



Darkness Ushering Illumination: A Critical Reading of 'A Temporary Matter' by Jhumpa Lahiri

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a critical reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's short story 'A Temporary Matter'. The analysis is conducted in line with the trajectory Lahiri has developed for the short story. Accordingly, it continues under fifteen sub-topics respectively: 1) Introduction; 2) Images of a Frozen Personal Relationship; 3) Frustration Precipitated by a Stillbirth; 4) Avoidance as a Defence Mechanism; 5) Defensive Isolation in Individual Behaviours; 6) Nostalgia about Domestic Harmony; 7) Alliance Forced by Darkness; 8) A Totally New Start; 9) Breaking the Ice; 10) The Luxury of Darkness; 11) Catharsis Invited by Daily Confession; 12) Disappointment without Power Cut; 13) End to the Pleasure; 14) A Mystery Revealed; and 15) Darkness Ushering Illumination. Each section foregrounds a significant development in the behaviours of the two protagonists concerned who are frustrated by the stillbirth of their baby on whose conception there was no consensus between the two and are not confident to face each other because of their initial differences about bearing and rearing babies. There is an effort to assess the efficacy of Lahiri's creative use of imagery and symbolism to portray the developments and conditions within the narrative space in a critical light so that the reader will be able to perceive how an Indian couple psychologically withstand a stillbirth in the family in an American alien cultural environment. The paper reflects on the paradox in the power cut that helps repair the shattered personal relationship between the two as a unique device in narrating the situation in question.

INTRODUCTION

In 'A Temporary Matter' by Jhumpa Lahiri (1998), as if to define the short story's title, the opening passage reveals what is going to be "a temporary matter" in the lives of the two protagonists Shobha and Shukumar. In simple terms, it relates that, because of a repair in a power line in that municipal area, a one-hour power cut will be introduced from eight to nine in the evening, for five consecutive days. The damage caused by the prevailing "snowstorm" and the speculation on "milder evenings" to "set it right" conveniently create an uncertain atmosphere for the short story to begin.

This atmosphere symbolizes with tremendous proximity, the situation of the two protagonists, whose relationship, like the power line, has been damaged now due to an abortion the woman had undergone and desperately needs repair. Like the American in "Hills like White Elephant" by Hemingway (1927), the man does not like the woman getting pregnant and tries to dissuade her from doing so, but the woman likes to become a mother in any case. But when the stillbirth occurs, she does not know what the man thinks about it. There is no possibility for her to learn the man's attitude toward their child. Based on his former disapproval of bearing and

rearing children, she has a preconception about his feelings and carries a misunderstanding right through.

The power cut provides an occasion for them to come to know about the true feelings of the man. Electricity is energy. This applies to humans too. In symbolic terms, humans also generate a kind of electricity to remain connected with each other. Human relationships too need to be galvanized at times. In that sense, as Kim et al (2019) claim, as power failures occur in their personal relationships, humans work on various strategies such as comprehending, communicating, interacting, compromising, and compensating in terms of repairing them. So, the two protagonists also try out such strategies in repairing their frozen personal relationship in the face of a power cut in their residential environment. They use the power cut in a positive light as a temporary matter in resolving the conflict between them over pregnancy and love.

IMAGES OF A FROZEN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

Coming from India, Shoba and Shukumar suffer alienation in America. As revealed in the MSMUnify (2023), this educated Indian immigrant couple residing in America is in a struggle to get adjusted to their present environment that contrasts



with their home in India. Because of their poor economic condition, they have selected to live in an underprivileged low-cost residential area in the town. The "houses on the quiet tree-lined street, within walking distance of a row of brick-faced stores and a trolley stop" (Lahiri, 1998) suggest that they are in the periphery of the city that usually receives step motherly treatment from the municipal authorities. They seem to have lived here for three years and that suggests their long-prevailing bleak economic condition. The "tin wall" needs wallpapering and it is reminded of the "calendar of William Morris wallpaper patterns" sent by a friend as "a Christmas gift" which is the only ornament on the wall. The Christmas gift of a calendar they receive from a friend reminds them of Christmas, but they have no means to celebrate it. Poverty seems to be depriving them of opportunities to repair their relationship and keep it fresh.

Lahiri suggests even through the portrayals of their personalities that Shobha and Shukumar are simply stranded between the cultures of their native India and their adopted homeland in America. Shobha's outfit of "a navy-blue poplin raincoat over grey sweatpants and white sneakers" suggests the transformation she has undergone while living in America not only in her fashions and fancies but also in her response to life. Like any other working woman in America, she seems to be going to the "gym" on her way home after work. Her present look as a woman of "thirty-three" seems to frustrate her claim for beauty and elegance. The unattended stains of "cranberry lipstick ... on the outer reaches of her mouth" and patches of "charcoal beneath her lower lashes" add to her present disinterest in pulchritude or fashion although they remind Shukumar of the romantic moments when she had been "too eager to collapse into his arms". The "leather satchel plump with files" she carries as a professional proofreader represents her struggle for existence. Her desperation to relieve herself of it and have a breath of fresh air is conveyed in the way she leaves it in the hallway. Her tiredness is suggestive even in her indifference to the "sheaf of mail" she brings in.

