

Cultural Identity of Jhumpa Lahiri's 'A Temporary Matter' in *Interpreter of Maladies*

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* is a beautiful collection of short stories. It analyses the different short stories with different themes like theme of the self-identity, cultural identity, immigration, dislocation, cultural confrontation etc. Moreover, all the stories record journeys across discernible and indiscernible frontiers that the characters transgress in order to discover their real identity. On the surface level, they become visible to offer an image of the complicated cultural relationships between India and the West, investigating the troubled position of the displaced individual caught between two cultures in which he / she finds himself / herself entirely strange. The present paper aims to bring out the exposition of the cultural realities portrayed by Jhumpa Lahiri in 'A Temporary Matter' in *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories.

'A Temporary Matter' is a story about anguish and the secrets people keep from one another. It describes an Indian couple who suffers due to the unavoidable circumstances that happened in their life. The story is narrated from the third person perspective. Though the narrator is omniscient, the events in the story are comprehended through his experiences. The story progresses with husband and wife Shukumar and Shoba who are notified that their electricity will be turned off for five evenings in order to fix a power line. The couple is alone in a foreign land. Shoba a middle aged woman spends her life in seclusion. Actually, this notice is more important for Shoba because she reads the notice aloud more for her own benefit than Shukumar.

The writer in the story describes the strained relationship between the husband and wife. Shoba and Shukumar, though looks like a fine couple, have a mental strain in their minds. There is very rare movement between them. The writer skillfully elaborates it in the story – 'Six months ago in September, Shukumar was at an academic conference in Baltimore when Shoba went in labor, three weeks before her due date.'

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Though Shoba is in need of Shukumar's support, he engages himself busy in his dissertation. She is unaccompanied even in labour pain. The incident of miscarriage creates an impact on the mind of Shukumar, 'When he returned to Boston it was over. The baby had been born dead.' (3) For Shukumar it is really shocking truth. He is in a perplexed state of mind. Actually, he feels distress that the anticipated things now would disappear from his mind. The relationship between them is affected due to the miscarriage. The writer describes that both of them from the contemporary situation. Actually, during this predicament, they need to support and sustain each other. But, this does not happen and the relationship widens as he thought of how he and his wife had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending most of the time in a separate floors as possible.

Shoba feels alienated and twice grief stricken as at one side, she lost her child and on other side, she missed her husband's support. Though the couple is conscious about the adversity, they behave normally. Although Shukumar is aware about the condition of Shoba's miscarriage, he is surprised to notice that she never reveals her misery in front of him. He immediately thinks about his mother who was disappointed and crushed in a difficult situation but on the contrary his wife had built courage in her mind to tackle her difficult situation as if nothing had happen. Thus the writer describes that the Indian women stood compact though they experience catastrophe in their life and he recalls how, 'his own mother had fallen to pieces when his father died, abandoning the house he grew up in and moving back to Calcutta leaving Shukumar to settle it all. He liked that Shoba was different. It astonished him, her capacity to think ahead. (6)

The writer further elaborates Shoba's childlessness. Still she is rigid and engages herself in her habitual life. However, inside she wails for her life. Though she does not express her grief to her husband she thinks that her husband should support her. In spite of sustaining her he engages with the dissertation. Shukumar also feels distress, but he does not disclose it in front of his wife. The writer expresses the unpleasant coldness of the couple. The couple should understand and find solace with each other at this critical juncture. Instead the couple tries to re-establish their life, '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.' (7)

Now, at night, the situation changes as there is no light in their house. Hence, they have to dine together. It shows the stressed relationship between them:

For months now they'd served themselves from the stove, and he'd taken his plate into his study, letting the meal grow cold on his desk before shaving it into his mouth without pause, while Shoba took her plate to the living room and watched game shows, or proofread files with the arsenal of colored pencil at hand.'(8)

Actually, Shukumar knew it was something that she enforced to do. He recalls how they ornamented the room for their new born infant. But, the destiny does not support them. He becomes sadden and is aware of the condition of Shoba. He keeps the secret, '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.' (8)

The relationship between them is purely an adjustment. Though they live under the same roof they are poles apart with each other. Shukumar remembers the first meeting with his wife. At that time, they were obsessive with each other, 'He remembered their first meals there, when they were so thrilled to be married, to be living together in the same house at last, that they would just reach for each other foolishly more eager to make love than to eat.' (10)

As it is the dinner time, both Shoba and Shukumar sit at the dine table. Shoba though engages herself into the activities, feels anguish. She imagines about her lost child. But, Shukumar realizes the reality that their baby never cried, 'Their baby would never have a rice ceremony even though Shoba had already made the guest list, and decided on which of her first taste of solid food, at six months if it was a boy seven if it was a girl.' (11)

The writer expresses the Bengali culture. Though the couple has no child, they dreamt of the rice giving ceremony. Lahiri here elaborates that the couple is attached with the culture even in a foreign land. Shukumar born as an Indian stays in the foreign land for a long time. Hence, he hardly ever remembers

India. The writer describes the plight of the immigrants from India and rarely know about their own country, 'It wasn't until after his father died, in his last year of college that the country began to interest him, and he studied its history from course books as if it were any other subject. He wished now that he had his own childhood story of India.' (12)

At the dinner table, Shoba thinks that they should play a game like truth or dare. She thinks and says that, 'how about telling each other something we've never told before.' (13) Shukumar though dumbfounded with the behaviour of Shoba, thinks that it might be good for both of them. He says that after getting married they have no enough time to spend together. He realizes the distance that gulped between him and Shoba. The writer competently elaborates the critical situation that, he could not recall the last time that when they had been photographed and it seems that they had even stopped attending parties and went nowhere together. Shukumar in the dark night, remembers his mother. He recalls how she exhausted her life for the welfare of the family. He realizes that even after the death of his father, his mother was in pain every time. He suddenly feels that he is unable to be an adjunct with his mother. He thinks of her lonely life with utter desolation, 'Each night his mother cooked 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.' (18)

The writer marvelously elaborates the passionate relationship of Shoba and Shukumar. They remember and feel their past in the dark night. They also remember about their families. But, probably both Shoba and Shukumar conceal something. Shukumar always think about their loss of child. He cannot expose it in front of Shoba. But he wishes he could reveal it this night. Shukumar was sickened that she had spent all the past events in preparing the life without him. He was comforted and yet he was sickened. This was what she had been frustrating to tell him for the past four evening. This was actually the point of her game. At this time, Shukumar remembers the catastrophe. Actually, he is perplexed, whether to reveal the truth or to conceal it, 'He had held her until a nurse knocked and took her 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.' (22)

But Shoba discovers the truth at that night. It is an unsympathetic fact that she cannot tolerate it. It is the reality that Shukumar hides. He has to sustain Shoba. The writer beautifully summarizes the lonely life of the Indian couple, 'Shoba had turned the lights off. She came back to the table and sat down, and after a moment Shukumar joined her. They wept together, for the things they now knew.' (22)

Thus Lahiri attempts to portray the marital monotony of the typical American society wherein marriage itself turns into temporary matters. In case of Shoba and Shukumar who are clearly Americanized, the anxiety and uncertain of a confounding relationship add to the unbalanced life of exile. Actually, the darkness represents the nightfall of the two distant cultures. It is also represents symbolically the darkness of the relation of Indian in America. Thus Lahiri leaves the conclusion to the readers because it is not confident whether the tranquility is temporary or permanent in their relationship. She just allows space for her reader's imagination.

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