A Brief Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction Story - A Temporary Matter

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***Abstract*—Generally speaking, we are used to the notion that evil things are best carried out in secret. For instance, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth desire darkness to carry out their sinister actions in Shakespeare's Macbeth. However, darkness is cleansed of this taint, at least in Jhumpa Lahiri's A Temporary Matter, which also happens to be the first story in the collection Interpreter of Maladies. The temporary darkness acts a blessing in disguise and saves a soured relationship. Before entering into the discussion, we are reminded here that Jhumpa Lahiri is a London-born second-generation expatriate. She was brought up in Rhodes Island. She bagged the Pulitzer Prize as the first person of South-Asian origin on 10th April, 2000 for her Interpreter of Maladies – a collection of 9 short stories. Embracing reality Lahiri in the stories chronicles the Indian experience - especially the East Indian one in America. She here focuses her attention on people – their relationship with each other, their subtle tensions, their moments of happiness and pain in an alien land. Truly the Interpreter of Maladies beautifully and poignantly addresses the issues of alienation, displacement, moral and emotional crisis, a sort of limbo in the so-called adopted homeland.**

***Index Terms*—Darkness**

I. INTRODUCTION

We are generally accustomed with the idea that dark deeds are better done in the dark. In Shakespeare's Macbeth for example both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth want darkness to perform their dark deeds. However, at least in Jhumpa Lahiri's A Temporary Matter which happens to be the first story of the collection Interpreter of Maladies, darkness is redeemed of this stain. Here darkness plays a pivotal role in uniting a drifting away relationship. The temporary darkness acts a blessing in disguise and saves a soured relationship. Before entering into the discussion, we are reminded here that Jhumpa Lahiri is a London-born second-generation expatriate. She was brought up in Rhodes Island. She bagged the Pulitzer Prize as the first person of South-Asian origin on 10th April, 2000 for her Interpreter of Maladies – a collection of 9 short stories. Embracing reality Lahiri in the stories chronicles the Indian experience - especially the East Indian one in America. She here focuses her attention on people – their relationship with each other, their subtle tensions, their moments of happiness and pain in an alien land. Truly the Interpreter of Maladies beautifully and poignantly addresses the issues of alienation, displacement, moral and emotional crisis, a sort of limbo in the so-called adopted homeland.

Besides Pulitzer Prize, Lahiri has also received many prizes like- the Trans-Atlantic Award (1993), Addison Metcalf Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (2000), The New Yorker's Best Debut of the year for Interpreter of Maladies (2000), James Beard Fourndation's M.F.K. Fisher Distinguished Writing Award for Indian Takeout in Food and Wine Magazine (2000) and Guggenheim Fellowship (2002). A Temporary Matter is the story of Shoba and Shukumar, a young couple, who had lived in Boston for three years. Shoba worked in an office downtown where she searched for typographical errors. Shukumar was in the sixth year of his graduate school and was to enter the job market the following year. For some time, their life was not so happy as they had lost their baby who was born dead. Moreover, as Shukumar thought:

"How he and Shoba had become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible. He thought of how he no longer looked forward to weekends… and how long it had been since she looked into his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name on those rare occasions they still reached for each other's bodies before sleeping." (IM: P- 4,5)

So, the more Shoba stayed out putting in extra hours at work, the more Shukumar wanted to stay in managing the household matters. Under such state of affairs, crisis in their married life continued when a „temporary matter" in the form of a notice broke in. It informed them about the five days' power cut off for one hour and it seemed to have salvaged their falling relationship. Lahiri excels as a story teller when she combines her Indian reminiscences and the larger problem of marital discord and the apparently catastrophic end of the couple's marriage in a single frame. However, that unexpected announcement provided them a chance to come close to each other once again. Unable to think anything in particular about spending an hour in darkness, Shoba turned nostalgic and said:

"I remember during power failures at my grandmother"s house, we all had to say something… A little poem. A joke. A fact about the world." (IM: P12).

So, she suggested:

"Let's do that… Say something to each other in the dark…How about telling each other something we've never told before." (IM: P-13).

Having thus decided, Shukumar and Shoba started revealing their untold facts to each other. Shoba told him about the times when they were newly acquainted and when she happened to steal a look into his address book to see if he had written her address there. Shukumar in his turn told her about how he had forgotten to tip the waiter when they went out to dinner for the first time and how the next morning, he went all the way back just to tip the waiter.

