooking Indian or Italian. Every other Saturday she and Shukumar used to go grocery shopping and “[h]e watched in disbelief as she bought more food, trailing behind her with canvas bags as she pushed through the crowd, arguing under the morning sun with boys (...) who twisted up brown paper bags of artichokes, plums, gingerroot, and yams, and dropped them on their scales, and tossed them to Shoba one by one” (*IOM 7*). At the market she displayed a very Indian attitude: pushing her way through the crowd, bargaining for better prices, and acquiring large quantities of food. During the drive back home, both marveled at how much food they had bought, although she was clearly the one in charge. But all the food did not go to waste, because Shoba would get home and cook for the whole week. Moreover, she loved to entertain and prepare elaborate meals for their numerous friends. Before the tragedy they thought the jars and bottles would last for their grandchildren to taste, but they had consumed the provisions in just a few months.

Shoba’s emotional state is reflected in the abundance of her pantry (before giving birth) and in the emptiness of the shelves (after the stillbirth). Her Indianness surfaces again, because during periods of mourning Indians cook less and do not eat certain foods at all. Now Shukumar is the one who presides over the kitchen, preparing meals for the two of them, finishing up her last supplies, using her cookbooks. He notices that each recipe has a date on it representing the first time they ate the dish together, even though “he had no memory of eating those meals, and yet there they were, recorded in her proofreader’s hand” (*IOM 7*). For the past months they have been eating separately, he in his study, pretending to work, she in the living room, watching game shows or doing some extra work. He is aware of the way in which their roles have reversed since their baby’s death because now if he did not cook Shoba would only eat a bowl of cereal for her

dinner.

Forced by the circumstances, he is cooking lamb when his wife comes home the first night of power cuts. He can only find some birthday candles to provide light, and recalls the surprise birthday party she had thrown for him the previous year. One hundred and twenty people had crammed into the house that day. They now systematically avoid these people and the house is empty, echoing the loneliness between the two. Since September their only guest has been Shoba's mother, who came from Arizona and stayed with them for two months, helping with household chores. A first-generation Indian immigrant, Shoba's mother is integrated in America (she drives around, has had a job in a department store) but still displays an Indian attitude (she sets up a shrine and prays twice a day for grandchildren). What is more, she comes to comfort her daughter and takes up a motherly role in times of hardship, namely cooking dinner every night and doing their laundry. Although she is polite to Shukumar and never talks to him about Shoba, once, when he mentions the baby's death, she looks up from her knitting and says, "But you weren't even there" (*IOM* 9). All this time, she has probably blamed him tacitly because her daughter had to go through the traumatic experience alone. But does Shoba agree with her? Maybe the distance between them is also due to the fact that she, too, blames him for being absent that night. Because they were not together when the baby was born and died, they now undergo individual, separate mourning processes. Despite their previously shared happiness, love, and cultural ties, they do not share the grief until the very last paragraph of the story.

Shukumar places the birthday candles in the soil of a potted ivy, and although "the plant was inches from the tap, the soil was so dry that he had to water it first before the candles would stand straight" (*IOM* 10). This image also resonates with the state of their relationship: none took the time to water the ivy, even though it would have been an effortless act. They lost interest in their shared environment, as they did in keeping the relationship alive. Noelle Brada-Williams writes that "[t]aken together, the sheer number of these small failures to provide care helps to define the depths of Shoba and Shukumar's common yet isolated experience of grief for their lost child as well as their waning care and love for each other" (457). They act like strangers living in the same house. In fact, Shoba now treats the whole house "as if it were a hotel" (*IOM* 6), an impersonal space in which she feels 'unhomely'. While setting the table, Shukumar remembers their first meals in that very kitchen, back when they were thrilled to be living in the same house

at last, more eager to make love than to eat. But when his wife comes downstairs she walks absently towards the stove and notices unenthusiastically that he has made paprika stew served with lentils and rice.

Then the lights go out, and Shoba remarks that it is like India where the current sometimes disappears for hours at a stretch. She continues that she once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark, and stresses how “[t]he baby just cried and cried” (*IOM* 11). Shukumar thinks that their baby never cried and would never have a rice ceremony, even though Shoba (meticulous as usual) already made the guest list, and decided which of her three brothers she was going to ask to feed the child its first taste of solid food, at six months if it was a boy, seven if it was a girl (according to Indian rituals). The same thoughts probably cross her mind also, but neither says anything. Instead she mentions the food is delicious and they drink wine together, but the silence that follows is heavy and awkward. The two are not used to communicating anymore, and they are even uncomfortable to be in the same space. Shukumar struggles to say something that interests her, and eventually learns “not to mind the silences” (*IOM* 12).