In this setting Shukumar's behaviour suggests how frustrating it is for him to pass the time in his present routine. Bugged down in his dissertation work, he is confined to the home and is right now cooking the evening meal. This is not usual for a man either in India or in America. His dissertation topic "Agrarian Revolts in India" is also not a subject to relish in such a gloomy situation. Their meeting in the evening starts with friction.

Her reaction to the warning about the power cut from the town authorities invites a dialogue between them that sheds light on the current lukewarm nature of their relationship. Shobha sounds very casual in her utterance, "But they should do this sort of thing during the day." Yet it urges Shukumar to make a cheeky innuendo, "When I'm here, you mean."

Although the stretch of discourse is limited to two utterances it succeeds in revealing the entire gamut of their relationship. Their roles have changed: the woman goes out to work, and the man keeps the home.

"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" (Lahiri, 1998)

Within the power matrix that emerges from their relationship regarding mundane affairs, in her role as breadwinner, as Luscombe (2014) suggests, she holds a greater share of power than her husband in his role as a housekeeper. So, the woman does not mind a power cut at home during her absence, and the man feels irritated by the woman's unconcern about how he survives a power cut when he is all alone. Thus, there is a great deal of indifference dominating the relationship between them.

The listlessness they both suffer because of their frozen relationship and their monotonous lifestyle as poverty-ridden outsiders in America appear also in their oblivion of the dates. Shobha has to scan the calendar to find out that the power cut begins that day. Their forgetfulness about Shukumar's dentist appointment the following day and his requirement to brush his teeth in preparation for it suggests that they are not conscious of the time moving. The dentist appointment reminds him of his morning ritual of brushing his teeth. This means they have lost their interest in life. The unattended stains of lipstick and charcoal on the woman's face and the unbrushed teeth in the man's mouth conjure up grotesque images of self-negligence.

FRUSTRATION PRECIPITATED BY A STILLBIRTH

It is obvious that the cause of the frustration in their household is the stillbirth of their first baby. Shukumar gets traumatized by this incident as he feels it unnecessarily created a rift between them by frustrating his love for her and creating an undue argument over pregnancy and parenthood. Lahiri revives his frustration through the recollection he has of the moment he left for a conference in Baltimore six months ago just the day Shobha was to get hospitalized for the delivery, three weeks in advance.

"When the cab pulled away that morning for the airport, Shoba stood waving goodbye in her robe, with one arm resting on the mound of her belly as if it were a perfectly natural part of her body" (Lahiri, 1998)

This spectacle recurs in his imagination and torments his feelings each time he is in nostalgia. Together with it, he visualizes the collapse of his communication with her. His refusal and her encouragement of him to go to the conference together lead to a great paradox as his presence was not going to be rewarded at all. Her insistence on making useful

professional contacts as a new entrant into the job market engenders irony as it proves useless without a proper personal relationship with his wife.

In this scenario, Shobha appears to be practical. By keeping a record of Shukumar's hotel details, his schedule, and his flight numbers and by arranging with her friend Gillian to take herself to the hospital she assures him that everything will be all right in his absence. Yet Shukumar remains daydreaming. During the drive to the airport, Shukumar wonders how he is going to cope with the baby Shobha is to deliver. The comparison he makes between their dingy car and that spacious cab pushes him through an imaginary transformation into a dwarf in the back seat. Further, his imagination of a family with several children urges in him the necessity of acquiring "a station wagon" that can take the children to "music lessons", "dentist appointments", etc. He almost simulates a father "gripping the wheel" while the mother of his children turns around to hand them "juice boxes". He is still "a student at thirty-five". Lahiri supports Shukumar's parenthood fears with an autumnal spectacle of maturity marked by the morning sun shining on trees "heavy with bronze leaves". The symbolism suggests Shukumar's concerns as those of a would-be father already somewhat late to start a family. He is no more in the "spring" of his life but in the "autumn".

The stillborn his wife delivers in his absence, as Turton et al (2018) explain, has a traumatic impact on Shukumar. Too emotional about the pain Shoba suffered in this matter, he harbours a notion that his presence could have changed the situation and feels guilty about not being around during her struggle. Lahiri depicts his mood in a short sentence; "When he returned to Boston it was over." The baby died because Shoba's placenta had gradually weakened. On his return from Baltimore, Shukumar gets demoralized about his poor capabilities as he finds the helpless state of Shoba in a dingy room, with a caesarean cut on her abdomen. The doctor's courtesies to them, the assurance given to Shoba that she would be back on her feet in a few weeks and would be able to have children in the future, and Shoba's own courage to be back to normal, are of no effect in regaining Shoba's self-confidence and recovering her from her psychological defeat.

