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THE BRIGHTER PERSPECTIVE OF DARKNESS: “A TEMPORARY MATTER”
BY JHUMPA LAHIRI

SHARMA JAYA¹, SATHE PRACHI²

^{1,2}Asst. Professor, Medi-Caps Institute of Science & Technology, Indore (M.P.)



ABSTRACT

Since the inception it has been inculcated to us that ‘dark’ symbolizes gloominess and represents devilish activities while ‘light’ is a symbol of righteousness and morality. The darkness can never bring happiness in one’s life and has always been associated with state of being miserable, mournful and broken-hearted. Even in literature, many authors have symbolized darkness to express the inner disturbances of one’s mind by and large. Although Lahiri is a current luminary in literary world, her approach and style of writing is very positive. She has an attribute of visualizing the brighter aspect even in the darkness. Jhumpa Lahiri’s endeavour in interpreting the troubles of émigrés is simple yet eloquent style of writing has put her amongst the top literary figures. The plot and characters are strategically bound to give an overall picture of the story. Her attempt to reconcile places and incidents with characters in one single entity is awesome and appreciable.

Key Words: Diaspora, endeavour, nostalgic, reminisce, flabbergasted, insouciant

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A Temporary Matter is a story about an Indian Bengali couple Shoba and Shukumar whose marriage is almost on the verge of falling apart and becomes a temporary matter for them. It is informed to them that there would be blackout for five days. The couple thinks of an idea of revealing secrets to each other during the hours of darkness and decides to tell the untold facts of their lives. This one hour of darkness brings light in their animated life and illuminates their dusky relationship as in every blackout they decide to share one or another secret and at last Shukumar reveals the bitter truth which he kept buried in his heart that their still born baby was a boy. This brings an affirmative change in their married life as Shoba wanted to keep this fact hidden during her pregnancy and gets happy to know that her husband kept his promise and still loves her as he used do earlier. They shun the burdens of their lives after expressing their feelings and restore the same trust and faith which used to be there before the awful incident. This sanguine view clears all the misunderstandings and confusions of them and makes them a happy couple again.

The story starts with the notice that “...their electricity would be cut off for one hour, beginning at eight pm” (1). Due to heavy snow fall, is another temporary matter that turns their life again onto a happy track and removes all the conflicts that once submerged in their life. This signifies that she had decided to use darkness as a channel to fill the communication gap between the couple. Her reader comes to know about the ‘electricity cut’ even before the description of the characters.

In this regard Himadri Lahiri puts her thoughts in the way, "...the movement in the plot is symbolically achieved through interplay of light and darkness. In the light the characters prepare their faces to meet the faces that they meet. They conform to the social norms and personal expectations. But in the dark the curtain of inhibitions is ripped off and they are able to speak their minds and reveal their secrets" (51).

Shukumar is a student in a university of Boston, finalizing the last chapters of his dissertation. He has been portrayed as an indolent character who spends most of his time at home, working on his project and avoids even going to market to buy necessary food items. On the contrary, Shoba works in an office where she searches for typographical errors in text books. She keeps herself busy spending the most of her time out of the house. As is but natural, the couple is facing some conflicts in their marriage although it was not as before. They were having no tension in the harmonious relation of their married life earlier. The main cause of their conflict occurs when Shoba delivers a still baby, which results in drastic changes not only in their relationship but also in their attitudes. The sensible and authoritative Shobha now turns into a negligent and insouciant lady. She was the one who had the capacity to think ahead and used to prepare herself for any emergency; whether it was about managing the home, stocking the food for winter or arranging for parties, it was well organized and well planned. Shukumar also reacted on this terrible experience and adopted the attitude of a delinquent husband. In the words of research scholar Vijay Mishra, the story "touches so delicately on an emotional register often overlooked in theorization about diaspora: the lived experiences of diasporic bodies as individual, as people with their very human dilemmas" (191-92).

They start ignoring each other's company and try to remain from each other as far away as possible. Shukumar thinks that time will settle everything and they'll be able to overcome the traumatic incident of their life and reunite once again but nothing seems so and they behave like strangers in the same house. Reproduction of Jhumpa's words in this regards is as follows, "In the beginning he had believed that it would pass, that he and Shoba would get through it all somehow" (5). His joyous and ambitious wife who was a perfect synthesis of Indian and American cultures behaves like a desolate life partner. The following lines reflect the psychological change in their relationship. "Shukumar moved her satchel and sneakers to the side of the fridge. She wasn't this way before. She used to put her coat on a hanger, her sneakers in the closet, and she paid bills as soon as they come. But now she treated the house as if it were a hotel". According to him she was "the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad" (Lahiri 6).