However, on this first night of power cuts, Shoba remembers that during power failures in India they sometimes told each other jokes or facts about the world. Her relatives always wanted her to tell them the names of people in America, fascinated with any piece of information about that faraway ‘promise land’. Indians are intrigued by the ‘riches’ of America, while their country is presented as extremely poor: the electricity is cut off periodically and Shukumar nearly died of amoebic dysentery when he was in India as an infant. Afterwards his parents went back to visit their relatives without him. Thus, as a teenager Shukumar preferred sailing camp or scooping ice cream during the summers to going to Calcutta. After his father died, in his last year of college, the country suddenly began to interest him, and he started to study its history from course books in a search for his roots. But he is less connected to their parents’ homeland than his wife, and wishes now “that he had his own childhood story of India” (*IOM* 12) so he could relate more to a common cultural background and, simultaneously, to her. Had the baby lived, they would have organized a rice ceremony and would have brought him up to incorporate their Indian heritage. While regretting that he only has a fragile link with the *desh*, Shukumar also mourns the fact that his baby has not survived to have its own ‘childhood story of India’.

Starting from her childhood memory, Shoba proposes to trade secrets in the intimacy provided by the darkness. She breaks the ice and lets him know that the first time she was alone in his apartment she peeked in his address book to see if he had written her in. At first he cannot think of anything to say; he recalls the first time they met, at a recital in Cambridge given by a group of Bengali poets. He was bored and noticed the beautiful woman sitting next to him. Now it strikes him each day that her once breathtaking beauty is fading away (a physical sign of the trauma), and “the cosmetics that had seemed superfluous were necessary now, not to improve her but to define her somehow” (*IOM* 14). Eventually, he confesses that the first time they went to dinner he forgot to tip the waiter so he went back the next day to do that. He explains he was distracted because by the end of the meal he had a funny feeling that he might marry her.

The following day, Shukumar goes out to buy candles and actually looks forward to the lights going out. After eating the lamb that was left over, they do the dishes together but act almost like strangers, “their reflections fitting together in the frame of the window” (*IOM* 15). At eight o’clock the house goes black and they go outside, sit on the steps, and watch people pass. Everyone seems to be on the street, and the Bradfords, an American couple from the suburb, announce they are going to the bookstore. These neighbors had left a sympathy card in Shoba and Shukumar’s mailbox in September, acknowledging their pain but not coming into the house and establishing a closer connection.

Meanwhile, Shukumar is wondering what her confession will be on this second night – is she going to admit to having an affair? Will she blame him outright for being away when she gave birth, like her mother did? Does she not respect him anymore because he is still a student while she has a promising career? But she eventually says that one night when his mother had come to visit she lied about staying late at work and went for a drink with her friend Gillian instead. Shukumar’s mother came to spend a few weeks with her son and his wife so they could commemorate together the twelve years since his father had passed. Each night she would cook something his father had liked, “but she was too upset to eat the dishes herself, and her eyes would well up as Shoba stroked her hand” (*IOM* 17). Now he pictures his wife complaining to Gillian about her mother-in-law’s visit, and this bothers him even more since Gillian was the one who drove Shoba to the hospital when she went into labor. Shukumar’s own confession is that he cheated on his oriental civilization exam in college; he copied an answer from an American guy

who knew Urdu and Sanskrit. She presses his hand, and they sit together until lights come back on, when they go inside hand in hand.

On the third night he admits that he sold a vest she had given him as a gift for their anniversary and then got drunk on the money, and on the fourth night he confesses to having ripped out the picture of a woman in a fashion magazine and had looked at it for a week. Shoba was pregnant then and her stomach was “suddenly immense, to the point where Shukumar no longer wanted to touch her” (*IOM* 19), but this is the closest he has come to infidelity. She does not say anything, but takes his hand again: “Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again”( *IOM* 19). Thus, the third night after the mutual confessions they kiss, and the fourth they walk “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” (*IOM* 19). She weeps without sound and then whispers his name, while he wonders what their confessions would be the next day, this thought exciting him and somehow reconnecting him to his wife.

On the fifth day the electric line is repaired ahead of schedule. Shukumar is disappointed; he was eager to cook shrimp *malai* for Shoba and he is afraid their newly recovered intimacy is going to be ruined. They still eat together in candlelight, but after finishing the shrimp and the first bottle of wine, Shoba declares that this is the end of their game. She blows the candle and turns on the light switch, saying “I want you to see my face when I tell you this” (*IOM* 21). His heart begins to pound since she used the same words the day she announced she was pregnant. He does not want her to be pregnant again, and he does not want “to have to pretend to be happy” (*IOM* 21). Instead, she says she has been looking for an apartment and has found one within walking distance from her office. Symbolically, the house is on Beacon Hill, showing she is ready for a fresh start, away from the ‘dark’ house they share. She has even signed the lease that very night before coming home.

