

# CULTURAL DILEMMA: A READING OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *A TEMPORARY MATTER*

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**Abstract:** The expatriate writing is always inter-related between the aspects of two cultures and two countries, it negotiates boundaries and relates to different temporal and spatial metaphors. As an Indian immigrant writer living in the US with expatriate sensibility, Jhumpa Lahiri encounters issues in multiple identities. While living in-between cross cultural identities, she experiences the cultural dilemmas of two worlds- one is the world of origin and the other one is the world of adopted land. *Interpreter of Maladies* is quintessential of various experiences of the exile and the writer attempts to reconcile these experiences.

**Keywords:** culture, expatriate, immigrant, identity, nostalgia

The migrants live in-between two cultures- the native culture and the adopted one- in the alien land. The Indian immigrants expand their social relations in a culturally cosmopolitan identity. The immigrant writers or diasporic writers migrate to an alien land to live there happily but in reality they struggle a lot for their survival. They are struggling to live in-between two cultures which give them the feeling of nostalgia and rootlessness. Thus, the South Asian Diaspora writers draw their attention to cultural conflicts, assimilation, East-West encounter, displacement, fragmentation and so on.

The expatriate writing is always inter-related between the aspects of two cultures and two countries, it negotiates boundaries and relates to different temporal and spatial metaphors. The elements of culture travel along with individuals who feel nostalgia or undergo the experience of amnesia. The writers abroad live on the margins of two societies and cultures. Indian diasporic writings designate the multi-cultural space of immigrants and thus, they extend a genre of a divergent Indian cultural discourse which depicts all sorts of struggles inside and outside the family circumstances. The themes of diasporic writings are rootlessness, dislocation, fragmented thoughts, memories of homeland, longing to go back to their motherland and so on.

The diasporic writers or immigrant writers stand in between two cultural scenarios in the process of moving from one culture to another and the same dual culture drives a wedge between the nation and the self. They profoundly associate not only with their hereditary customs, traditions, language and religion, but also they focus on alienation, hybridization, marginalization and local life of immigrants.

As an Indian immigrant writer living in the US with expatriate sensibility, Jhumpa Lahiri encounters issues in multiple identities. While living in-between cross cultural identities, she experiences the cultural dilemmas of two worlds- one is the world of origin and the other one is the world of adopted land. The characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* are quintessential of various experiences of the exile and the writer attempts to reconcile these experiences in her literary framework. In expatriate writings, the experience of the writer moves from one place to another with the sense of homelessness and rootlessness in the alien land.

The short story *Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of nine short stories which reinforce the characters to break the shackles of cultural dilemmas while live in-between their public lives and private beliefs. The characters in this short story are set in the alien land of Bengal, Boston and beyond, and are suppressed by the concept of cross-cultural issues. The short story also emphasizes the identity politics and the cultural clash of immigrants in the US in a soaring American multiculturalism.

In the first story, *A Temporary Matter*, the Indian immigrant couple Shukumar and Shoba live in Boston and have long been Americanized. The title of the story indicates a symbolic reference to an unusual-power cut for an hour in Boston that stands for their married life as well. Shoba lost her child during her delivery, which multiplied the depth of her dilemma and increased her traumatic experience in the alien land. Her husband Shukumar is away with his busy time schedule and papers presentation, and meanwhile she starts avoiding him when she is taken home after delivery. The story delineates her pathetic situation as: "... there was nothing to indicate that she would not be able to have children in the future." (4)

Gradually, Shukumar and his wife Shoba turn out to be experts in avoiding each other and start living in the alien land as caged birds with a deep barrier in their relationship. The power cut indicates this barrier which coincides with their dinner, from eight to nine in the evening, and since they could eat in the dark.

Moreover, Shoba prefers their dinner in candle light every day, which shows their emotional frustrations and suppression in familial relation. A year ago, they together attended birthday parties with kith and kin, but now they avert from such occasions and accompany only with Shoba's mother who comes from Arizona.

The issues regarding the power cut persists for five more days, and then Shoba insists Shukumar to come out with most interesting and astonishing stories which coincide with their life. Anyhow, in marital relationship they have no 'other' in their relationship and are sincere and true to each other unlike most of their western counterparts. Progressively, in the darkness, both husband and wife start to talk which is more remarkable than before. Their love making in the darkness after so many months makes Shoba despaired in the angst of dilemma and whispers his name without sound while she sleeps. Next day she comments: "I am preparing a life without him." (21)

The story delineates her frustration through her words, and she begins to feel herself similar to a typical American that she could not continue her life without a decent space around her. Indian community insists women an anxiety that their marriage should not fail. Indian women, distinct from western culture, are uncomfortable to survive without her family both socially and emotionally. Later Shukumar breaks the secret that their dead child was a boy, and he was there in the hospital when the baby was born. The story depicts the pathetic realities of Indian married couple living in the western culture, and they could not get any solace in their married life.

Being an Americanized Indian, Shoba starts to drink plenty of wine which is not allowed in Indian middle class society. Her frustrated life enforces Shoba to leave her husband since she lost her newborn baby. Such loneliness is a temporary matter in western culture that provides strong emotional nourishment to them. The feelings of alienation and loneliness in the immigrant land give them the inability to communicate, express feelings of love, concern and care that widen the depth of separation between them. The darkness in their house helps them to confess inner emotions without restrictions, guilty consciousness, eye contacts and inhibition. The sadness in her life does not indicate that she would not be able to have children in the future.

Thus, Lahiri highlights the depth of loneliness, exclusion, fidelity and tradition in the lives of Indian immigrants in the western soil. The power cut symbolizes the breakdown in their marital relationship and the inevitability of communication between individuals in their life. The communication, even in the alienness, provides release from all sorts of emotional exile and strength in their family relationship.

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