



Silent Struggle: Navigation Independence And Interdependence An Indian Immigrant Couple's Journey In Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter"

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Abstract

Independence and interdependence are indispensable ingredients to lead a meaningful and satisfying life, and especially in married life interdependence plays a more important role than independence. This paper investigates various aspects of interpersonal relationships that emerge between the Indian immigrant couple, Shukumar and Shoba, in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "A Temporary Matter," approaching the topic from different view points and depths of significance. A chasm is created between them for no fault of them. That is, both of them are not responsible for the death of their child and yet the division widens in due course of time as none of them is willing to look at the problem from the viewpoint of the partner. It is lack of interdependence that mars their married life. And Jhumpa Lahiri's conclusion of the story gives room for different interpretations.

Keywords: immigrant, Indian-American identity, self-interest, intrapersonal relationships, interpersonal relationships, commitments, marital disharmony

The whole world is in a great quest for independence. According to Oxford *Advanced Learner's Dictionary* the word *independence* has three different meanings and the following are the two meanings: “1. (of a country) freedom from political control by other countries. 2. the freedom to organize your own life, make your own decisions, etc. without needing help from other people” (791).

As the world in which we live is divided into many nations and each nation is, normally, governed by a particular political system, independence plays a significant role. Owing to quest for power, throughout human history, it is observed that many nations have been conquered and ruled by mighty nations against the wishes of the people of those nations. For instance, countries such as America and India were ruled by the British for over 170 and 200 years respectively. After these two nations had obtained Independence, America became a developed nation and India a developing nation.

Over the last few decades, a number of Indians have migrated to America in search of green pastures, that is, economic prosperity. The migration of Indians to America increased after the promulgation of Immigrant Act in 1965. Many an Indian who first migrated to America for higher studies took up jobs subsequently there, and as a result got a new identity – Indian-American. The lives of Indian-Americans in America have become the subject matter for all Indian diasporic writers such as Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, V.S. Naipaul, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri. And Jhumpa Lahiri is no exception to the treatment of the lives that Indian immigrants lead in America. Shoba and Shukumar are Indian-Americans, living in Boston for three years. A concise summary of the short story “A Temporary Matter” is provided here as it will help the readers have a better comprehension.

Shukumar and Shoba lead a happy married life in American soil until she gives birth to a stillborn child, and this tragedy occurs when Shukumar is away from home to attend a conference in Baltimore against his wishes. Though there is every possibility for the couple to give birth to another child, this unpleasant incident, instead of bringing them closer, creates a gulf between the couple, and consequently they avoid each other. A temporary power cut brings them closer and closer, and helps them break the silence between them, and as a consequence, they understand each other better at the end.

According to the second definition of the word *independence* stated previously in the first paragraph of this paper, a person makes his/her own decisions in every sphere of life. Of course, freedom of speech and freedom of expression were all bestowed on humanity. The freedom of choice was a gift given to man in the Garden of Eden: “And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.’ ” (*The Holy Bible*, Gen. 2.16-17) Man was given freedom to eat fruit from all trees except from that forbidden tree for his sake.

Freedom will be meaningless if there is only one path to choose. It is the choice that one makes help one enjoy the fruits of freedom. The Western society, especially American society, gives enormous freedom to its citizens. Independence, individuality, and self-identity are all hallmarks of American society and yet, as every man or woman is part of a family and part of a society, he/she has to value interdependence as well. Stephen Covey begins his Acknowledgements of his book titled *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* as follows: “Interdependence is a higher value than independence.” And these two concepts of *independence* and *interdependence* play a crucial role in the life of an Indian immigrant couple in Jhumpa Lahiri’s “A Temporary Matter,” and she herself is an Indian immigrant and a diasporic writer.

In this short story, Shoba reads the notice “for her own benefit than Shukumar’s” (1) which cautions the residents of their locality that there will not be electricity for one hour from 8 PM owing to a faulty line. Shukumar has been working during day time on his final chapters of his dissertation on agrarian revolts in India. Shoba, still looking at the notice, says, “But they should do this sort of thing during the day” (2). And this is solely uttered for the benefit of Shoba and not for Shukumar.