Somehow the whole affair had turned into an exchange of confessions. Confessions and unburdening their heart released them from their stagnancy. The following nights Shukumar told her about how he once ripped out a photo of a woman in one of the fashion magazines and carried in his books for a week. He revealed to her how he hadn't lost the sweater vest Shoba bought him for their third wedding anniversary but had exchanged it for cash at Filene's and that he had got drunk in the middle of the day at a hotel bar. Confession of each other's guilt was not all that the couple did but they also engaged themselves in some amount of love-making they had long forgotten. Touching each other, love and sex - all these are essentials for conjugal happiness. Eventually, Shukumar started looking forward to the lights going out so much so that he was really disappointed when he came to know that the fault was repaired one day ahead of the schedule.

The process of confession which started in the dark continued even in the light, for they had now developed the courage to face each other. However, when the reader anticipates a happy reunion after the closeness that Shukumar and Shoba shared by exchanging untold experiences, it feels like a douse of freezing cold water, when Shoba announces her decision to move into a new apartment. Now the question that puzzles our mind is – why does she want separation when there is silver lining in their soured relationship – a hint for the new beginning? Perhaps the problem lies in Shoba's inability to deal with her anger and frustration of losing the baby for whose arrival she had planned elaborately. Perhaps she blames Shukumar for this mishap. Here I am reminded of the famous Bengali cinema Antaheen1 , directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury. This cinema also deals with various human relationship, especially the lack of communication in marriage. In one part of the cinema, we see Paromita i.e. Aparna Sen while talking to Avik i.e. Rahul Bose says that perhaps her husband Ranjan i.e. Kalyan Ray holds her responsible for his father's death. Though Ranjan never told her about this yet tader modhye aviman jamte jamte pahar jame jai i.e. mentally they became alienated and isolated from each other and finally an estranged couple. Both got attached to their private world to avoid each other. And from that moment onwards they started living separately. Though there was no official separation yet they started living in different apartments. Here too there are silent inward grievances against each other which became tantamount to separation. In her state of disappointment and self-pity, Shoba did not care if her marriage fell apart. She hardly realizes that she is punishing both Shukumar and herself unduly.

In this matter we can't blame Shoba fully because, to the Indian psyche, marriage is not primarily a matter of sex; rather, as Bertrand Russell puts it, "an undertaking to cooperate in the procreation and rearing of children." (Russell)

A child cements the bond of marriage – without a child marriage is considered banal and incomplete. The loss of the child turns Shoba into a mechanized automation. The systematic care and affection with

which she had created a home for the two of them, cooking chutneys on Sundays, stirring boiling pots of tomatoes and prunes writing meticulous instructions on her cook books and dating the recipes, has now dried within her. Engrossed in her misery she started avoiding Shukumar. However, Shoba's decision of leaving home is a bolt from the blue and it shocks Shukumar. And now comes the final confession from Shukumar which he promised that day that he would never tell Shoba:

"Our baby was a boy. His skin was redder 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." (IM: P-22)

From then on Shoba becomes able to realize the truth that the loss of the baby has affected Sukumar as deeply as her that:

"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." (IM: P-22)

She understands that everyone has to bear his or her share of pain in life. But he was able to bear with it perhaps because he did what the doctor said:

"Holding the baby might help him with the process of grieving." (IM: P-22).

He held his son before he was cremated. This revelation brings them together in a flood of tears underlining the fact that the cultural roots can't be severed so easily. That tears are not idle tears rather they purge them of their inertia which crept into their relationship. Behind this re-union Shoba's efforts for isolated living also proved bliss in disguise – a bliss that cleared their hearts and brought them together once again. Thus, the story ends beautifully and poignantly when we see:

"Outside the evening was still warm, and the Bradfords were walking arm in arm. As he watched the couple the room went dark, and he spun around. 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." (IM:P-22)

This story illustrates on the one hand the fact that in New England marriage can be treated as a temporary matter, and on the other hand, the marital discord is shown to be a temporary matter just as the interruption in electric power supply has been. The story is the reassertion of the validity of a new beginning in life. Truly, the temporary matter – the power cut – took away the temporality from their conjugal life and provides them with strong emotional nourishment. Various issues like loneliness, exclusion, fidelity in marriage, and tradition in the lives of the Indian diasporic community in the U.S. are portrayed beautifully and realistically in this collection. Here, in the story of Shukumar and Shoba, before their relationship rolls on to the maladies of maladjustment, the electric blackout helps them open up and check their drifting married life. Lahiri seems to tell us how essential it is for individuals to communicate to reciprocate to each other. It is this which connects individuals, releases one from emotional exile and strengthens relationships. Though when Lahiri wrote the Interpreter of Maladies, she was not married yet she was well aware about the secret of successful relationship. She told Vibhuti Patel in an interview for the Pacific edition of Newsweek (20 September, 1999) that:

