

**The Unreal Reality: Reflections and Refractions of Failed Communion in
Lehiri's *A Temporary Matter***

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Abstract

Marriage is a socio- cultural celebration. The fact that happiness in a marriage depends and also deepens only through proper communication is the fact of the matter which the author intends to establish through the story *A Temporary Matter*. The paper endeavors to highlight how confession is an integral component of communication in marriage. The fact that couples are not ready to accept their flaws and grow out of their ego is one of the primary reasons for an unhappy marriage. *A Temporary Matter* aims to give a permanent restructuring to marriage and long-lasting relationships.

Key Words: Confession, Loss, Avoidance, Silence

Communication is one of the important connections as well as constraints in any relationship especially, in the context of marital intimacy. John Gay, the author of the self-help book, *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus*, tries to list out the reasons behind instant divorces in the entity of marriage. The most common and the most integral one is the lack of communication between the couples. Women by nature want men to be empathetic and expected men to compliment them time and again although they have been married for years. Men on the other hand want women to appreciate and acknowledge them so that they can do better in terms of carrying the familial burdens. One has to understand that women and men are not only different biologically but also psychologically. Although

both speak the same language, they tend to communicate their insights and instincts differently. Psychology says that the language processing area of a woman is large and hence they tend to speak more, they use a lot of similes', metaphors and hyperboles to express their opinions while men tend to be sharp and plain. The brains of men and women are also wired in a different way making them difficult to understand one another. That is one of the reasons as to why, Aristotle opined that a man must be understood but never loved while a woman must be loved but never understood. Marriage as Osho says is a social contract and this is one institution which is attested by religion. Hence the entity of marriage is complex and at the same time confusing because a husband and a wife come together to live the rest of their lives with expectations and hopes without understanding their bodily and mental makeup of one another. One of the reasons for failed marriages is the fact that there is none who could teach to win over the art and craft of marriage. This is something that comes either out of instincts or experience. The quote below from the book, Men are from Mars and Woman are from Venus which explicates the basic and the most rudimentary reasons for frustrations and the helplessness one undergoes to make marriages work.

I suddenly began to realize that marriage need not be such a struggle. By continuing to realize and explore our differences, we discover new ways to improve our relationships. We learn about relationships in a new way in ways that our parents never knew and therefore could not have taught us. So many people are frustrated in their relationships. They love their partners but when there is a tension, they do not know what to do to make things better. (5)

A Temporary Matter, the first of the nine short stories from the anthology Interpreter of Maladies deals with how couples Shoba and Shukumar, came out with a novel way to bury their hatchets. There is also an innate desire for both of them to make the relationship work apart from the most believed lie that each couple tell one another that they are happy with the marriage and the way their life progresses post wedding. The society in actuality expects that once a couple get married, it is the end of all, they need to live together for the rest of their lives because marriage is the reason and they must be equipped to run their lives amidst such chaos. There is a catch, from the day one of marriage, it is a learning for a life time as to how to get together as a couple and live successful because marriage is no fairy tale that ends with the biggest lie stating that the prince and the princess got married and lived happily ever after.

The plot is set in Boston, one of the usual locales of Lahiri. She probably had not gone beyond Boston, Baltimore or Arizona and hence most of her stories have almost the

same setting. The only difference that one could find is the variety in the plot construction where no two plots are the same in terms of themes or common concerns. Psychologically, when adults get into an argument, they do not tend to fight one another but rather decide to stop talking to the person or stop talking about the problem. In a more overt way, they tend to avoid one another, and stay away. This can be seen in the case of both sexes and the syndrome is the most common in adults, who get married. Shoba and Shukumar have been doing the same, where the former stays away from home after work while the former stays indoors without even finding an opportunity to meet one another during the day and at night, they both are fast asleep with a sense of reluctance to sleep together or seek one another in deep sleep. The story begins with a five day power cut that would be a temporary matter, which is the title of the story, but on extrapolation, the temporary matter could also mean the tussles and arguments which the couple has during the course of their fights and this would soon be resolved when one understands that these differences are ephemeral.