Shukumar realizes that while his confessions have been relatively benign and “have no real bearing on her” (Williams 72), Shoba spent these past evenings preparing for a life without him. Williams underlines that Shoba’s confessions “suggest a progression away from her husband, and increasing degrees of knowledge and agency” (72). She has carefully prepared her move, because in order for her to overcome the grief she needs to leave the ‘haunted’ house, a

constant reminder of their dead child. Their reconciliation was only a temporary matter, a misinterpretation on his part, Laura Anh Williams concludes. She argues that:

Although the story is told from Shukumar's perspective, Shoba has agency outside of his knowledge, as demonstrated by her refusal to restock the pantry or cook for her husband, actions that correspond to her development of an independent self that Shukumar knows nothing about. Finally this agency allows her to move past their tragedy to a new life that does not contain Shukumar's nutritionally and psychically consumptive and exhaustive presence and practices. (Williams 72)

But the story has one final twist. At one time he wondered what the point of her game was, what they did not know about each other. He knew all the little details, but also remembered that when they returned from the hospital the first thing she did was pick out different things from all the rooms and throw them into a pile in the hallway, "books from the shelves, plants from the windowsills, paintings from walls, photos from tables, pots and pans that hung from the hooks over the stove" (*IOM* 16). This should have indicated the fact that she would no longer be able to share that/a house with him.

Nevertheless, his final confession is going to be his revenge. Shoba had asked the doctor not to tell them the sex of the baby, seeking solace in this mystery. What she never suspected was that Shukumar had arrived from Baltimore just in time to see the baby and to hold it for a few minutes. As the doctor had suggested, these moments made the difference and helped him in the grieving process. Thus he announces: "Our baby was a boy. 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" (*IOM* 22). His tone is distant, the details are meant to hurt her, just like she hurt him with the decision to move out. The description is so accurate that one can 'see' the baby; for the first time in the story its looming absence is transformed into an overwhelming presence. She looks at him, her face contorted with sorrow, and they are both confronted with the enormity of the truth: "He had held his son, who had known life only within her, against his chest in a darkened room in an unknown wing of the hospital. He had held him until a nurse knocked

and took him away, and he promised himself that day that he would never tell Shoba, because he still loved her then, and it was the one thing in her life that she had wanted to be a surprise” (*IOM* 22). The fact that they had a boy is important (Indian tradition welcomes male newborns), and so is the detail that it looked exactly like its mother.

Initially the two characters are seemingly very skilled at translating between their Indian background and the American society in which they live. Shukumar, who does not have very strong ties with his heritage to begin with, wishes he did and is determined to raise his child according to the requirements of their shared Indianness. At the same time, when his wife stops cooking, he takes over and prepares excellent traditional foods. He is not a typical Lahirian male character because he is not well-assimilated in the work field, but prefers to do domestic chores rather than strive for a good job. Shoba, on the other hand, seems to be perfect at managing an Indian household and a demanding American career at the same time. She is an expert at preparing elaborate meals, stocking the pantry for winter, and taking care of the housework in general. Meanwhile, she is also careful with her appearance, using make-up and going to the gym.

However, their roles are inverted after the baby’s death. Shoba went to great lengths in order to maintain a functional marriage and a well-organized household because she was preparing to raise a child in the Indian tradition while smoothly navigating between the happy home and the American workplace. She was hoping to continue in her mother’s footsteps and be successful at both these endeavors. But, the fact that she abruptly stops taking care of the house and of her own body reveals her break from the traditional feminine roles she once embraced. Unable to pass down her Indian heritage, she shuns the ‘ideal’ of devoted wife and mother she adhered to before, and decides to stir towards Americanness. She wants to move alone to an apartment that is closer to her office, intending to dedicate herself to her work. Although the story is narrated from the male character’s point of view, Shukumar is a foil meant to highlight the changes Shoba goes through as a result of her failed motherhood. The doctor reassures her she is physically fit to give birth again, yet she apparently has no desire to do so and rejects this culturally determined role altogether. It is as if she is blaming herself for not having brought to life a healthy baby, and seeks refuge in the impersonal spaces of the office and of a new house which is not imbued with Shukumar’s presence and their child’s absence.

In the closing scene Shukumar takes the plates to the sink and looks out the window at the Bradfords walking arm in arm. Now that all their dark secrets are out in the light, Shoba turns off the switch and they sit at the table and weep “for the things they now knew” (*IOM* 22). The title and the open ending might lead to the conclusion that the two decide to split up. After all, Shoba has just leased an apartment and declared she intends to live alone. However, it is the first time that they actually grieve *together*, so the last paragraph might contain a flicker of hope for their relationship. Neither was prepared for how crushing the experience of losing a child would be, but perhaps the mourning period (coinciding with a time during which their marriage stopped working) is over and they have uncovered the love that united them in the beginning. It could, then, be a temporary matter until they have another child. Lahiri does not suggest remedies for the emotional maladies of her characters, but leaves it up to the readers to decide whether in the case of Shoba and Shukumar communication is the solution.

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