Shoba keeps her interest and her comfort first with regard to the power cut that is going to take place during day time. She will be back home only in the evenings and so she wishes that the repair be carried out during day time, but if it is done during day time, Shukumar cannot write the chapter of his dissertation comfortably. Of course, independence, and in the context, self-interest, is important and good, but in marital life, as a couple, they should care for each other. She values her independence, her welfare, and her comfort more than Shukumar’s. Shukumar is flabbergasted to learn that she is not interested in his welfare. And this incident widens the gulf that already exists between them which

resulted from the death of their child. In marital life there should be greater room for interdependence as it will help lead a harmonious life.

Influenced by the American way of life, she pursues her own path. It is easier to lead an independent life as it does not demand more responsibilities and commitments. Interdependence is a higher virtue because it insists on a lot of adjustments and sacrifices.

In India, family ties are very strong and stable. Indian culture and tradition give importance to, and even can be presumed, give more or even undue importance to interpersonal relationships, whereas American society puts an individual's freedom above everything. The Indian couple, Shukumar and Shoba, who were exposed to Indian way of life to a certain extent, are caught between the twin forces: independence and interdependence. They have been influenced by the American way of life or more specifically, the unbridled independence that they enjoy in the land of America.

In life tragic events like whirlwinds might, at anytime, strike at the boat of married life and rock it from side to side in the waves so that it is likely to capsize. In times of great troubles and misfortunes, the understanding between the couple is of paramount importance, and both are expected to come closer to face the trial together with a certain amount of fortitude so that they can overcome the difficulties, and consequently lead a peaceful life.

As per the dictates of Indian custom, Shukumar wishes to stay with Shoba and does not desire to attend the conference in Baltimore as her due date is nearer. And the following lines describe what really happened:

Shukumar was at an academic conference in Baltimore when Shoba went into labor, three weeks before her due date. He hadn't wanted to go to the conference, but she had insisted; it was important to make contacts, and he would be entering the job market next year. She told him that she had his number at the hotel, and a copy of his schedule and flight numbers, and she had arranged with her friend Gillian for a ride to the hospital in the event of an emergency. (2-3)

This passage points out the fact that though Shukumar wants to stay back and be with her as his presence will help her have more courage and confidence, it is she insists that he attend the conference. In the meantime

When he returned to Boston it was over. The baby had been born dead. Shoba was lying on a bed, asleep, in a private room so small there was barely enough space to stand beside her, in a wing of the hospital they hadn't been to on the tour for expectant parents. Her placenta had weakened and she'd had a cesarean, though not quickly enough. The doctor explained that these things happen. He smiled in the kindest way it was possible to smile at people known only professionally. Shoba would be back on her feet in a few weeks. There was nothing to indicate that she would not be able to have children in the future. (3-4)

Nobody can be blamed for this tragic event. The couple is not to blame at all, yet it is Shoba who begins distancing herself from Shukumar after the incident. She changes her attitude completely, especially towards her husband, and it appals Shukumar. She takes shelter under the umbrella of independence. The traumatic experience that they undergo, as a result of losing their baby, gives them more pain, and avoiding each other further adds fuel to the flame. Lahiri gives an account of how Shukumar thinks as follows: He thought of

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, when she sat for hours on the sofa with her colored pencils and her files, so that he feared that putting on a record in his own house might be rude. He thought of 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. (4-5)

The gap between them grows even wider, and the subsequent lines provide evidence of this: "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 shoving it into his mouth without pause, while Shoba took her plate to

the living room and watched game shows, or proofread files with her arsenal of colored pencils at hand” (8).

It is also learnt that after the child’s death, “They had stopped attending parties, went nowhere together.... After finishing the dishes, they leaned against the counter, drying the hands on either end of the towel” (15). Drying their hands on either end of the towel signifies that their relationship seems distant. All the events that take place in their life, after the death of their child, point out the fact that they are drifting away from each other physically and emotionally. Angalakuduru Aravind also shares this concern in his article as follows: “Both of them deliberately avoid each other. Actually, they lived very happily before the tragedy happened in their life. Shukumar thought that this crisis in their relationship would pass soon. She was just thirty-three and was strong and on her feet again. The doctor also tried to console them by saying, ‘that these things happen.’ ” (72-73) But each of them was not ready to bridge the gap created between them after the death of their child.

It is time for both of them to come closer to console and comfort each other so that they become interdependent. If they share their sorrow it will be halved. Instead, they live independently under the same roof which further broadens the chasm between them. The rift can be healed, and a balanced, healthy life can be built by nurturing their interpersonal bonds, rather than weak intrapersonal ones.