"Being involved in serious relationship enabled me to fill in the blanks." (Interview - Vibhuti)

She wants to convey the message that marital difficulties can be overcome if there is love, that relationship blossoms with love and affection only. Now I will conclude my discussion with a cross reference to Shubodh Ghosh's short story Jatugriho 2. Though Shubodh Ghosh and Jhumpa Lahiri are writers residing in two different parts of the globe, yet they are both in one way or the other interprets the maladies of their contemporary societies. Lahiri being an immigrant feels the importance of family and how it ties man/woman to his/her homeland. But this kind of cultural tension is not the raw material for Shubodh Ghosh's Jatugriho. Madhuri and Shatadal are born and brought up in West Bengal and speak the Bengali language. And so, the melancholy which he describes is one of his own societies. The local moves locally from Raipur to Ghatshila but never changes internationally. And so, Ghosh's society is much smaller than Jhumpa's cross cultural society.

But such cultural difference cannot erase the basic points of similarities in interpreting a social malady. For both, Lahiri and Ghosh, deal with broken marriages and the reader tries to search the cause for it. Is it the 20th century material mindedness which destroys the basic human feelings and sentiments? Or is it the basic existential temperament of looking at life? In Lahiri's story Shoba gives birth to a still-born

dead child and this creates in them a mental vacuum which is difficult to be filled up and which partly seems to be made up by their reminiscences in the darkness of load shedding “a temporary matter”. Shubodh Ghosh’s Madhuri and Satadal are a childless couple who are now separated from each other. They meet after fIve long years at a railway station. Shatadal was travelling to Kolkata and Madhuri to Rajgir. The rift in the relationship between Jhumpa Lahiri’s and Shubodh Ghosh’s couples is certainly a malady of the existential modern society.

Actually, Shoba and Sukumar in A Temporary Matter and Madhuri, Shatadal in Jatugriho are strong individualists who believe in complete freedom in social and familial matters. In both these couples there is nothing outside the preoccupation with their own selves. A still-born boy or, a childless marriage is enough to draw them apart from each other. They live a life which is passive and full of void and where there is no jest for life. This excessive preoccupation with “Being” takes them to a state of “Nothingness”; for “Nothingness” is an integral part of “Being”.

II. CONCLUSION

As in Jatugriho, Madhuri and Shatadal's fortuitous encounter at the Rajpur train station turns into a method for them to reflect on their former lives, so too does Boston's power outage, although a brief one, allow Shoba and Shukumar to reflect on their prior lives. In this way, the power outages in Lahiri's narrative and Madhuri and Shatadal's encounter in Rajpur take on symbolic meanings and represent a broken relationship. Once more, they emphasize that if there is love, compassion, understanding, and appropriate communication, marriage problems may be handled and resolved effectively. And Lahiri seems to emphasize this by reuniting the couple Shukumar and Shoba whereas in Jatugriho, Shatadal and Madhuri onboard two different trains moving headlong to two opposite directions; thus, refuting any possibility of reunion.

REFERENCES

[1] Lahiri, Jhumpa: Interpreter of Maladies. India: HarperCollins, 1999. All quotations and page references are to this edition.

[2] Jatugriho is a famous short story by Subodh Ghosh, the noted Bengali author and Journalist. Many of his short stories have been adapted for making of great Indian films, most notably Ritwik Ghatak‟s Ajantrik(1958) and Bimal Roy‟s Sujata(1959).This story Jatugriho too have been picked up by Tapan Sinha for a film on the same name in 1964.The cinema stars Uttam Kumar. Again, Ijaazat is a 1987 Indian Hindi film directed by Gulzar, based on Subodh Ghosh‟s Jatugriho. The cinema stars Rekha, Naseeruddin Shah and Anuradha Patel in leading roles. It also won two National Film Awards in 1988 in the music category.

[3] Russell, Bertrand. Marriage and Morals. U.S.A.: Bantam Books, 1968, P-161