

# A temporary matter of the permanent end



In *A Temporary Matter*, Jhumpa Lahiri illustrates a temporary blackout that enables Shukumar and Shoba to reconnect only to find that they have long been disconnected from each other. Shukumar and Shoba face four states of light, which metaphorically represent four stages of their relationship. Before the blackout, they are ambiguously distant as they avoid confronting each other about their feelings. During the blackout, the couple takes the chance of reconciliation. However, when the electricity has been repaired, they realize that they can only talk in a temporary darkness. They finally wake up from ignorance when Shoba turns on the light and reveals the purpose of their secret 'game'. Through these stages, Shukumar and Shoba come to admit that they are not happy to be together. Thus, the temporary blackout ironically leads to the permanent end of their marriage life. Shukumar and Shoba's relationship is in an ambiguous stage before the blackout. They are uncertain about their feelings towards each other but they also avoid confronting this uncertainty. As a result of seeking their own ways of resolving the stillbirth trauma, their lifestyles change as if there is a reverse in gender roles. Shukumar becomes passive in the house as Shoba interacts with the outside world. Shukumar does not find the motivation to finish his paper or even to brush his teeth regularly. "He would lie in their bed until he grew bored, gazing at his side of the closet"(4), while Shoba would be "sipping her third cup of coffee already, in her office downtown, where she searched for typographical errors in textbooks and marked them"(4). The contrast in their lifestyles highlights the distance that has grown between them. For months, Shukumar and Shoba pretend to live their normal lives while becoming "experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible"(4). Shoba's

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busy schedule allows her to be gone to work before Shukumar wakes up. Likewise, Shukumar pretends to write his paper in the room prepared for their child because “ it was a place Shoba avoided” (8). Before the blackout, the couple is in an unresolved stage in their relationship, living an unhappy life together yet trying to ignore the fact that they are disconnected. During the blackout, Shukumar and Shoba seem to be able to reconcile their love. Because there is no electricity, Shukumar and Shoba have no excuse to take their plates to each of their workrooms and so they have to dine together under the candlelight. When Shoba initiates the secret game, the two begin to share secrets and memories of their passionate love: “ something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again” (19). They start to revert each of their life patterns; Shoba “ came home earlier than usual” (14) and Shukumar finally has the motivation to go out “ through the melting snow” (14) to buy candles in preparation of their dinner. However, this reconciliation under the darkness is sudden and unusual. Despite not knowing Shoba’s intention of playing the secret game, Shukumar responds unquestioningly to the chance of reconciliation. He does not even know whether he still loves Shoba, and yet he is excited by the idea of reconnecting with Shoba: “ All day Shukumar had looked forward to the lights going out. He thought about what Shoba had said” (15). As they “ walked carefully upstairs...making love with a desperation they had forgotten...in the dark” (19-20), Shukumar and Shoba seems to be able to blindly reconnect their love. However, when the electricity has been repaired, the house remains dark; Shukumar and Shoba could have turned on the lights but they choose not to. At this point, they realize that they can only talk in the temporary darkness. With the lights back on, they would

have to return to their separate lives. “ It wasn’t the same...knowing that the lights wouldn’t go out” (20), Shukumar thought upon being informed that the electricity has been repaired. That night, the couple refuses to turn on the light and eat in a darkened room, in attempt to retain this temporary reconciliation. This reveals how Shukumar and Shoba have been taking refuge from reality as they share secrets and make love in the dark for the past four nights. Even Shukumar who remains hopeful of reconnecting with Shoba knows that what they have been doing in the darkness is only a ‘ game’. The temporary matter finally leads to an understanding of their permanent end when Shoba turns on the light. Shoba finally takes the initiative to admit the reality of their failure to reconnect as she “ blew out the candle, stood up, turned on the light” (20) and reveals her last secret to Shukumar. Upon discovering that Shoba is moving out and that “ she has spent these past evenings preparing for a life without him” (21), Shukumar realizes that all along, even before the blackout, he has been in a state of darkness. He has not been happy with his marriage life, living in a house that has been neglected and living with a person who has neglected the house and him. It is finally time for him to let go of living with “ a flashlight, but no batteries, and a half-empty box of birthday candles” (9), eating on a table full of “ piles of mail [and] unread library books” (10), avoiding all “ the friends and friends of friends” (9), and refusing all the liveliness in his life. The secret game that they have been playing during the temporary matter has not been a way of reconnecting, but it has been “ an exchange of confession—the little ways they’d hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves” (18). When Shoba turns on the light, it is as if Shukumar finally wakes up from a dark dream. As Shukumar reveals the last secret about

their dead child—a secret “ he promised himself that day that he would never tell Shoba, because he still loved her then” (22), he finally admits that he no longer loves Shoba. Their relationship has ended.