AVOIDANCE AS A DEFENCE MECHANISM

After Shoba's delivery of a stillborn the relationship between Shoba and Shukumar cools down. They both become demoralized by some unresolved puzzles and find it difficult to recover from the frustration. "These days Shoba was always gone by the time Shukumar woke up." Practically they do not see each other very much. Shoba's behaviour has been influenced by the traditions of her culture.

"The birth of a child into the Hindu community is a cause for great celebration. The extended family – especially

other women – will visit the mother and baby, bringing in many gifts such as new clothing and food. They will be particularly excited if the baby is male." (ethnicityonline.net)

Quite opposite of that now she should suffer a great blow to her personal happiness. Rather she is ashamed of what happened.

"Miscarriage and stillbirth may be sensitive issues for a Hindu woman and her family. There may be beliefs that the events were influenced by karmic processes. The woman and her family may prefer to deal with the matters privately and quietly." (hse.ie)

So, Shoba deliberately avoids Shukumar in her nostalgia for her family in India, where they have people to commiserate with her for her loss. As her traditions are so dominant in her psyche, although she does not express it, she is compelled to consider it ominous for a woman to have a stillbirth.

As Shoba and Shukumar are in a foreign country thousands of miles away from their homeland, they must come to terms with their misadventure all by themselves. They must deal with a taboo subject in the context of their conservative Hindu cultural background. So, they maintain silence most of the time. Shukumar's visualization of Shoba at work during her absence and his reflection that he is supposed to get benefited from her proofreading capabilities in the completion of his dissertation suggest that he, despite being deprived of the physical touch of her love because of a biological misadventure, does not develop any animosity against Shoba. Yet his explicit dislike of pregnancy has been so dominant in his feelings that he cannot either openly sympathize with her or instil hope in her about the future in accordance with her medical reports. So he resorts to suffering the frustration in silence. His behaviour has been hit by a strange feeling of intellectual lethargy and he now operates mechanically only under the warnings of his dissertation advisor. His imagination remains focused on the tricks the two of them have developed to avoid each other's eyes, "spending as much time on separate floors as possible", allowing weekends to pass without events, and preventing their bodies from touching each other before sleeping. His positive feelings developed over the medical report and Shoba's fitness as a "thirty-year" old woman gets submerged by the intellectual lethargy that confines him to bed until it is nearly lunchtime. The dullness hits him so hard that he feels lazy even to make his own cup of coffee.

DEFENSIVE ISOLATION IN INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOURS

As a result of the mundane commitments they have, Shukumar and Shoba have respectively sopped their roles. Shukumar does the cooking and housekeeping while Shoba continues her proofreading work. Because of Shukumar's dissertation work, he must be at home and finish the writing while Shoba has to earn the money required for the management of their

home. Lahiri suggests that, while cooking and carrying out the kitchen work, Shukumar silently acknowledges the little tricks he has learnt from Shoba. This implies the potential he must get back to his usual behaviour while associating with Shoba. He seems not to have gone out for over a week. His excuse has been the thick layer of snow and now he finds that his excuse cannot be made any more as the snow is thawing away. The image of the melting snow functions as a metaphor to describe the likeliness of his mind and heart to change from its prevailing frozen condition.

Lahiri conveys their reactions to the darkness which is ready to drown their world in half an hour:

“The lamb won’t be done by eight,” Shukumar said. “We may have to eat in the dark.”

“We can light candles,” Shoba suggested” (Lahiri, 1998)

In his subordinate position in the power matrix, Shukumar appears to surrender himself to the darkness while Shoba comes up with methods to repulse darkness. By using metaphors of “darkness” and “light” antithetically Lahiri suggests how Shukumar and Shoba contrast with each other in their reactions to their present family crisis precipitated by the man’s dislike of pregnancy followed by the woman’s delivery of a stillbirth. Their waiting for the food to be cooked alludes to the ancient acceptance in Asian cultures, as Srinivas (2011) observes, that food will settle most disputes. Lahiri combines food with candlelight in developing a close atmosphere for the protagonists to face each other and sort out their problems.

The noncommittal behaviour Shoba has developed over the weeks is suggestive in the way she treats the house: her personal effects are in disarray; the bills accumulate without being paid; the shabby look of the furniture prevails unattended; and all plans and preparations for interior decorations remain unimplemented. Lahiri presents a semiotic study of the disorganization in the house to establish the prevailing state of frustration in Shoba’s mind.