As per the schedule, the power goes off and both of them decide how they would manage that one hour of darkness in the company of each other. The symbolical use of darkness for bringing the couple together is unique and outstanding. Although darkness always symbolizes sadness, sullenness and silence but here Lahiri has used as a medium to reunite the couple. Observation of Devika has been quoted in this regard, "Jhumpa implements psychological approach to bring them together and share the poignancy of their irreparable loss. She has darkened everything surrounding them so that they can grope into their inside darkness, which they invariably do and move towards the light of realization".

In the darkness Shoba gets nostalgic and reminisce about her childhood days, she spent in India. Suddenly an idea strikes her to spend their time in the manner she used to do during the power failures at her grandmother's house. She plans to share their secrets with each other like playing the game of truth or dare. This is the turning point of the story as it resolves their collapsing relation and brings happiness and faith in their life once again. As decided, the game of sharing the secrets starts in between them and they reveal trivial secrets to each other. They try to read their minds in the darkness. Shoba starts by disclosing the first untold fact to Shukumar when they were dating each other and she secretly looks into Shukumar's address book to search her name. On Shukumar's turn, he admits that he once forgot to give tip to the waiter when they went out for their first dinner and went back the next morning just to pay a tip. They continued telling some more facts to each other for remaining days and "Somehow, without saying anything, it had turned into this. Into an exchange of confessions-the little ways they'd hurt or disappointed each other and themselves" (18).

Initially it seemed silly to them but later they eagerly waited for this dark hour to come. In the words of Mukherjee, "The past, however bitter it may be, looks romantic and beautiful when viewed through the windows of the present" (109). The switching off of lights like a window of present was letting them to recall

their sweet memories and brought love and romance again which had disappeared from their life. Shukumar's anxiety is revealed in the subsequent lines:

His heart quickened. All day Shukumar had looked forward to the lights going out. He thought about what Shoba had said the night before, about looking in his address book. It felt good to remember her as she was then, how bold yet nervous she'd been when they first met, how hopeful. They stood side by side at the sink, their reflections fitting together in the frame of window. It made him shy, the way he felt the first time they stood together in a mirror. (Lahiri 15)

On the morning of the fifth day Shukumar receives another notice about repaired fault a day before as per schedule. He gets disappointed as it was the only reason for their communication and to spend time together. But, they continue the process of making confession to each other even in the presence of light and play the game by turning the room dark. This further signifies that Lahiri intentionally sets the background dark so that her characters can spend few moments as at times it becomes easier to express the our pain in dark than in the light.

Shoba gives a jolt to Shukumar by saying that "She had signed the lease for separate apartment that night before coming home" (Lahiri 21). It appalls Shukumar that for the past four evenings she'd been preparing for it and realizes that the game of sharing secrets was merely a medium for Shoba and was purposely planned so that she can easily disclose her decision of living an isolated life. This can be reflected in the subsequent lines:

It was obvious that she'd rehearsed the line. All this time she'd been looking for an apartment, testing the water pressure, Asking a Realtor if heat and hot water is including in the rent. It sickened Shukumar, Knowing that she had spent these past evenings preparing for the life without him. He was relieved and yet he was sickened. This was what she'd been trying to tell him for last four evenings. This was the point of her game.

Flabbergasted on hearing this, Shukumar on his turn unveils the fact about the sex of their stillborn baby which he had thought, he would never divulge to Shoba as she had wanted it to be a surprise and had insisted not to let it be known to her until the child is delivered. Shoba's decision of living a separate life repulses her husband and he says, "Our baby was a boy." Lahiri further revealed an emotional state of a father in next lines, "He held his son, who had known life only within her, against his chest in a darkened room...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).

Shoba bursts into tears and feels relieved to know that at least Shukumar could hold their baby once and was with her at the time of an irreparable loss. The care and concern shown by him consoles her and fill her heart with solace, peace and courage to live with that tragic flaw of their life. Even though they were estranged yet were bearing the same agony and when it has been known to them, they feel reunited again and "wept together, for the things they now knew" (Lahiri 22).