In India, in most houses, it is very difficult to have privacy and independence because of the kind of familial system that exists. In any household, the members of a family live together, and perform most of the duties together. Sharing their interests, desires, and accomplishments among themselves is the order of the day. So, speaking to one another on many matters and sharing the views of everyone with others is part and parcel of Indian family life. Shoba is reminded of this widespread practice in India when she experiences a power outage in America. And the details are given below:

“I remember during power failures at my grandmother’s house, we all had to say something,” Shoba continued....

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. A little poem. A joke. A fact about the world. For some reason my relatives always wanted me to tell them the names of my friends in

America. I don’t know why the information was so interesting to them. The

last

time I saw my aunt she asked after four girls I went to elementary school with in Tucson. I barely remember them now.”

Shukumar hadn't spent as much time in India as Shoba had....

“Let's do that,” she said suddenly.

“Do what?”

“Say something to each other in the dark.”

“Like what? I don't know any jokes.”

“No, no jokes.” She thought for a minute. “How about telling each other something we've never told before.” (12-13)

After recalling the power outages at her grandmother's house in India, prompts Shoba and her husband Shukumar to come together and speak for the first time in a while, during the darkness. India is a land where there is no dearth of interpersonal relationships. It is this interpersonal relationship between a husband and a wife that is responsible for the respect, cordiality, and warmth that exist between them. Even in Boston, Shoba wishes to continue the habit of telling stories or jokes during a power outage, using it as a way, the couple break the ice between them and spark conversation and they reconnect.

For a long time the only thing, that is common between them, is silences. People get married not to keep quiet all the time and be silent but to share the joys and sorrows of their life, and even the unshared childhood days so that life can be meaningful and joyful. The darkness, in the form of the death of their child, shadows the life of Shukumar and Shoba but the literal darkness owing to power cut, as a blessing in disguise, and as an icebreaker, helps the couple come together to speak out. They light candles in the darkness, sit at the table, and start sharing between them matters that they have not revealed to each other so far. His subjects of sharing with Shoba are some of the incidents of his personal life, and they are listed as follows: cheating on a college examination, ripping a picture of a woman out of a magazine, and returning a sweater and getting drunk in the middle of the day instead. Even though these subjects seem to be silly and ridiculous, sharing these incidents in a sense confessing them to Shoba has helped Shukumar have a sense of relief, moreover, he feels that he is rid of a guilty conscience. Shubha Mukherjee is also of the view that “the sheltering darkness of an electrical failure develops a newfound relationship of a drifting couple, Shukumar and Shoba. This temporary phase of time with no electricity draws them closer and they reveal one secret of their lives to each other every day which they

have never thought of expressing before. Seeking protection from darkness they open up their hearts,” (170)

During the fifth day of the power cut, Shoba confides to Shukumar that she has found an apartment to live separately. This establishes the fact that she wants to be independent and not interdependent. Shukumar’s revelation of the truth about his presence at the hospital during the time of her delivery which Shoba is not aware of is as follows: “Our baby was a boy,” he said. “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.” (22)

After knowing the truth that Shukumar held their dead son against his chest who had been alive in her womb, she is moved, and she decides to stay with him the rest of her life. And this indicates the fact that she has changed her mind to lead a life of interdependence.

The final episodes of the story stress the fact that it is their interdependence that has reduced the tension between them and made them less stressful. Their unity in adversity will pave the way for a healthy and harmonious life. Solomon, the wisest king who ever lived on this planet, says, “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.” (*The Holy Bible*, Eccl.4:9-10)

This short story, as other stories of Jhumpa Lahiri, has an open ending. Lahiri offers freedom to the readers and allows them to conclude as they wish because in real life too there will be more than one ending. This is one of her fictional techniques. The end of the story is not in the hands of Lahiri but in the choice that the couple makes, that is, whether to live together forgetting and forgiving the lapses of each other or part with a heavy heart carrying the bitter memories with them.

The title of the short story is suggestive, and even in the beginning of the story she has hinted that as the power cut is a temporary matter so also is the gulf between them that resulted from the death of their baby. As darkness vanishes after the restoration of power supply, interdependence as a ray of hope drives away their temporary separation leading to a harmonious life.

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