NOSTALGIA ABOUT DOMESTIC HARMONY

The “new toothbrush” that he finds “in its box beneath the sink” suggests to Shukumar a salient feature of Shoba’s methodical home management. Although the cheap stiff bristles hurt his gums and cause him to spit blood into the basin, it suggests how circumspect Shoba is as a housewife. This brush is “one of many” Shoba “bought once when they were on sale” and “stored in a metal basket” to be used if a visitor decides, “at the last minute, to spend the night”. Shukumar remembers from this Shoba’s quality of being “the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad”. Surprises are like sea waves and in a lifetime, one has to face them in their hundreds. Therefore, Shukumar is compelled to admit that he has already enjoyed Shoba’s alertness on numerous occasions.

He appreciatively recalls the economic independence Shoba earned by keeping the bonuses from her job in a separate bank account in her name and the investments she made in the clothing and other things she really liked and in an always-plenteous larder in the house. In the presence of Shoba’s efficiency in pecuniary matters, he recalls his agony of losing his ancestral house in Calcutta due to the financial mess his mother had created and the struggle he had to make to save her from her debtors. This makes him compare Shoba with his own mother and find a great advantage in her managerial strategies.

He feels the struggle Shoba used to make while shopping for foodstuff as an investment made in the emergency meals they have to throw for groups of friends. Lahiri has provided a detailed account of Shoba’s kitchen in terms of depicting what a methodical housewife would do to ensure domestic harmony. All virtues of Shoba manifest to him each time he starts preparing a meal. “Shukumar enjoyed cooking now. It was the one thing that made him feel productive.” Lahiri implies here that Shukumar tends to consider Shoba his guide in managing the house, through the meticulously systematic kitchen practices she has introduced. Indirectly it suggests a potential hanging in the atmosphere for regaining the lost domestic harmony.

ALLIANCE FORCED BY DARKNESS

“Tonight, with no lights, they would have to eat together.” Lahiri indicates a turning point in the setting precipitated by the power cut. For months now, while Shukumar quietly ate in his study, Shoba ate in the parlour watching TV or working. So long, in this manner, they deliberately miss out on the social element in the meals they have in the house. Each time Shoba enters the house, Shukumar cunningly and timidly avoids her. As it is of no more use, Shukumar disassembles all the bright nursery school decorations they had applied to the room reserved for the baby. He sets an ultimatum to parenthood and continues his determination to avoid her. “For some reason, the room did not haunt him the way it haunted Shoba.” He occupies this room later for two reasons: (1) that it soothes him and (2) that Shoba does not like to be there. But, under the circumstance of the power cut, he cannot play his usual tricks to avoid her. Having browsed through the contents of the drawers, he just manages to find “a flashlight” and “a half-empty box of birthday candles”. The birthday candles refresh his memory of the surprise birthday party Shoba threw for him the previous year: whom she had invited; how the wine had been kept cool; how the vanilla cream had been made; what month she was passing in her pregnancy at that time; what she was drinking; and how she walked with him through the crowd. The memories of the birthday party are followed by the memories of Shoba’s mother who came to them from Arizona and stayed with them for two months after Shoba’s return from the hospital. In addition to her assistance in housekeeping, her religiousness

is demonstrated through prayers made to a goddess, and her politeness and care have shown to him without being friendly, he remembers her charging him for his failure to be present by Shoba for the delivery, conveyed in the remark, "But you weren't even there." Her remark rouses his guilty conscience about his opposition to Shoba's pregnancy.

An irony develops from the fact that Shoba's usual alertness for emergencies and surprises has not made her purchase any real candles. While organizing a stand for the birthday candles and arranging the kitchen table for them to eat dinner at, he makes another journey to the past.

"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" (Lahiri, 1998)

Suddenly, the table is ready with two eating places under the candlelight. The romantic atmosphere created by the ceremonial plates and wineglasses on embroidered place mats shining in the light of ten candles girdling the white-edged, star-shaped leaves of the ivy in the middle was reinforced by the jazz music from the radio. The work by Shukumar makes Shoba exclaim in amazement, "What's all this?" After a shower in the upstairs bathroom, she is fresh and clean. Her stomach is flat again and her waist is narrow before the flare of her hips, she looks smart in her flannel robe tied in a floppy knot. Shukumar is also clean after a mouthwash in the downstairs bathroom. Lahiri makes them meet, fresh and clean, at a candle-lit ceremonial-looking dining table to eat their dinner together. Paradoxically, darkness is now in a process of putting an end to their avoidance of each other and forcing them into a compulsory alliance. It really plays magic to restore their relationship. (See Chegeni et al, 2017)