Jhumpa leaves the end on uncertain note and gives freedom to her reader to contemplate on it "because it is not certain whether the stillness is temporary or the patch up is temporary in their relationship"(Devika 115). She analyses things from her own point of view and presents it from different perspectives so that her reader remains absorbed in the story and visualize the entire scene. She never gives her opinion about it but, rather lets her characters speak for herself. In the words of Devika, "It's not only the doctor that serves as the interpreter of maladies; in fact, Jhumpa herself acts as an interpreter for her readers. She allows them to have vicarious pleasure and get rid of something morbid in their attitude and passion" (114).

Lahiri examines the things with sensitive, susceptible and sharp-eyes and then carves it in the form of a diligent story. She weaves the memories of past and the situations of present together by nostalgic representation of characters. Through the character of Shoba, Lahiri shows that how the hours of darkness can be eradicated from one's life if we see the positive side of it. Shoba peeps into her childhood reminiscences to resolve the complexities of life and introduces the game of sharing secrets so that she can gather courage for telling truth to her husband about her intended separate living. The game of confession in front of each other

not only ends the personal conflicts but also brings again intimacy and familiarity in their relationship. This simple game brings a ray of hope and gives them an opportunity to resurrect their marriage. It proves that howsoever far we are from our tradition and culture; it ultimately provides assistance to us in finding a right direction and getting rid-off our personal egos and clashes. It appears that Jhumpa Lahiri too might have gone through the same experience of playing game in India which could help her craft a beautiful story to resolve temporary issues of life.

Shoba's frustration at the loss of her child puts her into such a state of great disappointment that her marriage becomes an ephemeral bond between the two. The couple feels isolated and searches for a place in their relationship to remove all the conflict out of it. It has been hinted that although the marriage is considered as a sacred bond, a union of two souls and two minds in India, it loses its value when the second generation of Indian immigrants does not understand its significance due to impact of westernization upon them. Shoba and Shukumar, like a classic Indian married couple, spend initial years of their married life successfully but the nuptial knot is shaken when the harsh reality of their life stares them in their face and their dream of becoming parents remains incomplete which Shukumar tries his best to save their married life, Shoba, possessed by remorse, takes the decision of living apart.

Lahiri adopts pragmatic and realistic approach in setting the plot and characters of the story. Her art of characterization is very vivid and appealing and depicts the personality of a character truly. It is so real that a reader can portray his or her picture in his mind. She has depicted Shobha as a thirty three year old woman who is sensible, prompt and responsible. She is an active lady who always prepares herself in advance for any situation. Whether it is about throwing a party, storing food items and household things or even buying personal belongings, she is always careful. Her self-dependency can be judged from her way of managing personal bank accounts. She gets ready for any eventuality in life and is praised by Shukumar very often as he gets astonished to see "her capacity to think ahead" (Lahiri 6).

However, all these qualities of her character do not help her in coming out of the catastrophe of her life and she behaves in very casual and unconcerned manner. Her attitude has undergone a change and to look after the home and performing all the necessities were not at her priority now. Jhumpa Lahiri expresses it in the following words, "But now she treated the house as if it were a hotel. The fact that the yellow chintz armchair in the living room clashed with the blue-and-maroon Turkish carpet no longer bothered her" (6).

Lahiri has portrayed Shukumar as an opposite to Shoba by nature. He is a lethargic man who prefers to be at home and does not go out for the necessary purchasing or for paying the bills. He, at the age of thirty five, is still a student and has less exposure to India as compared to his wife. However despite these differences, he is a very caring husband who takes pain in hiding the fact about their stillborn child and does not express it until Shoba makes her final confession which disturbs his inner psyche. Jhumpa Lahiri chose him as an interpreter of her thoughts and the readers look at the story from his point of view. He is an optimist who harbours the hope that with the passage of time, everything will settle down in their marital relationship which has reached a breaking point and a day will come when his wife will come out of the shock, and happiness will knock at their door once again. This is the brighter side of darkness which keeps Shukumar inspired and makes Shobha courageous to face the challenges of life once again.

Lahiri elaborates that a temporary blackout enables the couple to reconnect and find the cause for their estrangement. Before the blackout they remain aloof under the same roof and avoid confronting each other while at the time of power cut get a prospect of reuniting. This compels them so much that even in the presence of electricity they create a dark room to bring back happiness in their life. Hence, it can be concluded that howsoever dark our life is, it ultimately depends upon us to be in light that is always looking the brighter perspective.

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