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# GRIEF, SILENCE, AND MARITAL DISINTEGRATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "A TEMPORARY MATTER"

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**Abstract**

This article analyzes Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "A Temporary Matter" through the themes of grief, emotional repression, and marital disintegration within the immigrant experience. The study argues that Lahiri portrays grief not as a shared emotional process but as an isolating force that fractures communication and destabilizes intimate relationships. Through the characters of Shoba and Shukumar, the narrative demonstrates how silence, avoidance, and unresolved trauma gradually erode emotional intimacy. Drawing on psychoanalytic criticism, trauma theory, and Erik Erikson's framework of identity, this article explores how loss reshapes individual identity and disrupts relational bonds. Ultimately, the story reveals that emotional disconnection, rather than conflict, becomes the primary agent of marital collapse.

**Keywords**

Jhumpa Lahiri, grief, trauma, silence, marriage, emotional alienation, diaspora

In contemporary literature, narratives of immigration increasingly intersect with explorations of psychological trauma and emotional fragmentation. Among writers who capture this complexity with precision, Jhumpa Lahiri stands out for her restrained yet deeply affecting portrayal of human relationships. Her stories often avoid dramatic external conflict, instead focusing on subtle emotional shifts that unfold within domestic spaces.

"A Temporary Matter," one of Lahiri's most critically acclaimed stories, centers on a married couple, Shoba and Shukumar, who are struggling to cope with the stillbirth of their child. While the narrative does not explicitly foreground immigration as its central theme, the characters' diasporic context informs their emotional isolation and communication breakdown. The story presents grief as a destabilizing force that not only affects individual identity but also transforms the dynamics of intimate relationships. This article argues that Lahiri constructs grief as a form of emotional disintegration that operates through silence and avoidance. Rather than bringing the couple closer, their shared loss creates distance, exposing the fragility of their relationship. Through a close reading of the text, this study demonstrates that the temporary power outage—around which the story is structured—serves as a metaphorical space in which suppressed emotions are briefly revealed, only to confirm the irreversibility of their separation.

The analysis of "A Temporary Matter" is grounded in multiple theoretical perspectives that illuminate its psychological and emotional depth. First, psychoanalytic criticism provides a framework for understanding repression and emotional avoidance. According to psychoanalytic theory, individuals often suppress traumatic experiences to protect themselves from psychological pain. However, this repression can manifest in indirect ways, leading to emotional disconnection and behavioral changes. Second, trauma theory is essential for interpreting the impact of loss in the story. Trauma disrupts the continuity of experience, making it difficult for individuals to process emotions or articulate their feelings. In Lahiri's narrative, the stillbirth functions as a traumatic event that fractures both personal identity and relational stability. Finally, Erik Erikson's concept of identity formation helps explain how

individuals respond differently to crisis. Both Shoba and Shukumar experience identity disruption following their loss, but they cope in contrasting ways. This divergence contributes to the breakdown of their relationship. Together, these frameworks reveal that grief in the story is not merely an emotional response but a complex psychological condition that reshapes identity and communication.

At the core of "A Temporary Matter" is the theme of grief, portrayed not as a shared experience but as an isolating force. Following the stillbirth of their child, Shoba and Shukumar retreat into separate emotional worlds. Rather than supporting each other, they become increasingly distant, unable to bridge the gap created by their loss. Shoba copes with grief through withdrawal and avoidance. She immerses herself in work, distancing herself physically and emotionally from the home. Her behavior suggests a desire to escape the painful memories associated with her loss. By contrast, Shukumar remains within the domestic space, surrounded by reminders of what has been lost. His grief is characterized by passivity and introspection, leading to a sense of stagnation. This divergence highlights a critical aspect of trauma: individuals do not experience or process loss in the same way. The lack of shared coping mechanisms prevents Shoba and Shukumar from reconnecting, reinforcing their emotional isolation. One of the most striking features of the story is the pervasive presence of silence. Communication between Shoba and Shukumar is minimal, limited to practical exchanges rather than meaningful dialogue. This silence is not neutral; it is a manifestation of unresolved tension and emotional repression. Lahiri uses silence as a narrative strategy to emphasize the distance between the characters. The absence of open communication allows misunderstandings and assumptions to accumulate, further deepening their alienation. Both characters are aware of the growing gap between them, yet neither takes the initiative to address it directly. The power outage introduces a temporary disruption to this pattern. In the darkness, the couple begins to share secrets, creating an illusion of intimacy. However, this intimacy is fragile and ultimately deceptive. The confessions do not heal their relationship but instead reveal the extent of their disconnection. This dynamic suggests that emotional honesty requires a form of concealment. The absence of light removes the pressure of direct confrontation, enabling a temporary suspension of their usual communication barriers. However, this honesty is short-lived. When the power returns, so does the reality of their emotional distance. Light, in this context, represents awareness and truth, but also discomfort and exposure. The contrast between darkness and light underscores the tension between concealment and revelation, highlighting the fragility of the couple's attempts at reconnection. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the relationship between Shoba and Shukumar cannot be repaired. The temporary moments of connection created during the power outages are insufficient to overcome the deeper structural issues within their marriage. The final revelation—that Shoba has decided to leave—marks the culmination of this process. Her decision is not sudden but the result of prolonged emotional detachment. Shukumar's final confession about holding their dead child further intensifies the emotional impact of the ending, emphasizing the depth of his grief and the irreversibility of their separation. Lahiri avoids dramatic confrontation, instead presenting the dissolution of the marriage as a quiet, inevitable outcome. This restraint makes the narrative more powerful, as it reflects the subtle and often unnoticed ways in which relationships can deteriorate.

"A Temporary Matter" offers a profound exploration of grief, silence, and emotional alienation within the context of marriage. Through the characters of Shoba and Shukumar, Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrates that shared loss does not necessarily lead to mutual understanding. Instead, it can create distance, exposing the fragility of emotional connections. The story

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challenges conventional narratives of healing and reconciliation, suggesting that some forms of trauma cannot be easily resolved. Lahiri's understated style allows the emotional weight of the narrative to emerge gradually, revealing the complexity of human relationships. Ultimately, the story underscores the importance of communication and emotional openness, while acknowledging the difficulty of achieving them in the face of profound loss. It is this tension between desire and inability that gives the story its enduring power.

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