A TOTALLY NEW START

As if to demonstrate his newly gained expertise in the culinary arts, Shukumar proudly puts the food on the table. "You made *rogan josh*," Shoba's remark adds a powerful wave of energy to his enthusiasm. His announcement that the dinner is ready, and the disappearance of lights and music coincidentally urge them to come close to each other. Darkness and silence diminish their world, compelling them to enter into an agreement of interaction and interdependence. "Perfect timing ... All I could find were birthday candles ... It doesn't matter ... It looks lovely," (Lahiri, 1998) The comments Shoba makes resonate in the atmosphere free of distraction. Her act of "running a finger along the stem of her wineglass" in an aesthetic sense suggests an invitation for him to hold her by the waist, which is now "narrow before the flare of her hips". "In the dimness, he knew how she sat, a bit forward in her chair, ankles crossed against the lowest rung, left elbow on the table," (Lahiri, 1998) Her sitting posture confirms her openness to receive him. His pouring of wine into the

glasses "held close to his lap" symbolizes how ready he is in his subconscious mind to respond to her invitation. Red wine being poured from a bottle into a wineglass conjures up an image of coitus through a combination of phallic and yonic symbols. The little struggle Shukumar makes to "tend his makeshift candelabra" to keep the table area lit up, revives Shoba's memories of her life in India.

BREAKING THE ICE

While groping for a subject to talk about, Shoba goes back to her Indian days. Breaking the silence that prevailed between them, she recalls a rice ceremony she attended in the dark during a power cut like the present one. She talks about the baby, for whom the ceremony was held, crying due to the hot weather. This sends Shukumar down memory lane and makes him recall the basic preparations Shoba had made for a rice ceremony for the baby they were supposed to have. Unable to comment on what they have undergone; he changes the subject of their conversation. "Are you hot?" The question he asks her has numerous implications, along with darkness overwhelming them. While Shoba passes the time in a relaxed mood, Shukumar still feels irritated. First, he feels anxious to "go upstairs and sit in front of the computer". Yet darkness does not allow it. Quite contrarily, she remains totally collected and composed to repair their relationship. Very unusually, each time he attempts to get back to his shell, she holds him by making very positive remarks about the meal, getting him to fill her glass, and thanking him for the simple gestures of hospitality he makes. She continues to talk, and he struggles to respond. In the dark, her agility and his lethargy have a cold war against each other. The reason is mainly because of his guilty conscience about being opposed to Shoba's pregnancy.

She recalls how she spent time at her grandmother's when there was a power cut. The entire household gathers in one place, and as a rule, everybody says something to amuse the crowd. The recollections Shoba unfolds thus as Indian days compel Shukumar to remember how he missed India as a child. He fell sick there when he was a child, and his parents did not take him there with them again. Later, as a grown-up, he did not have any interest in the land, until he came to his final year of college. After some time, Shoba's agility wins over Shukumar's lethargy by getting him to wish that "he had his own childhood story of India".

Introducing a hedonistic element into the atmosphere overwhelmed by darkness, Shoba invites Shukumar to join her in a game of storytelling. "Say something to each other in the dark." After she explains that it is different from telling the truth, they both agree upon telling something new but interesting. Shukumar recalls that he did so in high school, after liquor but still hesitates as to what he should tell.

Shoba just starts the game by telling about what she did when she visited his apartment for the first time. She relates

that she looked up his address book for her own address, eavesdropped on a call he had from his mother to figure out whether it was a girl, and looked for any scribbles of her name in the margins of his newspaper and concludes her turn by stressing that she did not give him up after all.

Once she has finished, Shukumar has to start, according to the rules of the game. As he has not got much to say, he simply relates their first meeting at a lecture hall in Cambridge, where he found her beautiful. Next to that, he relates how he happened to make a separate trip to Somerville just to tip the waiter after their first dinner out. Asked her why he forgot to tip the waiter then and there, he answers he must have been distracted by the "funny feeling" he had at the end of the meal that he might marry her one day.

The conversational game proves interesting to them both. The topics revive their love and respect for each other. They break away from the practice of silence they have maintained for nearly six months. Thus the first hour of power cut in the renovation programme helps them to break the ice for a successful plunge into a pool of friendship and togetherness.

THE LUXURY OF DARKNESS

Motivated to continue the game they started the previous day, Shoba comes home early. By the time Shukumar had gone out through the melting snow and brought home a packet of taper candles and batteries for the flashlight. They eat dinner by seven. Unlike the other days, Shoba carries both their plates to the sink and washes them. Shukumar is pleasantly surprised by her change.

"Don't worry about the dishes..."

"It seems silly not to ... It's nearly eight o'clock" (Lahiri, 1998)

These exchanges between them mean nothing but their eagerness for the power cut. "His heart quickened. All day Shukumar had looked forward to the lights going out." Lahiri dramatizes the enthusiasm of Shukumar.

In reminiscence of the feelings, they had about each other at the inception of their relationship as confessed during the conversational game the night before, they feel good. After a long time, they happen to stand side by side at the sink and watch their reflection on the windowpane as if they are posing for a photograph. Shukumar remembers the film in his camera with snapshots of Shoba during her pregnancy. They sense the sudden change they are undergoing, as for quite some time they had stopped attending parties and had not gone anywhere together. The impact of the previous night's darkness is so powerful that now they share the same towel to dry their hands after finishing the dishes.