India is always at the background and being Bengali is at the foreground, which are indispensable units in almost all works of Lehari. Shukumar had never been to India except when he had been an infant, and the first visit with his father had brought him dreadful dysentery. His father was cautious and hence decided not to risk the life of the child by bringing him to India. Shukumar was then left at the house of his uncle whenever his parents went home. Shobha had also been brought up in the U.S like her husband but she would visit her grandmother at Calcutta when their family vacationed. The crux of the story is the way, the grandma of Shoba would ask her to play a game, not as same as truth or dare but something that would allow them to tell one another to pass the time. This could mean any mundane incident or a dull joke. The aim of the game was to make sure that they all played well and more importantly shared something about one another as a pass time.

When the story begins, at the initial pages one come to understand that the baby they had been expecting was born still. It was a time when Shukumar had to attend a conference at Baltimore while his wife who was on the verge of labor had to fight the battle on her own for there was none to take care of her. Shoba's mother in law was around but when she learnt that the child was born lifeless, she decided to get back to India grieving over the death of the child and the demise of her husband. One could find from the very narration that the child had been their one and only dream and this was shattered when both of them could not come to terms with the fact of its untimely and unexpected death. The trauma of the loss had been with them and they both decided to stop talking to one another unable to accept the shock. Shoba began to dress well, had her lip stick intact when she hit the gym while Shukumar forgot even to brush his teeth. The entire house became gloomy and silence loomed over the

entire space. Jeffry Simpson in his guide book, *The Oxford Handbook of Relationship Science*, outlines various causatives for relationship breakaways and despair; which are listed below.

Couples might tend to avoid each other due to a range of reasons including unresolved conflicts, poor communication, fear of intimacy, feeling emotionally drained from the relationship and lack of trust. When they avoid addressing issues, tension builds up, causing them to withdraw from each other. When a partner feels that he or she is constantly putting in more effort than the other, it can lead to exhaustion and a desire to step back. (3)

Shukumar decides to divert his attention by sleeping all day and cooking in the evenings while Shoba decides to focus on her editing work so that she could stay away from home and her husband until she is fine. The story has a lapse of six months since their child had died and they had decided to not confront one another. Shoba felt that he needed to complete his dissertation on the Agrarian Revolts in India and hence she could hide her emotions of loss to herself while he felt that he would remain silent rather than kindling her sorrow about the failed pregnancy. The silence gets broken only during the time of power cuts straight for a period of five days. The thought that the line men decided to set their fix up time at night was an added advantage because, they could be at home and hence could resolve their conflicts of silence. Confessing one's feelings of remorse or hurt is the way they began to make their relationships work by starting all over again. The game taught by her grandmother had now come handy where in, Shoba thought she could exploit it as an opportunity to break their silences and differences. The candles were not around and hence they decided to use the tapestry which were left over after the last birthday of Shukumar, they had celebrated together, the one last time they were happy in the last six months. The Bradfords, the aged couple who is shown as a parody to them, the only example to remind Shoba and Shukumar that they have their future together and this could not be spent with mere avoidance or silence. The Bradfords make their presence when they begin to play the game and the next time is when they have patched up.

Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again. The third night after supper, they had sat together on the sofa and once it was dark, he began kissing her awkwardly on her forehead and her face and though it was dark, he closed his eyes and knew that she did too. (19)

The author had used the word, love making and not sex with the adjective, long forgotten, to show that they had forgotten each other's presence and only after they had

understood one another they began to realize the need for one another. One of the things which had upset Shukumar was the fact that she did not ask him about the sex of the child. Shoba had been resting and had been weeping with much no sense of emotion in her. The death of the child had given them two important feelings, the first to make sure that they did not want to perturb each other and hence they did not speak about the loss or even bother to speak to one another. The other is, Shukumar wanted her to ask how the new born had looked like and even though it did not belong to them, he wished that she expressed her grief over the irreparable loss. Each of the confession that ever made gave them a sense of relief and at the same time taught each other that they needed to speak their problems out so that they could have a more amicable marital chord to strike. When Shukumar confessed to the fact that he had cheated in one the exams as a student at college, he felt really relived because he had been bearing the burden of the cross all these years. The last day, the power supply had resumed but they decided to play the game by turning off the lights so that they could still understand the sorrow of one another. The final day, did not give them chills of confession but the revelation that tears could be the greatest remedy to forget and unburden their angst. The story is an example to show how problems in marriage never end unless the couple have a mind to address them with all their hearts.

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