The long, steady candle flames inside the house and the snow thawing outside symbolize the warmth setting in their hearts, generating positive feelings towards each other.

They are in the dark for the second time. "Let's sit outside ... I think it's warm still." The tone in which Shoba makes this suggestion conveys the confidence she has developed from the one-hour power cut they enjoyed the previous night. The parade of neighbours passing by them with flashlights on, while they are sitting outside with candles in hand, conjures up a festive atmosphere. Lahiri presents a model through cheerful neighbours for her two helpless protagonists to follow. The old, happy, and sympathetic Bradfords, who appear arm in arm, invite them to go to a bookstore where they have power. "No thanks," Shoba and Shukumar both utter, surprising them as to how their words match.

When the situation calms down, they settle down to concentrate on each other's revelations. What emerges in Shukumar's psyche reveals in the real sense how they started avoiding each other. First, he purges from his imagination the fears and worries that are dormant in his mind, about the explosions possible from Shoba indicative of disloyalty, disrespect, and disdain. Then he makes up his mind about her by reassessing her character as faithful, trusting, and graceful. He restructures his consciousness about her by going through the details of her sleeping habits, her reactions to dreams, her gastrosophic preferences, and how she behaved the day she returned from the hospital.

"He knew that when they returned from the hospital the first thing she did when she walked into the house was to pick out objects of theirs and toss 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. Shukumar had stepped out of her way, watching as she moved methodically from room to room. When she was satisfied, she stood there staring at the pile she'd made, her lips drawn back in such distaste that Shukumar had thought she would spit. Then she'd started to cry" (Lahiri, 1998)

So long it is understood that Shukumar in his opposition to pregnancy is the hard nut in this relationship. But now it becomes clear that, on her return from the hospital, he is being vehemently penalized by Shoba for limiting his personal relationship with her to a search for some selfish carnal pleasure. It was said before that Shoba is more biased toward Indian culture than Shukumar because of her regular visits there and what he visualizes now alludes to Shoba's acute Indianness that does not approve of abortion. Shukumar has no opinion of his own about it. There is also an allusion to the harsh remark Shoba's mother made about Shukumar's absence during the confinement that virtually holds him responsible for the stillbirth.

In his present mood, chilled and benumbed by the cold weather, he does not feel like initiating the conversational game and waits for Shoba to do so. Sounding genuine, Shoba reveals her outing with Gillian on the pretext of working late,

on a night Shukumar's mother was with them. This reminds him of the inconvenience he suffered at the dinner that night without Shoba, the moral significance of his mother's visit to them, the sentiments his mother expressed over his late father and Shoba's sympathy with his mother. Although Gillian is a friend in need, his imagination of Shoba going out together with her the said night, is not very pleasurable for him. "He imagined her complaining, and Gillian sympathizing about visits from in-laws." Shukumar's contemplation remains tied to the candles glowing in the windows and the smoke rising from the chimney of the only house visible in the dark street while speculating on the topic of their conversation.

When his turn of telling a story comes, he divulges that he cheated on an exam in college. Although it happened fifteen years ago, he feels relieved now after talking about it and explaining why it happened so. His explanation that shortly after his father's death draws Shoba's sympathy towards him. "You didn't have to tell me why you did it..." She adds physical force to her response by holding and pressing his hand and moving close to him. In the same position, they sit together until the power cut is over. The Bradfords' return signals them to get back. "Then they stood up, his hand still in hers, and went inside." They breathe satisfaction over their exchange of confessions to "the little ways they'd hurt or disappointed each other and themselves". The relief they feel after each confession they make is tremendous. Thus, they enjoy the luxury of darkness in restoring their relationship.

CATHARSIS INVITED BY DAILY CONFESSION

Now more open to each other than before, they spend the third-night hour of darkness, telling more stories of things they did in the past. He initiates the game, confessing that he did not really lose "the sweater vest she bought him for their third wedding anniversary" but sold it to get drunk alone "in the middle of the day at a hotel bar". He confesses that he did so because he was depressed by the sweater vest as it was not as rich as the "ten-course dinner" he received from her for their first anniversary. Feeling guilty about what he did, he even relates the bartender's mature response to his grumbling. "What do you expect? ... You're married." The only thing Shoba does in response is to take his hand, "pressing it as she had done before".

Her story in that hour sufficiently counterbalances his. Once "after a lecture they'd attended, she let him speak to the chairman of his department without telling him that he had a dab of paste on his chin" (Lahiri, 1998). She confesses that she did so because "she'd been irritated with him for some reason, and so she'd let him go on and on, about securing his fellowship for the following semester," and regrets that she could have put "a finger to her own chin as a signal" (Lahiri, 1998).

"The third night after supper they'd sat together on the sofa, and once it was dark, he began kissing her

awkwardly on her forehead and her face, and though it was dark he closed his eyes, and knew that she did too" (Lahiri, 1998)

They conclude their reunion that night only by kissing each other awkwardly. They both close their eyes, in terms of gathering momentum in understanding, tolerating, and forgiving each other's petty weaknesses.

On the fourth night, he relates that "he once ripped out a photo of a woman in one of the fashion magazines she used to subscribe to and carried it in his books for a week". He confesses that he did not know why he did it, while the woman in the picture in "a white sequined dress" and with "a sullen face and lean, mannish legs" was not as Shoba. He implies that the woman attracted his attention because of the temporary transformation Shoba's figure had undergone due to pregnancy. "Shoba had been pregnant at the time, her stomach suddenly immense, to the point where Shukumar no longer wanted to touch her" (Lahiri, 1998) He regrets it though it was the closest he had come to infidelity. In response to his story, Shoba reveals her dislike of the only poem Shukumar has ever published in his life, in a literary magazine in Utah, on the grounds that she found it "sentimental".

They both realize that it was the darkness that put them together like this. The first night they just admired the company of each other. The second night they started talking to each other. On the third night, they kissed each other.

"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 desperation they had forgotten. She wept without sound, and whispered his name, and traced his eyebrows with her finger in the dark.

"As he made love to her, he wondered what he would say to her the next night, and what she would say, the thought of it exciting him, "Hold me," he said, "hold me in your arms." By the time the lights came back on downstairs, they'd fallen asleep" (Lahiri, 1998)

They access the love that has been the most inaccessible for the last six months. The catharsis they achieve in the confessions they each make to the other in the dark removes all doubts and hesitations they suffer and put them together as they have never been before. They are already satisfied with each other in their mental and physical explorations of mutual love. They become lovers full of newly gained energy.

DISAPPOINTMENT WITHOUT POWER CUT

A paradox rises from the notice from the electric company Shukumar finds in the mailbox on the morning of the fifth night. "The line had been repaired ahead of schedule, it said." Instead of becoming happy, he becomes disappointed. It draws away from him his enthusiasm to make shrimp *malai*

for Shoba. On the one hand, the shrimps he bought for the dish are not up to his satisfaction and he fears that, in the florescent light, Shoba will notice their low quality, and on the other, he suspects that it will curtail the intimacy they could develop over the four nights they spent in the dark. Yet he brings a beeswax candle and two bottles of wine.

"I suppose this is the end of our game..."

"You can still light candles if you want" (Lahiri, 1998)

Shoba's agreement to have candles instead of electric light softens his heart. Shukumar develops more hopes for the future when he notices her suit beneath the raincoat, and her recently retouched make-up. She does not have the shabby look she had the first day of the power cut and Shukumar considers it a vast improvement in their relationship. So, he pours himself some wine and puts on "a record, a Thelonious Monk album he knew she liked." Yet the absence of thanks or compliments from Shoba during the meal shatters his hopes. Once they have finished the food and wine, Shoba frantically blows out the candle, stands up, turns on the light switch, and sits again. Her mechanical nature causes concern in Shukumar again.

"Shouldn't we keep the lights off?"

"I want you to see my face when I tell you this ..."

"His heart began to pound. The day she told him she was pregnant, she had used the very same words, saying them in the same gentle way, turning off the basketball game he'd been watching on television. He hadn't been prepared then. Now he was.

"Only he didn't want her to be pregnant again. He didn't want to have to pretend to be happy" (Lahiri, 1998)

Shoba's tone alludes to the moment when she announced her pregnancy. He had been opposed to her getting pregnant right through. Feeling guilty about it, he wonders what she is going to announce this time. Lahiri dramatizes the occasion with the workings in the mind of Shukumar. Shoba's curtness to all his gestures of courtesy generates nothing but disappointment. Finally, she demands light to make her announcement. This suggests that, as already they have removed their masks in terms of playing a game of confessions, now it is time for them to face reality as it is. He should listen to whatever she says, as she is the greater loser in the scenario, they survived six months ago. Her loss of the baby is obviously much greater than his loss of the carnal pleasure from her.

END TO THE PLEASURE

"I've been looking for an apartment and I've found one," the announcement she makes manifests her spirit of independence. Fundamentally, this suggests separation from her husband. The reason for her decision is clear in the paradoxical claim she makes soon after it, "It was nobody's

fault..." This utterance that functions as an epilogue to this decisive announcement blocks the way for a long discussion. Lahiri uses a short sentence to articulate the frustration they both have had over the past six months. "They'd been through enough." The background to the announcement is presented in such a way that it conveys in concrete terms a feminist message on not only Shoba's appreciation of independence, requirements, potentials, priorities, and reasoning but also her likeliness to take timely action.

"She needed some time alone. She had money saved up for a security deposit. The apartment was on Beacon Hill, so she could walk to work. She had signed the lease that night before coming home" (Lahiri, 1998)

Lahiri implies the articulateness she maintains on this occasion; "It was obvious that she'd rehearsed the lines." Moreover, she conveys a warning about the nature of women, breathlessly pursuant to their desires especially when they have developed them in disillusionment with some situation. Since she has been disillusioned with Shukumar's selfishness in the context of bearing and rearing children, soon after her abortion, she decides to separate from him. In terms of fulfilling the prerequisites for the implementation of her decision, for quite some time she has been going on house hunting. Rejection is a defence mechanism as well as a revenge technique. (See Gyurak & Ayduk, 2014) She has come to the point of following it in retaliation for her husband's proscription against children and motherhood and now she is in action. In no time she enjoyed the outcome expected of her strategy. "It sickened Shukumar, knowing that she had spent these past evenings preparing for a life without him" (Lahiri, 1998) She manages here to demonstrate her power as an individual. So far Shukumar seems to have taken her for granted but now he knows that she can do her work without him. Lahiri develops a feminist position about Shoba's situation in her relationship with Shukumar who has so long not been committed to sharing her likes and dislikes or respecting her priorities in the most crucial aspect of her womanhood.

A MYSTERY REVEALED

So long the hospital episode and the details of the stillborn child have remained pieces of a great mystery in their relationship. Since Shoba's return home, they have not discussed anything related to that event. As Shoba is generally fond of surprises, she had wanted the doctor not to reveal the sex of the child until it was born. So, after her abortion, it has automatically remained a taboo subject. The mystery about the child and his hospital visit became later a refuge for Shoba. Here she indulges herself to seek comfort in ignorance. Shukumar also has let it remain so, pretending to have arrived at the hospital late and failed to hold the cadaver of the child before it was cremated. Lahiri reveals the truth about Shukumar's hospital visit and his success in achieving communion with the child as its father.

"At first, he had recoiled at the suggestion, but the doctor said holding the baby might help him with the process of grieving. ... 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" (Lahiri, 1998)

His behaviour depicted above suggests that, although he used to discourage Shoba from getting pregnant, he really loves her and has a warm heart. It is natural for him to feel jittery about holding a cadaver even though it is his own child's. Yet once he holds it, he starts contemplating his love of Shoba and his grief about losing their child. His sensitive behaviour while holding the child in his hands is suggestive of his capability to be a good father to the child. On his own, he does not give away the child, but a nurse takes it away. It is surmised from his attitude here that for so long he has kept silent about his experience of the child and his knowledge of its sex simply because of his commitment to Shoba's love and her desire for surprises.

"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."

"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" (Lahiri, 1998)

The close observations he has made of the child are suggestive of his exploration of the similarities between the child and its mother. He has paid attention to all its features to establish that the baby boy is identical to his mother. "Our baby," he refers to the child throughout his confession simply to suggest that then and there he accepted the child into his world. Overall, his disclosure at this point reveals the deep sense of love he has had for her throughout their relationship and his prohibition of pregnancy has always been verbal and has had no strong negative impact on their relationship.

DARKNESS USHERING ILLUMINATION

The mystery about his attitude towards their son is revealed. Both Shukumar and Shoba temporarily get stuck in their respective domains, without knowing what position they should take about each other in the future. The illumination they achieve has a dual impact on either of them; Shukumar becomes confounded, and Shoba becomes regretful. Lahiri suggests this in the kind of inertia dominating in Shukumar while clearing the table and the kind of perplexity dominating in Shoba during her departure. "He carried the plates to the sink, but instead of running the tap he looked out through

the window" (Lahiri, 1998) His behaviour awaits some stimulation or inspiration from the outside. In the meantime, Lahiri demonstrates a sudden change in the mood of Shoba. Her defiant spirit of separation seems to have subsided in a moment. "She came back to the table and sat down, and after a moment, Shukumar joined her" (Lahiri, 1998) Her return to the table suggests an apology for the misunderstanding and disillusionment with him she has been nursing in her subconscious mind. As always, they do, the Bradfords walking outside "arm in arm" provide them with a timely solution. Simultaneously, their room goes dark, and they join each other in the dark. This time they join each other with a purpose. "They wept together, for the things they now knew." *Will Shoba break away from him after so shockingly being surprised by him? Maybe she won't. Although Shukumar's revelation is influenced by an element of unconscious revenge the tears they both shed symbolize catharsis. Their crying would culminate in a reunion.* Lahiri demonstrates here the importance of understanding between the partners in the resuscitation of a personal relationship.

So long Shoba had been under the illusion that there is no potential for them to live together under one roof, but the darkness that prevailed during the power cut as "a temporary matter" allows them to join each other in isolation from the rest of the world. The significance of the temporary matter lies in its potential in creating a venue for them to meet each other in an unusually intimate atmosphere. The physical darkness leads to an intellectual illumination to restore the personal relationship between Shoba and Shukumar with a sense of mutual respect and understanding.

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